The Problem:

Many neighborhoods across Cuyahoga County are considered “food insecure” communities, where residents lack access to the foods needed to sustain a healthy diet. These “food desert” communities are concentrated in urban neighborhoods in Cleveland, due to a historic trend of urban supermarket closures, followed by an increase in the prominence of fast food establishments, convenience stores, and even gas stations. These limited service establishments began to fill a gap in the food retail market, and are providing an increasing role in supplying the daily diets of many families. As the retail grocery landscape has changed, access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other whole foods has become increasingly limited in many neighborhoods. Although a community may have access to numerous fast food restaurants and corner stores, none of these establishments can provide an individual with a healthy diet needed to sustain overall health and well-being. These very same communities face rising challenges from chronic diseases such as Type II diabetes, heart disease, and cancer, making the lack of access to healthy foods a detriment to the long-term health and productivity of many residents.

Goals:

The Community Food Assessment working group emerged to assess food security across Cuyahoga County, identifying target communities where healthy food access is a rising problem. The primary goals of the group are to assess food security and access in Cleveland and Cuyahoga County through quantitative methods such as analyzing census data, as well as through qualitative methods such as conducting interviews with Cleveland and Cuyahoga County residents. With this information, the working group can begin to target communities within Cleveland and Cuyahoga County that can be identified as food deserts or areas where there is a food gap, and begin to improve the retail food environment in these communities.

Progress to Date:

The Community Food Assessment Working Group has conducted a Northeast Ohio Local Food System Assessment and Plan, in partnership with LAND Studio, Neighborhood Progress Inc., and Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative. The assessment and plan identified business strategies and investments to strengthen the regional economy through local food production,
processing, and consumption. The working group also created a community conversations toolkit, including a discussion guide and survey instruments to discuss food access issues with local neighborhood residents. The group then used these tools to hold community focus groups in Euclid, Warrensville Heights, and several Cleveland neighborhoods; Clark-Fulton, Cudell, Hough, Kamm’s Corners, and Union-Miles. The group worked to conduct a Cuyahoga County Food Retail Assessment in 2008 to determine the ratio of fast food restaurants to retail grocery stores in Cleveland and in Cuyahoga County. In 2011, the group conducted a second retail food assessment, this time determining areas that are food deserts; neighborhoods where retail grocery shopping locations are limited, as well as household income and transportation access. A food desert is an area with no or distant grocery stores. Living in food deserts can mean higher obesity rates, premature death, and a lower quality of life, especially for mothers and children.

**Example:**
In the graph below, are some of the results from the 2011 retail food assessment in which major grocery stores are represented by black circles, and distance traveled to those stores is measured in shaded color regions. Residents of light pink areas must travel at least .5 miles to the nearest grocery store, residents of dark pink areas must travel at least 1 mile, and residents of purple areas must travel over 1.5 miles. As is demonstrated, many Cleveland residents must travel over .5 or 1 mile to attain groceries, with some residents traveling upwards of 1.5 miles.