

# DIGGING IN: SUPPORTING A HEALTHY, SUSTAINABLE FOOD FUTURE IN OMAHA NATION



A REPORT BY  
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CENTER *for*  
RURAL AFFAIRS

DIGGING IN: SUPPORTING A HEALTHY,  
SUSTAINABLE FOOD FUTURE  
IN OMAHA NATION

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September 2018

Digging in: Supporting a healthy, sustainable food future in Omaha Nation

This report is made possible thanks to the many people who contributed to the research and development of the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative. Thank you for your effort and dedication to this endeavor.

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This project was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Community Foods Project (CFP) grant with support from the First Nations Development Institute (FNDI).

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According to results of the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative, 82 percent of respondents indicated they would be willing to devote time and energy to learning about food traditions. Here, tribal members attend a workshop on Indian corn processing. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

## I. ABOUT THE CENTER FOR RURAL AFFAIRS

The Center for Rural Affairs is a nonprofit organization founded in 1973 by rural Nebraskans concerned about social justice, the loss of economic opportunity in agriculture, and the decline of rural communities. Staff work on food access issues, help develop regional food systems, and teach disadvantaged people how to grow their own food in a sustainable manner for consumption and economic benefit. The organization’s work on national policy focuses on the farm bill addressing work on conservation, beginning farmers, and rural development. The Center for Rural Affairs’ mission is to establish strong rural communities, social and economic justice, environmental stewardship, and genuine opportunity for all while engaging people in decisions that affect the quality of their lives and the future of their communities.

Since 2013, the Center for Rural Affairs has been engaged in community food work with the Omaha Nation. Such work has included training and assistance in gardening, farmers market sales, fresh food preparation, community and elder engagement, and more. Staff has helped more than 100 families start gardens, and assisted the community in opening a farmers market in 2013. This program has significantly increased fresh food access and consumption in the community. We have worked with many organizations and developed key contacts and supporters in each community. As it relates to the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative, the Center for Rural Affairs led the planning, action

step development, and execution of the Community Food Assessment by working alongside community members, Tribal extension, the Tribal college, and health and wellness personnel on the Omaha Indian Reservation in Nebraska (the Reservation).

## II. ABOUT THE OMAHA NATION FOOD SYSTEM INITIATIVE

In November 2015, the Center for Rural Affairs began researching the food system of the Omaha Reservation. This involved primary research, including meeting with knowledge holders and collecting community-based data. This report incorporates existing research relating to the Omaha people, their health, economics, culture, and food system to provide context for the primary research results.

The major goals of the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative were to:

1. Develop and document a broad understanding of the current Omaha Nation food system;
2. Build a community-wide understanding of the impacts of this food system on the community; and
3. Identify strategies and areas of consideration to enable the Omaha people and their neighbors to create a community food plan that will move the community toward realizing self-reliance of their food system.

### III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents the current state of the food system on the Omaha Reservation and identifies strategies and areas of consideration to enable the Omaha people and their neighbors to move toward realizing self-reliance of their food system. As part of the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative, the Center for Rural Affairs, alongside the advisory committee, interviewed and surveyed those living on the Reservation. Data was gathered on the current state of their food system in an effort to build a community-wide understanding of the impacts of this food system on the community.

Data collected from the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative reveals several key findings:

- People living on the Reservation lack access to healthy, affordable, and culturally-appropriate foods;
- Many residents are reliant on food assistance programs, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), to meet their basic food needs; and
- There is overwhelming interest in revitalizing traditional Omaha foods and agriculture.

Based on these findings, the Omaha community should work on developing initiatives to address lack of access to healthy, fresh, and affordable foods on the Reservation – initiatives that also focus on incorporating traditional foods and agricultural practices, including, but not limited to:

- Educating the community about healthy, traditional foods and offering these items at food access points that already exist on the Reservation;

- Creating additional access points to traditional foods, such as mobile grocery stores or veggie vans, community-supported agriculture (CSA), farmers markets, food hubs, and seed banks; and
- Instituting or working to achieve policy changes related to the food system on the Reservation, such as creating a plan to develop and support farm-to-institution sourcing and local food entrepreneurs, and/or bringing about land use policy reform to allow portions of Tribal land to be used to provide for the food needs on the Reservation.

The foregoing initiatives will help the Omaha people create a healthier community, revitalize traditional foods, create a self-sufficient food system, and develop a more resilient Nation.

### IV. WHY IS FOOD IMPORTANT, AND WHY SHOULD THE OMAHA NATION CRITICALLY EXAMINE ITS CURRENT FOOD SYSTEM?

Prior to American colonization efforts, the Omaha people existed in a closed loop food system – they provided for themselves, by their own efforts, from their own land, and without dependence on outside governments and systems. By producing and preserving their own food, the people ensured they had access to abundant sources of healthy food year-round. This closed loop food system was an integral part of Omaha culture, providing sustenance as well as existing as an essential component of spiritual beliefs and ceremonies.

**TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC AVERAGES FOR MACY, WALTHILL, AND STATE OF NEBRASKA**

	Macy	Walthill	Nebraska
Population	1,023	781	1,869,365
Percentage Native American (alone or in combination)	96.7%	81.0%	1.6%
Percentage of population unemployed	35.8%	24.1%	3.2%
Median household income	\$20,536	\$35,149	\$52,997
Percentage of families below poverty level	61.1%	25.5%	8.7%
Percentage of people below poverty level	66.2%	33.1%	12.7%

Today, the Omaha people face numerous barriers to food access, including unemployment, poverty, limited food outlets, and a loss of cultural connection to food. Nebraska overall had a very low unemployment rate of 3.2 percent in 2015; however, 36 and 24 percent of the labor force is unemployed in the two largest Omaha Reservation communities, Macy and Walthill, respectively.<sup>1</sup> More than 66 percent of people in Macy live below the poverty line, compared to 13 percent in the state overall. See Table 1 on page 2. Poverty, unemployment, and income statistics for the town of Walthill are not as extreme as those of Macy, but are also significantly worse than state averages. Macy and Walthill are designated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as low income and low access areas for fresh food accessibility.

These poverty rates significantly affect the health of the Omaha community. Higher rates of poverty are linked to higher obesity rates, which contribute to higher diabetes rates.<sup>2</sup> One in four of Nebraska's Native American adults suffer from diabetes.<sup>3</sup> Many of these issues can be directly linked to the food system in which these communities operate.<sup>4</sup>

The Omaha people largely lack access to healthy foods that could help them combat health challenges. In Macy and Walthill, grocery stores have very limited produce sections. Many of the fruits and vegetables have traveled halfway across the country. The produce is expensive and, as a result, difficult to sell fast enough to keep fresh supplies on the shelves.

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1 "2011 to 2015 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates." U.S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder, Table S2301, [factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_15\\_5YR\\_S2301&prodType=table](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_15_5YR_S2301&prodType=table). Accessed May 26, 2017.

2 Lee, Kristina K. "Native Americans and Diabetes." University of Nebraska - Lincoln, Department of Anthropology, *Nebraska Anthropologist*, Volume 14, Paper 108, Jan. 1, 1997, [digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebanthro/108/](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebanthro/108/). Accessed May 26, 2017.

3 "The Road to Health: A Strategic Plan for Diabetes Prevention and Control in Nebraska, 2010 to 2014." Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, Diabetes Prevention and Control Program, February 2010, [dhhs.ne.gov/publichealth/Documents/stateplan.pdf](http://dhhs.ne.gov/publichealth/Documents/stateplan.pdf).

4 As used in this report, the term "food system" includes production, processing, transport, and consumption of food.

A round trip from the community to the nearest full-service grocery store with lower-priced produce requires at least an hour and a half of driving. Many low-income residents lack access to reliable transportation. The cost of gas and wear and tear on vehicles makes long trips to a grocery store even more financially burdensome. Moreover, there is no public transportation on the Reservation, and the nearest bus service is in Sioux City, Iowa, 31 miles from Macy. Food is currently at its highest price in the past two decades, and will likely increase in the coming years. With these barriers, and as demonstrated by data collected in the Community Food Assessment, the Omaha people have difficulty in accessing quality fresh fruits and vegetables.

Compounding lack of physical access to food, many Omaha people lack knowledge of preparing and eating healthy food. While there are some opportunities for nutrition education on the Reservation – including those through the Diabetes Program, WIC, and others – many community members are unsure of what healthy eating should look like. Even when fresh fruits and vegetables are made available, many people do not know how to cook or prepare them. More importantly, the broad cultural history of economic, food production, artistic, and other activities is retained among



Food security is impacted by proximity to grocery stores and by costs incurred to access fresh and healthy food options. Gardening is one way Omaha community members are able to incorporate fresh options into their diet. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

community members, but specific, practical skills have largely disappeared. Cultural food traditions, such as the use and preparation of traditional foods (which are higher in nutrition than government commodity foods [commodities] or processed fare available at on-Reservation stores), have been lost or are not being passed on from generation to generation. The Omaha people are currently striving to improve their food, health, economy, and environment while also working to reclaim and integrate the cultural context and traditions that once provided for their needs.

## V. OMAHA NATION FOOD SYSTEM INITIATIVE PRIMARY RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

As part of the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative, the Center for Rural Affairs worked with the community to form an advisory committee (made up of Native and non-Native people who have knowledge regarding the traditions of the Omaha people and/or are key stakeholders in the Omaha Nation food system) to help lead the project, contribute data, and ensure community grounding. Advisory committee members were responsible for contributing to and approving the assessment plan, action steps, research activities, and general project structure, as well as assisting with the implementation of the Community Food Assessment.<sup>5</sup> Working with the advisory committee, the Center for Rural Affairs collected extensive data to understand the realities of the current Omaha Nation food system. The perspectives and recommendations of the Omaha people form the basis for this report.

### A. THE COMMUNITY AND STUDY AREA

#### 1. THE RESERVATION

The Omaha Indian Reservation lies mainly in southern Thurston County and northeastern Cuming County in Nebraska, though small areas of the Reservation extend into northeastern Burt County and across the Missouri River into Monona County, Iowa. See Figure 1<sup>6</sup> on page 5. The Reservation is

5 A Community Food Assessment provides a comprehensive snapshot of the way a community grows, processes, distributes, and consumes its food. It also documents the specific ways a community can strengthen the links among all aspects of its food system.

6 “Conducting Food Sovereignty Assessments in

just over 307 square miles. Based on 2010 U.S. Census population projections, the Reservation has a population of 5,194 individuals, with 1,004 of those individuals residing in Macy, Nebraska, the largest community on the Reservation.<sup>7</sup>

While the research and findings of the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative are aimed at addressing food systems issues for the Omaha people, the Center for Rural Affairs sought to include all communities on the Reservation, with specific focus in Macy, Nebraska, where most of the Reservation’s population is located. In addition, at the suggestion of the advisory committee, the Center for Rural Affairs sought input and survey information from Native and non-Native residents living on the Reservation.

#### 2. COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Research indicates the most effective solutions come from direct community involvement in the process.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, when designing the research for the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative, the Center for Rural Affairs and the advisory committee sought to gather local input using community-based participatory research methods.

Community-based participatory research is a partnership approach to research that seeks to equitably involve all partners (for example, community members, organizations, researchers, etc.) in every aspect of the research project, including, but not limited to, their contributions of expertise, experience, decision-making, and ownership. It is utilized to identify critical issues in a community, as well as long-term sustainable solutions for those issues. Use of this method is particularly important when working with historically marginalized people, whose voices have been excluded from official records.

This method of research allows people to give witness to their experiences and make recommendations for change within their communities. In addition, community-based participatory research

Native Communities: On-the-Ground Perspectives.” First Nations Development Institute, 2014, Longmont, Colorado, [firstnations.org/sites/default/files/RFPs/Attachments/On\\_Ground\\_Perspectives.pdf](http://firstnations.org/sites/default/files/RFPs/Attachments/On_Ground_Perspectives.pdf).

7 “2011 to 2015 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates.” U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, [census.gov/tribal](http://census.gov/tribal). Accessed May 26, 2017.

8 Stokols, Daniel. “Translating Social Ecological Theory Into Guidelines for Community Health Promotion.” *American Journal of Community Health Promotion*, 1996, Volume 10, Number 4, Pages 282 to 298.



**FIGURE 1. COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT PROJECT AREA: VICINITY MAP OF MACY, NEBRASKA, ON THE OMAHA RESERVATION**



assists in revealing systemic and social factors behind food systems.<sup>9</sup>

This report includes testimony from the Omaha people. Through surveys, interviews, and input from the advisory committee, the community-based participatory research framework helps build an assessment reflecting the current state of the Omaha food system from the residents’ perspectives.

## **B. PARTICIPANT SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS**

### **1. METHODOLOGY FOR DATA COLLECTION**

To generate baseline data, the Center for Rural Affairs worked with community advisors to develop a 43-question survey, using data collection inquiries and activities recommended in the First Nations Development Institute’s Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative Food Sovereignty

9 Minkler, Meredith, Victor Rubin, and Nina Wallerstein. “Community-Based Participatory Research: A Strategy for Building Healthy Communities and Promoting Health Through Policy Change.” PolicyLink and University of California, Berkeley School of Public Health, 2012, [policylink.org/sites/default/files/CBPR.pdf](http://policylink.org/sites/default/files/CBPR.pdf).

Assessment Tool.<sup>10</sup> The survey included questions relating to household income, types of food eaten, where food is purchased, general food access, food assistance programs, food system concerns/awareness, interest in traditional and local foods, and household health issues, among others. Additionally, interviews were conducted to elicit more detailed responses from survey participants. A \$50 gift card was offered to interviewees as an incentive to participate in the interview process. The specific data collection activities and survey information utilized in the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative were approved by the advisory committee. The surveys and interviews were administered by the Center for Rural Affairs’ research team during a series of events in summer and fall 2016. Given the widespread, rural nature of communities in the project area, surveys were collected at community events, such as the Diabetes Program, pow wows, farmers markets, and program activities at the Carl T. Curtis, Jr. Health Education Center. These gatherings produced the largest number of participants in a concentrated

10 Bell-Sheetter, Alicia. “Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool.” First Nations Development Institute, Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative, 2004, Fredericksburg, Virginia, [indigenousfoodsystems.org/sites/default/files/tools/FNDIFSATFinal.pdf](http://indigenousfoodsystems.org/sites/default/files/tools/FNDIFSATFinal.pdf).

time period. The greatest participation occurred at traditional community events and at activities held in conjunction with other Tribal organizations.

Survey and interview participants were selected at random and ranged in age from 20 to 68. Respondents were given the option of participating in interviews once their surveys were complete. After compiling data, the Center for Rural Affairs reviewed aggregate and individual data identifying noteworthy response patterns. The research team then noted findings and discussions for presentations and recommendations.

## 2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In reviewing survey data, the research team identified several important patterns surrounding food access, food assistance, food system concerns, and diet and traditional foods of the Omaha people. The results include statistics (based on participant responses to the surveys and interviews), a brief analysis, and a discussion of the findings.

### (A) DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

A total of 60 surveys were collected. Twenty-six participants were male and 34 were female. The age and gender breakdown of respondents is depicted in Figures 2 and 3. Participation in the study was fairly well spread among age groups, with the 70 and older population not represented.<sup>11,12</sup> These results represent diverse age ranges within the project area.<sup>13</sup> For the purpose of this study, the responses have not been separated by gender.

11 The 70 and older population also represents the lowest percentage of the population on the Reservation. According to Indian Health Service, American Indian people “have long experienced lower health status when compared with other Americans. Lower life expectancy and the disproportionate disease burden exist perhaps because of inadequate education, disproportionate poverty, discrimination in the delivery of health services, and cultural differences.”

12 “Disparities.” Indian Health Service: The Federal Health Program for American Indians and Alaska Natives, March 2016, [ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/disparities/](https://www.ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/disparities/).

13 For the purposes of the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative, no youth younger than age 18 were surveyed or interviewed. However, the voices of the youth are extremely valuable. Research regarding this segment of the community would be important in understanding youth attitudes toward food and food knowledge, as well as determining the food system needs of the community as it moves forward into the next 50 years.

FIGURE 2. PARTICIPANT AGES – PARTICIPANT SURVEY

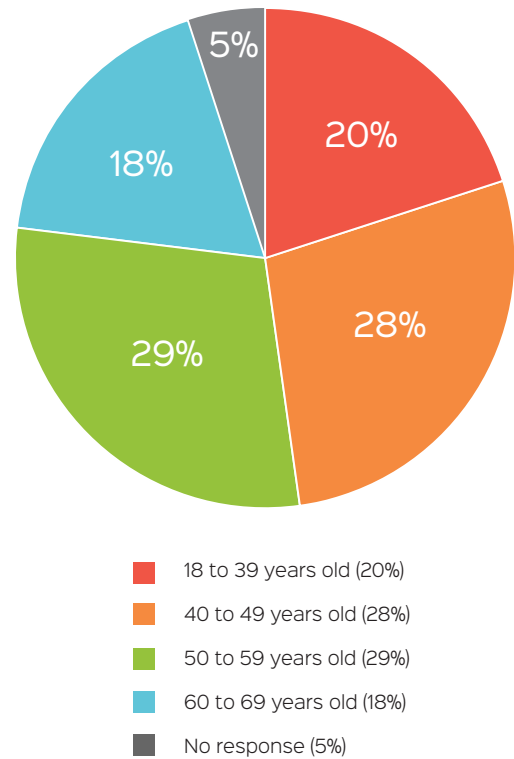
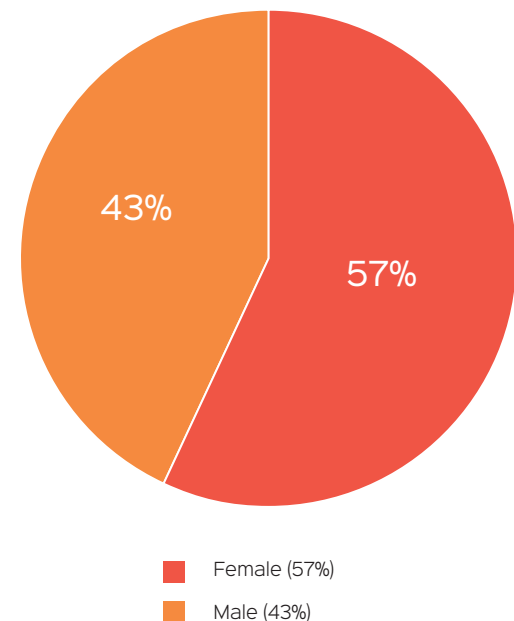


FIGURE 3. PARTICIPANT GENDER – PARTICIPANT SURVEY



## (B) INCOME, EMPLOYMENT, AND POVERTY LINE

Among survey respondents, 52 percent of participants made less than \$34,000 in annual income; 35 percent of total respondents earned \$24,000 or less per year; approximately 18 percent made less than \$14,000 per year; and 33 percent of respondents had an income greater than \$34,000 per year. See Figure 4.

Approximately 23 percent of survey participants were unemployed at the time of the survey, while 77 percent indicated at least one person in their household was employed. In addition to income levels and employment status noted by survey respondents, a family's poverty status is determined by the number of family members living in the home and the family's annual pretax income. An estimated 61 percent of all families and 66 percent of all people in Macy live below the poverty line.<sup>14</sup> See Table 1 on page 2.

## (C) FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMING

Survey participants were asked to indicate how they purchase their food. Fifteen percent of survey respondents noted they use SNAP (formerly known as food stamps) benefits to purchase their food.<sup>15</sup> See Figure 5.

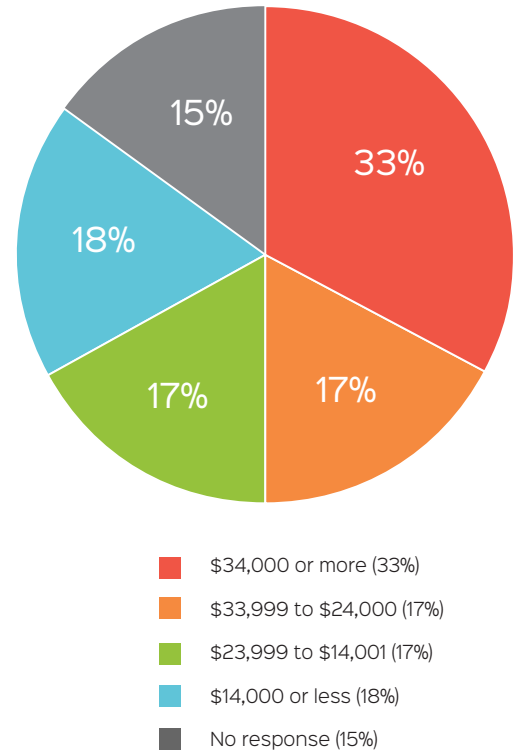
In most cases, nutritional deficiencies correlate with low income, high unemployment, and high rates of poverty. When the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative data for income and employment was analyzed in conjunction with U.S. Census data on the poverty in the two main communities on the Reservation, results showed the community is vulnerable to food insufficiency (lack of adequate access to food). This is particularly evident when 57 percent of survey participants responded "Yes" to the question, "Are you concerned about the consistent supply of foods?"

These survey responses provide some data to support the community's objective of reducing actual and perceived food insecurity as part of its goals. SNAP, WIC, and other supplemental nutrition programs are intended to be just that – supplemental.

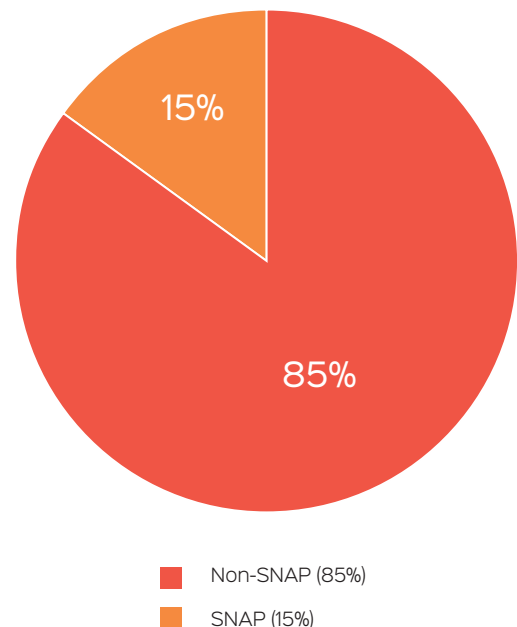
14 "2011 to 2015 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates." U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, [census.gov/tribal](https://www.census.gov/tribal). Accessed May 26, 2017.

15 Based on the household income noted in the surveys and the number of family members living in the home, it appears many survey participants qualify for food assistance programs, even if their survey responses did not indicate they use such programs.

### FIGURE 4. INCOME LEVEL – PARTICIPANT SURVEY



### FIGURE 5. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO REPORTED USING SNAP FOR FOOD PURCHASES



Such programs are incapable of providing enough food to meet a family’s full nutritional needs and cannot be relied on to provide an adequate supply of food for a family. Next steps forward must address ways to provide food security for the people on the Omaha Reservation.

In addition, the future of these food assistance programs must be considered when evaluating a community’s vulnerability to food insecurity and food insufficiency. In 2016, the U.S. House Budget Committee approved a budget plan that would cut SNAP benefits by 20 percent (or more than \$150 billion) over the next 10 years (2017 to 2026).<sup>16</sup> A cut of this magnitude would effectively end and/or reduce food assistance for millions of families.

These proposed cuts come on top of previous cuts to SNAP funding that occurred in November 2013. Facing an unpredictable future of food assistance programming, the community should work toward becoming more food secure and food sufficient, so cuts do not devastate those already exposed to food insecurity.

#### (D) FOOD ACCESS

The survey asked questions to gauge the participants’ access to food. These questions addressed identification of food types not available in the project area, distances traveled, and number of trips to access foods.

##### • FOODS UNAVAILABLE IN THE COMMUNITY

When prompted, “Name three foods you would add to your diet if they were more affordable and accessible,” approximately 46 percent of people surveyed indicated there are foods they would like, but such foods are not affordable or accessible in their community. See Figure 6. Notably, while responses noted a variety of foods, 43 percent of participants described a desire for access to fresh produce (vegetables and fruits). See Figure 7. Several noted an appetite for access to organic fruits and vegetables.

Interview participants on the Omaha Reservation repeatedly commented on the pervasive presence of “junk food,” commenting, “Junk food is readily available,” and “There is a lack of healthy food in our community.”

16 Keith-Jennings, Brynne, and Dottie Rosenbaum. “House 2017 Budget Plan Would Slash SNAP by More Than \$150 Billion Over 10 Years.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 21, 2016, [cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/house-2017-budget-plan-would-slash-snap-by-more-than-150-billion-over-ten](http://cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/house-2017-budget-plan-would-slash-snap-by-more-than-150-billion-over-ten).

FIGURE 6. SURVEY PARTICIPANTS WHO WOULD INCLUDE CERTAIN FOODS IN THEIR DIET IF THEY WERE AVAILABLE IN THEIR COMMUNITY

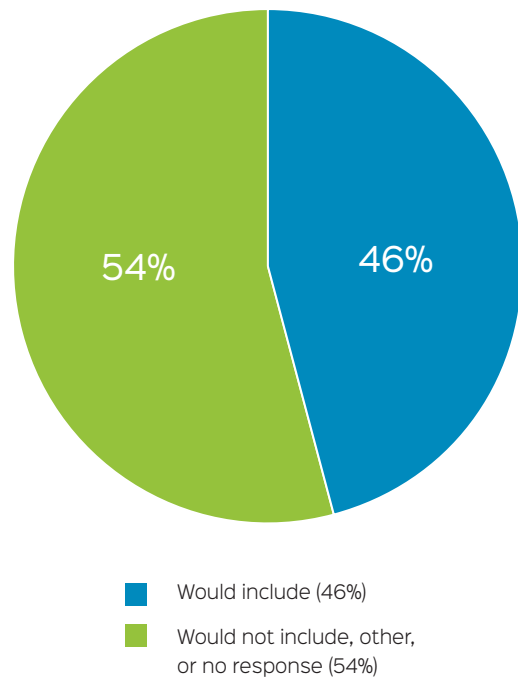
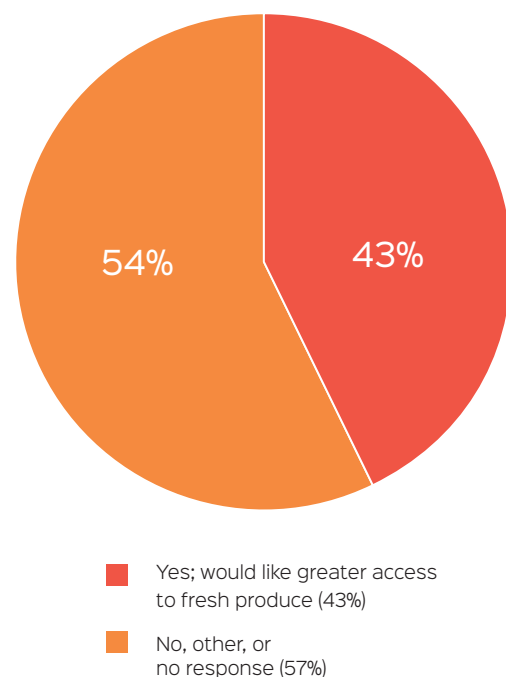
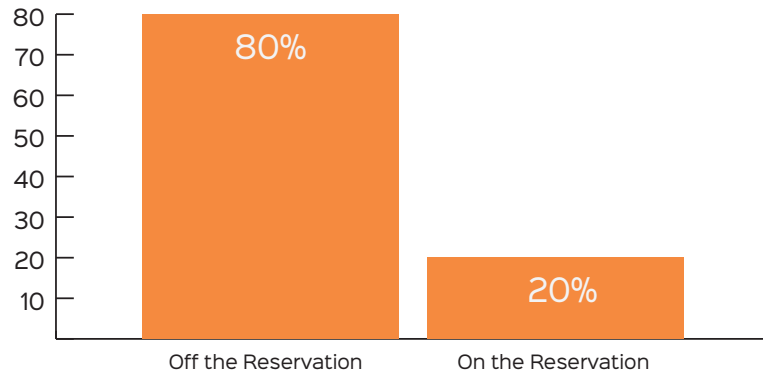


FIGURE 7. PARTICIPANTS WHO DESCRIBED DESIRE FOR GREATER ACCESS TO FRESH PRODUCE



**FIGURE 8. QUESTION: WHERE DO YOU PURCHASE YOUR FOOD?**



**FIGURE 9. LOCATIONS OF MACY, NEBRASKA, AND MOST-USED GROCERY STORE BY OMAHA RESERVATION RESIDENTS (WALMART IN SIOUX CITY, IOWA, 62 MILES ROUND-TRIP)**





Farmers markets allow Omaha community members access to fresh, healthy, affordable food on the Reservation. Events like these create a social environment for community members and a place for local producers to sell their products. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

#### • DISTANCE TO ACCESS FOOD

When asked the question, “Where do you purchase your food?” 80 percent of survey participants indicated travel to off-Reservation stores, primarily Hy-Vee and Walmart, which are located in Sioux City, Iowa, to purchase groceries. See Figure 8 on page 9.

The shortest distance traveled by participants who shop off-Reservation for food is a 62-mile round-trip by individuals traveling from Macy, Nebraska, to Sioux City, Iowa. This equates to travel time of more than an hour to access and return from the closest full-service grocery store. See Figure 9 on page 9.

#### • DISCUSSION ABOUT FOOD ACCESS

Survey findings reveal a majority of participants shop at off-Reservation grocery stores, and most participants travel at least 62 miles round-trip to access foods. According to interviews, many individuals taking the trip are motivated by lower prices, higher quality food, and more options. Nearly half of participants expressed a desire for greater access to fresh produce, but “we have to drive so many miles to get it,” said one interviewee. If additional food options, such as fresh produce, were offered locally at reasonable prices, people

likely would not drive such long distances to off-Reservation grocery stores to access these foods. Food security is impacted not only by proximity to grocery stores, but also by costs incurred to access fresh and healthy food options. Most survey participants incur fairly substantial costs traveling to access food during the month. The time traveling such distances adds additional cost. Moreover, in direct correlation to the lower socioeconomic status of the majority of households on the Reservation, reliable access to a vehicle is an issue for many. Lack of access to a dependable vehicle, particularly for those living great distances from the closest full-service grocery store, can contribute to food insecurity.

The fact that most participants shop off-Reservation is not only important when it comes to food access, but it is also a factor resulting in economic loss for the Omaha Nation as a whole. If a majority of people on the Reservation are traveling off-Reservation to buy groceries, potentially thousands of dollars are lost from the Omaha Nation. These are funds that could have been spent on the Reservation if access points with fresh, healthy, and affordable foods existed. If food dollars can be captured with on-Reservation businesses, those dollars will continue to circulate within the community.

FIGURE 10. QUESTION: WOULD BETTER FOOD IMPACT BETTER HEALTH FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY?

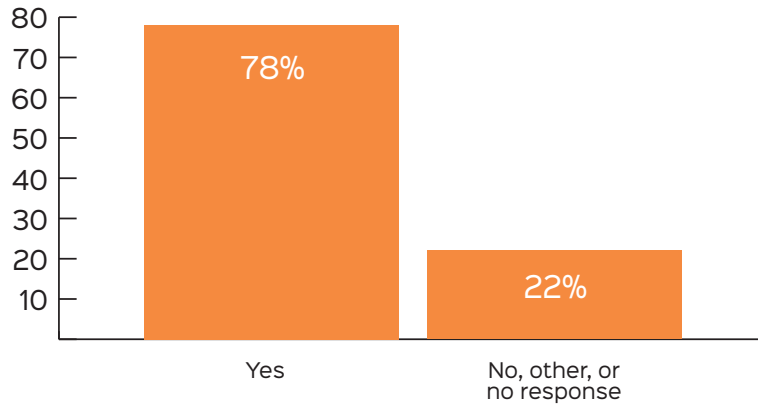
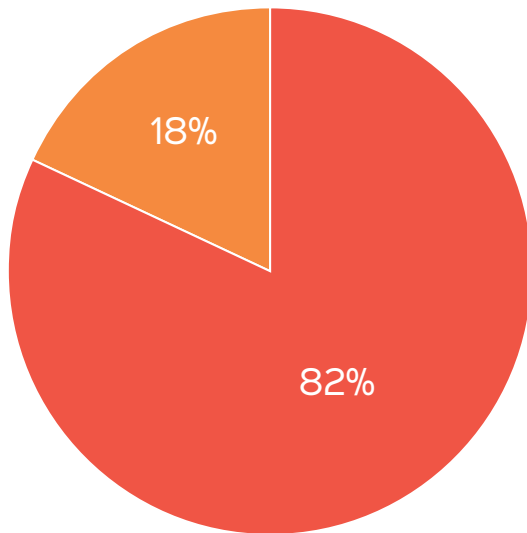
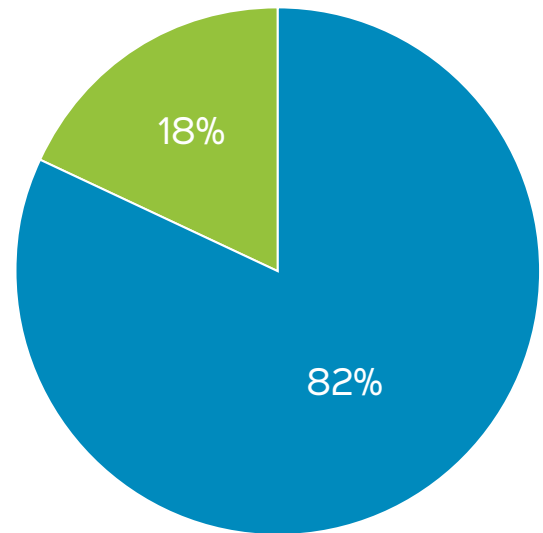


FIGURE 11. QUESTION: DO YOU FEEL THAT AGRICULTURE AND FOOD TRADITIONS HAVE BEEN LOST IN YOUR COMMUNITY?



■ Yes (82%)  
■ No, other, or no response (18%)

FIGURE 12. QUESTION: WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO DEVOTE TIME AND ENERGY TO LEARNING ABOUT FOOD TRADITIONS?



■ Yes (82%)  
■ No, other, or no response (18%)

A self-reliant community food system requires adequate access to food. While the Reservation has a small grocery store and a few other access points to buy food, the fact that a majority of survey participants travel off-Reservation to grocery shop is indicative of a dependence on off-Reservation stores to meet the food needs of the community. To address lack of access to healthy foods on the Reservation, solutions focusing on local food production and distribution, improving and expanding existing access points, and the creation of additional access points will increase availability of healthy foods. These solutions will also assist in keeping economic resources on the Reservation while allowing for the development of a more self-sufficient food economy.

### (E) DIET AND TRADITIONAL FOODS

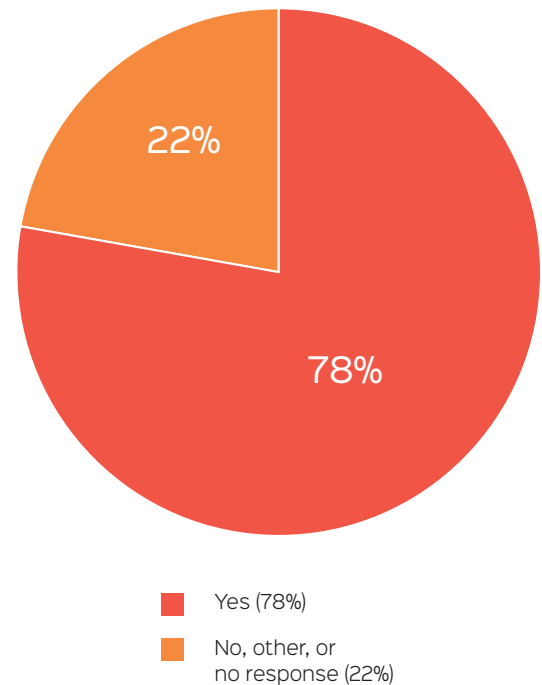
In the surveys, participants were asked about diet and the idea of “traditional foods.” When asked, “Would better food impact better health for you and your family?” 78 percent of respondents answered “Yes.” See Figure 10 on page 11. One interviewee commented, “Traditional foods are healthy foods. But, ready access to junk and fast foods are causing our children to lose their connections to traditional foods.”

Survey participants were asked about accessing “traditional foods,” with the question, “Do you feel that agriculture and food traditions have been lost in your community?” Eighty-two percent of participants indicated “Yes.” See Figure 11 on page 11. Similarly, 82 percent of respondents indicated they are interested in preserving cultural food traditions by responding “Yes” to the question, “Would you be willing to devote time and energy to learning about food traditions?” See Figure 12 on page 11.

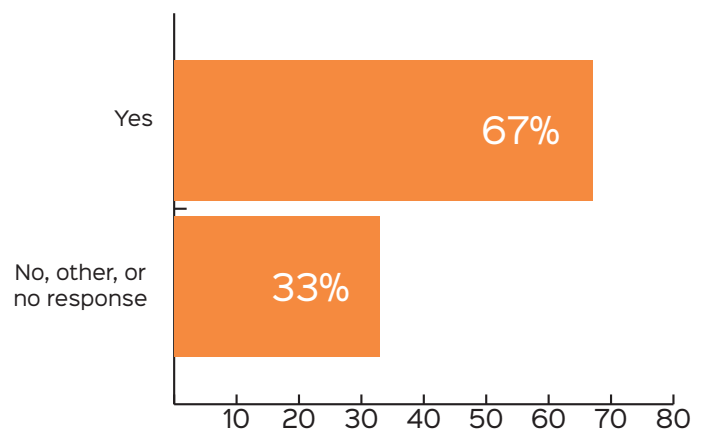
When asked the question, “Are there people in your community who have knowledge of food traditions?” 78 percent of participants indicated “Yes.” See Figure 13. Additionally, when prompted to “Name three foods you would consider to be ‘traditional’ Omaha foods,” the most repeated foods were venison, corn, and squash.

Moreover, when asked to name three foods participants would add to their diet if they were more affordable and accessible, the most repeated foods were fresh fruits and vegetables. Notably, 67 percent of respondents answered “Yes” when asked whether foods are an important part of their community activities. See Figure 14.

**FIGURE 13. QUESTION: ARE THERE PEOPLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY WHO HAVE KNOWLEDGE OF FOOD TRADITIONS?**



**FIGURE 14. QUESTION: ARE FOODS AN IMPORTANT PART OF YOUR GROUNDS OR COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES?**





## • DISCUSSION ABOUT DIET AND TRADITIONAL FOODS

Underlying many of the problems in Nebraska's Native Nations is a loss of identity and culture. Cultural history of past food production and economic activity remains, but specific, practical skills have largely been lost. For example, "I don't know how to preserve what I grow, so I don't have access to what I grow after the season," said one interviewee. Therefore, these communities work to improve their food, health, economy, and environment while also working to reclaim and integrate the cultural context and traditions that once provided for their needs.

An overwhelming majority of the Omaha Reservation's survey participants, 78 percent, indicated the modern Omaha diet lacks access to healthy and nutritious food and has a negative impact on the community's health. Assessment data also revealed that 82 percent of respondents have a strong interest in learning more about traditional foods and in revitalizing traditional foods. Notably, corn, squash, and venison are part of the traditional

Omaha diet and were specifically referenced by many survey participants as foods they would incorporate into their diet if available and affordable.

Many Omaha philosophies on environment, climate, social interaction, health, and wellness, as well as the general culture, are tied to traditional stories and teachings of food. This is reflected in the data, as 67 percent of respondents indicated foods are an important part of their spiritual and community activities. In addition, the assessment data revealed community members know they are accessing foods that are not the best for their diet. The reintroduction and restoration of traditional food knowledge may help address current food and health issues on the Reservation.

According to survey participants, some community members have knowledge of food traditions. This reveals the need to create opportunities which allow knowledge holders to transmit their knowledge to other community members to address some food and health issues faced by the Omaha people.



Bounthy Parker, Center for Rural Affairs garden/orchard market assistant, prepares a food demonstration at a Reservation farmers market in Walthill, Nebraska. Public education revolving around fresh food is one way to engage the Omaha community with their food system. | Photo by Kylie Kai



Community members work together to construct raised, wooden garden beds for those who choose garden above ground versus the traditional, underground garden style. | Photo by Suzi French

### C. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS OF THE COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

Surveys and interviews from the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative reveal that the Omaha people (1) lack access to healthy, fresh, and culturally appropriate foods; (2) rely on food assistance programs, such as SNAP and WIC, to meet some of their basic food needs; and (3) have a strong interest in revitalizing their traditional foods. Based on these findings, the Omaha Nation should work on developing initiatives to address lack of access to fresh and healthy foods on the Reservation – initiatives that also focus on incorporating information about traditional foods

## VI. STRATEGIES AND AREAS OF CONSIDERATION

The Center for Rural Affairs, alongside the advisory committee and other local collaborators, has identified areas of consideration for the Omaha community to move toward realizing a self-sufficient food system. These considerations are based on the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative research project, which was informed by the Community Food Assessment and advisory committee members. In addition, these strategies and recommendations are intended to inform decision-making for the advisory committee, as well as the community at large, as they begin the process of planning and action to create a successful and sustainable food system.

### A. PUBLIC EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Public education and outreach, such as events and activities related to gardening, farming, livestock management, hunting, or foraging for wild edibles and medicinals, are ways to engage more community members with the food system. This can be accomplished through adding activities to existing formal program events, such as Indian Health Services events, diabetes programming, or WIC programming events. In addition, exploring new ways to extend these services may lead to increased community participation.

Based on results of the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative, the community can take several steps toward improving members' lack of access to fresh, healthy food on the Reservation. For example, revitalizing traditional food and agricultural practices while producing local food improves access. Local food can be offered at a lower cost than food accessed off-Reservation, as demonstrated by the farmers market and food basket programs. In addition, making locally-produced foods available through food assistance programs, like commodities, SNAP, and WIC, could help increase food security, while providing culturally appropriate and healthy foods to participants. The formation of food co-ops, food hubs, or additional farmers markets could create additional access points on the Reservation while simultaneously promoting the consumption of healthier foods. Efforts to support local access points should be a priority for future food initiatives in the community (such as farm to institution and other areas of policy reform).

## B. CREATING NEW ACCESS POINTS FOR HEALTHY AND TRADITIONAL FOODS

In addition to educating the community about healthy, traditional foods and offering these items at food access points that already exist on the Reservation, the Omaha community could create more access points to traditional foods.

### 1. MOBILE GROCERY STORES / VEGGIE VANS

Mobile grocery stores or veggie vans are ways that communities can increase access to fresh and healthy foods. Mobile grocery stores are refrigerated vans or trucks that bring affordable produce into communities at a certain time and day. The stores can be an effective way to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to communities that may not otherwise have access to such produce. In addition, the offerings of a mobile grocery store could be expanded to include traditional or locally-produced foods, which brick-and-mortar grocery stores in the area lack.

### 2. COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA)

Another strategy for creating additional access to local and traditional foods is through the development of CSAs on the Reservation. CSAs function akin to a magazine subscription – a customer pays in advance for a subscription to a season of produce deliveries, receiving a “share” from a CSA farmer. The farmer uses that money to grow food, and then delivers a weekly box of produce to the customer. The Food Baskets program, scheduled to be tested on the Reservation in 2018, is a step in this direction.

### 3. FARMERS MARKETS

Farmers markets create a social environment for community members to access healthy foods and a place for local producers to sell their products. In 2013, with support from the Center for Rural Affairs and Nebraska Indian Community College, the community opened a farmers market at sites in Macy and Walthill. In 2016, the farmers market hosted 10 vendors and 2,200 customers, marking a steady increase in numbers since its first season.

Data from the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative reveals survey participants are interested in local farmers markets; 92 percent of respondents said they would shop at a farmers market, if one was nearby. This interest in local food options, in conjunction with the significant distances traveled by many to grocery shop, reveals a need for local

access points to affordable, fresh, healthy food. If the food is fresh and affordable, community members are willing to support local farmers and gardeners, which benefits the Omaha Nation economy.

These food system activities are a great start, but leave much of the local food system on the Reservation in need of development. With so little food grown and sold in the community, food entrepreneurship is currently very difficult.

### 4. FOOD HUBS

The National Food Hub Collaboration defines a food hub as “a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of... food products primarily from local and regional producers in order to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.” Food hubs are networks that allow local growers to collaborate on marketing and distribution – essentially the producers are “stronger together,” as they can supply more produce to meet larger scale wholesale or retail orders. These hubs create an opportunity for communities to simultaneously improve access to local foods and create business for local farmers, distributors, and retailers.



Based on the results of the Omaha Nation Food System Initiative, there is overwhelming interest in revitalizing traditional Omaha foods and agriculture. Teaching individuals about growing traditional foods will create a more self-sufficient food system. | Photo by Suzi French

At planning meetings with the advisory team for the Center for Rural Affairs' food systems work in Macy, team members have raised discussions about community food and food entrepreneurship opportunities. Frequently, attendees of the Center for Rural Affairs' garden and market training workshops talk about food systems, growing, selling, distribution, and small scale garden-to-market selling opportunities. Accordingly, there is interest in the community that may support creation of a food hub and lead to additional economic opportunities for community members. Despite the need for coordination and capacity to sustain a prolonged food hub development process, these are important goals toward creating a more self-sufficient food system.

## 5. NATIVE SEED BANKS

The Omaha people can further efforts to protect culturally important plant materials through the creation of a community seed bank. Seed banks operate by allowing a person to "check out" seeds, rootstocks, or other plant materials, taking them home to grow out, then saving seeds or rootstocks to give back following harvest. Native seed banks not only protect such plant materials, but also provide farmers, gardeners, and other growers access to seeds.

## C. AREAS OF POLICY REFORM

### 1. FARM TO INSTITUTION

In addition to the health, poverty, and employment challenges faced by the Omaha people, Macy's school districts are in the 90th percentile in Nebraska for free and reduced school lunch participation.

Despite these barriers, the Omaha people are working hard to improve their health and economic situations. Within the community, interest in food entrepreneurship is growing, and there is great potential to increase local food production. Direct-to-consumer sales are a way to build economically beneficial local food systems while providing many community members with healthy food. In addition, many producers have expressed interest in selling to institutions, where they know the food they grow will feed other community members. Institutional markets are an ideal direct market for growers in Reservation communities. Many institutions on the Reservation, including schools, senior centers, nursing homes, jails, and other programs, feed community members on a regular basis. Because many community members rely on these institutions for their meals, local growers sourcing to these institu-

tions could reach a broad audience with healthy, locally-produced food. Institutions also have the funds and capacity to purchase locally, whereas many individuals are unable to buy from growers who cannot accept SNAP, WIC, or other forms of supplementary food purchasing assistance. However, food entrepreneurs within the community are relatively new to food production and need training and support to reach the institutional market.

A plan to develop and support farm-to-institution sourcing and local food entrepreneurs in the Omaha community would be a large step in the right direction for developing a self-sufficient, healthy food system. This could include programming designed to educate institutions on sourcing and utilizing fresh produce; efforts connecting growers with local grocery stores and gas stations to increase outlets that offer local fresh produce; and Tribal policy reforms requiring Tribal properties and programs, such as casinos, institutions, convenience stores, and grocery stores, to purchase produce from local growers.

### 2. LAND USE POLICY REFORM

One avenue for food system expansion is through Tribal land policy. The Omaha Nation owns more than 27,000 acres of land. Most of the farmland is rented to non-Tribal farmers and is used for row crop farming operations. The land provides income to the Tribe, but fails to adequately address or provide for food needs on the Reservation. The Omaha people can focus on land use, including envisioning a new purpose for a portion of the land as a cornerstone of a healthful local food system. The issues of jobs, economics, and resources all could be addressed through land use policies as long as goals are set requiring actions different from the current state. The aforementioned items are just a few areas where policy changes can help in creating a more self-sufficient food system on the Reservation, though many other possibilities exist.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The Omaha Nation is poised to take the next steps toward creating a healthier community, revitalizing traditional foods, building up a self-sufficient food system, and developing a more resilient Nation.

We hope this report serves as a resource to start conversations about the Omaha Nation food system and brings the community together to understand its needs, envision a better food future, and lay the foundation for realizing that future.

