

# “My Daughter Does Not Know How to Make the Chappati”: Understanding Food Access Among African Immigrants in Lewiston, Maine

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## Abstract

*Food access for Maine’s growing African refugee population reflects multiple levels of general access to society. To better understand the challenges and opportunities unique to this community, a multidisciplinary team of students, faculty, and community partners integrated the expertise of local residents with the results of a food assessment of Lewiston, Maine, to discuss the complexity of food access issues for African immigrants. Policy implications and recommendations deriving from this assessment are considered for Lewiston as well as other similar metropolitan areas.*

## Introduction

*After many challenging discussions, Abdi and his sister, Zahra, finally reach an agreement: Abdi agrees to borrow a car and travel all the way downtown to purchase halal chicken at the Somali-owned store; Zahra, in turn, agrees to mix it with the significantly less expensive chicken they can purchase at the [Supermarket]. Zahra is concerned: Mixing the chicken, she says, makes it all haram. Abdi counters that, though under some interpretations this may be the case, if they eat only halal chicken, they can only afford to eat chicken once a month.*

This scenario describes a situation not uncommon among Lewiston, Maine’s African immigrant population—it is a story of insufficient resources, loss, compromise, adjustment, and resiliency. This situation exemplifies how food and access to food is determined by our culture, income, location, and familiarity; and how these accessibility factors determine what foods we eat, how we eat them, and how well our nutritional needs are met. It also illustrates elements of food access that go beyond biological and public health concerns, but touch on the very fiber of how we are connected to our family, our religion, our community and our identity.

This article will overview aspects of an ongoing community food assessment being conducted in Lewiston, and what this assessment has taught us about the particular food needs and assets of the local African immigrant population. We also consider how these findings may transfer to a better understanding of the unique food needs of

other African immigrant populations, the policy implications of these findings, and how these findings can guide community building decisions.

## **Background**

As the picture of immigrants entering the United States over the past two decades has changed, research increasingly focuses on the unique needs and assets of the “new” immigrant population. Over the past decade, immigrants from Africa have gained increasing attention as refugees and asylees from war torn countries like Somalia, Liberia, Ethiopia and the Sudan have immigrated to cities like Atlanta, Georgia; Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Lewiston, Maine.

The circumstances of how and why Somali immigrants relocated to Lewiston is vital context to a full understanding of their unique political, social, and cultural place in the city, but is beyond the scope of this article. What is critical to understand to fully assess the food picture for African immigrants in Lewiston is that between 2001 and 2010, nearly 6,000 African immigrants relocated to Lewiston, mostly as secondary migrants and that their transition to the city has not been without political and social tension.

At an October 2010 panel discussion on immigrants in Lewiston, city leaders including Assistant City Administrator Phil Nadeau and Immigrant and Refugee Services Case Worker Qamar Bashir described how rapid Lewiston’s demographic changes have been: In 2000, less than 1 percent of Lewiston’s population was people of color, as opposed with over 10 percent in 2010 (Q. Bashir, pers. comm. 2010; P. Nadeau, pers. comm. 2010). Local education experts estimate that there are nearly 1,000 students who are English language learners in Lewiston’s public schools (as compared with approximately 20 in 2000); and over 20 percent of Lewiston’s public school children are from immigrant families (Abdi Musa, personal communication to author, October 2011). In fact, 80 percent of Lewiston’s “New Mainers” are from Somalia (Rector 2008); most live in families including two or more children, many live in public or low income housing, and nearly all are adjusting to learning a new language and integrating with a population that is culturally and socially very different from that of their home country.

Most of Lewiston’s African immigrants are secondary refugees, having originally relocated to a primary refugee relocation site in some other U.S. city and then to Lewiston. As such, not only do these migrants not qualify for primary refugee benefits, but the city receives no additional financial support for their residence. These exacerbated financial conditions have fueled fires of animosity as Lewiston’s long-time poor and vulnerable feel disadvantaged by the influx of Somalis. Some city leaders have even been known to view this influx as a strain on city coffers rather than an asset.

Although nearly every element of life is dramatically different in Maine, among the most profound differences for Somalis involves food, which also is a primary embodiment of religious and cultural practice. African immigrants are accustomed to eating different foods, fruits, vegetables, and spices in their diet than they can easily

access in Lewiston. They are used to shopping differently for food, preparing food differently, and consuming food differently—all factors which must be considered in accessing food availability in Lewiston. These qualitative factors influence access to food for Lewiston’s immigrant population.

Food access includes factors such as affordability, opportunity, proximity, comfort, and cultural and religious guidelines. As defined by Hadley and Sellen (2006, 369), “[f]ood insecurity occurs whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and *safe* foods or the ability to acquire them is limited” (emphasis added). Food insecurity, which can result in malnutrition and hunger, as well as a number of nutrition-related health issues, is a public health challenge requiring increasing attention. The USDA recently reported that in 2009, 14.7 percent of U.S. households were food insecure (Nord et al. 2010) while in Maine it was 14.8 percent. Rates of food insecurity are particularly high for low-income and minority households: 24.9 percent of Black households, 26.9 percent of Latino households, 43 percent of households below the poverty line, and 36.6 percent of households headed by single women were food insecure in 2008 (Nord et al. 2010).

Achieving a richer understanding of food insecurity among Lewiston’s most vulnerable populations is a primary function of the Local Food for Lewiston (LFL) project, a community food assessment of assets and challenges to food access in Lewiston, Maine. (For more in-depth descriptions of Lewiston’s community food assessment, Local Food for Lewiston, see Harris et al. [2010], Vazquez Jacobus and Harris [2007], and Walter [2011]). Evaluating how and why Lewiston’s immigrant population might be vulnerable to food insecurity, and how to ameliorate this condition, are critical policy issues for assessment not just in Lewiston but for other metropolitan areas experiencing similar demographic changes. This vulnerability has ramifications through several social systems including health care, the economy, education, housing, and community relations generally. Challenges to culturally appropriate food access for immigrants indicate compromised access to society for a significant percentage of the population. Our community suffers to the extent that these challenges result in higher health care costs, decreased community development, limited diversity in food and cultural options, tense inter-cultural relationships, poor educational outcomes, as well as stunted innovation and growth.

## **Qualitative Assessment of Food Access for African Immigrants**

In order to develop the picture of food access for African immigrants in Lewiston, extensive interviews were conducted with nine community leaders, including Somali social service providers and owners of halal stores from August 2009 through October 2010. Although asked specific questions regarding food access, differences in consumption practices, and recommendations for ameliorating challenges, the interviews were held informally and inquiries were made in an open-ended fashion. These leaders were consulted specifically because of their multiple expertise and

interest; they do not represent a cross section of the African population of Lewiston. Yet, as parents, refugee resettlement workers, business owners, and neighborhood residents their knowledge affords an inroad to the complex map of food accessibility among vulnerable new Americans. Their abilities to traverse cultures and articulate the challenges of the most marginalized enable us to collaboratively organize a qualitative assessment from which to envision comprehensive approaches to address the issue of food access for Lewiston's increasingly multicultural population. The following assessment and discussion of the implications and recommendations is a conglomeration of their expertise, contextualized by the current social and cultural picture of Lewiston.

## **Food Access Including Expense, Proximity, and Familiarity**

Research in a number of diverse cities indicates that immigrants and refugees have high levels of food insecurity (Hadley and Selen 2006) and nutrition-related health problems (Chilton et al. 2009; Kalil and Chen 2008; Patil, Hadley, and Nahayo 2008). Children of immigrant parents are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity as the compounding risk factors of poverty, language isolation, household composition, and environmental challenges further compromise their development and long-term health (Capps et al. 2009; Chilton et al. 2009; Kalil and Chen 2008).

As is true of many new immigrant populations, most of Lewiston's African immigrants are low income (Q. Bashir, pers. comm. 2010; P. Nadeau, pers. comm. 2010). It is estimated that over 50 percent of the African immigrants in Lewiston are unemployed (Rector 2008), more than 75 percent live at or below the poverty level, and over 90 percent of Lewiston's immigrant school children qualify for free or reduced lunch (Maine Department of Education 2010). These figures likely underestimate the level of income insecurity experienced by Lewiston's immigrant population as many immigrants, even those who qualify, do not participate in government assistance programs (Q. Bashir, pers. comm. 2010; Kalil and Chen 2008). Tensions in the city, stigma, and lack of understanding may all inhibit qualified immigrants from seeking assistance at soup kitchens and food pantries, as well as fully utilizing benefits such as Mainecare, TANF, and food stamps to which they may be entitled (Kalil and Chen 2008). Further, those who are receiving benefits find that their allotments do not account for the higher prices of halal or culturally appropriate food (Patil, Hadley, and Nahayo 2008).

“A few years ago we found out that one of the infant formula products that many of us were buying included a pork product but we didn't understand this because it was written in its chemical name. . . . Many single moms will pay three times the price for THE SAME Nestle powdered milk written in Arabic than the one written in English because they feel safe that it is not haram.”

Most of the African immigrants in Lewiston are Muslim and, as such, are religiously prohibited from eating food which is not “halal” (religiously permitted). “Haram” (religiously prohibited) food includes primarily pork or pork products, but also includes meats and poultry that are not butchered according to Islamic law. Halal meat is not generally sold in any stores in Lewiston, with the exception of the few halal markets, which are all in downtown Lewiston. Because the religious halal process requires special personnel and because there are few sources of access to halal products, halal products including meats are generally more expensive than meats not so prepared.

In addition to halal meats, many African immigrants and many Muslims in Lewiston are most comfortable buying specialty items that are prepared in a way to assure Muslim consumers that they are not haram. Thus rice, spices, dried fruits, and condiments also must be imported from specialty distributors abroad. Often these sources are in Muslim or Middle Eastern nations and, as such, the import, security, and inspection process can be quite expensive, time consuming, and cumbersome. These items are often carried only at the halal specialty shops in Lewiston, are of limited availability, and can be relatively costly.

“I would rather buy my food from the shop on Lisbon Street, but the big stores are much less expensive. When I am buying for clients with very limited money, I buy their staples at [the Supermarket] and then give them some money to buy their meat at the halal store where they can feel better. The environment in a store like [the Supermarket] makes us uncomfortable—with all the bright lights, it seems so sterile—and there is so much of everything. You can’t even find what you want because there is so much! And it doesn’t even smell like food! How can you have a food store that doesn’t even smell like food?”

Muslim merchants in Lewiston face greater hurdles than most small “Mom and Pop” businesses. Tight governmental controls on the products they import, combined with limited availability and minimal competition, result in businesses that struggle to earn a profit when the traditional market regulators (such as supply and demand) are compromised. For the most part, these business owners run their businesses to serve their community; and to provide employment, culturally appropriate options; and social networking and services; as much as to earn a living.

Religious laws also dictate business practices that influence the Muslim proprietors’ flexibility and success. To prevent exploitation, Sharia (Islamic law) prohibits the charging and payment of interest upon loans. Yet, virtually all American commercial enterprise depends on the availability of credit: it is a great challenge for Muslims to buy property or businesses. This challenge, in addition to the other expenses recounted, mean that it is not easy for Muslims to start businesses or own property. Their entry into the economy is compromised as is their access to the “American Dream” of home ownership.

An important influence on access is proximity to a food source. Presently, all but two of Lewiston's African food stores are located on one street in downtown Lewiston. Many recently arrived refugees do live in the downtown area near this street and refugee resettlement workers often try to place them in the downtown area because of their proximity to stores and services that meet their cultural needs. However most of Lewiston's African immigrants do not live within walking distance of the downtown, but live either in one of the large public housing complexes at the outskirts of the city, or in one of several property-management-owned buildings which are closer, but still not easily walkable to downtown. Because so many residents live far from the African stores, their use of these stores is dependent on access to a vehicle or public transportation. The city has taken measures recently to improve access to their public bus system, but the buses do not yet run to the more distant city areas and the bus has limited evening and weekend hours. The buses also are also well utilized by the refugee population in Lewiston, perhaps because there are few African bus drivers; this form of transportation is unfamiliar to many; costs money; and it is a difficult manner of travel if you have young children or several packages. Thus, for most of Lewiston's African residents who do *not* live downtown, accessing culturally familiar food requires access to a private vehicle.

## **Food and Culture: Differences in Dietary Practices**

*"We are losing some of our culture here. I don't brag, but I am the best chapatti maker in the community. But my 16-year-old daughter—she does not know how to make the chapatti."*

Food is a means of connection to culture; dietary practices from shopping to eating can be among the most profound of bonds to country, family, and home. "The foods that people eat are critical in defining them and are an integral part of shaping ethnic identity [citations omitted] so that maintenance of food-related cultural practices in situations of forced relocation beyond the homeland may play an important psychological role in continually reconfirming ties to one's culture and traditions" (Hadley and Sellen 2006, 373).

*"We used to walk everywhere—we had to buy food every day and it was our social time. It's so different here: no one walks anymore—we all take the car."*

From food preparation to consumption, all of the immigrants with whom we spoke reported significant differences in dietary practices upon relocating to Lewiston. For many immigrants, shopping in their home country involved physical activity as they daily walked from the baker, to the butcher, to the green grocer to gather their menu. In addition, food shopping and preparation were social opportunities involving sharing of recipes and skills, where pride was established and techniques demonstrated. Care was taken in the choosing of ingredients and value placed in how food was prepared. In addition, diets in the home country were different—many Somalis were used to eating relatively more meat in Africa, different greens and tubers, and more and varied grains and spices. In the United States, inexpensive, heavily processed, and prepared

foods are readily available. For families on limited budgets, or with limited understanding or access to culturally familiar foods, these preprocessed foods are in many cases the only accessible option. The ambling social trips to the shops are replaced by drives to the supermarket and processed calorie-dense foods substitute for the carefully prepared stews simmered for hours. In addition, where a family is on a limited budget, receiving the support of food stamps or WIC, the more expensive halal meats, or the trip to the cultural specialty shop may be beyond their reach (Hadley and Sellen 2006).

Socioemotional factors also may play a role in varying diets. Immigrants who have experienced famine or great deprivation, may readily opt for calorie dense (even if low nutritive value) foods as a compensatory behavior to assure that neither they nor their children experience hunger (Rosas et al. 2009; Patil, Hadley, and Nahayo 2008). There also may be issues of perspective and priority. A Somali social service worker with whom we spoke observed many of her clients differently appreciate the potential severity of nutrition-related health concerns:

*“When you have lived in a refugee camp for years and worried about having enough food to feed your family, things like high-cholesterol or diabetes seem like minor worries.”*

## **Food Access and the Schools**

*“My children know they should not eat haram and I think they try, but, at school, it is hard. They often serve foods with pork and the younger children do not always know. I think they sometimes eat it and don’t tell us—they are embarrassed and they don’t want to upset us or have us make ‘a big deal’ out of it with the school.”*

The social costs of limited food access also are significant factors to weigh in policy evaluations. Food insecurity can negatively impact children’s school performance (Rodgers and Milewska 2007). Food-insecure children may have more trouble concentrating, decreased interest in school subjects, and less energy for the peer and teacher connections required for optimum school functioning. Further, food is one of the chief means by which children and families connect with each other and with their culture. Immigrant children bring home new “American” practices at all levels—from communication forms to eating behaviors (Patil, Hadley, and Nahayo 2008). When Somali children inadvertently eat ham in the school lunch line, are embarrassed to request the special “non-pork” menu item, or refuse to eat the food specially prepared by their mothers so that they don’t eat the school’s haram offerings, the loss to the child’s growing sense of identity, as well as connection to family is immeasurable.

A vivid example of the particularity of Lewiston’s immigrant food issues plays out among Lewiston’s children in the city schools. Historically a Franco-American and Catholic city, Lewiston city schools’ menus and practices are primarily rooted in Christian tradition. The schools have holidays around Christmas and Easter, not

Ramadan and Eids, and the cafeterias commonly serve pork products in their menus. In response to advocacy by Muslim parents, this situation has improved recently, from a typical month lunch menu at a Lewiston elementary school in April 2009 serving pork products in 18 of 25 meals, down to 6 of 16 in December 2010. Nonetheless, having haram food so frequently imposed on their children's food choices is a great source of stress for Lewiston's Muslim families. Although options other than pork are available, they are not always clearly labeled. Further, even if there are options but the non-pork item is cooked with a pork item, it is tainted as haram. What is even more problematic is that many commonly served foods, from gelatin to powdered milk products, contain pork byproducts of which not even the school administrators may be aware. As so many of Lewiston's immigrant school children qualify for free or reduced lunch, the lack of a religiously allowed food option arguably presents a civil rights issue as much as a cultural one.

## **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

*“Single moms will shop at the [halal] market—they can buy bananas and put it on a ‘tab’—they can’t do that at a big market and [the halal shop owner] will explain about the baby formula or translate the label. They don’t have to worry about not speaking English or how they are dressed or that anyone will bother them. They even get help with getting the groceries home.”*

The cultural experts interviewed for this assessment also provided invaluable guidance regarding policy implications and recommendations. Just as limited food access, particularly for the most vulnerable, has ramifications on several levels, increased access to society has the potential to ameliorate, if not remedy, the challenge of limited food access—as well as to expand resources and build capacity.

Improving access to culturally appropriate healthy food begins by working through the community's already substantial assets. A number of African stores are already in business in downtown Lewiston and during the writing of this article, new such stores were opening on a regular basis. African-owned businesses provide many functions to the community. These stores operate as social centers, cultural consultants, language translators, and centers of “safe” and comfortable foods and products. For single parents and for newly arrived immigrants, these cultural businesses can be a lifeline of support. Similar businesses also could be supported in opening operations in the areas not served by such stores and not easily accessible to transportation—such as near the two large public housing developments at the city's outskirts, which house a large number of African immigrants, but have no accessible markets nor easy access to transportation. Developing creative financial products such as agreements that do not violate Sharia law (French 2009) and providing tax and regulatory guidance would be helpful in this regard.

*“Kosher food is safe for us to eat, too. It is required that it be ‘slaughtered by a man of God’ and kosher food is prepared this way so if we teach people to look for the kosher symbols, they can do that.”*

In order to meet the needs of Lewiston's immigrant population, as well as community members living downtown, efforts need be made to encourage and provide access to healthy fresh food in the underserved areas like downtown Lewiston. Many dietary challenges center around adherence to halal practices for meat consumption. Currently, African storekeepers must endure expensive and complicated procedures in order to import halal meat from as far as Australia. When they buy halal products "locally" from New Jersey or Boston, they find much greater prices due to the lack of competition. Creative endeavors like cooperative buying groups could be facilitated so that small businesses, including the African stores, have some buying power to negotiate with larger produce distributors. In these negotiations, careful attention ought be provided to local farms as sources of food so that the area's own organically and locally produced meat and produce can be sold through these stores. During the growing months, connections with community farms could provide a source of locally grown produce, which could be made available through the local stores already in place. Opportunity abounds here for innovative business people to develop an arrangement between local farms and African businesses to supply USDA certified and halal meats to local businesses. Local farmers could be offered incentives or subsidies to grow or raise culturally familiar produce, such as tubers or greens as well as goat or beef, for halal butchering. In a complementary manner, community members might be afforded increased opportunity to cooperatively cultivate land or raise food for their own consumption.

The city of Lewiston, and similar communities, also needs to take initiative in cultivating a diverse multicultural community that can economically and socially thrive as well as sustain growth. City planning that supports healthy living for all residents will not only improve access to healthy foods, but also encourage activity. Clean and walkable city streets; carefully designed, accessible and user-friendly public transportation; and neighborhood restoration projects are all part of a revitalized multicultural metropolitan area that provides increased access and health to the increasingly diverse needs of the community.

### **Policy Implications for Social Services**

Researchers have demonstrated that government assistance programs, such as the food stamp program, do work to alleviate food insecurity (Borjas 2004). Further, in states where welfare benefits have been significantly limited, particularly with regard to the immigrant population, the very social problems designed to be ameliorated by such programs have become more acute (Borjas 2004). Thus, as programs such as TANF, WIC, and the food stamp program are helpful in preventing and ameliorating food insecurity, it is vital to maintain flexibility and continuation of food and health support programs, especially for the most vulnerable. In addition, although refugees are exempted from restrictions imposed on non-citizen immigrants receiving benefits, as most of Lewiston's African immigrants are *secondary* migrants, they are often caught in a confusing morass of regulations that are at best difficult to parse. It is estimated that a significant portion of Lewiston's eligible immigrants do not receive benefits. Whether this may be because of the "chilling effect" described by social scientists

investigating the impact of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA) on benefit use by immigrants (Kalil and Chen 2008), or other social or emotional factors impacting receipt, as long as needy members of the community are not benefitting from the services they require, food insecurity among the most vulnerable continues to be a challenge.

Many describe culturally specific barriers to provision of social services (Kalil and Chen 2008; Patil, Hadley, and Nahayo 2008). There are few African DHHS workers in Lewiston and those who are in these positions may be uncomfortable to approach for many immigrant clientele. This may be because the workers belong to an opposing clan, because of gender or age barriers, confidentiality concerns, or because not all social service personnel (of any culture) are necessarily personable. In addition, as halal and culturally familiar food tends to be more expensive, those immigrants who do receive benefits may find that their allotments are quickly depleted. Existing food pantries and soup kitchens may not always carry food which is culturally “safe” for Muslim clientele. Further, although they may not be limited in receiving benefits, the limitations on other immigrants may cause a chilling effect, a hesitancy, or at least confusion about their own receipt of benefits.

Food supplementation programs and government assistance programs should be evaluated in consultation with culturally informed nutrition and policy experts to assure that the programs are well targeted and culturally sensitive to the needs of the population served. In-depth qualitative analysis also is called for to assess the cultural match, or lack thereof, between services and clientele (Kalil and Chen 2008). Service personnel, style, and delivery all need to be current with the population and its changing needs. It may be necessary to afford greater allowances for provision of halal products and to review food lists to ascertain whether “haram” food additives are being included among the products given to Muslim families. Where possible, providers should be trained and hired from the African community to be available as consultants and social workers. To enhance services generally, all service providers need be culturally informed and aware of the dietary and social requirements of their immigrant clients. To the extent that limitations in the provision of social services compromise the potential diversity and cultural inclusiveness of our state in providing access to society for all of its residents, these restrictions also ought to be reexamined for the negative impact they have on our cities’ growth and economic strength.

### **School Nutrition as Educational Policy**

The public schools are social institutions through which many positive strides can be taken toward improved food access. It is time for educational and nutritional policy makers, particularly in diverse communities like Lewiston, to rethink dietary options in light of increasing community diversity. For example, in one of Lewiston’s most immigrant-rich elementary schools, Longley Elementary School, Susan Martin, coordinator of English language learning, estimates that 80 percent of the school’s population is from African immigrant families (S. Martin, pers. comm. 2010). At Longley, 97 percent of the children receive free or reduced lunch (Maine Department

of Education 2010), and a majority of this school's population eats up to ten meals a week at school. It is critical then that we recognize the educational opportunity of dietary options provided in school: lunch should be regarded as part of the curriculum—an applied opportunity to learn about health, policy, culture, chemistry, and the economy. We also must consider the civil and constitutional issues involved in marginalizing a community from food choices in schools.

The role of children as dietary brokers and educators also is an area of policy research that ought to be more fully explored. Not only are many school children consuming half of their meals per week in school, they are bringing home the dietary practices and choices learned in the school meal environment (for good and not). In light of the recent passage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, this is a particularly ripe moment for action in changing school nutrition.

Now also might be the time for a coalition of families and advocates to together take a seat at the table to promote the design of a school nutrition curriculum that includes “lunch” as an opportunity for education at multiple levels. Immigrant parents could be employed as guest chefs and cultural consultants to provide guidance regarding culturally sensitive meal choices, and they could work in conjunction with health experts to be sure these choices are prepared in a healthy manner. Connections could be made with local cultural stores to provide some of the specialty items, as well as with local farmers to supply the fresh produce.

## **Supporting Indigenous Social and Cultural Capital**

*“There are many assets in [our city] who are trapped in their homes—great assets of selling, cooking, parenting—all with creative ideas and new business opportunities that simply don't get out. The key is for us to work together to figure out how to get them into the community.”*

The richest area of policy exploration is in enhancing the indigenous resources already a part of our social capital and using them to expand access to healthy food for our communities. Already Lewiston is fortunate to have in its midst a rich network of community organizations and leaders with a long history of collaborative problem solving. Many of the envisioned solutions require only these innovative leaders integrating their strengths.

Local Somali leaders and city officials agree that one of the greatest challenges to new immigrants is a lack of jobs for which New Mainers are both qualified and well-suited (P. Nadeau pers. comm. 2010; Rector 2008). By developing incentive programs for scholarships and career placement, greater strides can be taken to encourage immigrants to take advantage of local higher education opportunities and to utilize their skills in work with the community. Several states offer financial support for college in exchange for entering high-need fields like health care, nutrition, and education. Such programs can be of great mutual benefit in many municipalities.

In addition, to support businesses, entrepreneurship, and home ownership by Muslim immigrants, Sharia compliant loans could be offered by local financial institutions. These opportunities would enable current African business owners to access funds for upgrading their stores and improving access to their services and resources, as well as increase opportunities for new businesses, homes, and other initiatives to be taken on by Muslim residents.

*“I was here for two years before I realized that collard greens are the greens that we are used to. And cilantro—we have that but I didn’t know what you call it. I found that the Latino tubers and spices are closest to what we are used to—the plantains, mango, cilantro—we eat all that.”*

Recognizing the inherent expertise of our cities’ immigrants, a network of cultural food consultants and social service advocates can be developed as a way of enhancing programs in a more immediate way. Cultural food consultants could be called upon to be in attendance at Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) meetings when immigrants are signing up for benefits, at local stores to provide shopping guidance, at soup kitchens and food pantries to inform provisioning, and at local schools to assist with culturally appropriate food choices and preparation. A contingent of cultural peer advocates could be organized to provide informal cultural and language translation services to immigrants challenged in navigating aspects of the foods system or to accompany community members on shopping trips or to meetings with administrative personnel. These cultural experts could work with local business owners and social service agencies to issue a resource book that lists the culturally friendly businesses as well as their services and products available. They could author a recipe book that not only includes familiar recipes from home, but that substitutes affordable and healthy options, and provides guidance about where these items can be found. Through community-supported local farming programs cultural brokers could connect local farmers with sources for their produce.

One of the most significant policy changes we recommend actually occurs at the most familiar level. Administrators, educators, and policy makers alike must find ways to empower immigrant families to take pride in their cultural dietary practices and to find support and strength from their networks and families. Informed parents can make wise and healthy food choices for their families, as well as be equipped and supported sufficiently to be able to prepare their native dishes with local available foods. Schools and daycare providers can reinforce this realignment by providing and celebrating diverse cultural options. Family chefs can be lauded as they demonstrate cultural recipes for school lunch programs and provide cooking classes at community centers. From advertising, to parenting, there are a myriad of ways in which we can promote the continuation of healthy culturally focused dietary practices.

Cultural renewal is critical to maintaining family ties and identity, but also to improving health. Just as there are risk factors that predispose us toward food

insecurity, there also are also protective factors that weigh against these proclivities (Burns 2004). Cultural practices that involve activity, care in selection of food, attention to ingredients, aesthetic presentation, and shared dining all provide protective capacity against unhealthy eating practices. In addition, teaching food provision and preparation practices that sustain health and food are all culturally powerful ways to promote healthy nutrition practices.

## **Conclusion**

In a society where food insecurity and nutritional ill health are so highly associated with barriers to food access, the search for improving access revolves around a recognition of protective factors that coat against the corrosion of unhealthy dietary practices. These protective factors include money and resources sufficient to increase options for healthy and well-prepared local and fresh foods. However, resiliency also is available through increased popular interest in promoting local businesses, protecting the planet, and in celebrating diversity. We can overcome challenges to food access through our social networks, friends, neighbors, and family as well as with connections to heritage. Above all there is the overarching influence of our cultural norms and modes—what we see in advertising and what is promoted, inadvertently at times, by our social institutions. In this last regard, there is an increasing battle waging not only for our hearts and minds, but for our bellies. With increased corporate and media influence enhancing the wallop of abundant processed and tasty foods, the protective factors of culture, activity, and interest are being eroded as a consumption culture prevails. However, research gathered through this assessment reassures us that our appetites can be reclaimed. Through the protective factors of celebration and interest in culture, Somali food, like other “ethnic” foods now so ubiquitous in the United States, can be made with local ingredients; with care taken to decrease saturated fats; and with attention to spice, ingredients, preparation, and presentation. These foods can be enhanced with social context, increased activity, and interactive preparation. Local chefs and cultural purveyors can be consulted for their expertise and lauded for their community engagement as they share their gifts.

The picture of food access for immigrants in Lewiston is the picture of general access to society for these New Mainers. Currently, this picture is compromised, but offers a cornucopia of points of access for improvement—through children, through creativity, and through collaboration.

*Note: Where the information provided by our interviewees is based in their expertise or professional knowledge, they are cited by name as a primary source of the information provided. However, where their quotes are anecdotal and based in their experience as Somalis, which is more generalizable to the experiences of relocated African refugees, the quotes are unattributed as intended to speak for a broader voice.*

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## **Acknowledgements**

This piece is a collaborative effort representing the integrated knowledge and ideas of multiple cultural and community experts. Thus we owe not only our gratitude, but the very work itself, to the invaluable contribution of the following, without whose expertise, knowledge, perspective, and generosity it would not be possible: Ismail Ahmed, Qamar Bashir, Robert Baskett, David Harris, Khadra Jama, Said Mohamud, and Zam Zam Mohamud.

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