

Malnourishment a city-wide problem

Food security people want better food access for West Side seniors, disabled

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Many people believe all the residents of the West Side have money and eat well, says Spring Gillard with the Westside Food Security Collaborative.

"It's a shock how many don't," she said. "I don't know if I can say people living on the West Side are going hungry, but some of them are malnourished because of a lack of access to fresh fruits and vegetables."



CREDIT: Photo-Dan Toulgoet

Spring Gillard: "I don't know if I can say people living on the West Side are going hungry, but some of them are malnourished because of a lack of access to fresh fruits and vegetables."

The Westside Food Security Collaborative is a coalition of groups, organizations and individuals who live or work on the city's West Side and are interested in food security, a term used to describe a local food system that's independent and sustainable enough so that everyone living in a community has enough to eat.

Gillard said seniors and the disabled, many of whom use public transportation or walk, often struggle with heavy bags of groceries. She noted many grocery stores, particularly green grocers, aren't designed to allow wheelchairs or scooters. "Many of them have end-of-aisle displays and they can't get around them," said Gillard.

To illustrate some of the problems in local stores, the group is hosting a May 3 tour of West Side grocery stores of various sizes, formats and locations to learn about their role in enhancing public health and how they help ensure a secure food supply. The tour will examine the links between grocery stores and public transportation and streetscape design, local development and cultural diversity. The grocery stores included on the tour include traditional retail, natural and organic stores and green grocers.

Gillard said the group is talking with Quest Outreach Society about opening a low-cost grocery store on the West Side so seniors and people with disabilities in that part of the city can buy healthy food. Quest, which last year rescued \$8.26 million worth of food headed to landfills, runs two grocery stores for low-income shoppers on the East Side. Groceries available at the stores sell for about 30 cents on the dollar.

Considering the high cost of rent everywhere on the West Side, a Quest West Side store would likely be mobile. Gillard said similar mobile grocery stores stocked with healthy food are on the road in Europe and the U.S.

"They're very creative," said Gillard. "One group converted an old FedEx truck and others are using [motor homes] and old buses," she said. "One of them includes a solar-powered generator and we really love that idea. It's really green."

West Side resident Sally Spears, who sits on the Westside Food Security Collaborative board, supports the proposal for a low-income grocery store. She has cerebral palsy, lives on a disability pension and uses a scooter for mobility.

Spears said the provincial government allows her nine free visits a year to combined physiotherapy, chiropractic and massage sessions, therapies she considers vital to her health. Since Spears has already attended nine sessions this year, she's using part of her food allowance to pay for the rest of her sessions.

"I know a lot of people living on disability who are already broke this month," she said. "If you live on provincial disability you only get so much."

The 50-year-old described how grocery shopping with a scooter can be difficult. "I can only see from the second or third row down," she said. "It's like, 'Oh gee, everything I want is too high.'"

Spears finds some stores easier to get around in than others. The luxury of simply shopping around is often not an option, she said, and once she's familiar with a store it's easier to navigate. She buys just what she needs and leaves.

Despite what many people assume, Spears knows first-hand that many West Siders don't have a lot of money to pay for groceries.

According to Gillard, the mobile low-income store would be wheelchair accessible and would park at various locations during the week. Shoppers would have to provide identification from a social service agency to qualify to shop there.

The grocery store tour hosted by the Westside Food Security Collaborative begins at 10 a.m., May 3, outside Capers Community Market, at the corner of West Fourth Avenue and Vine Street.

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