

CASE STUDY

Growing a More Inclusive Muskegon County Food System



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- Page 9, pictured: Pavan Iyer, Founder/Principle, eightvillage
Event: Broadway Collaborative Vision Planning Session Day #2, June 18th, 2024
Location: Muskegon Area Transit System (MATS), Louis A. McMurray Conference Center
- Page 10, pictured: Timothy Dobbins, Founder, Scientia Food Safety Consulting, LLC
Event: ServSafe Food Manager Training + Exam, August 24, 2024
Location: Muskegon Heights Branch of Muskegon Area District Library

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Introduction and Context

This case study report shares the findings of a series of listening sessions conducted by the non-profit organization Lakeshore Flavor, with the support of Michigan State University, to support the development of an incubator kitchen in Muskegon County, Michigan. The aims of these listening sessions were to identify how residents and other stakeholders interact with the food system as consumers, producers, entrepreneurs, and public health employees, characterize areas of inequity within Muskegon's food system, and identify ways to improve inclusivity and participation from underrepresented community stakeholders.

Existing data highlights several pain points within the Muskegon food system, particularly for residents of color. According to Feeding America's 2023 [Map the Meal](#) Gap report, approximately 15.2% of Muskegon County residents experienced food insecurity, and 73% of households were eligible for SNAP benefits (Feeding America, n.d.). The same report estimated that Black and Latine households faced food insecurity rates of 34% and 20% respectively. At the same time that Black and Latine households deal with an increased burden of food insecurity, they are also underrepresented among business owners, reflecting both a gap in food access and economic opportunities to remedy local food insecurity challenges. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that Black and Hispanic families made up 13.6% and 6.4% of the total Muskegon population, respectively, in 2023. According to the US Census Bureau's 2017 Survey of Business Owners, in Muskegon County, however, there were only 173 Black or African American-owned businesses (1.1% of all businesses), 84 Hispanic-owned businesses (0.5% of all businesses), and 2,840 Women-owned businesses (17.3% of all businesses) (US Census Bureau, n.d.).

To address these and other challenges facing the local food system, Lakeshore Flavor seeks to intervene through the development of a food business incubator and training facility in Muskegon County. This multi-purpose facility is envisioned as a shared commercial kitchen that offers production and classroom space for small food businesses and workforce training programs. Programs and support services, delivered in culturally and linguistically inclusive ways, are seen as integral parts of the incubator. The development of this facility is rooted within a food sovereignty framework, seeking to bring a degree of local control of the food system to residents currently marginalized within it. In alignment with that framework, Lakeshore Flavor intends to ground the mission and programming of the new facility within the stated needs and goals of the local community. To that end, a series of listening sessions were held in 2023 to give the community a voice in defining the most pressing challenges facing them within their local food system, as well as shaping how a new local institution can best address those issues.



**LAKESHORE FLAVOR
SEEKS TO DEVELOP
A FOOD BUSINESS
INCUBATOR AND
TRAINING FACILITY IN
MUSKEGON COUNTY**

This report provides actionable guidance both for the development of programming and other resources to support racial equity and food businesses owned by women and people of color within Muskegon County, as well as highlighting the value of taking a participatory and locally-based approach to developing equitable and resilient local food systems.

Approach

Lakeshore Flavor, led by Andrea Copeland, organized and facilitated 11 listening sessions across six locations in Muskegon County in 2023. In total, 146 individuals participated in these sessions, with individual sessions ranging from 4 to 58 participants in an individual session. Participants were primarily distinguished by and recruited to provide diversity across their roles within the food system. Broadly, the categories included community members/consumers, food business owners, producers and food processors, and public health professionals. Participants received a \$50 Visa gift card as a token of appreciation for their time.

As a strategy to integrate local food into the sessions, Lakeshore Flavor catered food for each session from local vendors. Vendors included Navarro's Mexican Take-Out, Kuntry Cookin, Soul Filled Eatery, and She's Divine Atlanta & Muskegon. This practice not only honored the mission of Lakeshore Flavor by highlighting local food entrepreneurship, but also created a comfortable atmosphere for participants. Including these vendors grounded each session in the overarching vision of Lakeshore Flavor to encourage the development of a local food system where Muskegon residents own a meaningful stake and say in its direction.

Each session covered a range of topics related to the challenges facing the local food system, as well as potential approaches Lakeshore Flavor might take to address these issues. The sessions began with asking participants to reflect on the ways they interact with the food system, using the food system diagram developed by Wilkins and Eames-Sheavly (2011) as a visual to help stimulate discussion. This infographic is presented in Figure 1. Following this discussion, the sessions shifted to how participants perceived the current food environment, including retail food access and any perceived challenges within the food system. The conversations then moved to a discussion of how respondents would like to see those challenges addressed, and the role that Lakeshore Flavor could play in spearheading or otherwise supporting those changes.

Figure 1: Food System Elements



Adapted by Christy Shi, Center for Environmental Farming Systems.

From: Wilkins, J. and Eams-Sheavly, M. Discovering the Food System; An experiential learning program for young and inquiring minds. Cornell University, Departments of Nutritional Science and Horticulture. <http://www.discoverfoodsys.cornell.edu/>

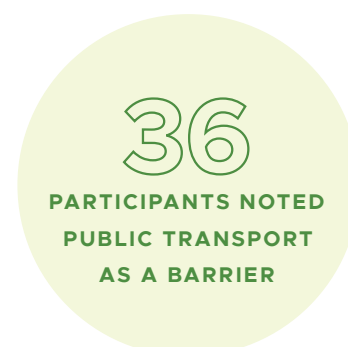
To track responses to these questions, respondents were encouraged to write their initial response on a sticky note, which was then attached to a board at the front of the room. The floor was then opened after each question for elaboration and synthesis. This approach was developed for several reasons. First, most of the initial questions were framed in such a way as to allow for a brief response (e.g. what grocery store(s) do you shop at?) Thus, the sticky notes provided an easy approach to track and aggregate the responses provided for reporting after the sessions. In addition, this allowed the participants to see the responses in real time, facilitating robust follow-up discussion. Asking participants to initially write their responses on a sticky note was also intended to get everyone to engage with the question at some level, further encouraging broad participation among the group.

Results

EXISTING BARRIERS TO FOOD ACCESS

One of the first questions presented to participants inquired about where they did the majority of their grocery shopping. The distribution of results is presented in Table 1. The first three retailers on this list, Meijer, Walmart, and ALDI, each have multiple locations within the city limits of Muskegon (2 each for Walmart and Meijer, 3 for ALDI). In addition, several of the other top responses also have locations within Muskegon's city limits, including the city's farmers market, Sam's Club, and several dollar stores.

Despite the physical presence of food across the city, however, respondents discussed several ways in which the *functional* food access in the city is limited. The most common challenge identified by participants was limitations with transportation, particularly public transportation, with 36 participants mentioning it during the sessions. Among the issues listed with public transportation were unreliable service, limited routes, and inconsistent schedules. For example, some participants noted that the local bus system only operates until 5:50 p.m. on weekdays and is closed on weekends, making it difficult for families without private transportation options, especially families with traditional 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. work schedules, to make it to food retailers without relying on other, more expensive services (e.g. ride-sharing platforms). Several responses also noted the challenges for senior residents, who are often reliant on public transportation due to a lack of personal vehicles, while also facing mobility and other physical challenges which amplifies the issues presented by inconsistent and limited public transportation.



Muskegon Heights, a neighborhood in the southeast quadrant of Muskegon County, is a notable example of the lived reality of these responses. Despite having nominal food access with Meijer and several other large retailers in close proximity to the city, most of these retailers are located on the opposite side of a major road, the BUS-31. For those unable or unwilling to navigate this crossing, their options are more limited to dollar stores and corner stores, which tend to provide more limited selections of products, while often charging more for the products they do offer.

This dynamic underscores the second and third most-cited challenges by participants, the availability/quality of produce (28 mentions), and the affordability of food at retailers (24 mentions). One demonstration of this specific challenge mentioned by participants was the practice of price gouging

those with EBT cards. Several individuals reported that local stores and gas stations in the area inflated prices of core groceries, including fresh produce, knowing that customers lacked other shopping options. This fact is facilitated both by the geography of the city and major roads, and the lack of institutional support for residents to navigate the local foodscape. Changes to food assistance programs such as SNAP and Double Up Food Bucks, which saw expanded benefits during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, but have since had those expansions shuttered, puts additional pressures on households in the area.

While this discussion focused on smaller locations such as dollar stores and gas stations, these problems are also present in larger retailers, albeit in an indirect way. The overwhelming dominance of large chains such as Meijer and Walmart is an increasingly common dynamic across the country as major food retailers continue to consolidate, pushing out smaller businesses. While not explicitly discussed within the context of price, previous research has indicated the negative effect that major retailers can have on local prices and employment, as these stores put significant economic pressure on smaller businesses (Saitone, T. L., & Sexton, R. J., 2017). Additionally, the loss of smaller retailers in local food systems also has a negative impact on the diversity of foods available to local residents, as specialized stores give way to national chains with more homogenous options. Several participants did note this specific challenge, with six responses citing the lack of cultural diversity in the food options available to residents, both in grocery stores and in restaurants.

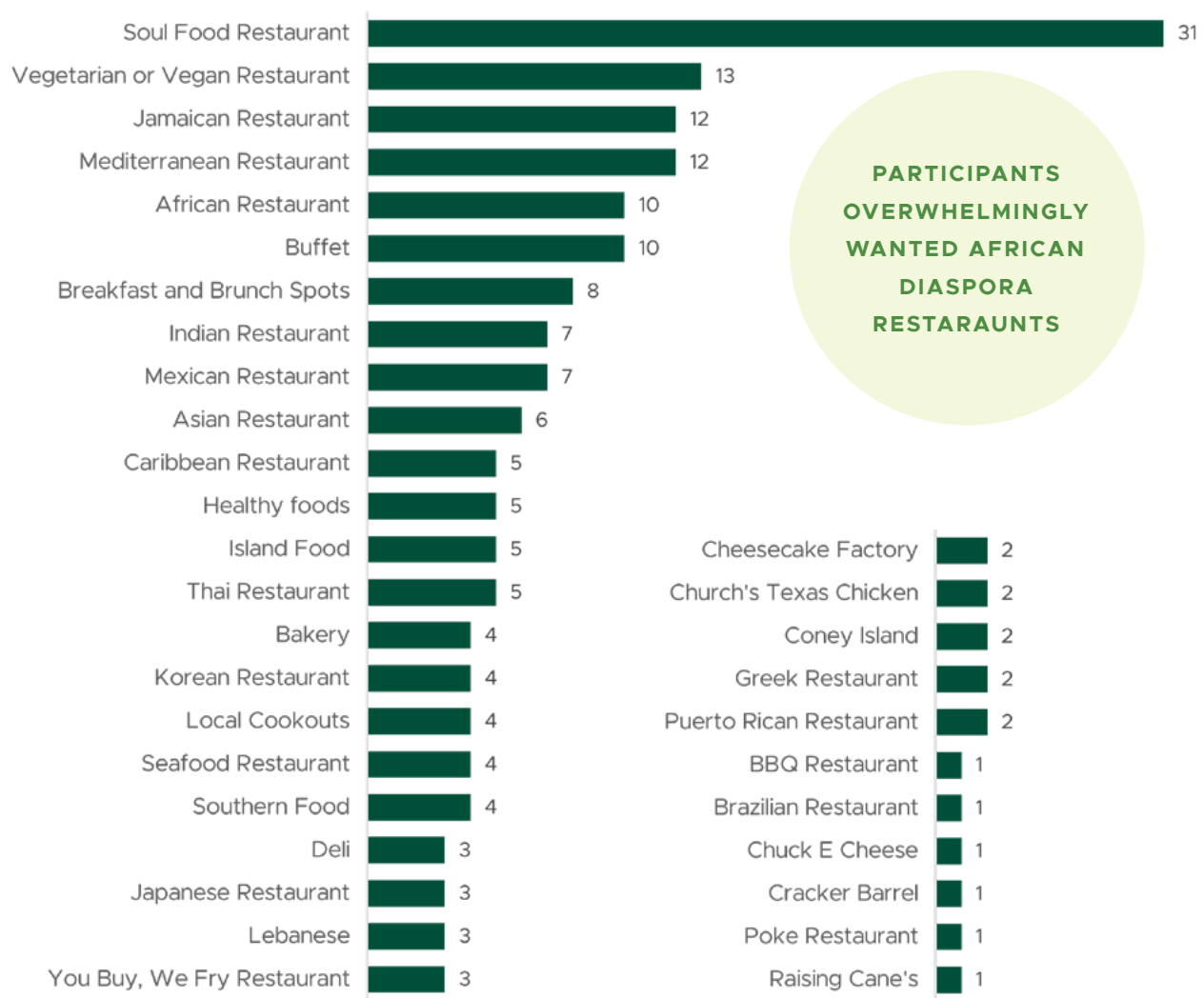
Table 1. Stores where respondents shopped most frequently

Stores shopped at	Totals
Meijer	103
Walmart	92
Aldi	55
Farmers market	34
Sam's Club	31
Scott's Meats	25
Gordon Food Service	13
Save A Lot	10
Dollar General	8
Amazon	5
Daily Deals	3
Target	3
Family Dollar	3
Spanish Grocery Store	3
Dollar Tree	3
McDonald's	3
Hellofresh	2
Food Pantry	2
Trader Joe's	2
Costco	2
Montague Foods	2
Walgreens	2
Feeding America (Food bank)	2
KB Market	1
Hardings	1
Local Farmers	1
Bird's Meats	1
E & A	1
Burger King	1
Arby's	1

COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED NEEDS WITHIN THE FOOD SYSTEM

Corresponding to the perceived lack of diversity within the current foodscape, participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire for more cultural representation in their food system. Specifically, when asked what types of food businesses they wished to see established in Muskegon, the responses were dominated by a desire for restaurants representing a diversity of cultural cuisines. The responses are summarized in Figure 2. Among the responses, a desire for establishments serving food representing the African diaspora was particularly prominent, with three of the top six responses reflecting these cuisines, including the top choice, soul food restaurants, which was named 31 times, more than twice the second-most popular choice.

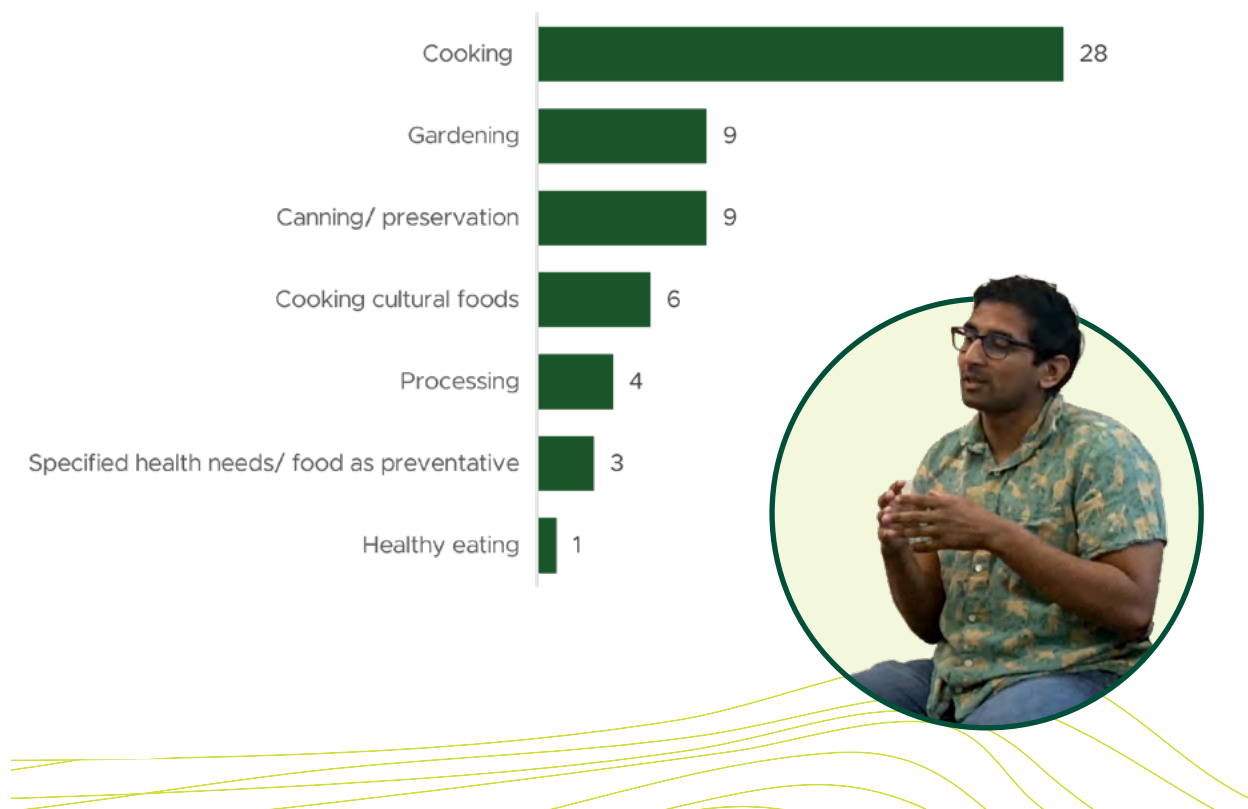
Figure 2: Types of Restaurants Mentioned by Participants



At a broader level, the discussion of restaurants reflected a desire to reclaim control of various elements of the food system and shape it to better reflect the community, and to shift the dynamic of how residents interact with the food system. The lack of diversity among restaurants and other retailers has obvious effects on the local economy, including economic equity, as well as the food environment facing consumers. However, the lack of economic ownership within the food system also places residents into the role of acting solely as a consumer within the food system, rather than a more dynamic role as a creator or producer. This effect is more subtle, and more difficult to capture in aggregate statistics, but numerous participants discussed their concerns about the growing disconnect between successive generations of residents and their food system. This includes a loss of knowledge about culturally-relevant food preparation, general culinary skills necessary for both healthy food preparation and as a potential pathway to multiple careers, and the loss of cultural ties to the community which had been established in the food culture, including traditions of urban gardening across Muskegon.

In addition to discussing a desire to see new businesses emerge reflecting the diversity of the community, participants recognized the importance of rebuilding the local food culture through educational programming and other cultural events. When discussing potential educational opportunities related to the food system, classes related to cooking and food preparation, gardening, and nutrition were all mentioned, with a particular emphasis on cooking classes, which was mentioned over 30 times in total. The responses to desired educational opportunities are presented in Figure 3. When asked to give additional context to these overarching needs, many respondents specifically discussed the need to target portions of this programming towards children and their families, specifically sessions around urban gardening and meal prep, in order to begin re-establishing the food culture within the community among its youngest members.

Figure 3: Desired Classes and Educational Opportunities in Muskegon County



THE ROLE OF LAKESHORE FLAVOR

Within this landscape of needs, respondents identified several areas for Lakeshore Flavor to support the development of a more equitable food system. As a proposed incubator space, one obvious avenue that participants discussed was support for food businesses led by people of color. Currently, there are other incubator spaces within Muskegon, though participants noted that they lack capacity and, in some cases, the physical equipment, necessary to support a growing number of businesses. These spaces are not fully equipped to meet the needs of burgeoning businesses or to achieve meaningful change in the overall composition of food businesses in the area. To that end, 11 participants explicitly stated a need for additional commercial production and storage space for entrepreneurs to safely and efficiently prepare food products.

Participants also discussed the need for support with acquiring financial capital in addition to physical capital, with 31 respondents indicating a need for assistance with navigating various grants and other financial assistance mechanisms, such as loans or identifying potential investors.

Beyond the need for hard capital, participants suggested a potential role for Lakeshore Flavor might also be support in building the 'soft' capital vital to business success, including various educational and networking opportunities. Entering the food system as a producer or a business requires navigating an extensive list of various regulations and logistical hurdles, including those which are common across businesses, such as finding suppliers or finding a location for a brick-and-mortar storefront, as well as those which are distinct from other business ventures, such as navigating food safety and labeling rules. As an institution operating at this intersection of multiple nodes in the food system, respondents noted that Lakeshore Flavor might consider leveraging its resources to connect food businesses and producers, while also providing a range of educational workshops on topics from where to begin with starting a food business (14 mentions), marketing (14 mentions), and general business skills (12 mentions). Assistance with regulatory frameworks was a particularly common topic as well, with 30 mentions across numerous subjects, including licensing/permitting (14 mentions), cottage food laws (4 mentions), and food labeling (4 mentions).

For the broader community, participants discussed the potential role for Lakeshore Flavor in leading the rejuvenation of the local food culture. Specifically, participants brainstormed a range of events that Lakeshore Flavor might consider hosting as a means to engage with the community, connect residents to a growing food business sector led by people of color, and provide valuable educational and cultural touchpoints to reconnect the community to the food system beyond their role as consumers. A list of events discussed is provided in Table 2.



Table 2: Events Desired by Community

Desired Events	Totals	Notes
Food Tastings like Taste of Muskegon	39	Soul food (10), New Businesses (1), Muskegon Heights vendors (1), Chicago (4)
Music, Ambience, and Entertainment	14	
Food Celebrations and Festivals	13	Dessert (1), Vegetarian (1), in Muskegon Heights (1), Southern Food (1)
International and Cultural Food Celebrations and Festivals	11	Soul food (5), African (1), Hispanic (4)
Seasonal Food Celebrations and Festivals	10	Winter (8), Fall (2)
Competitions	9	Cook off (2), Scavenger Hunt (2)
Food and Drink Pairings	8	
Food Truck Rally	7	
Food Demonstrations	4	
Pig Roast	3	
Expanded Farmers Market in Muskegon Heights	3	
Workshops	2	
Food Crawl	2	

Overwhelmingly, participants discussed different variations of local food or ‘Taste of Muskegon’ events, which would feature existing and future vendors of color, food trucks, or seasonal celebrations, as well as some support for other community events, such as workshops or cooking competitions.

Beyond this obvious role, however, the community also expressed a desire and need for Lakeshore Flavor to serve as an advocate for the community and their collective desires within the food system. As an institution seeking to support developing food businesses and producers, promoting local businesses (5 mentions) and advocating for those products to line the shelves in local retailers (2 mentions) were also key roles the community wished to see Lakeshore Flavor play in the future. In addition, reflecting the current lack of engagement between key stakeholders in the food system and the broader community, several participants expressed their appreciation at having these listening sessions to discuss their concerns and have them taken seriously. Participants also expressed a desire to have Lakeshore Flavor to continue hosting these listening sessions/ continue to engage with the community (4 mentions), while also acting as conduit to policymakers to advocate on behalf of the community (4 mentions).



Conclusion

The findings of this report align with the findings of existing scholarship on the numerous ways in which growing consolidation and diminishing public services have weakened food access in communities across the United States (Hendrickson et al, 2020). Limited public transportation and retailer options leave many residents within Muskegon/Muskegon Heights effectively locked out of the food system, functionally acting solely as passive consumers in the system. The listening sessions conducted by Lakeshore Flavor provided critical context to these challenges, including the desire to rebuild the local food culture, the limitations of existing resources to address those concerns, and pathways to making meaningful change within the local food system. Residents clearly identified a need for expanded food offerings, particularly those representing a wider diversity of cultures, reconnecting residents to their food culture, and supporting businesses to build economic opportunities for families of color within the food system. Among other strategies, residents also clearly identified a need to provide diverse producers and food businesses additional support in physical and human capital beyond the resources currently present to them, as well as community events to connect families to a growing community-led food scape. Of particular note is the desire by residents of Muskegon to see Lakeshore Flavor act as a hub supporting stakeholders both on the consumption and production side of the food system, and the need for open lines of communication and connection with the community to ensure that existing programs meet community needs.

NEEDS IDENTIFIED BY RESIDENTS



**Increased cultural
diversity of food
businesses**



**Reconnection of
residents to their food
culture**



**Support for families
of color through food
businesses**

Next steps for Lakeshore Flavor include building the capital necessary to begin developing this programming, as well as building an adaptive and community-engaged evaluation framework to ensure their interventions are meeting community needs. Generally, these results also point to the need for other organizations seeking to engage in racial equity work to ground those solutions in the needs of their individual communities, rather than taking a ‘top-down’ approach to food system change based on the experiences of others, or the academic literature alone.

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VISION

CRFS envisions a thriving economy, equity, and sustainability for Michigan, the country, and the planet through food systems rooted in local regions and centered on Good Food: food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable.

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