Pittsburgh, Allegheny County food deserts located

Monica Disare Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Jun 10, 2013 12:00 AM

Clairton is separated from the Giant Eagle in Elizabeth by the Monongahela River. The nearest source of groceries to Manchester is 1.4 miles uphill. From the center of Millvale, the closest Giant Eagle is 3.5 miles away.

These communities in Allegheny County are examples of food deserts, as defined by the Food Abundance Index, a measure of food accessibility, diversity and quality created by Audrey Murrell and researchers affiliated with the Business School at the University of Pittsburgh.

On Friday, Just Harvest, an organization that seeks to eliminate hunger and poverty in Pittsburgh, released a report using this index to warn Pittsburghers about the dangers of food deserts and to suggest solutions to the poor accessibility of fresh produce in parts of Allegheny County.

In addition to the report, Just Harvest met Friday with representatives of about 70 community groups, churches and political leaders to discuss how to get healthy food choices to neighborhoods in need.

Ricardo Williams, executive director of Homewood-Brushton YMCA, said the YMCA runs food pantries twice a month, but during the weeks that the pantry is not open, he notices that people are in need of food.

Ken Regal, executive director of Just Harvest, said that one of the main themes of the agency’s report is that each neighborhood has different challenges that call for unique solutions. It identifies Clairton, Millvale, McKees Rocks and Stowe as suburban food deserts and East End, North Side and Hilltop as city neighborhoods with food deserts and recommends solutions for each area.

In Clairton, for example, Just Harvest suggests improving public transportation to grocery stores while in McKees Rocks and Stowe the report calls for establishing healthy corner stores and mobile markets.

The report recommends four policy changes: transforming existing corner stores into places that sell healthy goods; creating more mobile supermarkets; establishing farmers’ markets and farm stands; and building full-scale grocery stores.

Community representatives on Friday were optimistic that changes can be made. Ivan Frank, a volunteer for the Pittsburgh Jewish Social Justice Roundtable, said that in the next three to four years he would like to see five food deserts eliminated.

A continued discussion of food deserts will take place at 9 a.m. June 20 at the Bridgeway Capital Building, 707 Grant St., Downtown.