



The GES Community Food System: An Assessment and Recommendations

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1. Executive Summary

This report examines the community food system in the Northern Denver neighborhoods of Globeville, Elyria, and Swansea, commonly known as GES. We considered the community food system context and strategies community members use to navigate it. The report also makes several recommendations about how institutions and organizations – e.g. academic, nonprofits, local city government, philanthropic organizations and private sector – can work to support GES and similar communities.

Through interviews and focus groups, participation in community activities, and ongoing collaboration with GES community members, this engaged research project highlights both the strengths of local efforts and the challenges many residents face when it comes to their food access. GES is a culturally rich community with strong food traditions, active organizations, and a growing number of food programs. Yet, many households still struggle to consistently access affordable, nutritious, and culturally familiar food. Therefore, our recommendations aim to both highlight the current work going on in response to the community food system struggles, as well as identify ways to build capacity to address the root causes of food insecurity.

Key takeaways from this report include:

- Food access in GES is shaped by several connected factors including income, housing costs, transportation, and environmental conditions.
- Having food programs in place does not necessarily result in improved access or utilization.
- Food needs to be affordable, culturally appropriate, and easy to access within people's daily routines.
- The lack of an affordable grocery store in GES and transportation challenges make it harder to regularly access food.
- Community organizations and informal networks play key roles in helping people access food.
- Food programs are more effective when they reflect people's culture, needs, and daily realities.
- Improving food access requires coordinated efforts that address these challenges while supporting community-led work.

The findings show that food access in GES is shaped by interconnected factors such as low wages, rising housing costs, transportation barriers, the lack of a nearby affordable grocery store, and environmental concerns that limit local food production. At the same time, residents and community organizations play an important role in supporting food access through food distribution programs, gardens, markets, informal food networks, and everyday strategies such as sharing food and coordinating resources. The analysis shows that these efforts highlight that food access is not only about food availability, but also about the ways families and communities support one another in meeting everyday needs.

The report also outlines how food provided matters as much as food quality and quantity. Trust plays a role in how food is accessed in GES, as past experiences have shaped how residents

view programs and institutions. Additionally, the geographic, infrastructural and cultural differences across the three distinct neighborhoods within GES also affect how people learn about and access available resources.

Based on these findings, recommendations are organized into five main areas that reflect the interconnected nature of the GES food system. The recommendations are intentionally ordered to reflect how these areas build one another, starting with foundational conditions that shape food access and moving toward longer-term system improvements.

The five main areas include:

- Support basic household needs such as housing, transportation, mental health, and income to improve consistent access to food.
- Build local leadership and skills by expanding training, education, and pathways for participation and employment in food systems.
- Invest in food system infrastructure, including grocery access, food production spaces, and business development opportunities.
- Strengthen trust and participation through community-engaged approaches aimed at reducing barriers and increasing shared decision-making.
- Support research and innovation to better understand community needs and guide long-term strategies, including soil testing and anti-displacement efforts.

To support implementation across different actors, the report divides recommendations into quick wins and stretch goals. Quick wins focus on using existing resources and coordination, while stretch goals require greater investment and alignment but offer deeper and more sustained impact over time. These findings and recommendations also offer a foundation for understanding food access in GES and identifying areas for action. The following section provides the introduction and background on food insecurity and community food systems to frame the analysis presented in this report.

2. Introduction

Food insecurity remains a persistent problem in urban areas across the United States, affected by a combination of factors such as histories, policy choices and community responses. According to Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), “food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2024, p 3). That is why food security has been considered a basic human right that should be guaranteed for all people, regardless of income, race, nationality, or background. Yet, a range of factors continue to limit access to food in US urban communities, including, rising housing costs, retail concentration in middle and upper income areas, household’s limited income, and historical patterns of uneven infrastructure and human capital investment (Cummins & Macintyre, 2002; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). In response, many urban communities have worked to develop and strengthen community food systems to help mitigate food insecurity, by localizing food production, distribution, access, and governance. Urban community food systems support livelihoods by increasing the access of fresh food, strengthening networks of trust and collaborative support,

and creating entrepreneurship opportunities through initiatives such as local food markets, and urban farming (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Nonetheless, while these efforts may contribute to resilience and local capacity, community food systems alone cannot eliminate food insecurity. Solutions include understanding and investing in root causes that many times are beyond typical understandings of food system boundaries and include other systems, such as the broader economy, basic needs, and environmental health, among others. Broader impact and progress towards food security in urban communities depends on sustained collaboration and institutional support that views food insecurity as connected to a range of socio-economic and environmental issues.

Within this context, this report focuses on understanding the urban community food system of Globeville, Elyria and Swansea (GES), an area of north Denver with a known history of food insecurity (DDPHE, 2026) and strong community efforts to address it. Residents in GES face several challenges when accessing food, including the lack of a nearby full-service grocery store, low-income levels, and rising housing costs. Despite these challenges, GES has engaged in a range of responses, including local programs that support food access and initiatives that expand food production and distribution. In addition, informal everyday food networks play an important role in supporting food access and livelihoods in the neighborhood.

As an anchor institution with a place-based long-term presence and impact on the community (Ehlenz, 2018), CSU Spur aims to be responsive to the needs of GES and identify ways to support its community food system. In this sense, the report represents an initial assessment intended to account for current conditions, assets, and challenges shaping the community's food system. Drawing on community engaged research using the Community Capitals Framework (Emery & Flora, 2006), the analysis identifies challenges and barriers across different forms of capital while also documenting local strengths and capacities. By clarifying areas where institutional support, governance alignment, and resource integration are most needed, this report aims to guide strategic decision-making and strengthen collaborative efforts across the local food system. More broadly, it is our hope that this report and its recommendations can be seen as a resource for food institutions and organizations – such as universities, NGOs, funders, local government, private sectors and grass root organizations and coalitions – working to coordinate and contribute to strengthening community food systems in Denver and beyond.

This report is based on two years of research doing in-depth interviews, participant observation, and secondary data analysis. Data collection was mainly conducted in GES where 67 interviews were held with community food leaders, CSU-Spur staff, and households. To examine GES within the broader context of Denver, 30 additional interviews were completed with urban farmers, local food policy officials, and non-profit workers.

Drawing on the Community Capitals Framework (Emery & Flora, 2006) to assess the GES community food system, this report answers three main research questions:

1. What are the main challenges and opportunities communities face for enjoying a prosperous food system?
2. What are the main strategies communities and families use to cope with the challenges they face within their food systems?
3. How can institutions and organizations partner with communities to co-create food system solutions according to communities' needs?

The report is organized into three sections. The first section discusses the Community Capitals Framework (Emery & Flora, 2006) and outlines the methods used, including the research approach, participant selection, participant recruitment process, and data analysis. The second section presents the findings by addressing the first two research questions. It first examines the main challenges and opportunities GES faces for experiencing a prosperous food system; and then explores the strategies that families and community organizations use to navigate these conditions from a strengths-base perspective. The third and last section addresses the last research question by offering recommendations focused on strengthening community capacity and improving the local governance and investment of GES's food system.

This report helps improve our understanding of how community food system efforts connect to, and are connected within, the GES community, and the everyday realities residents face. The report brings together community experience and local data to provide a fuller picture of how food access and strategies work in practice. This approach provides context that helps identify how short-term actions can be taken, and where long-term and sustainable actions are needed to address the root challenges and barriers.

3. Community Food Systems and the Community Capitals Framework

This project uses a community capitals approach to understand the GES community food system.

Community food systems typically work to address gaps in conventional food systems. Those involved in their local food systems also often aim to strengthen the community's understanding of the food production process, local food relationships, and opportunities for participation in food systems governance (Allen & Gillon, 2022).

***“A community food system is one in which production, processing, distribution and consumption are geographically integrated and benefit from the environment, economy and social and nutritional health of a particular community”
(USDA, 2023)***

The Community Capitals approach helps explain the way all different capitals are embedded and interconnected in community food systems work. This framework views food systems and livelihoods as dependent on a series of assets or capitals that can either be abundant or lacking, and are both reflective of local contexts, and broader dynamics. Emery & Flora (2006) identified seven capitals that are interrelated: natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built capital. In this sense, community food systems are not isolated systems; they are embedded in economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental interactions that shape each other. For example, food availability, accessibility, nutrition, and stability – the four pillars

of food security – are all dependent on people’s income and wages, housing stability, immigration status, a healthy environment, policies, and market prices.

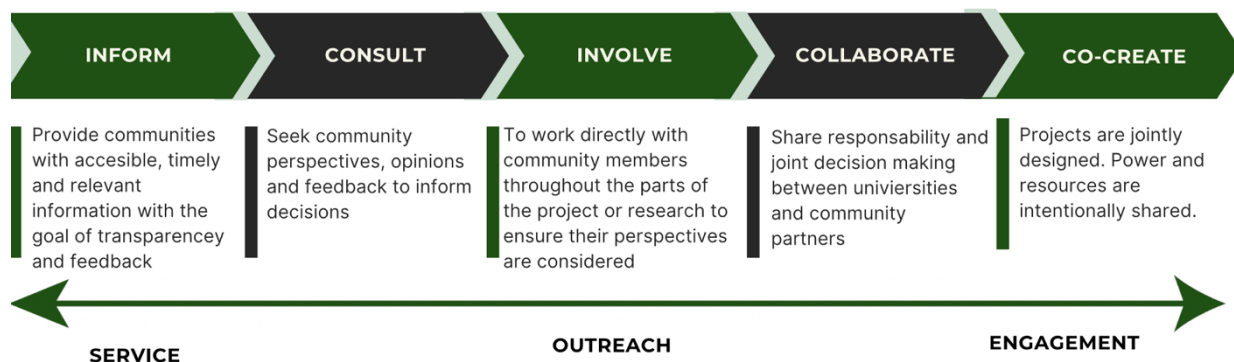
By identifying these forms of capital, the framework highlights key opportunities and barriers on how food systems work. For example, financial capital, including income and wages, shapes the purchasing ability of families. Natural capital, like environmental quality, influences food production; and socio-cultural capital can reflect the ways trust, networks and governance, support the growth of food programming and infrastructure.

To add further nuance to the Community Capitals Framework, a community care perspective helps emphasize the work it takes to develop and maintain community capitals at household, network, and institutional levels. Understanding community food systems as spaces of care lends itself to also seeing food security as a shared responsibility, rooted in how people support one another in meeting everyday needs. It recognizes that the work done by households and communities to sustain community food systems is not just supported by individuals, but also organizations, institutions, and policy. In this view, food access is not just about availability but how a variety of actors are involved in responding to people’s real conditions and experiences.

4. Methodology

This project utilized an engaged research approach (Israel et al., 2010) to analyze the GES community food system, grounded in CSU's identity as a land-grant university and CSU-Spur's role as a designated anchor institution. Anchor institutions are large, place-based organizations committed to advancing the wellbeing of their surrounding communities. Jeffrey (2025) defines them as organizations whose purpose, size, and durability provide a basis for benefiting local communities. Anchor institutions work under three main pillars including impacting workforce and purchasing and place base investing (Healthcare Anchor Network, 2026). Strategies include building community-level capacities, fostering programs that address basic needs such as food systems and food access, supporting the development of community facilities, and shaping local policy and governance networks (Ehlenz, 2018; Serang et al., 2013).

Figure 1: Community Engagement Continuum



Source: Own creation based on CSU Extension and Outreach (n.d)

Community Engaged Research (CER) and practice aim to guide the design and implementation of research projects in collaboration with community members, grounding knowledge production in local experience (Israel et al., 2010). Rather than studying communities through a pre-determined research agenda, CER centers community priorities and ensures that knowledge of production is both academically rigorous and of direct value to the community. As shown in Figure 1, CER is part of a holistic and dynamic system that includes service, outreach, and ongoing engagement. In this project, a community-engaged approach shaped every stage of the research, from how participants were identified and recruited, to how data was collected, interpreted, and shared back with the community.

Positionality

This research was led by a team based at CSU Spur and within the Department of Sociology in CSU Fort Collins. The positionality of the lead author as Latina raised in Latin America and Spanish native speaker, provided meaningful access to community members and organizations. However, as a team within CSU, we had to continually reflect on how institutional relationships may have shaped what participants felt comfortable sharing and how findings were interpreted. Efforts were made throughout the process to remain transparent about the purpose of the research, to listen without assumption, and to ensure that community voices, not institutional priorities, guided the findings. These efforts included an initial workshop that was organized to share the aims of the report with community leaders and listen to concerns they would like to be addressed during data collection. Community perspectives shaped the questions asked, the interpretation of findings, and the identification of key themes such as food access, cultural relevance, and participation.

Sampling

Sampling is the process of selecting research participants from the larger population, in this case to learn about their community food system. This study used a purposive and snowball sampling approach to include people with direct experience in the GES food system. Participants were selected to reflect a range of perspectives, including households, community leaders, CSU Spur staff, and broader Denver food system actors. Community leaders were included for their knowledge, long-term involvement, and connections with residents, while households were central to understanding the everyday realities of accessing and preparing food. Additional participants were selected to provide broader context on the policies, programs, and challenges of shaping food systems in Denver.

At the outset of the project, a workshop was held with community leaders to introduce the research, share its goals, and listen to concerns they wanted addressed during data collection. This conversation helped shape recruitment priorities and ensured that the study was responsive to community needs from the beginning. Interviews with community leaders helped guide further recruitment through referrals, while households were primarily reached through community events and word of mouth. Having a bilingual researcher lead the outreach and data collection, allowed materials and conversations to take place in both Spanish and English. This approach helped build trust and strengthen participation across different groups.

In total, 97 people participated in the study between August 2024 and December 2025. This included 21 community organization representatives, 33 mothers and grandmothers responsible for feeding their households, 13 CSU Spur staff members, and 30 food system leaders across Denver.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection included secondary data analysis, participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and ongoing collaboration with community members and local organizations. Secondary data analysis provided historical background on food efforts in GES and broader context on Denver's health, geographic, and demographic conditions. Participant observation took place throughout the study and included attending and volunteering at local events such as farmers' markets, meal distributions, community fairs, and neighborhood meetings.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community leaders, households, CSU Spur staff, and other individuals involved in Denver's food system. Focus groups were held with local women who had participated in earlier interviews, with the goal of exploring shared experiences related to food and care work and understanding available support systems. Community perspectives shaped the questions asked, the interpretation of findings, and the identification of key themes including food access, cultural relevance, and participation.

The methods themselves served as a form of community engagement. Participation in local events and ongoing collaboration with community practitioners created opportunities to build relationships, share knowledge, and remain responsive to community perspectives. Interviews and focus groups provided space for residents to reflect on their experiences and collectively identify key challenges and priorities, ensuring the research remained grounded in local knowledge throughout.

Analysis

All interviews and field notes were transcribed in their original language and analyzed through thematic analysis using NVivo. The analysis was primarily guided by the Community Capitals Framework, which provided a structure for identifying strengths, gaps, and patterns across the local food system, while additional patterns that emerged from the data were also incorporated into the findings. Coding was conducted by the research team, focusing on key barriers, existing resources, and community priorities. To strengthen credibility, findings were shared with select community members through a community discussion event, ensuring that interpretations accurately reflected community experiences and perspectives.

Limitations

While this study drew on a range of methods and engaged many different participant groups, some limitations are worth noting. Purposive and snowball sampling, while appropriate for this type of community-based research, means that findings reflect the perspectives of those who were reachable and willing to participate, and may not capture the full range of experiences within GES. Residents who are more isolated, transient, or distrustful of institutional research may be underrepresented. Additionally, the research team's affiliation with CSU Spur, while facilitating access, may have influenced how some participants responded.

5. Community Food Systems: Challenges and Opportunities

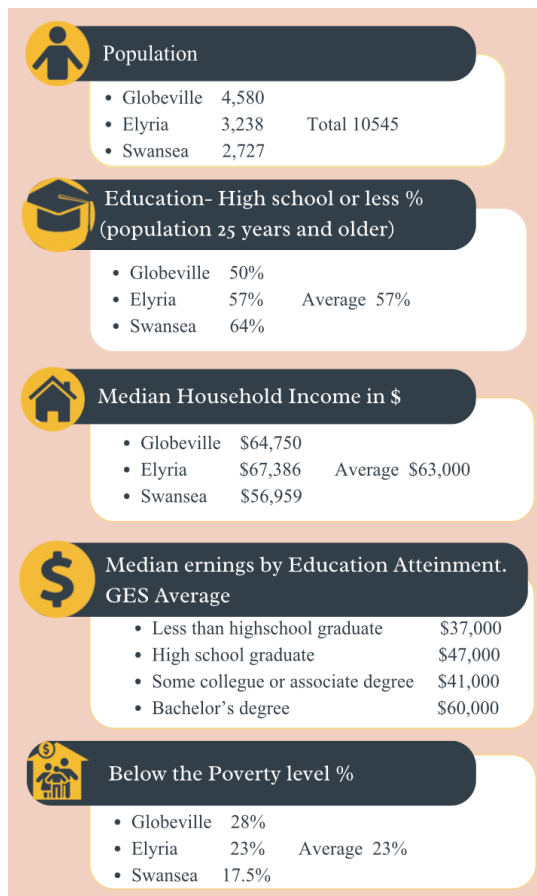
5.1. Background: The GES Community Food System

Globeville, Elyria and Swansea, are three of the oldest neighborhoods in Denver, originally settled in the late 1800s as working-class communities linked to nearby coal power and industrial activities (Environs-CSU, January 31, 2025). Today, the neighborhood is known for its cultural richness, with a population of approximately 10,500 people, of which about 80% identify as Black, Native American, or Hispanic (Dunmire, 2020). Within Elyria and Swansea, more than 75% of residents are of Hispanic or Latino origin (City of Denver, 2024).

The socio-economic characteristics of GES include being low-income, having low educational attainment and residents experiencing difficulties with housing access and prices. According to the U.S. Census (2024), the median household income is about \$63,000, compared to approximately \$70,000 for the city of Denver (Figure 2). Educational attainment is also lower, with about 57% of the working population having a high school diploma or less. This group earns between \$37,000 and \$47,000 annually, around 26% less than the median income for GES. Additionally, housing costs place a significant burden on residents. The City of Denver (2021) reports that about 40% of households spend 30% or more of their income on housing expenses, including rent or mortgage payments.

When looking at the history of its food system and its natural and built capitals, there are long-standing barriers that have shaped everyday food realities. For example, the GES community was designated an EPA Superfund due to environmental pollution which has contaminated the air, water, and soil, undermining the health and enjoyment of local natural resources. Further, the high concentration of underresourced residents have faced issues such as redlining, lower quality education, and limited access to employment or low-paying jobs (Environs-CSU, January 31, 2025), which directly impact people's food access.

Figure 2: GES Demographic and Economic Characteristics

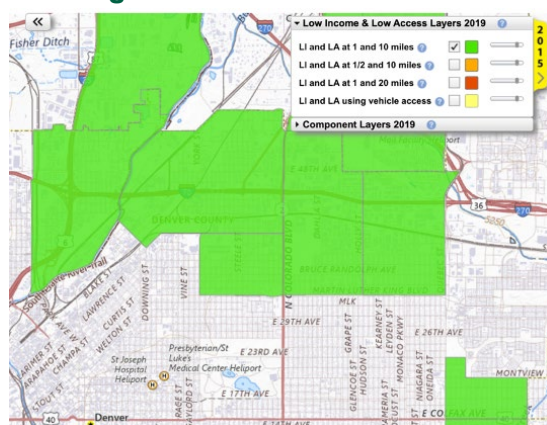


Source: US-Census, 2024

Specifically to its food system, GES is considered a food desert, or a low food access and low-income neighborhood, meaning that many residents do not have a full-service grocery store within walking distance (Figure 3). At least 33% of residents live more than one mile from the nearest supermarket, and on average, people must walk about 30 minutes to reach a grocery store. This is significantly longer than the ten-minute walk typical for most Denver residents (Environs-CSU, January 31, 2025).

Several additional factors contribute to food insecurity in North Denver. Research shows that living below the poverty level, limited transportation, high housing costs, and rising food prices are key drivers of food insecurity (The Share Network and Partners, 2014; Denver Department of Public Health & Environment, 2026). A recent City of Denver food security survey (n = 3,046) found that about 40% of Denver City Council District 9 residents -where GES is located - reported cutting meal sizes or skipping meals due to lack of food. Among households with children, 21% reported reducing the portion sizes of their children's meals for the same reason, placing District 9 as fourth highest on its food security vulnerability out of eleven districts in City Council Districts in Metro Denver.

Figure 3: Food Atlas for GES



Source: Economic Research Service (ERS), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 2024

Food insecurity is not experienced equally across the community. The Share Network and Partners (2014) found that over 40% of North Denver residents “sometimes” or “always” cannot afford balanced meals, with significant disparities by race and ethnicity. African American, Hispanic, and Latino residents were two times less likely to consume 5 or more fruits and vegetables daily compared to White residents. Limited transportation also shapes where people shop, often leading them to rely on small local stores with fewer options and higher prices. At the same time, the neighborhood food environment is dominated by unhealthy options: 68% of respondents reported that junk food is easily available, and 72% reported eating fast food three times per week, largely due to its accessibility. The report also highlights risks for children, noting that there are eight unhealthy food outlets for every one healthy option, and 13 out of 16 schools in North Denver are located within a quarter mile of an unhealthy food retailer. However, since 2014 the City has invested in at least 7 corner stores in Northern Colorado through their program Denver Healthy Corner Store initiative (DDPHE, 2017).

At the same time, grassroots organizations and community efforts have been an important part of the neighborhood's responses to these challenges. Over the years, different organizations have focused on specific issues. For example, the GES Coalition has supported solutions around housing access and displacement. While groups such as Green Latinos and Green House Connection Center look to address different environmental conditions in the neighborhood. Regarding the community food system, organizations including GrowHaus and its food box distributions, along with community gardens and urban food pantries, are part of short-term solutions to support the food access experience in the neighborhood.

These patterns help explain the broader situation of food access in GES, but they do not fully show what daily life looks like for residents. To better understand this, the next section focuses on people's everyday experiences, including how they find food, the challenges they face, and the different ways they manage to meet their household's food needs.

5.2. Current Challenges and Assets within the GES Community Food Experience

This section will detail the current challenges experienced in the GES food system using the Community Capitals Framework, including natural and built environment capital, financial capital, politics and governance capital, and socio-cultural capital. Challenges will touch on the four key parts of food security: availability, access, use, and stability. Taken together, this framework shows that challenges in the food system are not isolated but linked across multiple aspects of daily life in the community. Figure 4 below summarizes barriers encountered under each capital, as well as the strengths or assets present in GES, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. For example, there is strong interest and experience in food production, preparation, sharing knowledge about how to access food resources, and other related activities.

Figure 4: GES Community Food System, Barriers and Assets

S FINANCIAL CAPITAL	
BARRIERS - Low and unstable income - High housing and living costs - Limited formal business opportunities - Difficulty funding small food businesses	ASSETS - Informal food economy (home-based sales) - Workforce programs & support orgs - Household strategies for limited budgets - Community-based economic activities
P POLITICAL & GOVERNANCE CAPITAL	
BARRIERS - Limited trust in institutions - Fragmented coordination across sectors - Few sources of funding	ASSETS - Active community organizations & advocacy - Growing interest in community participation - Public & nonprofit actors engaged - Opportunities for cross-sector coordination

N NATURAL & BUILT CAPITAL	
BARRIERS - Limited access to affordable grocery store - Transportation challenges - Inadequate infrastructure - Physical barriers (highways, railroads) - Limited land for food production - Environmental degradation - Limited storage & distribution infrastructure - Displacement, gentrification	ASSETS - Network of pantries, fridges, school meals - Community gardens & food production sites - Alternative growing methods (raised beds) - Community interest in expanding food access - Opportunities to invest in food infrastructure
S SOCIO-CULTURAL & HUMAN CAPITAL	
BARRIERS - Language barriers (limited English) - Time constraints (work & caregiving) - Disconnection between neighborhoods - Uneven access to information & services - Limited cultural alignment in programs	ASSETS - Cultural diversity - Strong cooking, gardening & food prep skills - Strong family & community networks - Food sharing & mutual aid practices - Rich cultural food traditions & preferences - Community leadership through local orgs

Source: Own creation

Capital 1. Natural and Built Environment

The natural and built environment in GES strongly influence how residents' access and produce food. Barriers related to transportation, infrastructure, and environmental conditions increase the time, effort, and uncertainty involved in obtaining food and limit opportunities for local food production.

Transportation and Transportation Infrastructure

Transportation and mobility are major barriers to food access in GES. Residents consistently described the lack of a nearby grocery store and limited transportation options as key challenges. Many households do not have access to a car and depend on public transportation, shared rides, or delivery services to obtain food. As one community participant explained:

"A lot of them don't have cars [referring to GES neighbors], so getting to the grocery store is not accessible. It's not a way for them to get there. unless they take the access ride [the Connector] or they're taking the bus, there's no way for them to get food unless they're receiving the deliveries from the Denver Food Rescue or from us".

These challenges are linked to factors such as income, lack of driver's licenses, and safety concerns. In many cases, those responsible for buying food rely on others or must navigate complex transportation systems to reach supermarkets outside the neighborhood.

Even when transportation is available, infrastructure conditions make travel difficult. Participants described barriers such as limited sidewalks, major highways, railroads, and industrial areas that make moving within and across the neighborhood challenging. Traveling between different parts of GES often requires crossing I-70 or navigating unsafe routes, while bus stops frequently lack shelter and bike lanes are limited or unclear. As one community member shared,

"There's no access to transportation, reliable transportation. There's the RTD bus, but they don't have weatherproof stops. Stops here in GES are uncovered, and so if it's raining, if it's snowing, there's no place to sit down, and then we don't have access to reliable bike lanes."

These conditions increase the time and effort required to access food and limit mobility for many residents.

Environmental Concerns

Environmental conditions and land use also limit local food production in GES. The neighborhood includes a

mix of residential, commercial, and industrial land, leaving limited and often uncertain space for growing food. Residents expressed concerns about pollution from nearby facilities such as the Suncor oil refinery, railroad, and highways, which affect air, water, and soil quality (Environs-CSU, January 31, 2025). Soil contamination was described as a persistent concern that limits the possibility of expanding food production and contributes to uncertainty about using available land. Concerns about the safety of the soil directly affect people's ability to grow food. Participants described both frustration and

Call out box 1. Housing, displacement, and food access.

Housing pressures and historical disinvestment shape food access in GES.

Rising housing costs and neighborhood change are directly affecting how residents access food and remain in the community. Participants described how higher rents and cost of living reduce the income available for food and limit household stability. As one resident explained:

"people don't have the means. It is because it's so expensive to live in this community, even though it's so tough to live here, the gentrification has made it that you have to make so much more to stay in the neighborhood, or food is so expensive".

These conditions also limit the ability to invest in home or community-based food production, as households prioritize immediate expenses. At the same time, property values have increased rapidly, with 73% of residential and 53% of industrial properties rising by more than 100% between 2015 and 2020 (Dunmire, 2020). This change is linked to redevelopment pressures and shifts in the local economy, including the loss of manufacturing jobs and growth in higher-wage sectors (Dunmire, 2020).

These trends build on longer-term patterns of disinvestment. Historical redlining shaped land use, infrastructure, and access to resources in GES, and its effects continue today. Together, rising housing costs, displacement pressures, and historical inequalities show how neighborhood change directly affects food access for current residents.

hesitation when considering growing food at home or in the community. One resident explained,

“At this point, the choices we have are minimal. What choice do I have, except to go to Safeway! I tried to grow. And I keep trying to grow my land across [this soil] full of lead and arsenic. I can’t grow anything”

These concerns were echoed by another resident who recognized that *“there’s not that many farmers in GES because of the environmental harms of the land. A lot of people are scared to grow food, and rightfully so”*. Such situations limit both household gardening and community-based production, although residents noted that access to soil testing and clear guidance on safe growing practices could help increase confidence.

Participants highlighted the need for a safer, more connected, and accessible neighborhood with basic infrastructure such as sidewalks, protected bus stops, bike lanes, and a nearby affordable grocery store. As one resident noted, access should not require long travel times or difficult trade-offs between essential items. These factors shape how residents move through the neighborhood, access food, and engage in local food production, and are closely connected to other barriers discussed in the following sections.

Capital 2. Financial

Financial capital factors in GES directly affect the local community food system in the ways residents' access and afford food. Low wages, unstable employment, and rising living costs limit household budgets, while the local informal economy, such as selling and sharing food within community networks, provides important support but often lacks stability and formal opportunities.

Low-wage Employment and High Cost of Living

Many residents rely on low-paying, part-time, or informal jobs, which makes it difficult to consistently afford food. Our fieldwork shows that factors such as education, migratory status, English fluency, and access to jobs influence the types of employment available. As a result, households often focus on covering immediate needs, leaving limited resources for higher-quality food, healthcare, or opportunities to increase income. This dynamic reinforces short-term survival strategies rather than long-term stability. These findings align with previous research identifying low income as a key barrier to accessing healthy and fresh food (The Share Network and Partners, 2014; Denver Department of Public Health & Environment, 2026). As one participant described,

“The cost of living is so high that our earnings are not (...) , our community is working two jobs, you know, then barely making it. And that's not okay. I know that Denver has increased the minimum wage, but still, I mean, like, at the minimum wage, if you work 40 hours, you can't make it. You just can't. I mean, if you're paying over \$2,000 in rent, insurance, food, you cannot make it”

Income constraints are also reflected in broader data. About 23% of the GES population lives below the poverty level, and many households spend most of their income on basic expenses. While some families receive support through SNAP and WIC, these programs often supplement income rather than fully cover food needs (US-Census, 2021). Rising food prices in 2025 and 2026 have further strained household budgets, leading families to adjust what they buy and eat. Interviewed families reported reducing purchases of higher-cost foods such as meat, fruits, and vegetables. As one mother shared, *“Sí los precios se han ido subiendo un poco. Lo que hemos hecho es bajar la compra de carne. Nos gusta mucho la carne, pero tratamos de compensarlo con el pollo”*. [Yes, prices have been rising. What we have done is to lower the purchase of meat. We really like meat, but we try to make up for it with chicken]. These changes directly affect diet quality and food security.

Limited Availability/Support of Local Economy Initiatives

At the same time, the local economy includes a strong informal food sector that supports both income and food access. Many residents prepare and sell food from their homes or within their networks. As one participant explained, *“there’s a lot of people who sell food from their homes and they sell to their immediate friends, or a lot of people in the community, they make money out of selling food”*. These activities are often led by women, particularly Latina women, and reflect existing skills, cultural knowledge, and community connections.

However, opportunities to formalize and expand these type of food businesses are limited. Barriers include access to licenses, commercial kitchen space, capital, training, and clear guidance on regulations. While recent policy changes in Colorado, such as the “Tamale Act,” have reduced some enforcement pressures and clarified certain pathways, they mainly apply to

Call out box 2: Limited access to a grocery store

The lack of a full-service, affordable grocery store within walking distance remains a consistent concern among GES residents. While food programs and smaller retail options exist, they do not replace the role of a nearby grocery store for everyday needs. Residents emphasized that food access depends not only on availability, but also on affordability, cultural relevance, and ease of access.

Although a Natural Grocers opened in Globeville in 2017, many participants reported that prices, product selection, and store environment do not align with their needs. Some described the store as oriented toward newer residents, making it less relevant for long-time community members. For households with limited budgets, trying unfamiliar foods can be risky.

Transportation adds another layer of difficulty. Many rely on public transportation, shared rides, or delivery programs. Even when available, reaching a supermarket can require significant time and coordination.

Food assistance programs help fill some gaps but also present limitations, including waiting lists, restricted food options, and challenges related to preparation and storage. In some cases, available foods do not reflect cultural preferences. As one participant explained:

“I think food justice is just providing a safe place where people can come get food and walk away feeling proud... without having to change their cultural needs because that’s what’s available”

Together, these experiences show that food access in GES is shaped by the interaction of cost, distance, transportation, and how well available food aligns with household needs and daily routines.

low-risk foods and still require specific certifications and conditions. Foods that require temperature control continue to face stricter requirements. Participants also highlighted uncertainty around how undocumented entrepreneurs can legally grow their businesses. As one resident noted, *“There is not knowledge on how to support food related businesses of people that are undocumented”*. As a result, much of this economic activity remains informal, limiting its potential to provide stable income and to strengthen the local food system.

Capital 3. Politics and Governance

Political, governance, and sociocultural history and practices in GES reflect the ways food resources are distributed, how decisions are made, and how residents participate in food system efforts. The community’s culture influences food preferences and practices, affects how residents engage with and benefit from local food system efforts. These factors impact not only access to food, but also who is involved in shaping solutions and how effective those solutions are over time (Hassenein, 2003; Flora & Flora, 2013). Across interviews and observations, several patterns emerged, including a loss of trust in institutions, a sense of disconnection across neighborhoods, and differences in how people access information, services, and opportunities.

Trust in Institutions

A key finding is the role that trust plays in shaping participation and collaboration. Many residents and community leaders described a history of disinvestment and top-down decision-making that has led to skepticism toward outside organizations, new developments, and research initiatives. As one participant explained, *“I’ve worked in a lot of different neighborhoods (...) but trust is like, particularly in GES (...) there’s this tension where nonprofits have stepped in to support, but there’s also this fundamental distrust of those nonprofits”*. As a result, grassroots organizations are often selective in choosing partners, prioritizing those who take time to build relationships and respect community knowledge. This expectation was clearly expressed by a community leader, *“what we really believe at the core is that community control is really important (...) if you leave the solutions to people outside of the community, the solutions will never come”*. These dynamics affect how food programs are implemented and whether residents engage with available food resources.

Disconnection Across Neighborhoods

At the same time, residents described a sense of disconnection within GES itself. Although Globeville, Elyria, and Swansea are often grouped together, participants emphasized that they function as distinct neighborhoods with different identities, needs, and levels of access. As one community member noted, *“they’ve always talked about together, but there are actually three different neighborhoods (...) divided by infrastructure or trains or highways”*. These physical and social divisions affect how information about food programs circulates and who is able to participate. For example, food initiatives taking place in one part of GES are not always well communicated or accessible to residents in another area. This uneven distribution of information and services can limit coordination and reduce the overall reach of food system efforts.

Capital 4. Socio-cultural

Social and cultural capital also shapes how residents access and use food. GES has long been a point of entry for migrant communities, contributing to a population with different languages, traditions, and food preferences.

Availability of Culturally Familiar Food

While about 70% of residents are of Latino descent, the community also includes people from African and Caribbean backgrounds. This variety influences both the types of food available and how residents engage with food programs. Although many local businesses reflect Latino food traditions (see Figure 5), participants reported that prices at nearby stores are often too high to use on a regular basis. As one mother explained, *“la verdura es bien importante, pero cuando la compramos aquí, es más caro, es muy caro!”*. [*“vegetables are very important, but when we buy them here, it is more expensive, very expensive!”*]. As a result, even culturally familiar food may remain financially out of reach, affecting diet quality and food security.

In general, we identified a greater concern for providing cultural appropriate foods in local food pantries, community gardens, food bank events, food markets, and community events. More inclusive cultural food provisioning comes from the feedback communities of color have given to food access initiatives, regarding their preferences, the types of foods they know how to prepare, enjoy eating, and consider nourishing (Moffat et al, 2017; Long et al, 2022). Participants also noted that when food assistance programs distribute items unfamiliar to households, those foods are sometimes unused or wasted. As one reflected:

“The food access has to be also cultural in that way--the foods that our soul needs, the foods people find joy in- (...) When I was a kid we would go to food banks, my parents still go. But some of the foods were just left in our house because we didn’t know how to cook it. There’s only so much you can do with five bags of almonds.”

Food access is not only about availability, but also about whether households are able and willing to use the food provided, which directly affects food security outcomes.

Figure 5: Examples of GES corner store and its fresh food offerings



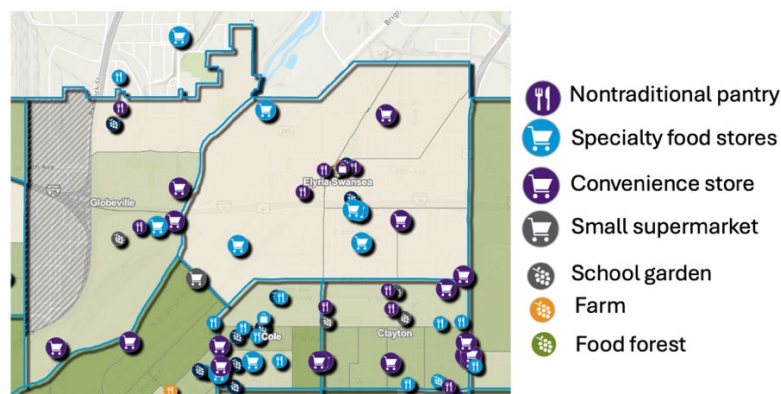
Source: own creation

These political, governance, and socio-cultural dynamics influence how food systems function in GES. Trust, communication, cultural relevance, and access to services all influence whether residents are able to participate in programs, access food, and benefit community efforts. These conditions help explain why food resources, even when available, are not always evenly used across the community and point to the importance of coordination and inclusion in strengthening local food systems.

5.3. Strategies for Navigating Food System Challenges

While previous sections described the challenges affecting the GES food system, residents, community organizations, and partners have developed a range of strategies to respond to food insecurity in their daily lives. From an asset-based perspective, these strategies include food production, food access, and capacity building around food. All of them reflect food knowledge and skills, social networks, community programs, and small-scale economic activities that the community use to access and share food. Families often rely on informal networks, shared practices, and local initiatives to navigate limitations in affordability, access, and infrastructure, reflecting the resourcefulness and ongoing efforts within the community (see Appendix 1 for an extended list of strategies). These capacities are reflective of the configurations of community capitals present in GES.

Figure 6. City of Denver's food access sites for GES



Source: own creation based on City of Denver (2025)

The City of Denver has mapped some food access and production sites in GES (Figure 6), including mobile pantries, specialty stores such as panaderías and butcheries, corner stores, a nearby grocery store, and a few food production initiatives such as school gardens and food forests. However, fieldwork shows that community food strategies are more diverse and extend beyond what is captured in these maps, as shown in the following sections.

Food Production Strategies and Assets

Food production in GES is supported by community members and local organizations through a range of initiatives that combine food access, education, and shared space. These efforts create opportunities for residents to grow fresh produce, learn about how food is produced, and participate in community-based activities that take place throughout the year. In many cases,

these sites function as spaces where people can engage directly with growing practices, attend workshops, and access food in ways that complement other food sources in the neighborhood. As one local grower described:

“We want to create this really warm, open gathering space where people can come and be on the land, regardless of whether we’re there, and where they can learn about their food system. They can see their food being grown there right in front of them... and then also just to be able to distribute food at a low cost or no cost to the community”

This perspective reflects how food production sites in GES are used not only for growing food, but also for learning, gathering, and supporting access to fresh produce.

Examples of these initiatives show the variety of approaches to food production in the neighborhood. Huerta Urbana at Focus Points combines training in food production and small-scale entrepreneurship with access to raised garden beds where community members can harvest produce. The GES Food Forest and the Abolition Garden provide spaces for growing fruits, vegetables, and culturally relevant crops, while also incorporating educational and community-based activities. Youth-focused programs, such as the Teens for Food Justice farm at Bruce Randolph high school, introduce students to food production while contributing to local food access. Additional sites, including CSU Spur greenhouses and school gardens at Garden Place Academy and Swansea Elementary, support both food distribution and learning opportunities. Across these examples, food production in GES takes place in different types of spaces and through different models, contributing to the overall mix of food-related activities in the community. While there is such infrastructure, and efforts to activate spaces through social and cultural capital, there are still challenges with time and financial support for such efforts to thrive.

Food Access Strategies

A range of organizations, programs, and retail spaces contribute to food access in GES through different models, including food distribution, school-based programs, and community-based initiatives. These efforts provide food through scheduled distributions, open-access sites, and seasonal markets, creating multiple ways for households to obtain food. For example, GrowHaus distributes food boxes every two weeks to selected families through pickup sites such as the Tepeyac Clinic and Valdez Perry Library, while Bird Seed Collective offers weekly food boxes, prepared meals, and a pop-up pantry alongside community workshops. Additionally, several other community spaces, such as the Valdez Perry Library and the Green House Connection Center, provide pantry items and daily snacks. School and youth programs, including summer lunch and afterschool food services at Elyria and Swansea Recreation Centers, also contribute to food access for children and families.

Other initiatives expand access through mobile and seasonal models. The We Don’t Waste mobile food market operates monthly, offering fresh produce, meat, and household items to preregistered families, while the Huerta Urbana Food Market provides subsidized produce

during the summer months, including additional purchasing support for SNAP and WIC participants. Programs such as VivaWellness' La Piñata distribute monthly food bags to Latino families with young children. Additional sources include snacks and occasional food distribution at CSU-Spur events, as well as local corner stores and panaderías that serve as everyday food access points. Together, these initiatives help build on community capitals to increase food access options across the neighborhood. However, as described in the barriers section, factors such as transportation, cost, time constraints, and cultural misalignment with the kind of food offered can influence how these resources are used. As a result, the presence of these initiatives does not necessarily mean that all residents are able to access or consistently use them.

Additional Economic, Cultural, and Educational Initiatives

In addition to food production and access, a broader set of initiatives in GES supports the functioning of the community food system through activities related to economic development, cultural practices, education, workforce development, and transportation. These efforts do not directly provide food, but they shape how food is produced, accessed, and shared.

Economic Development Strategies and Assets

For example, the Community Investment Fund (CIF) directs resources from the National Western Center into neighborhood-based projects, including support for local gardens, improvements to small food businesses, and mobility infrastructure. La Fresca, a cooperative led by local women, focuses on strengthening food-related businesses through shared resources and infrastructure improvements. Other initiatives contribute by supporting knowledge and cultural practices connected to food. The Abolition Garden integrates food production with cultural knowledge and education, while Danza Azteca promotes connections between food, land, and cultural traditions through ceremonial and community-based practices.

Education and Workforce Development

Additional programs focus on workforce development, education, and mobility. Prodigy Coffeehouse provides youth with employment, training in food service, and career readiness through its café operations. The Green House Connection Center offers cooking classes and community programming that incorporate food, environmental education, and access to kitchen tools, while CSU-Spur has hosted workshops such as Salud ConCiencia focused on culturally relevant nutrition education.

Transportation

Transportation-related initiatives also play a role in supporting food access. For example, the Connector provides a free ride service that residents use to reach grocery stores, while programs like Safe Cycle offer bicycle repair training and promote safer routes to food access points. Some organizations also distribute bus tickets to support mobility. Together, these initiatives illustrate efforts to build capacities (i.e. capitals) within the broader food system in GES, even when they are not directly focused on food provisioning.

Household Practices

Likewise, households in GES use a range of strategies to manage food access within the constraints of their daily lives. Families often organize their weekly routines around the schedules and locations of food distribution programs, grocery stores, and available transportation. This coordination requires balancing work, caregiving responsibilities, and travel time. In many cases, women take on the primary responsibility for this work, arranging trips to food pantries or supermarkets by using services such as the Connector or coordinating rides with friends and neighbors. In addition, households compare prices and food quality across multiple stores, often visiting two or more locations to stretch their budgets. Decisions about where to shop are influenced by affordability, the purchasing power of SNAP/WIC benefits, and the availability of specific food items.

Families also rely on strategies that extend beyond formal programs. Some travel longer distances to access culturally appropriate foods, visiting supermarkets in other parts of Denver, including areas like Aurora, where there is greater food variety. Informal social networks also play an important role, with households sharing food among relatives, friends, and neighbors, including redistributing items received through food programs. While these strategies allow families to manage their food needs, they require significant time, coordination, and effort.

In sum, the strategies used by households and community organizations in GES reflect how food access is managed through a combination of limited resources, coordination, and social support. Families stretch their food budgets by comparing prices, traveling longer distances, and relying on available food programs, while also using informal social networks to share and redistribute food. At the same time, community organizations expand these efforts by providing food access infrastructure, educational programs, and other forms of support such as financial capital. Together, these strategies show how access to food in GES depends on the interaction of multiple forms of community capital that can be both enabling and constraining. The following section builds on these findings to identify areas where organizations and institutions can strengthen their support for the community food system.

6. Recommendations

The findings show that food access in GES is shaped by multiple interconnected conditions, including financial constraints, transportation limitations, housing pressures, environmental concerns, and uneven access to services and programs. While a range of food initiatives exist, barriers related to cost, distance, time, and cultural relevance continue to affect how households access and use food. At the same time, residents and community organizations play an important role in supporting food access through food distribution, local food activities, resource sharing, and informal care networks, often with limited resources. Together, these factors point to the importance of coordinated approaches that both address barriers and support the ways communities already engage with and sustain their local food systems.

Our recommendations are organized into five different support areas, which together can support community and household food security. The recommendations not only aim to address food security from a nutrition or food provisioning perspective but contend with root causes that shape the long-term impact potential of initiatives. The five recommendation areas are:

1. Develop and support programs that aim to address the basic needs of households
2. Build local leadership and human resources for community food systems work
3. Invest in physical infrastructure for community food systems
4. Design programs and policies that build trust and eliminate entry barriers with and within the community
5. Support research and innovation

The recommendation areas are presented in this order to reflect their relative importance and the way they build on one another. While addressing basic needs requires significant and sustained effort, it is essential because these conditions are among the root causes of shaping food access in the community. For this reason, we begin by focusing on supporting key household needs. From there, the recommendations move toward strengthening human capital by creating opportunities for residents to develop the skills and capacities needed to support their community food system and livelihoods. The next area focuses on investing in the physical and organizational infrastructure required for the food system to function effectively. This is followed by recommendations aimed at reducing barriers and fostering more inclusive and accessible participation. Finally, we highlight areas where research and innovation can further support and inform long-term improvements in the GES community food system.

To help different actors such as community organizations, NGOs, local government, academia, and the private sector coordinate and operationalize these recommendations, the proposed actions are divided into two categories: quick wins and stretch goals. Quick wins refer to actions that can be implemented using existing resources, coordination networks, and current policies. In contrast, stretch goals may require more substantial investment, including new funding sources, policy alignment, stronger coordination, staff capacity, and broader resource allocation. While stretch goals demand more effort and time, they have the potential to generate deeper and longer-term impacts by addressing the root causes shaping the GES community food system. We have drafted these recommendations for a broad audience with the understanding that they will be adapted within particular institutional and organizational contexts.

1) Develop and Support Programs that Aim to Address the Basic Needs of Households

Our findings show that participation in community food programs depends on meeting basic household needs. Factors such as access to affordable housing, reliable transportation, mental health support, and stable income directly affect a family's ability to access food and take part in available programs. There are programs already in place that support the community's basic needs. For example, Habitat for Humanity of Metro Denver, which supports accessible housing; Servicios de la Raza provides assistance for culturally relevant mental health, transportation tickets and food access. Another example is Focus Points Family Center that offers workforce programs, family support, and service navigation. However, some participants mentioned they face challenges accessing such organizations due to transportation struggles or schedules conflict with work hours or services. For this reason, institutions and organizations working on food systems can also play a role in supporting both local and broader programs that improve accessibility. Among quick wins and stretch goals we propose:

Quick wins

- Partner with food banks, groceries, and food hubs to provide affordable, culturally appropriate food.
- Support initiatives that increase access to safe and affordable housing.
- Expand access to mental health and social work services.
- Allocate flexible funds to bundle food access with transportation vouchers, childcare stipends, and mental health referrals within existing programs (e.g., pantry days, workshops).

Stretch goals

- Invest in transportation options that make it easier to reach food and services.
- Develop cross-agency, and interagency, funding agreements (housing, food, transportation) to support integrated service delivery rather than siloed programs.
- Support and lead efforts that ensure job opportunities that offer livable wages.
- Provide childcare and dependent care services that allow households to participate better in the job market.

2) Build Local Leadership and Human Resources for Community Food Systems Work

Our findings are consistent with previous studies in GES which highlight ongoing challenges such as limited formal education, increased caregiving responsibilities, long working hours, and restricted access to English language programs in the food systems space (The Share Network and Partners, 2014; EPA-City of Denver, 2017). These conditions limit residents' ability to participate in community organizations and access workforce training aligned with their interests, resources, and migratory status. At the same time, many residents already have valuable food-related skills – including cooking, gardening, food preparation, informal food sales, and partnerships – that are often not connected to formal training or business development opportunities. Based on community leader input, two main areas for support were identified. First, there is a need to strengthen local leadership and advocacy so that more residents can participate in decision-making spaces related to food systems. Second, there is an opportunity to better connect existing community skills to formal training, certification, and business pathways. To support these areas, organizations can focus on the following:

Quick wins

- Provide leadership, advocacy, business, and policy training focused on food systems (e.g. CSU Extension's Family Leadership Training Institute – FLTI).
- Offer bilingual, low-barrier workshops (evenings/weekends) on food safety certification, small business basics, and navigating licensing.
- Provide training in food production, including soil preparation, composting, raised beds, seasonal planting, and pest management.
- Offer workshops and training on how local government, food policy councils, and funding systems operate.

Stretch goals

- Provide training in grant writing, data collection, and program evaluation.
- Develop low- or no-cost certification programs in food safety, preparation, kitchen operations, and menu planning.
- Offer training in business management, marketing, and branding.
- Offer guidance on managing food pantries and markets, including food safety, inventory, culturally appropriate food distribution, volunteer coordination, and emergency preparedness.

3) Invest in Physical Infrastructure for Community Food Systems

Limited infrastructure is one of the main challenges affecting the GES community food system. Gaps in this area create barriers for food access, local economic opportunities, and the development of both existing and future community initiatives. Community members identified several priority areas where institutions and organizations can support investment, including subsidized grocery stores, food business incubators, and food production infrastructure such as gardens, commissary kitchens, and greenhouses. There are national and local examples of how the infrastructure investments are key in supporting a prosperous urban food system but do require some initial steps which we emphasize in the quick wins. Partnerships and coordinated funding can play an important role in advancing these efforts.

Food Access Through Markets

Different models have been used to support low-cost or no-cost grocery access, particularly in communities where traditional supermarkets are not financially viable (McNeal et al., 2024). These include municipal, nonprofit, cooperative, and public-private models. In Colorado, examples such as the Silverton Grocery Initiative demonstrate how a city-led model can maintain food access after a store closure. More recently, the Montbello FreshLo Hub has been developed as a mixed-use project that combines food retail, small business support, and community space, funded through a mix of public and private sources (Denverite, 2026). Other models, such as the Colorado Food Cluster, explore options for providing groceries at no cost to specific groups (Morgridge Family Foundation, 2024). These examples illustrate different approaches that could inform similar efforts in GES.

Food Business Incubator

Food business incubators are programs that bring together a range of resources to support community-led food businesses, particularly those led by immigrant women and low-income entrepreneurs. These programs typically provide access to licensed commercial kitchen space, along with support for business planning, licensing, and food safety certification. They also offer training in marketing and branding, access to capital and microloans, and connections to distribution channels such as farmers markets, retail, and wholesale opportunities. In many cases, these programs are designed to be culturally responsive to the communities they serve. There are several examples of this model across the United States. La Cocina in San Francisco currently supports 86 active businesses, primarily owned by low-income families, women, immigrants, and people of

color (Iacocina.org). Similar initiatives include Hot Bread Kitchen in New York, Commonwealth Kitchen in Boston, and Detroit Kitchen Connect in Michigan. In GES, the Comal Heritage Food Incubator was an early example of this approach. Although it is no longer operating, its closure reflects the financial, operational, and real estate challenges that small food enterprises face in high-cost urban areas, rather than a limitation of the model itself. At the same time, the continued presence of informal food businesses in GES suggests there is ongoing demand for this type of support.

Increase Food Production Sites and Methods

Existing food production sites in GES often rely on shared spaces, volunteer labor, and alternative growing methods such as raised beds and greenhouses, partly due to concerns about soil contamination. While these approaches allow production to take place, they are typically supported by limited resources. Expanding the number of production sites and improving infrastructure can increase local food availability. Community members also identified interest in growing culturally relevant foods that are not easily available in local stores, including Andean, Afro-Caribbean, and African crops. Given space limitations, investments in vertical growing, greenhouse systems, and other space-efficient methods can support both community-level and household-level production. Pilot projects using controlled-environment agriculture and low-cost growing systems can also help organizations and residents evaluate what methods are most feasible and sustainable within GES conditions.

Continue Support for Food Access Infrastructure

GES already has a network of food access points, including food pantries, community fridges, food banks, school-based programs, and seasonal meal services for youth. These resources play an important role in supporting households, but they often operate with limited and competitive funding. Expanding partnerships and funding opportunities can help sustain and strengthen these services. In addition to food procurement, there is a need to invest in infrastructure such as storage spaces, refrigeration, kitchens, and food processing facilities. Examples of funding supporting such initiatives include the USDA Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP), which supports the development of local and regional food systems through investments in food distribution, storage, aggregation, and processing infrastructure (USDA, 2026). Likewise, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), a national program that helps fund grocery stores, food retail projects, and food access infrastructure in communities that need extra support (Reinvestment Fund (2026)). These types of investments can improve the long-term capacity of organizations to provide consistent and reliable services.

To achieve the proposed infrastructure goals, we propose to continue supporting and strengthening the existing food access initiatives as quick wins, but also to start piloting and building foundations to reach the more impactful goals.

Quick wins

- Strengthen coordination and funding for existing food access sites (food pantries, community fridges, school programs).
- Expand storage, refrigeration, and distribution capacity within current organizations.
- Support mobile markets or pop-up food distribution in underresourced areas.
- Identify and activate underused spaces (schools, community centers, churches) for food storage, preparation, or distribution.
- Provide small-scale upgrades to existing gardens and farms (raised beds, composting systems, irrigation improvements).
- Pilot greenhouse, hydroponic, container-based, or vertical growing projects using existing sites and low-cost infrastructure adapted to local environmental conditions.
- Facilitate partnerships between organizations to share kitchen space and equipment.

Stretch goals

- Develop a subsidized or low-cost grocery store model adapted to GES (co-op, nonprofit, or public-private model).
- Establish a food business incubator with access to licensed commercial kitchens, training, and financing pathways.
- Build or expand permanent infrastructure for food storage, processing, and distribution (e.g., food hubs, commissary kitchens).
- Increase the number of dedicated food production sites, including greenhouses and controlled-environment agriculture systems.
- Invest in vertical, hydroponic, or other space-efficient growing systems that respond to land, soil, and economic constraints within the neighborhood.
- Create long-term funding mechanisms and partnerships to sustain food access infrastructure.
- Integrate food infrastructure planning with broader neighborhood development and anti-displacement strategies.

4) Design Programs and Policies that Build Trust and Eliminate Entry Barriers With and Within the Community

Working together in GES depends on trust, clear communication, and shared decision-making. In the past, short-term projects, limited investment, and unclear results have made some community members cautious about new programs. Building trust takes time and requires consistent effort, follow-through, and a focus on community priorities. Approaches that involve residents are transparent and show clear results can help strengthen trust.

Follow a Community Engaged Approach

Community engagement should be an ongoing process, not a one-time activity. This means involving residents in planning, running, and evaluating programs. It also includes recognizing people's time and knowledge by offering compensation when possible, and being clear about goals, expectations, and limitations.

Have a Community Navigator Program

A community navigator model, such as the promotora model developed through community health work with Latino communities (Johnson et al., 2013), is a community-based approach where trusted residents are trained to provide outreach, education, and support. In community food systems work, community navigators can assist with food access outreach, nutrition education, and gathering community input, for example, while serving as a connection between organizations and residents. This model supports cultural and language accessibility and helps align programs with community needs. Examples of organizations using this approach in Denver include Re:Vision, Servicios de la Raza, and Cultivando.

Shared Co-governance with Community Committees

Establish community committees that create spaces where residents can take part in decisions about food programs and services in their neighborhoods. These groups allow people to share their ideas, help plan activities and work together with organizations. This can improve coordination, strengthen trust, and support long-term efforts (Ostrom, 1990; Flora & Flora, 2013).

Reduce Entry Barriers for Communities to Participate

Participants described several challenges that make it difficult to take part in programs and activities offered by organizations in GES and across Denver. These barriers include limited transportation options, a lack of Spanish-speaking staff, limited childcare during events, and spaces or programs that do not feel culturally welcoming. Together, these factors affect both the ability and the willingness of residents to participate. Organizations and institutions can help address these challenges by continuing to invest in ways that make programs more accessible and inclusive. This includes improving transportation support, offering services in multiple languages, providing childcare, and designing spaces and activities that reflect the cultures and experiences of the community. These practical changes can help create more supportive conditions for participation and support ongoing community involvement.

Quick wins

- Use community-engaged approaches in existing programs by involving residents in planning, implementation, governance, and evaluation.
- Clearly communicate program goals, timelines, and limitations to build transparency.
- Provide compensation (stipends, food, childcare) for participation.
- Hire one community navigator, or partner with existing promotor(a) programs, for outreach, education, and community feedback.
- Offer services and materials in both English and Spanish.
- Provide childcare and transportation support during meetings and events.
- Adjust program schedules (evenings/weekends) to better match residents' availability.

-
- Adapt funding and evaluation criteria to recognize culture and different starting points, ensuring that newer, community-based organizations are not disadvantaged by limited access to networks, funding experience, or formal leadership structures.

Stretch goals

- Establish and sustain community navigator teams as a formal part of food system outreach and engagement.
 - Create and support community-led governance structures (e.g., neighborhood food committees) with decision-making roles.
 - Develop long-term funding to compensate community leadership and participation consistently.
 - Invest in trainings on culturally responsive and trauma-informed engagement for organizations.
 - Align engagement strategies across organizations to reduce duplication and improve coordination.
 - Integrate community participation into formal policy and planning processes at the city level.
-

5) Support Research and Innovation

Our findings show that additional data and community-informed research can help to better understand the GES food system and identify effective strategies. Several areas were identified where organizations and institutions can support research and learning.

Soil Testing on GES Sites with Potential for Gardening

There is strong interest from community members in understanding whether available land is safe for growing food. This includes knowing what steps are needed for soil remediation, what growing methods are appropriate, and what the costs may be. Supporting soil testing and sharing clear, accessible information can help residents make informed decisions about food production. This also creates an opportunity for participatory research that combines technical knowledge with community experience.

Nutrition Needs and Types of Training and Outreach

Research shows that food insecurity is closely connected to factors such as income, housing, and time, rather than a lack of nutrition knowledge (Guthman, 2011; Bowen et al., 2019). For this reason, nutrition programs can be more effective when they are shaped by community priorities and reflect people's daily realities. Approaches such as culturally relevant education, affordable cooking methods, and intergenerational learning can improve engagement. In addition, trauma-informed approaches to nutrition recognize how stress and past experiences influence eating habits and can help create more supportive programs (Milton et al., 2025).

Adaptive, Evidence-based and Anti-gentrification Strategies

Improvements to the food system can also contribute to rising costs and displacement in the community. Local organizations, including the GES Coalition, are already working on strategies such as monitoring housing changes and supporting land trusts. However, there is a need for further research on how to reduce displacement while improving access to resources. This includes exploring tools such as protections for small food businesses and other community-based safeguards.

Continuous Research and Evaluation on Community Food Systems

Organizations and institutions can strengthen community food systems by supporting ongoing, community participatory research and evaluation efforts that focus on drivers of food access. Priority areas include understanding how income, housing, transportation, and care work shape participation in food programs, as well as examining the role of informal food systems and local economic opportunities. Research can continue to improve our understanding of how strategies support community food systems stability over time. Strengthening collaboration between community organizations, academia, and public institutions can help ensure that research is grounded in local experiences and used to guide more effective and coordinated long-term actions.

Quick wins

- Partner with higher education, local organizations, and government agencies to conduct targeted soil testing and share clear, accessible guidance on safe growing practices.
- Integrate community input into nutrition programs through workshops and feedback sessions to ensure they reflect daily realities and cultural preferences.
- Support participatory research by directly involving residents in documenting food practices, strategies, needs, and priorities.
- Compile and share existing data on food access, transportation, and housing trends relevant to GES.
- Use existing programs (pantries, workshops) to gather feedback on barriers to food participation and services use.

Stretch goals

- Strengthen and expand existing soil testing efforts by increasing community engagement, follow-up, and clear guidance on remediation and safe growing practices.
- Deepen culturally relevant, trauma-informed nutrition programs through ongoing community involvement and evaluation over time.
- Conduct research on anti-gentrification strategies related to food system development, including impacts on housing and small businesses.
- Develop and test policy tools that support community stability, such as protections for local food businesses and land use strategies.
- Develop and evaluate cross-sector policy strategies that connect food access with housing, transportation, and livelihoods to address the structural drivers of food insecurity.

7. Conclusion

The GES community food system reflects a complex and interconnected set of challenges, strengths, and possibilities. This report has shown that food insecurity in Globeville, Elyria, and Swansea is not the result of a single gap or failure, but rather the product of overlapping conditions – including low wages, rising housing costs, limited transportation, environmental contamination, and the absence of a nearby affordable grocery store – that compound one another in daily life. Understanding food access in GES requires looking beyond the availability of food programs to the broader systems that shape whether and how residents can consistently meet their households' food needs.

At the same time, this report documents the remarkable depth of community knowledge, resourcefulness, and care that already exists in GES. Residents, local organizations, and informal networks actively work to sustain food access through food production sites, distribution programs, cultural practices, and everyday strategies such as sharing food and coordinating resources across households. These efforts are not simply workarounds; they represent genuine forms of community capital that deserve recognition, investment, and sustained support. Care work – the largely invisible labor of feeding families and sustaining community food systems – is central to how food security is maintained in GES and must be accounted for in how institutions design and evaluate their programs and partnerships.

The findings also highlight that how food is provided matters as much as how much food is available. Food that is culturally familiar, affordable, accessible within people's daily routines, and offered through trusted relationships is more likely to reach and benefit residents. Programs that are designed without attention to these dimensions may fail to achieve their goals, even when resources are in place. Trust, built through consistency, transparency, and genuine partnership, is a prerequisite for effective collaboration in GES.

The five recommendation areas presented in this report – addressing basic household needs, building local leadership, investing in food system infrastructure, fostering community engagement and trust, and supporting research and innovation – are not independent priorities. They reinforce one another, and progress in one area creates conditions for progress in others. Addressing root causes such as housing instability and income insecurity requires sustained, cross-sector collaboration, while shorter-term actions can meaningfully expand access and opportunity in the near term.

CSU Spur's role as an anchor institution in GES creates both a responsibility and an opportunity to act on these recommendations in collaboration with community members, local organizations, city agencies, and other institutional partners. Our work suggests that anchor institutions can be most effective when they listen before they act, align their resources with community-identified priorities, and commit to long-term presence over short-term projects.

Improving food security in GES will require more than individual programs or isolated investments. It calls for sustained, coordinated action that addresses the structural conditions shaping food access while supporting the community-led systems that residents have built. This

report aims to serve as a foundation for that work – a shared resource for the institutions, organizations, and residents committed to a more enriching and resilient food system in GES and across Denver.

8. Appendix

Appendix I: List of community food system strategies

Food Production Sites	
Focus Points Family Resource Center Huerta Urbana	Training program that supports families to grow and sell food, with community garden beds offering free produce.
The Food Forest by Tierra Colectiva and GES Coalition	Community garden with fruit trees and vegetables, supported by local organizations.
Bruce Randolph Teens for Food Justice Farm	School-based farm where youth learn food production and distribute fresh produce.
The Abolition Garden	Community garden focused on food access, youth education, and culturally relevant growing practices.
Green Dot Coalition	Project improving green spaces through planting beds and small-scale urban agriculture.
CSU-Spur Green houses at the Horticulture Center and the Community Food Justice Garden	Greenhouses that grow food for donation and provide shared growing space for organizations.
School gardens	Gardens in local schools used for education and small-scale food production.
Food Access	
GrowHaus Food Boxes	GrowHaus distributes every 2 weeks food boxes to selected and qualifying families in GES through various means. Participating families can come and pick up their food box at the Tepeyac Clinic and the Valdez Perry Library or visit their warehouse.
Bird Seed Collective	Weekly food boxes, prepared meals, pantry services, and community workshops.
Local food pantries and snacks	Community spaces offering grab-and-go food and pantry items for daily needs.
Summer lunch and/or after school	Free meals and snacks for youth through recreation center programs.
LiveWell and la Piñata	Monthly food bags for Latino families with young children through early education programs.
We Don't Waste free mobile food market	Mobile market offering fresh food and essentials at different locations each month.

Huerta Urbana Food Market	Seasonal subsidized market with discounts and SNAP/WIC matching benefits.
Laradon Community Fridge	Public fridge where residents can freely take or donate food.
CSU-Spur	Provides food during events and distributes small food boxes when possible.
Local corner stores	Small stores and panaderías offering convenient but often limited and higher-cost food options.
Common Harvest Colorado	Connects local food producers and distribution networks to neighborhood food access efforts, including affordable food subscription and marketplace programs that increase access to locally produced food.
Other Areas of the Community Food System	
The Community Investment Fund (CIF) and La Fresca	Funding programs and cooperative efforts that support local food projects and small businesses.
Knowledge and Culture: Danza Azteca and the Abolition Garden	Cultural initiatives connecting food practices with tradition, healing, and community identity.
Workforce Development: Prodigy Coffeehouse	Youth workforce program offering job training in food service and customer skills.
Green House Connection Center and CSU-Spur Salud ConCiencia	Programs offering cooking classes, nutrition education, and community learning.
Transportation and mobilization	Services like the Connector, Safe Cycle, and bus tickets that help residents access food.
Households	
Coordinating their schedules	Planning around food distributions and coordinating rides to access food sources.
Comparing prices and food quality among supermarkets	Shopping at multiple stores to find affordable food and better quality options.
Traveling longer distances to find culturally appropriate food	Going outside the neighborhood to find culturally familiar and affordable foods.
Reducing purchases of higher-cost foods when budgets are tight	Cutting back on more expensive items such as meat and fresh produce.
Sharing food within social networks	Exchanging food within family and community networks to support one another.

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