

# Investing in Community Linkages to Improve our Food System

## Final Report for CS10-076

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation

Funds awarded in 2010: \$10,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2012

Region: Southern

State: Texas

Principal Investigator:

[Jay Crossley](#)

Houston Tomorrow

## Project Information

### Abstract:

The Investing in Community Linkages to Improve our Food System (ICLIFS) Project was an attempt to insure rural and food producer participation and representation in a larger proposed Houston Regional Food Assessment. The project included a pilot community food security assessment in a rural area and outreach to farmers and rural communities. However, we have not yet secured the rest of the expected funding for the larger project, so we shifted our focus to maintain the usefulness of the SARE funding by laying the groundwork to achieve the project goals once the broader regional study is funded.

Houston Tomorrow, together with a coalition of local governments, nonprofit organizations, and academic institutions, is embarking on a food system assessment of the Houston region. The assessment will 1) assess the overall food system that currently feeds 6 million people in the 13-county region and 2) consider implications for the system as the region grows to an expected 10 million people by 2040, according to forecasts by the Houston-Galveston Area Council. It will cover 13 counties including: Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Colorado, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Matagorda, Montgomery, Walker, Waller, and Wharton.

This assessment will provide policymakers and the public with a clear picture of the food system's strengths and vulnerabilities. Tying together demographic trends such as population growth, nutrition-related disease, and other indicators, with 25 in-depth community food security assessments, this study will provide the data and understanding we critically need to make informed decisions.

While we continue to seek funding for the larger project, this project has impacted various Houston Food Policy Workgroup efforts and efforts by several partners. Most notably, the Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services Department received significant funding that includes a food assessment for the major county in our region. When that study is complete, Houston Tomorrow intends to seek funding to complete the regional assessment building upon that work and this ICLIFS project.

## Introduction

The Houston Regional Food Assessment will give local policy makers the best access in the nation to meaningful information, maps, data, and policy ideas on the Houston food system that feeds 6 million people and growing. We believe that this access to better information can transform the region's ability to find local solutions to equitably provide better access to healthy foods, better preserve agricultural resources, and lead toward more sustainable dependable careers and benefits for farmers, distributors, chefs, processors, restaurateurs, ranchers, and more, while allowing more efficient targeting of government and nonprofit services.

SARE funding is allowing the Houston Regional Food Assessment (HRFA) to bring new attention to rural issues in the Houston region. We are attempting to meet the problems and the promise of feeding a region expected to grow to 10 million people by 2040 while maximizing agricultural potential and sustainability.

The full HRFA will combine 25 neighborhood Community Food Security Assessments across the Houston region including at least 5 rural communities. We are currently conducting a pilot assessment following USDA toolkit for Matagorda County, home to 36,702 people and along with other operations, substantial rice farms - \$15 million in rice production over 20,446 acres in production across the County (as of 2007 Census data from the National Agricultural Statistics Service).

Following the pilot assessment, we plan to ramp up operations to conduct the full set of assessments, including at least 4 other rural communities, as well as conducting the other elements of the complete food system study that will look at all aspects from soils and changing land use to access to markets to obesity. In general, we have extended our schedule and slowed down the expected process for the entire HRFA due to funding constraints. We hope to secure several grants from two local foundations who have indicated strong support for the project that will allow us to move into the next phase of the project.

### Project Objectives:

Information collected will be used to inform the development of policies, identify economic opportunities, improve the overall health and quality of life, and ideally will lead to the establishment of the Houston Food Policy Council to implement recommendations from the assessment. This food policy council will provide an ongoing forum for governments, nonprofits, private interests, and citizens to improve the local food system, which impacts all residents in the Houston region.

The assessment will:

- Describe and identify gaps in the Houston Region Food System.
- Define the food needs of the Houston Region through 2040.
- Measure food security in 25 representative communities throughout the region.
- Identify the limitations and barriers to healthy food access, and inequities therein between communities.
- Quantify the prevalence of hunger, obesity, diabetes, and other food-related public health impacts throughout the region.
- Identify government policies that affect the food system.
- Identify barriers to collaboration between public and nonprofit efforts.
- Provide recommendations to enhance the food system and ensure regional, equitable access to healthy food.
- Identify economic opportunities for citizens and businesses in local food.

SCIG funds will support:

- overseeing and managing continual outreach by the field team;

- conducting 3-5 individual community food assessments in rural areas;
- contributing datasets and qualitative information for the production of a Local Food Guide,
- holding auxiliary networking and information events in rural locations in the project region,
- developing a distribution and education plan that takes into consideration other information from the HRFA, and provides the HFPW with guidance on how to take the next logical steps toward addressing high priority policy issues.

The Investing in Community Linkages to Improve our Food System Project has 3 important objectives. The project objectives are:

1. Develop a feasible framework to conduct community food assessments in rural areas of the 13-county region and according to guidance from the USDA Economic Resource Services Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit.
2. Hold community food talk events to expand communications, share information, provide networking opportunity, and develop business relationships. Create a regularly scheduled forum that brings stakeholders together to discuss issues of common concern.
3. Complete individual community food assessments with broad local support from farm businesses, food distribution organizations, faith-based organizations, advocacy groups, government agencies, agricultural extension and academic entities, and other groups with invested interest.

## Cooperators

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## Research

### **Participation Summary**

## Educational & Outreach Activities

### **PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:**

Education/outreach description:

This work has not resulted in any publications at this time, due to the ongoing nature of the larger project. Work done on the ICLIFS project will appear in future publications of the greater Houston Regional Food Assessment.

## Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

Houston Tomorrow staff developed a methodology, gathered community partners, and conducted a Community Food Security Assessment for Matagorda County, a primarily rural county in the Houston region. This methodology and lessons from this study will be used for future assessments in both rural and urban areas. As noted above, we essentially are awaiting further matching funding to realize the full potential of the ICLIFS project, but we are concluding the SARE sponsored portion of this project. The Houston Food Policy Workgroup has successfully grown into a regional network of rural and urban elements of the regional food system and this project has contributed to bringing farmers, ranchers, and other food producers into a regional food policy discussion. We look forward to fully realizing the fruits of this labor over the next several years.

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