If you happen to stop by the corner of Macomb and Georgia streets on a Saturday, you will see a bustling gathering of community entrepreneurs trading everything from fresh greens to organic homemade soaps and candles. Farmer’s markets, like the one in Tallahassee’s historic Frenchtown, connect people with fresh, locally grown food and each other.

In “food deserts,” like parts of Tallahassee, where places to purchase nutritious produce are scant and nearby food stores instead emphasize packaged or fast foods, a farmer’s market would seem to
present the perfect solution to improve nutrition for local residents while also supporting small to medium-sized local farmers.

However, some residents in food deserts may not be shopping at local farmer’s markets as expected, even with incentives from the USDA that double dollars spent using SNAP (supplemental nutrition assistance program) benefits or EBT cards.

What are the barriers in effect that are preventing some populations of local residents from connecting with fresh local food? How can markets like the Frenchtown Heritage Marketplace attract more business and put more good food on the plates of local residents?

The key may be community empowerment in the planning and decision-making process. This is the impetus for a study underway by FAMU’s Institute of Public Health (FAMU IPH) in collaboration with the Frenchtown Heritage Marketplace (FHM), Tallahassee housing and food agencies, and the Tallahassee Food Network. The study is focused on understanding ways in which the FHM can better connect with potential farmer’s market customers living in public housing communities nearby.

The project emphasizes cultural awareness and empowerment of the local community as it seeks to fill a void in research on perspectives of public housing residents’ relationships with food and their receptivity to food from farmer’s markets. The project, titled, “Building the Consumer Base: Supporting the Farmer’s Market Solution to Food Deserts,” is supported by a $200,000 grant award from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Unique to this research project is a collaborative implementation strategy that includes an Advisory Board of community organizers and local area experts in food, health education, community engagement and cultural competency as well as members of the public housing community, who are resident research assistants. The multistage ethnographic study includes interviews, field tests, observations and participant surveys to determine effective engagement methods for increasing target population interaction with the local farmers market.

The research objectives are: to reach 225 potential market customers who reside in targeted public housing communities in Tallahassee; to increase the customer volume to the FHM by 35 percent; and to hire and train community members to conduct the research in collaboration with project staff and FAMU IPH masters and doctoral students.

The public housing community neighbors were trained as teams with the FAMU IPH graduate students and bonded as research partners. So far, the teams have conducted 42 research interviews as well as assisting with Phase 2 of the study, data transfer and analysis.
The kick-off event for the field tests took place Sept. 26 at the Springfield Community Center. This highly interactive event included rotations among booths displaying savory, healthier food preparation as well as educational discussions and games that encouraged participants to express what they had learned. In one insightful game tagged “The Money Saver,” neighbors were asked to determine where each of three food shopping bags were obtained by estimating which grocer gave more ‘bang for the buck:’ Winn-Dixie, Walmart or FFM. Residents consistently thought the bag packed with the most food was from Walmart when it was actually from the farmer’s market, showing you could get the most food there for the same amount of money!

With the assistance and input of the community researchers, findings from these and other engagement and education strategies, as well as an evaluation of their efficacy and effectiveness, will be published in Spring 2016.

TALLAHASSEE
Food Deserts in Tallahassee

For more information about the Frenchtown Heritage Market, visit www.Frenchtownheritage.org.

The Community Researchers include: Joslin Bellamy, Cassandra Brown, Kimberly Jones, and Latoya Wilson. The Graduate Student Researchers included: Vanessa Crowther, Felicia Green, Adetosoye Oladokun and Elizabeth Stewart. Graduate Student Support included: Meridith Pooler and Brandon Moton. Project Staff include Michelle Gomez, Program Manager; Dr. Matthew Dutton, Assistant Professor, IPH, Dr. Richard Gragg, Professor at School of the Environment, and Drs. Qasimah Boston and Michael Brezin, Program Consultants. The Principal Investigator of this USDA Grant is Dr. Ivette A. López, Associate Professor at the Institute of Public Health, and Director of the Latino Initiative at the FAMU College of Pharmacy’s Center for Health Equity.

Dr. Ivette Lopez is an Associate Professor of Behavioral Science and Health Education at Florida A&M University’s Institute for Public Health and serves as the principal investigator for the USDA funded study on Food Deserts. “Greening Our Community” articles are brought to you by the Capital Area Sustainability Council (CASC), a forum organized by Sustainable Tallahassee. Learn more at www.SustainableTallahassee.org/CASC.