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Goal Statement: To overcome the obstacles for achieving food security and healthy eating in Holyoke, by speaking with the many stakeholders and community members that are affected by this issue.

Scope of the Problem:

Holyoke is an old mill city that has Holyoke has gone through many transitions. The small trading post was only sparsely inhabited until the construction of the Holyoke Canal System turned the small town into a booming industrialized city with the opening of over 25 paper mills and earning it the nickname “Paper City.” The city grew to 60,000 residents in 1920. Irish immigrants, French Canadians, Jews, Poles, and Germans all immigrated following the opportunities for factory jobs. In the 1950s, Puerto Rican and other Latino groups represent the largest minority in the city. An economic recession in Puerto Rico in 1968 brought many Puerto Ricans to Holyoke because of the availability of work in the nearby tobacco fields. Holyoke is now home to the second largest Puerto Rican population of any city in the continental United States. Currently, approximately 40,000 people call Holyoke home, averaging a median household income of about \$30,000. About 40% of the population is of Latino descent.

In 2000, the United States Census bureau noted approximately 26% of the population live below the poverty line. The vast majority of residents who live below the poverty line are children and senior citizens. Holyoke is also among the poorest cities in the State of Massachusetts. Healthy living and food security are some of the greatest challenges faced by residents who live below the poverty line. In reality, the most affordable food is often the unhealthiest food. Families fill their cabinets with food that is mostly comprised of processed sugar, oil, and salt. The consumptions of such foods cause heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension. Furthermore, those who would like to practice healthy eating habits are faced with the obstacle of finding a grocery store. Residents often travel to the neighboring town, Chicopee, to shop for fresh produce at Big Y. It is evident that it is impossible for a resident who is living below the poverty line, with more than one child, and without an automobile in their family to be food secure. Unfortunately, this is the reality that thousands of families face in Holyoke.

Past/Current Policy:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—the federal government provides financial assistance to people who meet income test, which enables them to buy groceries.
- WIC program—the program provides education, food, and health care referrals to pregnant, breastfeeding, breastfeeding women and children up to age five.
- Free school lunch program—they provide free lunch to public school, and nonprofit school students who are eligible.

- HHC- various healthy living programs
- Nuestras Raices—community gardens
- Holyoke Food and Fitness Policy Council Alliance—committee of representatives from various organizations in Holyoke who work to promote healthy living in Holyoke
- Soup kitchens and food pantries (Kate’s kitchen, and the Food Bank of Western, MA)—provide meals and groceries to those in need

Policy Options:

- Greater focus on developing small scale agriculture to meet the needs of Holyoke residents.
- Developing unused land in Holyoke which can be used to create more community gardens.
- Provide housing for those who labor on the farms
- Government authorization for the use of unused land and buildings in Holyoke for the purposes of community empowerment and sustainment.
- Funding from the government and private donors.
- Cooperation from investors and community members

Key Organizations/Individuals:

There are many stakeholders that are invested in the issues of not just having enough to eat, but having the right things to eat. In Holyoke, two of the most active organizations tackling these problems are the Holyoke Health Center, and Nuestras Raices. Within those two organizations are a variety of dedicated and hardworking individuals and citizens who strive towards healthier eating and living despite the structural and economic barriers they face. Other organizations in Holyoke include the local YMCA, as well as Providence Ministries who run Kate’s Kitchen, and Margaret’s Pantry.

Some of the individuals who were instrumental in providing perspective:

- Judy Sopenski- Holyoke Health Center
- Maria Fessia- Nutritionist, Holyoke Health Center
- Maria Salgado- Assistant Director of Programs, Nuestras Raices
- Jeanette Rodriguez- Holyoke Health Center
- Christine Burns- Development/Special Projects, Providence Ministries
- Ralphie- Nuestras Raices

**The many patrons of the Holyoke Health Center who go unnamed were perhaps the most important stakeholder in this issue. They are the ones primarily faced with the issues of inadequate food security.*

Glossary:

Food Security: “The World Food Summit of 1996 defined food security as existing “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life”. Commonly, the concept of food security is defined as including both physical and economic access to food that meets people’s dietary needs as well as their food preferences.

Health: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” (WHO- 1948)

Structural Barrier: Structural barriers are defined as specifically not individual beliefs or preferences, but rather, the “formal and informal rules that regulate an entire system of interaction; and the physical limitations of an environment.” (Ouellet 2005)

Works Cited

Terms

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Holyoke the town

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