

Characterizing Rural NE Michigan Food Retail: Opportunities to Improve Healthy Food Access Webinar Transcription

Well, good afternoon. I'm Rich Pirog, senior associate director for the Center for Regional Food Systems at Michigan State University. I hope you're -- if you have any issues around not hearing, or difficulty in hearing, or if you have questions, you will find in your top left-hand panel of the screen, a bar that will include Q&A. And we ask you to type any questions that you might have, or comments in there, and so as we move forward. We're going to use a format here where we've got - there are three panelists, myself, our main researcher Courtney Pinard and Chris Bardenhagen, also a grad student at MSU. And we'll -- I'm going to be starting to sort of provide an overview in context. Again, as you have questions, just please type in the Q&A pod, and we'll be -- if they're very simple questions, either Chris, or Courtney or I will answer them as we move forward. And then we'll answer -- we'll have about 15 minutes at the end for Q&A for other questions that you may have.

So I want to provide -- start by just providing some context for this particular project and the partnerships that we have here. This particular piece of research was conducted through a contract between Michigan State University and the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition, based in Omaha, Nebraska. I'll introduce Courtney in a few minutes of the Gretchen Swanson Center is an independent, non-profit research organization focused on food systems, food insecurity, childhood obesity, prevention and evaluation. We have other projects with Gretchen Swanson, including our shared measurement project for the Michigan Good Food Charter. For those of you not familiar with the Center for Regional Food Systems, we've been a center since 2012, spring of 2012. We work in a number of areas, including local and regional foods farm institution, food hubs, food innovation districts, healthy food access, healthy food financing, food system networks, and small-scale and midscale livestock and meat supply chains, as well as organic production systems. And our overall goal is to engage people both here in Michigan and nationally and internationally in regionally-integrated sustainable food systems.

So this project came about in part because of the work of the Michigan Good Food Charter. And you have six goals in the charter, including goals around healthy food access for all Michiganders. We talk about good food in Michigan. We talk about food that is affordable, healthy, green and fair for all Michiganders. The northeast of this -- of Michigan, for those of you that are on this webinar and are as not as familiar with the Michigan geography and demographics, the northeast part of the state is quite rural, it's quite forested, and we also have a number of areas that are low-income and low food access. As we looked at developing this project, it was really important for us, as we look at the Michigan big food charter, which we use a collective impact framework, and by that we mean we have a set of goals around achieving good food for all Michiganders by the year 2020.



We, in particular, want to address some of the challenges we have in rural communities around healthy food access. And the northeast part of the state in particular, low population, low food access, and also fewer boots on the grounds, fewer people that rural community residents can turn to, work with in educational programs, and in other services than on a relative basis compared to other parts of the state. So this project in which we contracted with Gretchen Swanson was an attempt to further advance the goals of the Good Food Charter, and also address a part of the state where, as I said, we had less activity and more [inaudible] opportunities and a set of challenges. We're also very fortunate in Michigan -- you know, and I think the case here, you know, we have a lot of resources, but we need to be able to do our work in rural areas in sort of the same robust manner as we might in urban or suburban areas. Northeast Michigan is no different than other parts of the state in some ways. But because of its rural base, we see a declining customer base. We see a lot more older residents. There's lack of available small business capital. We have issues around food distribution.

And there are very few very large food super centers like we have in suburban or urban areas. And some people, you know, once a month, you know, make trips into those big cities to be able to do shopping. But their local grocery stores have some limited selections. So there's transportation challenges, there's issues around having perhaps too much shelf-stable packaged foods compared to, say, residents that live in suburban areas of the state. Next slide. As I mentioned, this part of Michigan, the northeast part -- and for those of you that are familiar, we're looking at about -- if you put your hand up as the mitten and you look at sort of where your middle knuckle was, that would be around St. Clair, Michigan.

If you went from Clair all the way up to the bridge at that strait where the Mackinac Bridge is, and from that southern point in Clair, if you went east to Tawas City, so it's about a 15-county area of northeast lower Michigan. You can see in this slide -- this comes from the American Heart Association's Food for Every Child report that they did in junction with Food Trust based in Pennsylvania, you'll see a lot of deep red in both Northeast and Northwest Michigan. Actually, parts of those deep red areas are also where the national forests are. And actually, there's more of it in part of Northwest Michigan, a big chunk of that area you see. But you also see some significant areas of Northeast Michigan.

And so this study, in part, tried to -- we're going to take a look -- we took a look at doing a typology of the existing food retail and the existing challenges, including actual supermarket and small convenient store visits in that part of the state, to get a better handle and to better characterize what Northeast Michigan already has when it comes to food retail. And we'll also talk about some of the challenges and opportunities, and also share a very unique GIS database that we've been able to put together. So that's sort of the overview and context of this webinar. Again, we ask you -- we've had one comment about minimizing echo. And so I would just ask, Chris, if you're not on mute, we're going to make sure you're on mute. I'm on mute. But if others are having an echo issue, we'll try on our part to reduce that. So what I'd like to do now is to introduce the lead investigator for this work. We did this work in conjunction with Gretchen Swanson.



I'd like to introduce Courtney Pinard. Courtney is a research scientist at the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition. She also holds a special deans appointment as an assistant professor in the College of Public Health with the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Again, the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition is in Nebraska. This collaborative research is our second project with the Gretchen Swanson Center. Dr. Pinard conducts research focusing on public health outcomes and policies programs and practices that impact nutrition and diet. And a particular interest to Courtney is rural food access and how regional food systems can strengthen community food security in more remote areas that are also low income. So Courtney, I'm going to go on mute, ask you to un-mute and to move forward with the presentation.

Courtney Pinard: Great. Hi, everyone. Thanks for being on today, and we're really excited to tell you more about what we learned from this needs assessment. So as Rich described, rural Northeast Michigan is -- there's really a lack of understanding about what the factors are that impact healthy food access. And it's a very understudied area. So that was sort of the impetus of wanting to do this research, as well as inform the Michigan Good Food Fund, which he mentioned. And so the purpose of the needs assessment was really to characterize the food retail environment in this region, and inform these programs moving forward with the ultimate goal of the Good Food Fund. So as Rich said, also this 15-county region, you can see in detail here the list of those counties, and that sort of outlined area of where we are focusing. And we'll show a few maps later on that also show where the stores are in these locations. But the green areas come from part of our secondary data, which indicate low access and low income as well. And so this needs assessment combines secondary and primary data collection.

So we looked at existing data, and did some observations in stores. And so some of the secondary sources that we pulled together were really to inform what types of stores and where their locations were in order to map them. And this came from the SNAP retail locator and retail food establishments, and a few other sources that we kind of combined. And we'll talk a little bit more about the process here. So with that, the list of stores that we had we compiled into one uniform dataset, eliminated any ones that weren't unique, duplicates. And then the challenge was really to categorize these stores based on various characteristics that were in the dataset, such as revenue and whether they had a gas station, and just the different descriptions of them. And so we wanted to make -- believe it or not, there really isn't a gold standard for how you categorize these stores, especially in rural environments. So we really wanted to have these categories meaningful for Northeast Michigan. And so you can see here the total list of the types of stores that we came up with. And at this point, I will pass it on to Chris Bardenhagen, who is a doctoral student in the Department of Humanities and Sustainability. And he also happens to be a licensed lawyer and farmer, as well as mechanic. So the multitasking Chris will now describe more about our data collection. Chris, you're on mute.



Chris Bardenhagen: Thanks Courtney, and howdy everybody. A word on the in-store categorizations. You see there, there's the smaller midscale grocers with gas, midsized independents and food markets with gas station, and the small grocers [inaudible] without gas. One thing that I found when, you know, in the in-person visits was that the midscale grocers, whether they had gas or not, seemed to be big enough to provide more of a full offering of fruits and vegetables, whereas some of the smaller grocers were challenged for that, probably due to volume. And the small grocers, whether they had gas or not, you know, you have -- you know, looking at them on a case-by-case basis, there are two types of business focuses, ones that more focused on snacks and liquor, and the others that focus more on food and grocery. So there seems to be those two trends.

And of course, it's sometimes hard to see one clearly because most have liquor and most have some grocery. But the food mart gas stations, their focus is generally simply on convenience foods, and liquor and pop, that kind of thing. Next slide, please. Yes. So a particular interest to me was the small midscale with gas category. This category seems to represent a trend in Northeast Michigan, where you'll see a small grocer that has a pump or two for gas. And they're generally very rural and -- but they have a focus on groceries. So one was I talked to the owner and was originally sort of a small town's grocery. And after a while, they -- after ten or 20 years, they decided to add gas, and then they started adding things like hardware and other things, maybe movies. They're very rural but, you know, they had a pretty decent selection for a small rural grocery store. They kind of call themselves "convenience plus". So a really small -- fairly small volume, but providing sort of a full -- trying to provide a full range of foods. Another actually pictured here on the right side of your screen, this one, they -- in there, they sell local eggs, local frozen meats, and some produce, and even had some focus on Michigan foods. As you can see, they are very rural, and they are actually serving as a post office out in the forested area.

So and then on the screen on the left, bottom left, that is actually a picture of one of the midscale, midsized very small-town -- real small-town grocery, but it is big enough to have -- as you can see, there's the main cooler there and then behind it, you can barely see the other cooler that has more of the things there. So two coolers and plus, this place actually had a small meat counter where they ground meat and things like that as well that you can't see in that picture. So that would be the midscale size. Next slide, please. So the environmental scan tool, basically, when I went in I talked to the manager, or owner, or at least clerk, whoever was around, and tried to get a few questions answered by them. At first, the scan tools were taking me about 45 minutes to fill out. So I'd go through and I'd have to mark off which foods that each, you know, grocer had. After a while, I got pretty good at it. You know, it took about 20 to 25 minutes. But at first in these small towns, I got some looks from people. I'm walking around with the, you know, this pen and paper and, "Who is that guy? What is he up to," you know? So there's a little explaining to do here and there.

One thing I wanted to note is that, you know, I found that in some stores, sort of out of the blue that I wouldn't expect this, I found some nice selections of frozen meat, almost like specialty,



small specialty selection of meat, fish and other things; fresh meats, local fresh or frozen meats. My experience basically confirms some of the literature that meat can be a drawer to these rural retail stores, rural grocers. But it also exposed the need. I found some owners, some grocers that were not aware that they could sell local food. They weren't -- so that shows a need to provide some information on the law out there so that people know what they can and can't do. So -- Thanks. Thank you.

Courtney Pinard: Okay, great. And as you can see on this slide, the tool, we kind of combined from two existing tools that have been used in the field from bridging the gap and one that's called the "Food Retail Outlet Survey". And the reason we wanted to kind of make our own and modify these is just to make it meaningful, and not so burdensome for Chris to go out, but meaningful for the stores that we knew we'd be going into. So we're happy to share that tool in the future as well. Let's see. Next slide. So we also conducted a few interviews to complement this other secondary and primary data collection. And originally, we had set out to recruit storeowners, and I was trying to connect with them over the phone. And it proved to be a little more difficult than we originally thought with their varying schedules, and just maybe more of a preference for in-person interactions than just hard to get them in one place at one time because they're very busy and trying to run these stores a lot of times with very little staff. So we had a few storeowners that we interviewed, and you'll see some of the numbers later on, but also just expanded this to other stakeholders in the area in the region, so local governments, food bank staff, and so on. So we'll talk more about that.

But now we'll just jump into results. And so here, you can see the results of our mappings. So we talked about the secondary datasets and boiling those down to a single set of list of stores. And I believed it was -- I can't remember the total number, somewhere in the 500 region, and across these various store types. And we used this mapping tool that's available online. People can develop their maps at this link that's at the bottom, which will also -- it's also included in the report, so you don't need to copy it down or anything. But being able to map the store location by store type, we were really able to see, with the overlay, the green areas being the food desert areas, low-income, low-food access areas. We were able to then determine, you know, reasonably what would be a good selection for those in-person observations to make sure you were targeting areas that had a higher need. And so having this mapping tool was really helpful in the rest of what we did and just a nice visual for folks to be able to see what's in each of the counties and different communities. And so just really quickly, you can see the different number of retailers per county. It's probably nothing earth-shattering here. Maybe it's relative to the population in each of the counties.

But more interestingly, you can see on this slide the percentage of food retailers by the different categories. And so seeing that the small grocery, both with and without gas were the most common store type, I think has a really meaningful purpose in this whole endeavor. So we'll just keep that in mind as we move forward. And so Rich -- or Chris showed the four different store types that we went to assess in person. So the reason we didn't go to a variety of all the various store types is we wanted to focus on these four types that could potentially



benefit, you know, with future Good Food Fund efforts. So the descriptions that I have here are really more of a generalization of what these stores are providing. And Chris gave some really good anecdotes of what his on-the-ground experience was. And a lot of that comes from this. So this is more of a depiction of what these types of stores are. So you have your midsized independent grocer, which tends to be like your main street grocery, and has a pretty good selection of fruits and vegetables. And we'll get into the different food types in a bit here.

Whereas the smaller groceries, both with and without gas, tend to be more focused on tourist and convenience items, and catering to that, and then similar with the even smaller, limited food marts with gas stations. So here you can see when Chris visited 20 stores. And you can see the breakdown of the different store types, the largest being the small grocery convenience without gas. And some of the general characteristics is, you know, most are selling beer and wine, as well as liquor and promoting tobacco, and meanwhile, also accepting SNAP, majority accepting at least SNAP, some with SNAP and WIC. Something in my eye. So the next few slides will really describe the availability within specific food groups that we included in the observational tool. So we'll start with these ready-to-eat items. And you can see the most commonly available one are sandwiches, cold sandwiches. And I think just in general, this category is very interesting because more and more people are relying on these convenient, ready-to-eat items. And so I think it's an area of opportunity, especially in these rural areas where you don't have a lot of food outlets to look at the healthfulness of these and, you know, create convenience items that, you know, are of a higher food quality and higher nutritional value. And with the low-fat milk and ground beef availability -- because you'll see this trend kind of throughout, when you compare them by store type, you're going to see a higher nutritional value in the bigger store, the midsized independent grocer. So they're able to offer that wider selection.

So in general, we see that the higher fat content of these foods was more widely available, and somewhat more available in the leaner values in this larger-sized store. In terms of snack food and junk food availability, you know, and I think with healthy food access, a lot of the work that's being done across the country in the US is focused on increasing access to healthy and not reducing access to unhealthy. So I don't know that we're there yet, but I think that's something to keep in mind for the future, you know, as we starting making these changes to these stores. But the bottom line here is that the small grocery and convenient stores, really all of them have a pretty wide selection of these less healthy processed items. In terms of fruit and vegetable availability, we really see that the canned and frozen are much more common than fresh and the midsized, again, independents are able to offer a greater selection of those fresh items. I'll just pause there. And in addition to availability, we also included a scale for variety and quality. And so when you compare by store type -- it's not shown on the slide, actually the midsize independents are more likely to have that higher quality and variety. So and, you know, beyond just whether something's available at a store, we want to consider the quality and the variety that might be there. So another aspect for healthy food access is whole grains, beans and cereals. And so you can see they're pretty widely available, but they're more available in the sugarless whole grain version. And the midsized grocers tend to have those healthier versions.



So jumping now into the interview results, you can see the more specifics on who we interviewed here on the slide. And some of the key things that really came out of the interviews will help elaborate on those other findings. So we talked about people driving long distances to go to the bigger superstores, super centers, and that really being a drain on these small stores and their ability to maintain a customer base. And with that, you'll also have not just closing of store, but also the food pantries, so a dwindling population that's able to support them even from a volunteer based in the case of the pantry, as well as just the economics of a dwindling population in a lot of the rural communities. And this is related to, obviously, economic challenges.

And one aspect that I mentioned was the demand for convenience items, so some of the stores being more catering to the tourists, but also considering what the local population might need, and where that balance is between meeting that consumer demand and shifting to a healthier variety. And many of these communities experience transportation challenges. And along with the economic barriers is just the -- even the perception, as well as the reality of the cost of healthy eating. And at the same time, though, there was expressed an interest in Michigan-grown and sort of this changing agricultural system, which may call for a need for further education for the entire community to stakeholders through down to the consumer that kind of came out in a few different interviews. So I'll give a few examples now of just quotes that will really help paint a picture that come from these various themes. So in terms of the dwindling population, someone mentioned that a lot of our young people are moving away from the small towns to more urban areas. And this leaves behind a lot of elderly folks who have trouble getting to the stores. So I think we've heard that a few times; it's pretty common. In terms of economic challenges, it was pretty apparent with this quote. In some of our really rural areas where a lot of jobs don't get replaced, it becomes a lot more chronic that [inaudible] aren't able to get employment, or they are disabled and cannot work.

So it's sort of an ongoing chronic thing that people are struggling with. And with that, the cost of healthy eating. So even if there is fresh produce available, is often expensive or past its prime. It's not attractive to people coming into the store. And then in terms of education, this is kind of -- this quote kind of describes even if you change the physical food environment, it may not shift that consumer behavior if there isn't an education awareness to go along with it. So they said so many other things stacked against what would be healthier choices, it's hard for the healthier choices to ever win. It's really the education to do -- what to do with the fresh produce, and why it's a better option. Education is more critical than putting more options everywhere. So it's a bit of a I guess a wakeup call for us to keep in mind that we consider education as this effort moves forward. So I kind of sped through those. We're going to have a lot of times for discussion, but I'll review some of the conclusions, and findings, or recommendations that really came out of this. Some of the things that we didn't -- one of the things that we really didn't mention today that might be a pivotal role moving forward is the role that Double Up Food Bucks might play in incentivizing both the store and the consumer so that -- for those of you who don't know, Double Up is an incentive for SNAP recipients to purchase



more fresh produce.

And so hopefully this tool that we developed, the map as well as to findings from the observational tool, will highlight that small stores in rural areas might be prime areas for investment, as well as just being able to increase their ability to offer more healthful products, and, you know, the combined resource of the mapping and some of the observations and interviews can really inform where those may best be utilized or implemented. And I think I mentioned quite a few times that those midsized independents tend to have that larger availability. So that's not to say that's where the investment needs to be. It's just showing what's already there. So it could be a dual-crowned effort where we're focusing some of the smaller stores that might not be there, and need some resources to help get to where some of the midsized independents -- or to further enhance what the midsized independents can do as far as needing a healthier nutritional profile. And the distribution that is a challenge, you know, just give them the rural-esque [phonetic] area that we're talking about. And innovative solutions may be different partnering between either multiple stores, or even other outlets, like food pantries.

So thinking how we can collaborate together in solving some of these challenges and, you know, overcoming the dwindling population and all these aspects we're talking about. And then as I just described, the nutrition education in stores may help with the uptake of this extended access, and then the potential to really leverage healthfulness of ready-to-eat or convenience items. And so ultimately, we hope this can inform efforts in the Good Food Fund and other, you know, efforts even across the country. And we're really excited to kind of be where we're at with understanding real food access, and look forward to future conversation. So we have a few acknowledgments. We'd like to thank these people for their efforts and input, especially Shane from Tufts who helped put together a lot of the charts that you saw, the data charts. And so you can see the final report at this link which will also be sent to you following this webinar. So at this point, we can answer questions, and/or open it up for discussion. But we'll have to go through this chat function.

Richard Pirog: Okay. So again, that Q&A box that you have, folks, you can type in your question in that Q&A box. Courtney, and Chris, and myself will be able to see that. Or you -- hopefully, you're able to find that box and type any questions or comments. While we're waiting for that, just wanted to also remind -- repeat what Courtney has shared that everybody that is on this webinar will, within 24 hours, get a link sent to them of the report. The report is already on the Center for Regional Food Systems website. It goes into far more detail, including in the appendix it has maps showing all of the different store types for each of the counties that are represented in these 15 county areas. So Courtney, I'm going to turn things back to you. We have two questions.

Courtney Pinard: Sure. Well, Chris asked about farmers market and there definitely are. We didn't mention them. They're a part of the map that we developed. So I could go back to the



slide that shows the store type. Let's see. So there were 14 farmers markets in this 15-county region. So I think they'll be shown on that map link that we provided, which may not be visible - - Oops. Here. Farmers markets would be these -- I guess you can see it, they are these purple diamonds. So if you wanted to look at that. The neat thing about this map is you can add the layers and take them off as you need. So if you just wanted to look at the farmers markets, you could click on that and see. Oops. So Christine mentioned that there were no surprises here, that in Alcona County, the nutrition doesn't necessarily seem to be a priority, but they eat a lot of this, and which I guess that's a good aspect. [Laughs] Maybe we could promote that in the small stores. And Linda asked, "Can you provide some examples about how local food farmers might work effectively with small grocery stores?" I think that's a challenge. Maybe Rich has some -- did you have something to say?

Richard Pirog: I wanted to just add that the NEMCOG, the North East Michigan Council of Governments, which is a significant chunk of this area, had commissioned David Glen and some other colleagues to do more of a local food assessment for a big chunk of this area. And I don't know of anybody that's associated with that council of governments that's on this COG. I know -- think David is traveling, and so he may not be available. But there is some additional efforts to look at that are linking all stores and restaurants with local food providers. Again, there were fewer, as we said earlier, boots on the ground of people helping to work with producers, work with -- there's fewer farmers markets. And so there are opportunities here, but that's sort of in addition to the nutrition aspects and the lack of availability. There's sort of the coordination of production and marketing issues that the Council of Government's report is addressing. Okay; go ahead and -- Courtney, if you would want to go to the other questions.

Courtney Pinard: Yes. So how local farmers can work with the small grocers, I think it's important to understand their distribution system, who their distributor is, and if they have a minimum order that they have to meet weekly or monthly, and that the local farming and local products may be above and beyond that. So maybe also thinking -- someone else asked about food hubs, so thinking of these innovative models of how we can get food to these locations. A food hub ant might be a solution to how we can connect to that. And I know a lot of work is being done in the state in general with food hubs. So that might be a good connection for that. But I think it's important that we look -- when you're really thinking about working with the small grocery stores, that we think about their restraints and what they have as far as contracts and commitments to various distribution mechanisms.

Richard Pirog: Courtney, before you answer the next one, I just wanted to add one more thing. There's another new project, a consulting outfit out of Chicago, new venture advisors, and a number of partners in Iowa, a few other states, and Michigan are looking at the potential of using small grocers as food hubs. Michigan will be involved in that study and, again, Dave Glenn and hopefully, the Northeast Council of Governments will be involved, and that study will launch in the next year. Go ahead, Courtney.



Courtney Pinard: So someone else asked about if we were going to count the number of families that garden. I don't -- not within this scope of this project. I don't know if Dave looked at that at all in this area, or if any other reports have that information. It would have to be a pretty detailed level population survey to get at that. So I'm not sure if anyone has any anecdotes to support whether people are gardening or not in that region. And so someone agreed that education is an important foundation for behavior change, build self-confidence -- Yes. So someone just wrote -- people are agreeing on the education aspect. Sorry, just trying to read through these and answer them as they go. So UW Extension did a study of the local food system in Wisconsin, and found many of the same results from the study; interesting. Where did that go now?

Richard Pirog: Courtney, I just asked Patrick to send us the link for that study.

Courtney Pinard: Oh, okay. So you put that in here. Okay. Yes. That will be interesting to compare and maybe talk with those folks. And then Sharon is in Northeast Michigan to visit the small stores, convenience markets, and oftentimes, they're SNAP and WIC-approved, they're in compliance with the new WIC food package. I think that's an important piece. But the fresh fruit and vegetable offerings are not necessarily appealing. Does WIC do these kinds of quality checks on WIC-approved stores? I don't know that they do. I think they have to meet that minimum requirement. And I think the new WIC food package, as you mentioned, is a step up from what it was. And it's also more restrictive or health-promoting than SNAP. But yes, I don't know that they're being audited on the quality of what those offerings are, or how that really works. And the idea of Double Up Food Bucks, an incentive, would be a good option for these stores. "MSU Extension does SNAP educational programming in the region. And they're very excited about the possibility of connecting with health departments, business development. Glad you mentioned the government interests. I do work with county commissioners." Okay.

Yes; so really, you know, that makes a really good fit for the need for education as partnering with extension when we're talking about work and expanding healthy offerings in these stores, pairing it with in-store demonstrations, such as recipes and other nutrition education. That extension could really carry that as part of their -- meeting their mission and goals too. That's a good option. Another issue to consider is TB in cattle. It makes it very difficult to sell local meat. Yes; and I think the issue of selling local meat and having it go through USDA-inspected facilities in order to sell to the public, a lot of barriers with that, but I wasn't aware of the TB issue. And, "What percent of stores take SNAP? Do consumers -- does customer service play a factor in it?" Yes, definitely. So the percent of stores that take SNAP, you'll be able to pull up on this map. And I don't think I have that number in front of me. But it was around 80% that took SNAP, and that includes about the 20% that also had WIC. So a fair amount of them do accept SNAP. And the other part of that question was, "Does customer service play a factor in the store's success?" So I was actually working on a project that I'm working on in Michigan. And I'm sure it's the same -- or in Nebraska, rather. And I'm sure it's the same in Michigan that these small rural stores part of their competitive edge is offering that added customer service.

So, you know, they are not trying to compete with Wal-Mart on price of paper towels, but they



may have better quality in some of the produce, or meat, and other areas. Also their customer service is huge; and having that connection with the community. So MSU has a new educator beginning in Tawas -- I'm not sure how to say that, as well as an educator in Montmorency and [inaudible]. So there is a number of extension educators that should be connected with any work that goes on as far as improving access. And regarding gardening, the mentality is to grow your own to survive. So they may not sell extra, but will preserve. So yes, that's going strong in that area, that would be a good aspect for people to build on. They're not necessarily selling, but they're growing their own, considering the lack of access. Might be interesting to look at that further. And Patrick asked, "Did you look at access for individual farmer stands or produce stands close to farmers market that require a large enough population in order to operate an honor system?" No; we did not look at that because we didn't have the resources to, like, cover all that ground physically. And it's not really tracked in these secondary datasets. So that's one limitation. I didn't necessarily hear that in the interviews, but as we talked to more people, maybe some of the sort of informal food system that were maybe in existence as well.

So that's another thing that, you know, could be looked at in the future. "And to what extent are public schools involved in promoting healthy food options? To what extent do older rural populations have access to a computer to provide educational awareness?" Not sure about computer access; I would assume very limited in the older rural population, although more and more with the changing times in reliance on technology. And public school systems I think it just depends on where you are and what the school district is. And I know just talking to rural school food service directors here in Nebraska that they are more resource-strapped, and don't have as much of the staff and manpower that some of the larger, more urban school districts have. So it's harder for them to really, I guess, do more like farm-to-school and scratch cooking and all that. But at the same time, they could have more informal relationships, like with the grocery store where, you know, some -- or a restaurant where some of the processing -- say it's chopping apples or apple slices, is done, you know offsite. So we don't have formal data on this area, but I think the rural public schools are challenged, but they also can be pretty resilient in how they approach it. And it's really up to the food service director and their staff. And as a prior WIC employee in -- I don't know if it's Northeast or Nebraska. Oh, I think it's probably northeast. I know -- and that our WIC doesn't do quality checks. Okay; so that is confirmed that --

Richard Pirog: So that is the initials for Nebraska.

Courtney Pinard: Yes. [Laughs] Well, I didn't know if she meant Northeast.

Richard Pirog: Okay; it's possible. It's possible.

Courtney Pinard: [Laughs] That would be more relevant. And then I do know of a WISEWOMAN project in the region where underinsured women receive education and grant funds for gardening, and then encourage entrepreneurship through farm markets that the study could strengthen the validity of the program. That's interesting. That would be a good -- another complement to the educational aspect, too. And I think the notion of driving local economies is more prevalent in the North, more so than consumers -- customer service. They



don't want to shop in the large retail stores that have no choice. So we talk about that a little bit on, you know, what is the consumer demand, and what's the appeal of various things? And I think we still don't know a lot about it from a research perspective.

But definitely supporting your local economy and supporting your neighbor is more of a stronger notion than, say, being healthy or even -- I'm not saying it's not a priority in any rural area, but even the storeowner would want to support people being able to have family meals -- and that's just the difference in terminology than, you know, accepting that they want people to be eating a healthier diet. But, yes, the economy and then supporting their local economy is definitely a strong social aspect.

Richard Pirog: I think maybe you could have answered it privately. Courtney, on the ZOOM webinar chat, Laurie Yelton from MDARD asked the question about whether the regional obesity rate is similar to the state rate. The overall state rate is 30% -- 30 to 32%. Laurie put down 31.5. I don't think we --

Courtney Pinard: It's in the appendix.

Richard Pirog: It's in the appendix, right, of the report.

Courtney Pinard: I could pull it up. I think it's somewhat similar. It's not lower. I know that.

Richard Pirog: It's not lower, and it is likely the same or slightly higher.

Courtney Pinard: Yes, let me see. I can quickly pull it up if people hang on a second.

Richard Pirog: And I just wanted to remind folks that the report, which you'll get tomorrow, has detailed maps of all of the [inaudible]. In addition to [inaudible] here, we did use this typology and characterized the stores on a county basis, which we think will be very useful, not only for programs like Double Up Fruit Bucks, and we sort of characterized retail for our -- the Michigan Good Food Fund, which is a health food financing initiative, but it could also help in other types of food education and planning through this very rural part of the state.

Courtney Pinard: So what did you say that the rate is statewide?

Richard Pirog: Laurie says it's 31.5. I know it's the --

Courtney Pinard: So we have the range Alcona is the lowest at 30.1, and Roscommon is the highest at 33.3, sorry. Gladwin's higher at 34.2, and Arenac is 4.3. So we have some that reach above the average, and a few below.

Richard Pirog: And I -- and probably, for our non-Michigan viewers, those counties may not be as -- may not be able to picture them, but the trend is that there is a number of counties above the state average.



Courtney Pinard: Yes; and I probably murdered their pronunciation.

Richard Pirog: All right. Now, their -- every state is different. And Christine Ranger made that last comment of --There's probably more -- she says there's -- Maybe more fast food restaurants in those counties.

Courtney Pinard: Yes. I don't know if those are more of those tourist hubs, like, where they have the fast food and some of these more convenience items that I would suspect. So -- and Denise mentioned work on smarter school lunch rooms to the Michigan Department of Education, and working with the food service directors. And many are open to change. It's just slow to change for administration. And distribution is part of the problem, the barrier. So that's good that that work is being addressed too. Well, we have about five minutes. So if anyone else has any other comments or questions.

Richard Pirog: Yes; Courtney has put the link for both the -- for the final report and also for the Michigan Good Food Fund, which, again, is a healthy food financing initiative here in Michigan, helping to hopefully address healthy food access issues in rural and urban parts of the state.

Courtney Pinard: And David mentioned that he's a small grocer without gas in Livingston County, Hamburg Township Southeast. And he said that our findings are echoed there, and if we had any plans to study that region as well, and that they're interested in looking at food hubs. So we might want to make a connection with Rich.

Richard Pirog: We may -- there are other partners that we might work with that might take the lead in those kinds of studies, David, but we do have a Michigan Food Hub Network. And I think we have your email here. We can get you linked up with that network. It's a learning community of food hubs around the state that meets three times a year.

Courtney Pinard: Seasonal aspect to the study, obviously more healthy food available in the summer. And the data was collected near the end of the summer. So that may have impacted - - I mean, we may see a very different thing in the winter, it's true, so just something to keep in mind.

Richard Pirog: I'm answering Denise's question about being available possibly to remotely answer questions for the Regional Obesity Prevention Coalition meeting, Courtney.

Courtney Pinard: Okay, great.

Richard Pirog: Have we answered Patrick's question?



Courtney Pinard: Yes. I think there are definitely what could be a seasonal aspect. And the data was collected I think June through August, whenever Chris went out there.

Richard Pirog: Okay.

Courtney Pinard: And so probably peak season for a lot of local produce and we may see a very different thing in the --

Richard Pirog: Yes. Several retailers mentioned that they provide, you know, local foods or just produce during the summer. There's more business for them, especially with the tourists and the local foods that are available. So there's definitely a seasonality aspect to it for some grocers. And Christine Ranger asks, "What is the next step for Gretchen Swanson and for the Center for Regional Food Systems?" We want to continue to promote this report, which will -- is part of the package along with this webinar. And we said our Regional Food Systems is very involved in the Michigan Good Food Fund. And we do hope that this report can help inform opportunities for funds -- healthy food financing funds like the Good Food Fund to identify opportunities in a part of the state that clearly is underserved. So Courtney, do you have any last comments you'd like to make?

Courtney Pinard: No; just that this project was really fun to work on. And I thank you all for your interest. And I think we'll see a lot of parallels across the country as we start looking at real food access more.

Richard Pirog: And for all of those folks on the -- still on the webinar, you will get this -- just a reminder you will get the link, and we'll also try to -- we also will have this recording for the webinar available for those that weren't able to hear it, so -- as well as the slide deck. So on behalf of the Center for Regional Food Systems and our panelists, Courtney Pinard and Chris Bardenhagen, we want to thank all of you for joining us. And we hope you all -- we thought that this -- even though it's a few days before Thanksgiving, the timeliness of this as we all get together with our families and friends to celebrate Thanksgiving, and the idea of healthy food access is a timely one. So we want to thank you all for participating, and come back to us if you have questions for either Courtney or myself. Again, thank you very much, and have a good Thanksgiving holiday.

