

**FEAST on this!**  
**Community Organizes Around Healthy Food**  
*by Chhaya Kolavalli & Cole Cottin*



On Monday, September 24, 2012, over 70 people gathered at Highland Community College's historic Klinefelter Barn to engage in Kansas' first ever "Community FEAST." [FEAST \(Food, Education, Agriculture Solutions Together\)](#) is a model for community organizing created by the Oregon Food Bank to help involve people in addressing regional food systems issues. FEASTs held elsewhere in the nation have resulted in increased nutrition education efforts, farm-to-school partnerships, local food hubs, new farmers markets, food producer networking groups, community gardens, food policy councils, and more.

### **Why Here. Why Now?**

Why hold Kansas' first ever FEAST in Brown County? With one of the highest food insecurity rates in Kansas and a health status ranking of 89 out of 100 Kansas counties– Brown County certainly stands to benefit from initiatives to strengthen its food systems. However, FEAST could not have happened there without help from the diverse group of community members who make up the [Brown County Healthy Foods Coalition \(BCHFC\)](#). Supported by a grant from the Kansas Health Foundation, BCHFC identified FEAST as a tool for generating greater community involvement in improving the availability of, and access to, healthy foods in the county.

After attending a FEAST Facilitator's Training, held at Kansas State University (K-State) in June, BCHFC partnered with the [Kansas Rural Center \(KRC\)](#), K-State's [Center for Engagement and Community Development \(CECD\)](#), [Kansas Farm Bureau](#), and [Glacial Hills Resource Conservation and Development \(RC&D\)](#) to make this event happen. Significant collaboration in event planning helped minimize expenses for the event – which cost BCHFC little more than the ingredients used to prepare a locally-sourced dinner for participants.

The primary goal of Brown County Community FEAST was to unite a broad range of community members under one roof to discuss challenges to and opportunities for responding to regional health issues and food access needs. FEAST participants included: farmers, school workers, food business owners, tribal representatives, government employees, and food bank staff members.

### **What Happened at FEAST?**

Karla Harter, of the Brown County Health Department, kicked off the evening with a presentation on the challenges to community health in the area. Just four grocery stores serve all of Brown County's predominantly rural population. Harter asked participants: "What do you do when you can't even afford to *get* to the grocery store? Then, if you do get there, the only food you can afford is highly processed,

high sodium, calorie dense, and nutritionally poor.” In order for healthy food to become a regular part of residents’ lives, Harter says it must be available, reachable, affordable, and prepare-able. “The days of grandma in the kitchen teaching you how to prepare wholesome foods are gone, folks,” she emphasized – pointing to the need to educate people about healthy foods identification and use.



Next up, from the Department of Education, Cheryl Johnson and Barb Depew shared information on the many programs public schools can choose to offer to respond to issues of access and education. Often, they said, healthy eating “starts with the kids.” Just getting kids excited about different types of healthy foods can have a great impact on how families eat. “October is national Farm-to-School Month,” they pointed out, “We hope Brown County will be a shining example for the state!” In fact, later that evening, connections *were* made between farmers and school food service directors interested in purchasing healthy, local food for their schools.

Other enthusiastic speakers included: Matt Young, Brown County Extension Agent, who encouraged participants to use his office as a resource for increasing the local food supply; Brown County farmers, Mark Ward and Jake Johannes, who emphasized the economic potential of marketing farm products locally and regionally; and Annarose Hart, Agribusiness Development and Farmers Market Specialist for the Kansas Department of Agriculture, who spoke about creative models for improving food access in communities. Hart pointed out that programs like [Electronic Benefit Transfer \(EBT\)](#), which facilitates vision card (food stamp) and credit card sales at farmers markets, have doubled the income of some farmers markets: “It’s a huge way to be able to capture the food dollar, to help make sure that farmers can keep farming and that people can have access to healthy foods.”



After the presentations and a question and answer session, participants were invited to enjoy a locally-sourced meal... but with a catch: Each participant had to submit a “meal card” highlighting just one area or project they feel is important to the development of their regional food system. These meal cards were then used to develop topics for the small “working group” session that would follow their meal.



Small group topics included issues of access, education, production, and distribution of healthy foods in Brown County. Driven by the premise that sustainable solutions to community challenges must be community-based, the groups took notes on the main take-aways from their discussions and submitted them to BCHFC with a list of allies and resources that might be useful for addressing different areas of concern.



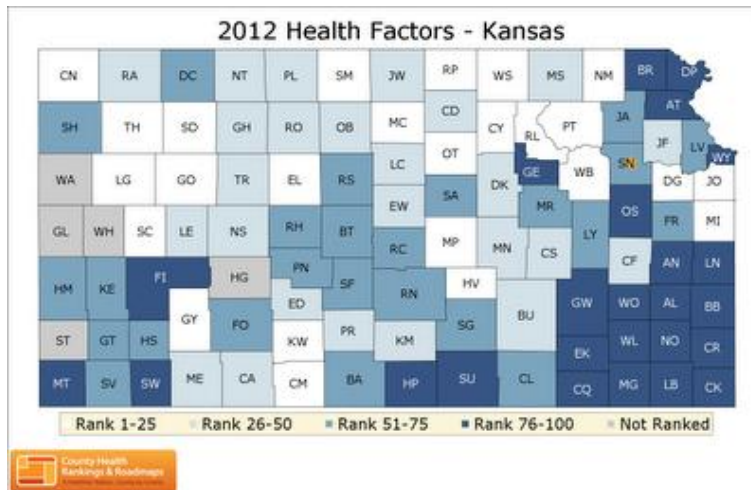
To close the FEAST, small group representatives shared key ideas that resulted from their discussions. One group creatively suggested “mobile food trucks” as a solution to the challenge of physical access to food. “Brown County has limited grocery stores and only one farmers market,” they said, “but a mobile food truck operation, perhaps run through a local grocery store and in collaboration with area farmers, could deliver food to outlying communities.” Other participants suggested that a virtual food store, in which customers order food online and receive a delivery to their door, could increase food accessibility.

In his closing speech BCHFC Chair, Steve Smith, addressed the FEAST participants: “The things we are discussing tonight are not easy fixes. They are total societal changes. We have a lot in front of us.” His sentiments echoed Harter’s opening statement, “We can change history. We can change the course of Brown County.”

### **Why FEAST Matters**

Brown County is not alone in its struggle to access healthy foods. Rural residents are at greatest risk for limited access to healthy foods, but pockets exist even in urban areas. Of the 675 cities in Kansas, only 51% have a grocery store. At the same time, the Kansas Health Institute states that 60% of Kansas adults

and one-third of Kansas children are overweight or obese, and the annual cost of treating obesity related diseases in Kansas is \$561 million.



There is some irony in the fact that Kansas, the “breadbasket” of the United States with more than 46 million acres of farmland, struggles to connect its residents to healthy food. It is estimated that only 77,000 acres are needed to feed Kansans, but in our current food system we find the vast majority of Kansas produced foods leave the state (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2007). In 2010, Kansans spent \$7.5 billion dollars on food of all kinds. For produce purchases alone, we currently spend about \$767 million annually – but only 4% of that produce is sourced from Kansas farms. Notable economic potential could exist in the job creation and income generation that could result from connecting more Kansans to Kansas produced foods.

What should Kansans do to respond to these realities? How can Kansas food systems adapt to address our state’s growing health concerns? Community organizing events, such as FEAST, may be a beginning.

If you are interested in organizing community around food and agriculture, or learning more about hosting a FEAST-like event, you can download a “FEAST Planning Guide” from the Oregon Food Bank’s website at: <http://oregonfoodbank.org/Our-Work/Building-Food-Security/Community-Programs/> Also, keep an eye out for a soon-to-be released “FEAST Toolkit” from the Kansas Rural Center’s at: <http://www.kansasruralcenter.org/publications.html>



Links Used:

[FEAST \(Food, Education, Agriculture Solutions Together\): http://oregonfoodbank.org/Our-Work/Building-Food-Security/Community-Programs/FEAST](http://oregonfoodbank.org/Our-Work/Building-Food-Security/Community-Programs/FEAST)

[Brown County Healthy Foods Coalition \(BCHFC\): http://www.hiawathaworldonline.com/main.asp?SectionID=4&SubSectionID=21&ArticleID=6804&TM=790.226](http://www.hiawathaworldonline.com/main.asp?SectionID=4&SubSectionID=21&ArticleID=6804&TM=790.226)

[Kansas Rural Center \(KRC\): http://www.kansasruralcenter.org/](http://www.kansasruralcenter.org/)

[Center for Engagement and Community Development \(CECD\): http://www.k-state.edu/cecd/](http://www.k-state.edu/cecd/)

[Kansas Farm Bureau: http://www.kfb.org/](http://www.kfb.org/)

[Glacial Hills Resource Conservation and Development \(RC&D\): http://www.glacialhillsrccd.org/](http://www.glacialhillsrccd.org/)