



PERRY COUNTY LOCAL FOOD COUNCIL NEEDS ASSESSMENT AUGUST 2026



Public Health
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Perry County
Health Department

INTRODUCTION

The Perry County Health Department (PCHD) was awarded a Creating Healthy Communities grant from the Ohio Department of Health, Bureau of Health Improvement and Wellness to implement community-led solutions that increase access to healthy foods and opportunities for active living. In 2026, PCHD began developing a Local Food Council bring together farmers, community leaders, public health professionals, and community residents to improve the food system in the county. PCHD contracted with researchers from Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Health for technical assistance and evaluation services.

ASSESSMENT OF FOOD SYSTEM NEEDS

Methodology

To better understand food system strengths, challenges, and gaps in Perry County, and identify possible areas of focus for the Local Food Council, Ohio University researchers developed a needs assessment tool. The researchers facilitated an in-person needs assessment discussion with Local Food Council stakeholders in June 2026. The discussion was audio-recorded, and a written transcript of the discussion was produced. In addition, a similar needs assessment survey was distributed to key constituents in the community. Both the transcript and the survey data were analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques to identify, analyze, and interpret themes that emerged from the discussion.

Key Findings

Several consistent themes emerged regarding the role that the newly established Local Food Council could play in strengthening Perry County's food system. Participants acknowledged that many positive resources already exist, including food pantries, food bank partnerships, farmers markets, school agriculture programs, community gardens, local growers, and strong collaboration among community organizations. However, participants also identified significant gaps that limit residents' ability to access, utilize, and benefit from these resources.

Theme 1: Improve Access to Food and Food Resources

The most frequently discussed need was improving access to food, particularly for residents experiencing food insecurity.

A. Centralized and Accurate Information on Food Resources

Participants stressed there are many resources, but information is scattered across multiple websites, organizations, and informal networks and is often outdated.

- Need one reliable, centralized directory that lists:
 - All food pantries, their hours, locations, eligibility rules, and changes in schedule
 - Mobile distributions (e.g., Junction City Lutheran/Social Services giveaway, Hopewell UMC Thursday distribution) and who they serve
 - Blessing boxes, where they are, and how they're used
 - Farmers markets' locations, days/hours, and available products
 - Local farm stands, mobile vendors, and retail mobile foods (frozen meats, eggs, etc.) from existing licensing lists
- Better coordination with 211 is needed so Perry County food resource information is up to date there

Survey respondents also emphasized the need for better awareness of existing food resources. Several noted that residents may not know where resources are available or how to access them, suggesting that increasing visibility and promotion of existing services is needed.

Many participants identified the creation of a reliable, regularly updated resource directory as a priority. At the same time, participants noted that Perry County's strong network of community organizations provides an existing foundation for improving communication and outreach.

B. Transportation to Food Access Points

Participants described transportation as a major barrier, especially for low-income, elderly, and rural residents. Survey respondents noted this is particularly true for residents who need to travel outside their immediate community to obtain food or food-related services.

- Difficulty getting to pantries, distributions, and markets
- Although Perry County Transit is available to food pantries, participants noted concerns about long wait times and difficulties coordinating transportation within pantry operating hours
- Stronger coordination with Perry County Transit/JFS was recommended (e.g., MOUs, clear expectations about wait times, ensuring riders can get there and back within pantry hours)

Many participants implied the council should treat transportation as a top-priority structural issue.

C. Access to Nutritious and Perishable Foods

Participants described several needs related to accessing nutritious foods:

- More fresh produce, dairy products, and other perishable items should be available through local food assistance programs. Several pantry representatives noted challenges obtaining and storing these foods despite increasing demand.
- Participants would also like to see EBT/SNAP acceptance at local markets where feasible and not overly burdensome on small farmers

Multiple survey respondents suggested expanding community gardens to grow food locally. Participants viewed community gardens as a way to improve food access, support education, and strengthen community engagement.

D. Food Storage and Infrastructure Needs

Participants highlighted limitations in local infrastructure related to food processing, preservation, and storage. Common concerns included:

- Insufficient refrigeration and freezer capacity
- Aging pantry facilities
- Limited space for food storage and distribution
- Lack of shared commercial kitchen or food processing space

Many participants viewed the development of shared cold storage infrastructure, such as a walk-in cooler or freezer, as an important community asset. Such infrastructure could support food donation programs, increase storage capacity, and create opportunities for future food rescue activities. Participants suggested the council should prioritize securing and organizing a shared storage hub before scaling up food rescue or new volunteer efforts.

E. Food Rescue and Better Use of Surplus

Participants expressed interest in food rescue efforts to redirect surplus food from grocery stores, restaurants, farms, and community events to organizations serving residents in need.

However, participants noted that successful food rescue efforts would require:

- A reliable volunteer network to collect and transport food
- Adequate cold storage capacity
- Clear coordination to ensure food is handled safely and efficiently

Some felt a central hub and rescue network would be an appropriate early focus for the council.

Theme 2: Expand Food Education and Youth Engagement

Participants frequently discussed education as an area where a Local Food Council could make meaningful progress. Conversations focused on increasing youth engagement and providing practical food-related skills for individuals and families.

A. Youth Engagement and Education

Participants expressed concern that many young people have limited understanding of where food comes from, how it is produced, and how food systems function.

School gardens, FFA programs, 4-H, school greenhouses, and agricultural education programs were viewed as valuable opportunities to increase food and agriculture knowledge. Participants noted that engaging youth in food-related activities could help develop future growers, food producers, and community leaders while encouraging healthy eating habits.

Participants also highlighted opportunities for intergenerational activities that would allow older adults to share gardening, cooking, and food preservation skills with younger generations.

B. Expand Practical Food Education for Families

Participants identified a need for hands-on education focused on gardening, food preservation, cooking, food safety, and meal preparation. Survey respondents also emphasized education related to healthy meal preparation, food budgeting, reducing food waste, and helping residents understand how to prepare unfamiliar or locally produced foods. Several participants noted that increasing practical food skills could improve both household health and food security.

Suggested approaches included:

- Family-oriented cooking classes (with take home food)
- Gardening workshops
- Canning and food preservation demonstrations
- School-based educational programs
- Educational materials distributed through food pantries

Several participants suggested that educational efforts should focus primarily on youth and families, where they believed the greatest long-term impact could be achieved.

Participants viewed these activities as highly feasible if implemented in partnership with organizations such as Ohio State University Extension, local schools, and workforce development programs

Theme 3: Support Local Food Businesses and Food-Related Economic Development

In addition to addressing food insecurity, participants discussed opportunities to strengthen the local food economy.

Participants expressed interest in supporting small-scale producers, including farm stands, greenhouse operators, Amish farms, and local meat vendors, by increasing visibility and

strengthening connections to local consumers, food pantries, and community organizations.

Several participants suggested developing an opt-in directory of local producers interested in:

- Selling products locally
- Donating surplus food
- Participating in future food rescue efforts

Participants also discussed the importance of exposing youth to career opportunities in agriculture, food production, processing, and related industries through activities such as career days, guest speakers, and workforce development partnerships.

Survey respondents also emphasized the importance of increasing consumer support for local farmers and helping residents understand the value of purchasing locally grown products. Participants suggested that building local demand may encourage producers to invest in expanded production and new food-related enterprises.

Theme 4: Broaden Community Representation and Partnerships

Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that the Local Food Council includes representatives from a broad range of community sectors.

Many noted that faith-based organizations should be included because they frequently assist individuals experiencing hardship and often serve as an important source of food assistance and referrals.

Participants also recommended including youth representatives from organizations such as FFA, agricultural education programs, 4-H, and Scouts to ensure younger perspectives are represented and to help cultivate future community leadership.

Theme 5: Focus on Greatest Needs

Participants consistently emphasized that the Council's activities should remain focused on residents who face the greatest barriers to accessing food.

A. Priority Populations

Participants stressed that the primary focus of the Council should be people facing food insecurity, including:

- Low-income households
- Older adults
- Individuals with disabilities
- People experiencing homelessness
- Single-parent households

- Residents facing multiple barriers to food access

Participants noted that broader local food system initiatives could be pursued alongside these efforts, provided the needs of residents experiencing food insecurity remain central.

B. Greatest Immediate Needs

The needs participants most clearly want the Local Food Council to address in its early work are:

1. Developing a centralized and regularly updated food-resource directory (pantries, blessing boxes, markets, farm stands, hours).
2. Addressing transportation barriers and coordination so people can get to those resources.
3. More nutritious/perishable foods at pantries, supported by a shared storage infrastructure / central hub to enable food rescue (if possible) and better use of surplus
4. Providing practical education (gardening, cooking, preservation) focused on youth and families.
5. Strengthening collaboration among community organizations, faith-based groups, and youth-serving organizations.
6. Supporting local growers and small food-related businesses in ways that align with food access goals.

Overall Summary

Participants described the Local Food Council as a potential coordinating body that could strengthen communication among food system stakeholders, improve awareness of available resources, and enhance access to food for residents experiencing food insecurity. Rather than creating entirely new programs, participants generally emphasized building on existing community assets, partnerships, and resources. Key opportunities identified included improving access to information and transportation, expanding food education and youth engagement, strengthening food storage and distribution infrastructure, supporting food rescue efforts, and promoting local food production and economic development. Together, these efforts were viewed as opportunities to create a more connected, efficient, and resilient local food system in Perry County.