



ORANGE COUNTY
FOOD COUNCIL

Community Food Access Assessment

SEPTEMBER 2022

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This Community Food Access Report summarizes an assessment process that began late in 2021 and finished in July 2022.

The Report provides information about the important resources that informed our methods and lays out a detailed list of Community Expert recommendations. The purpose of this assessment was to focus on the expertise and experiences of those most impacted by food insecurity. We intentionally avoided more traditional assessment practices such as surveys or an overreliance on quantitative data. Instead, our focus was on listening to the community and honoring their experiences as subject-matter expertise. We begin this report with some key definitions, a bit of food insecurity data to help us define the issues we aim to address, and a summary of our methods. These sections are only meant as introductions. The most essential part of this report is the Community Experts Recommendations section because, ultimately, the goal is to get closer to the solutions by working with those closest to the problems. A longer summary of the quantitative and qualitative data we collected during this process plus additional content from a two month long photovoice project will be shared in October.

KEY DEFINITIONS

- **FOOD INSECURITY:** Food security is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture as access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life¹. Please note that throughout this report we will use terms like ‘hunger’ and ‘food access’ interchangeably to describe the many issues and causes connected to food insecurity.
- **FOOD APARTHEID:** Farmer and activist Karen Washington developed the term. In her words, “people use the words ‘food desert’ to describe low-income communities who have limited access to food. In fact, we do have access to food—cheap, subsidized, processed food. The word ‘desert’ also makes us think of an empty, absolutely desolate place. But there is so much life, vibrancy, and potential in these communities. I coined the term ‘food apartheid’ to ask us to look at the root causes of inequity in our food system on the basis of race, class, and geography. Let’s face it: healthy, fresh food is accessible in wealthy neighborhoods while unhealthy food abounds in poor neighborhoods. ‘Food apartheid’ underscores that this is the result of decades of discriminatory planning and policy decisions.”
- **COMMUNITY EXPERT:** Someone with lived experience that is directly and oftentimes most impacted by the issues, programs, and/or policies connected to food insecurity. For the purpose of this assessment, we also defined a Community Expert as someone with this expertise living in Orange County, North Carolina.
- **COMMUNITY CONSULTANT:** A Community Expert (see above definition) with additional experience in advocacy, systems change, programming, and policy. The Community Consultant was hired at the beginning of the process to help advise the assessment team’s work, develop the design of the assessment, co-facilitate Community Expert Sessions, recruit participants, and be liaison between the assessment team and community.
- **ASSESSMENT TEAM:** The group of UNC researchers from the Food, Fitness and Opportunity Research Collaborative (FFORC) and the Orange County Food Council coordinator who supported this process from start to finish.

¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/>

INTRODUCTION

Food security for all is a goal Orange County continuously strives for; however, 1 in 10 county residents experience food insecurity as of 2020¹. Food insecurity is caused by many factors. Social inequities like household and neighborhood poverty, a lack of investment in the built environment and transportation, limited or zero access to grocery stores, and government neglect of low-income and marginalized communities heavily impact one's ability to access the food they need². While the County outperforms the state as a whole (2020 prevalence of food insecurity was 10.2% in Orange County and 12% in North Carolina), food insecurity is still a critical public health issue as it can result in negative health and social outcomes.

Orange County has prioritized food justice through initiatives aiming to increase access to fresh affordable food in neighborhoods experiencing food insecurity. Oftentimes these neighborhoods are described as “food deserts,” evoking an arid, empty environment with limited resources. Using this language also indicates a natural state rather than a built environment. The term “food desert” does not adequately describe the communities experiencing hunger or the decades of discriminatory policies and disinvestment that has resulted in poor neighborhoods. For these reasons, farmer and food activist Karen Washington coined the phrase food apartheid³. While Orange County has the highest per capita income in the state, those experiencing food insecurity are not seeing the abundance⁴. Therefore, food apartheid is a more appropriate term to acknowledge that inequity has been perpetuated in Orange County by a food system that favors wealthier, white residents. We must reckon with the disparities perpetuated by our systems and acknowledge that there are two parallel Orange Counties – one with wealth and favored by systems, and one without.

As of 2020, 14,970 county residents experience food insecurity. Of those residents, 40% have incomes at or below 200% of the poverty threshold. Black and Latinx residents experience poverty over twice as often as white residents, and residents in historical communities of color are being pushed out or forced to prioritize the high cost of housing, property taxes, and sewer and water bills over nutritious food⁵. Communities like Perry Hill, Northside, Pine Knolls, Tin Top, and Roger Eubanks have experienced generations of disinvestment practices and are now experiencing the high costs and pressures of gentrification. Refugee and immigrant communities experience many of these same inequities. Food insecurity has many causes and can be considered a symptom of other systemic failures. An additional investment of over \$9 million is needed annually to ensure all residents experiencing food insecurity can purchase just enough food to meet their needs⁶.

It is time to take a more intersectional and community-focused approach to making data informed decisions. Traditional quantitative data and survey results have been shared in reports by various County departments on a regular basis, yet food insecurity rates have only decreased 2.5% from 2017 to 2020 (much of which may be attributed to COVID-19 investment that is soon to end or the out-migration of community members unable to afford the rising cost of living in Orange County⁷). Meanwhile, low-income and marginalized communities continue to have data extracted and see little change in their day to day lives. A food justice and community-focused approach to addressing food insecurity involves shifting power to those most impacted. This approach involves asking deeper questions like, “why are people hungry” instead of only “how many people are hungry?” Therefore, this assessment process was designed to engage community members, those with lived experience of hunger, as the experts that they are. From this point forward you will not see any more quantitative data. The data that is shared is the experience and recommendations of Community Experts and should be considered in future “data-informed decisions.”

We hope this report brings decision-makers closer to community wisdom and the subject-matter expertise that is needed to address the root causes of hunger. Community Experts shared their time, stories, and knowledge with us over ten months through various project spaces and conversations. A primary “theme” we heard repeated throughout this process was a need for decision-makers to truly understand the experience of food, housing, and economic insecurity. This written report is just one way of providing direct feedback from Community Experts. We encourage decision-makers to consider additional ways to more deeply understand the issues and to connect with the people and organizations that are rooted in community⁸. We urge those with the power to make important decisions about other's lives to listen to the Community Expert Recommendations in this report and to do so with a sense of humility, empathy, and respect.

1 <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2020/overall/north-carolina/county/orange>

2 <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/food-insecurity>

3 <https://www.karenthefarmer.com/faq-index>

4 <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/orangecountynorthcarolina,NC/POP010210>

5 <http://www.uncinclusionproject.org/documents/orangecountyreportfinal.pdf>

6 <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2020/overall/north-carolina/county/orange>

7 <http://www.uncinclusionproject.org/documents/orangecountyreportfinal.pdf>

8 <https://metropolitix.org/Community-Rooted-Organizations-Enhanced-Accountability-and-Capacity-Building.html>

METHODS

In order to examine food access and hunger in Orange County, a strict focus was placed on engaging with Community Experts to learn what efforts are working and where improvements are needed on behalf of the County and County funded organizations. Community Experts are defined as people living within Orange County who have lived experience with hunger. Community Experts were identified by the assessment team's Community Consultant who has deep roots and relationships within the community along with lived experience with issues of food access. The Community Consultant played an important role throughout the entire assessment process from design to implementation to report development. The Consultant helped advise the assessment team's work, recruit participants, co-facilitate sessions, and be a consistent liaison and relationship-builder between the assessment team and Community Experts. All Community Experts were compensated for their time and expertise and this compensation was commensurate with an average hourly consulting fee (\$40 to \$50 / hour). The Community Consultant was also compensated for their role. Unfortunately, we did not have the funding available to compensate for their work at the appropriate rate, but the Consultant felt strongly that the majority of the funding should go to supporting the group of Community Experts involved in the process.

Prioritizing the direct community feedback that is presented in this report will actively challenge the white supremacy characteristics of Paternalism and Qualified that scholar Tema Okun includes in her work on white supremacy characteristics. These characteristics show up in our common practice as:

- Decision-makers and those in power do not understand the viewpoint and experience of those they are making decisions for. There may even be a sense that they are making decisions because they are more qualified.
- Power is hoarded and those without are not included in decision-making processes. When they are included, there is still further analyses and decision-making that occurs without their knowledge or presence.
- Quantitative data is extracted from impacted communities and regarded as the holy grail when making decisions. These numbers have more say in the process than the people in the communities they were extracted from.
- Lived experience is not regarded as the knowledge that it is. Cultural and community ways of knowing are not considered in decision making and policy¹.

These and other white supremacy characteristics are deeply rooted in any data-collection and assessment process. In this Methods section of the report, we will define the assessment teams process. Additional resources that informed our work can be found in the Acknowledgments section and throughout the report as footnotes.

¹ <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/one-right-way.html>

The assessment process consisted of 3 main steps, as follows:

1. Collection of Budget Data

Neoliberalism and Individualism are white supremacy manifestations that show up in our food system as the focus on personal responsibility, that hard work can combat hunger, and that food charity and food distribution are enough. This takes away government responsibility and shifts blame from the failure of our systems to the communities experiencing food insecurity. To combat this, we wanted to know where county funding was going and if community experts were seeing the results¹.

We examined Orange County budgets between 2017 to Spring 2022 to see how much money was going to programs related to food access. Because we recognize that many factors influence if someone is able to access food, such as access to housing and transportation, we decided that if money was connected to any of the following categories, it could be considered food access funding:

- **Food:** Funding that directly supports emergency food programs, charitable food programs, and food-based aid and assistance.
- **Transportation:** Funding that can impact food access when routing public transit.
- **Housing:** Funding to support housing expenses and in turn free up funding to pay for food.
- **Economic Development:** Funding that promotes economic development initiatives, local food businesses (including food production and agriculture), creates an economic tax/revenue source, or provides incentives to attract more businesses (i.e., tax incentives for a new grocery store or development).
- **Multiple:** Falling into more than one category listed above.



Figure 1. Comprehensive Food Access Criteria that guided our budget analysis.

¹ <https://wfpc.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2022/05/Whiteness-Food-Movements-Research-Brief-WFPC-October-2020.pdf>

Funding information was collected and compared by these categories. After budget information was collected, it was separated by type of program: institutional vs community and charitable organizations. Institutional programs included any funding going to programs operated by local or federal government, and community programs included any funding going to non-profit and community based organizations. American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding was identified and compared across the five categories identified in Figure 1. This information was then compiled in a workbook that was distributed to the Community Experts prior to the Community Expert sessions.

It is hard to judge food access investments and interventions on budget data alone. In addition to budget data, the assessment team originally aimed to collect both internal department policies and programmatic policy information in each of the five areas in order to develop a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the systems in place. After reaching out to numerous department directors and staff members, it became clear that it would be challenging to collect policy information. The two biggest challenges to collecting policy data included 1) staff not knowing how or not having the capacity to organize all policy information and 2) limited or no response from some departments. Policy data can be difficult to organize because of the layers and interactions between town, county, state, and federal policies that are implemented at the local level. Community Experts are still interested in more policy transparency from the County.

2. Photovoice

The narrative that “communities can’t take care of themselves” assumes that people experiencing hunger are lazy and need to be helped by those with more “knowledge.” This is rooted in race and class stereotypes, and results in outside, often white-led, organizations deciding what is best for communities. Photovoice combats this by embracing the lived experience and knowledge of communities experiencing food insecurity and uses photography as a medium to illuminate structural inequalities².

Photovoice is a qualitative research approach that uses the power of photography and personal experience to spark conversation and advocate for change in the community. The Photovoice process was facilitated by five Master’s of Public Health candidates completing coursework in a Photovoice class at UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health in a series of 4 sessions. Prior to each meeting, four Community Experts decided on a question to prompt the photos and videos they would take for the week. The guiding questions were as follows:

- How does healthy eating affect communities differently?
- How do disparities in food access, quality and availability affect our ability to be healthy?
- How does housing, transportation, education and cost impact the types of food we can get and how we prepare them?

Community experts then shared their photos with the group and selected one photo to guide their conversation using the **SHOWED** method: What do you **S**ee here? What is really **H**appening here? How does this relate to **O**ur lives? **W**hy does this condition **E**xist? What can we **D**o about it? The Photovoice facilitators recorded and transcribed these conversations, and used qualitative analysis methods to code the conversations and identify common themes. These themes were shared in a presentation, and were used along with direct quotes to inspire the poetry framing this report. The Photovoice conversations made it clear that the gap between community wisdom and policy decisions on food access and insecurity needs to be bridged. This informed our open conversation approach for the community expert sessions that followed.

² <https://wfpc.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2022/05/Whiteness-Food-Movements-Research-Brief-WFPC-October-2020.pdf>

3. Community Expert Sessions:

Another result of Paternalism shows up as the failure to listen to the community. Often organizations and government bodies pre-determine what “best practice” should be applied, and community members are not trusted to determine their own solutions or know what is best. Community-led solutions require not just listening to community feedback, but shifting power to community members and allowing them to guide each step of the conversation³.

Four sessions were held with a larger group of Community Experts to analyze County budget data from 2017–2022, share experiences, and develop key recommendations for decision-makers. Community Experts from a broad range of backgrounds, including those from rural, urban, Black, Latinx, Refugee and Immigrant communities, participated in this process. These Experts represented those most impacted by food insecurity. During the sessions, budget data was presented and Community Experts engaged in conversation about what issues are important to them, if they see this money from the budget impacting their community, and where there are clear gaps in county priorities and community needs. The first session focused primarily on sharing budget data and asking the Community Experts to help design the following 3 sessions – this included developing a shared community agreement between all Experts and outlining some general goals. The following 3 sessions were primarily guided by the Community Experts. This approach varied from a traditional focus group format because Experts guided the conversation, allowing for a more open space and deeper analysis. They chose which areas to focus on, what conversations to have, and when to begin developing recommendations. The result is a list of candid recommendations and solutions to mitigate food insecurity substantiated by quotes directly from Community Experts.

Assessment Team Practices

The team met weekly to evaluate our approach and adapt in order to best suit community needs and Community Expert feedback. Constant iteration was a vital part of the process in order to center equity and ensure that the community was guiding the report. The assessment team used Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation as a reflection tool to gauge where power was being held⁴. The aim of this report is to provide direct community recommendations as the community experts shared them. While we have adapted Community Expert feedback into a report format, we have attempted to minimize any filtering and interpretation that has not come directly from the Experts. This required an additional Community Expert session to ensure that recommendations were being captured accurately. Additionally, the team’s Community Consultant oversaw report writing and the Consultant along with Experts provided edits before the final report was released. Despite these efforts, there is still a level of interpretation that had to be done to meet the request for this assessment by the county. We recommend that county officials support additional community-led efforts and qualitative research to inform policy and funding distribution with an equity lens.

³ <https://wfpc.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2022/05/Whiteness-Food-Movements-Research-Brief-WFPC-October-2020.pdf>

⁴ <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Categories

- I. **Direct Service Programs:** includes direct service programs like school foods, transportation, and charitable food programs.
- II. **Deeper Investments in Ending Hunger:** includes issues like housing, economic development, and other wrap-around services.
- III. **Feedback for Decision-Makers:** feedback specifically aimed at decision-makers and how decisions are made.

I. DIRECT SERVICE PROGRAMS

School food programs should be improving. This is a top priority for Community Experts.

“Our community’s polite... If I complain about what is handed to me, it’s biting the hand that feeds you. But at this point, our community is poor, but I’m not going to let you give us scraps. This is why the community is not complaining to the school because they’re thankful that you’re giving them something, but they should deserve better... We are polite because you’re giving us something for free. But just because you’re giving us something for free, doesn’t mean you can give us bad milk”

Recommended actions:

- *Increase funding for fresh foods and foods that appeal to students to eat, this may require additional funding for purchasing foods and hiring staff to prepare the kinds of foods that any decision-maker or elected official would want to eat themselves or serve their children.*
- *A commitment to long-term investments must be made, instead of programs that are advertised as a big change but do not feel truly impactful for families and children.*
- *During summer foods programs, allow children and families to pick up food and eat it when they need/want to eat it. Children should not be forced to eat lunch outside in the heat during the summer, they should have the option to take it home to share or eat it later. This may require additional funding and to forgo funding from state/federal sources, but this kind of undignified programming should not exist in one of the wealthiest counties in the state.*

Existing programs are appreciated but the following changes are needed.

“I’m like great, it’s provided, but also when UNC students are out, the bus isn’t running that much either. It’s based on UNC students and not based on the Chapel Hill people... That’s not realistic for the community here to use a bus because some, on the holidays, not running and low-income families they got to go to work”

Recommended Actions:

- *The buses do not meet the actual needs of the community. A consistent bus schedule needs to be offered that works for community members working non-traditional work hours and is offered year round instead of centering around UNC students and the University calendar.*

“The vegetables that they’re giving out, they’re overripe, you know, they won’t last but a day or two. They’re a bit moldy...the packs of meats they’re like on the last day of expiration, and then you’ll get home and they’re already starting to melt, and then you don’t know if you should freeze it or use it. And it’s not being ungrateful. They’re doing the best they can, but I would think it would be better if, instead of getting a large quantity, let’s give maybe a smaller quantity”

Recommended Actions:

- *Food programs provide supplemental support but experts say there are three main issues with accessing food charity:*
 - *There should be more choice to ensure the types of foods offered/being provided are appropriate and actually used by the recipient*
 - *More fresh foods are needed the perishable foods currently being provided are not filling the need*
 - *Too often fresh food from charity distributions are either rotten or very dirty and not something you would find being sold. When fresh foods are offered through charity programs, they should be the same quality that would be sold at a store or market.*



Figure 2. Rotten produce from a county food distribution program photographed by a Community Expert.

We must improve language and translation services.

“I seen it when a message comes out, their own language comes like two weeks later, a month later, when people who able to speak language already get all of the funding, all of the mutual assistance, they’ve been connected to resource already. And if you have these language barriers you three steps behind that going into like housing, like the EHA emergency housing.”

Recommended Actions:

- *County materials are often translated after being released, causing delays for those who do not speak English. All materials should be translated before being released so that refugee and immigrant community members are not put further behind. Language advocates and language services should be made available to increase communication outside of written language and provide additional context to understand complicated programs, resources, applications, and processes.*

We must streamline Federal Nutritional Services when possible and do a better job of providing information about these services especially when changes occur.

“For me, language piece is a big thing... It doesn’t matter how long to be in United States. When you don’t have a chance to go to school, it’s going to be everyday chaos to figure out how to use your SNAP, how to figure out your WIC. The age changes, like things [products] will start changing and you can only buy certain thing...it’s like you buy, and then scan it, and you swipe and it’s not what the WIC provided because you don’t know what the [acceptable] brand is. Then family are using their own pocket money instead of WIC. It’s like, who do they report to when they’re going through that hardship?”

Recommended Actions:

- *More direct and consistent support and/or communication should be available at a local level to help individuals navigate food programs and federal systems. Community Experts say programs like WIC (Women Infants and Children) and other FNS (Federal Nutrition Services like SNAP/EBT) programs are difficult to navigate and even more challenging if English is your second or third language. Changes occur in programs without effective communication to the participants. For example, WIC may choose to no longer cover an item or specific brand that a participant has purchased before, even something purchased recently using WIC funds, and suddenly they are checking out at the grocery store and are forced to pay out of pocket or remove the item.*

We need a more effective, dignified, and direct way of providing food assistance.

“I’ve got specific people’s faces in my mind when I’m speaking...seeing their struggles, having to help them myself when I could just get to the grocery store...the helplessness on someone’s face having to depend on these [programs]... a lot of these people they don’t want to have to ask nobody for nothing, you know what I’m saying? And they will go without sometimes just cause they don’t want to have to ask nobody. They are paying their taxes and they’ve been working all their life. They just need a little help. They don’t want a handout. They just want help.”

Recommended Actions:

- In one of the wealthiest counties in North Carolina, we should not be struggling with hunger or undignified ways of receiving food assistance. Experts recommend a service similar to Instacart to be available as a public program. People should be able to choose their foods and schedule when to pick up or receive them. This would help increase access and dignity for those receiving food program support, especially for people who are homebound or need delivery services due to transportation issues. The proposed online service should allow for SNAP/EBT to be used.*



Figure 3. Dirty produce from a county food distribution program photographed by a Community Expert.

II. DEEPER INVESTMENTS IN ENDING HUNGER

There needs to be a focus on longer term changes not just immediate-needs based services.

“A lot of these people, they will find food and they will find housing, but they can never get ahead, you know, uh, because they had never be able to afford to live here. They’re stuck in that area.”

Recommended Actions:

- *Experts recommend focusing on reducing poverty, not just direct service programs that meet immediate needs. The County needs to invest significant funding in longer term supports that enable people to change their economic status over time.*

Economic programs that serve as stepping stones and enable a clear pathway to a sustainable economic status for households and individuals are essential.

“There’s a saying that I learned back in school, if you feed a man a fish he’ll eat for one day, if you teach a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime...The reason why I’m here is because yeah, I know there’s money and there’s a lot of money. Thankfully, we live in a very wealthy area... They pay high taxes for their multimillion dollar homes, and then you walk like a streetlight and then you’re in the lower income housing and whatnot. So the money is there, but I feel like we also need to find ways to help our community help themselves because we can’t just continue to provide, for example, the groceries we’re providing. The grocery money is there. The families are thankful they’re feeding their families, their children, but is that really helping in the long run? What if they continue to need this help? They don’t have a way to feed their own household.”

Recommended Actions:

- *Community Experts recommend creating economic support programs that enable someone to advance in their profession/employment and make existing incentive programs more accessible and with better wrap-around supports. Support programs could pay for specific educational or certification programs, provide gas vouchers, expand free wifi/internet access, and provide child-care programs or subsidies. There are community members and families falling through the cracks because they may not be eligible for certain federally funded programs but are still struggling to find stable housing, good employment options, and be able to afford food. We cannot let people fall through these cracks.*

Housing is an important part of these longer term solutions.

“There’s two houses in my neighborhood that are half a million dollars right now. Like, and this neighborhood is all one level, maybe two or three bedrooms. And since the market is.. so it’s a buyer’s market, no one would ever move into my neighborhood that looks like me. They’re going to constantly not look like me and be in a different class than me when they move into this neighborhood, when the neighborhood wasn’t like that before.”

“What I’ve noticed is living here forever, back in the day, you can go to your neighbor and ask them for something. But the gentrification is really tearing down neighborhoods...tearing neighborhoods apart. Like there’s probably only 4 original Black families in my neighborhood when there was usually like 20 or 30 and you can’t go and borrow something or give your neighbor a ride because your neighbors don’t interact with you anymore.”

Recommended Actions:

- *Community Experts recommend that any time a new development is being proposed or built, a certain number of new apartments or homes must be set aside for subsidized/affordable housing. Experts see gentrification tearing apart communities and neighborhoods being broken up because of taxes and cost of living. There needs to be a publicly accessible list of existing policies that combat the harms of gentrification.*

III. FEEDBACK FOR DECISION MAKERS

This section addresses community expert feedback that is applicable to County operations and the state of our County as a whole. Therefore, there are no specific recommended actions listed. This feedback should be considered in all actions the County takes to improve food access and center equity.

“We’re not giving out handouts, but, um, if there’s more money to be shared, then share more money. You know what I’m saying? I worked hard all my life and I, you know, and I had to do this and I had to do that...in this situation, we have a whole lot more resources, so the struggle should not be as bad.”

- We are a rich community and all the necessary resources seem to be here. No one should be going hungry or experiencing housing insecurity in a community like Orange County.

“We want to know the data that they’re getting. We want to know what the County is getting as data from these organizations that they said that they’re doing so good, but our community is saying that it’s not working.”

- The community needs to know what kind of data the county is getting from the service providers that show their program’s impacts and how this informs their decisions for funding and other priorities. Community Experts need to be included to ensure the data and information accurately reflect community experiences. There is a desire for accountability and to understand how these decisions are being made. If a program has existed for 10 or 20 years, what are the examples of directly impacted community members that feel supported by this program? Testimonials and other metrics of success should be shared openly with the public.

“Can we get your boss to walk around the town to see what we want them to see? Cause I feel like you can read on a paper but you can’t see it.”

- Elected officials and decision-makers should participate in simulation courses to make sure they understand the experiences of those in the community they are intended to serve. They need to ride the bus for a day and try to get to where they need to be on a Sunday. They also need to experience signing up for and participating in social service programs.

“Somehow or another, we’ve got to get the power back into the hands of those who are in need. That’s what I’m thinking that this whole thing is all about. You know, we’re trying to empower those who don’t have power, you know? So I guess what I’m saying is that is one of the things that I focus on, trying to get the people who actually are in need the ability to communicate directly to those who are providing their needs. You know, give them a voice somehow.”

- Community Experts say past assessments and report processes have altered or “sugar coated” their voices and perspectives. Communities deserve to be heard in exactly the ways we express ourselves and to share information directly with decision-makers.

“There’s one gentleman that goes to the Carrboro meetings every June, before the cycle gets decided, he’s always saying, what the heck I am appalled of you... And he does that every year. He’s always complaining about it. So when I see him going for five years in a row, I’m like, if we all went and sat down and said, so this is one of the things we need to make awareness of community members that know that we’re struggling, and the things that they have in place are not working, we can speak in this sessions and go in and say, look, you’re giving too little to this food program or the money that’s going for housing. We make them accountable.”

- Board meetings should become more accessible to improve democratic participation. This can begin with better communication especially with directly impacted communities and those historically disenfranchised. Meeting schedules should be shared regularly with important topics and decisions highlighted. An active message board or email alert system would help make sure communities know about important meetings. Meeting environments and elected boards should embrace and support participation from communities most impacted by economic, housing, transportation, and food policy decisions. Overall, Orange County and the Towns do not have an equitable or fair way of listening to community. The same privileged groups of people who are able to show up at meetings and who have the time, skills, or access to track local policy and program information continue to have an unfair influence on decisions.

LANGUAGE

Their mouths vomit out words

What are they saying?

The foreign words hit my ears

They rattle in the brain

No sense to be found

session is over

I understood nothing

Where was the help?

The barrier is built high

came to find aid

left without it

One month later

The Barrier is let down

*Their foreign words become the words of home on a piece of
paper*

It's too late now

All is left is the scrapes of aid to those who need it the most

– Maria-Jose Guerrero Hernandez

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Community Experts:

Thank you to each of the Community Experts that participated in and supported this process. This assessment and report would not be possible without your guidance and expertise. A special thanks to the Community Expert that shared her creativity and writing, Maria-Jose Guerrero Hernandez. Maria's powerful and beautiful writing is featured at the beginning and end of this report. We appreciate the trust Community Experts gave to our assessment team in order to have deep conversations and share in community, especially considering many Experts have participated in past assessment processes where they have not seen any outcomes or changes. They are the reason this report should be considered in all future policy and budget decisions.

Community Consultant:

None of this work would have been possible without the leadership and guidance of the Community Consultant. It is because of her knowledge and experience that we were able to develop a community-focused process. Her deep roots and trusting relationships within the most impacted communities created a pathway to working with an incredible group of Community Experts. She guided the assessment team through every step of this process. We are incredibly grateful for her mentorship and support.

Members of the Assessment Team:

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