

# A Portrait of Self-Determination



The Detroit Black Community  
Food Security Network's  
Efforts to Start a  
Food Cooperative in Detroit

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## Executive Summary

Some things in life are inescapable. Food is one of them. Everybody has to eat to survive, making food an integral part of life. Not only does it sustain life, but it serves an important role in creating and sustaining culture, tradition, and community. It is a strong link that connects and binds us to one another in intricate ways. The influence of food is widespread. Production, distribution, acquisition, and consumption of food intersects and connects many systems, disciplines, and people, creating a very complex food industry. This mammoth of an industry ties our lives and livelihoods with those across our state, nation, and even the world. Unfortunately, this far-reaching system is very broken, and symptoms of this are present in Detroit.

When trying to maintain a healthy life, access to fresh, healthy, nutritious, and high-quality food must be available. Unfortunately, that reality is not true for many Detroiters. Many would describe Detroit as a “food desert.” A term coined in 2007 in a study by Mari Gallagher, food deserts are areas where residents have to “travel more than twice as far to reach a full-service grocer than an alternative, and often less healthy food supplier.”<sup>1</sup> As many as 500,000 Detroiters are said to be food insecure and live in these types of areas, with over 80% of food insecure Detroiters making the bulk of their food purchase at over 1,000 fringe food retailers, that includes gas stations, party stores, or liquor stores.<sup>2,3</sup> Limited access to fresh and high quality food culminated in 2007 when Farmer Jack, the last major chain grocer, left the city.<sup>4</sup>

Although there is a vast need in the city for greater access to fresh food, Detroit is far from hopeless. Community-based initiatives are on the rise, largely working from a *community food security* framework, which emphasizes social justice and community residents intentionally creating a sustainable food system to meet their needs.<sup>5</sup> The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) is one of them. This brief reports will look at the evolution of DBCFSN, and then focus on one of their current projects: a feasibility study for a full service grocery food cooperative they would like to open. This report will give a brief history of DBCFSN and the progress of this project, but will mostly serve as a vehicle for storytelling. This report features three profiles from community members who are active in DBCFSN, and three profiles from community members who see the need for a food cooperative in the city of Detroit.

1 Detroit Fresh Food Access Initiative. *Report of Taskforce Findings*. August 2008.

2 Id

3 Monica M. White, PhD. *D-Town Farm: African American Resistance to Food Insecurity and the Transformation of Detroit*. Environmental Practice 13 (4). December 2011

4 Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. *Emerson Fellow Workplan*. August 2011

5 Monica M. White, PhD. *D-Town Farm: African American Resistance to Food Insecurity and the Transformation of Detroit*. Environmental Practice 13 (4). December 2011

# View the Present:

## Detroit Food Landscape at a Glance

500,000 Detroiters food insecure or live in food desert

92% of authorized food stamp retailers are party stores

National food insecurity was said to be 14.7 percent in 2009. The 2009-2010 Detroit Food Policy Council Food Report estimated that the rate for Detroit was twice that.

There is an estimated number of 2000+ community gardens in the city of Detroit

Although the city's population is 82% African-American/Black, there is only one black-owned grocery store in the city

In 2010, there were 8 neighborhood farmer's markets, 2 mobile markets, and farm stands, sponsored by Eastern Market, in 40 locations in Metro Detroit to increase food access

88% of Detroiters eligible for SNAP, received those benefits in 2009

This pre-existing data was obtained from:

The Detroit Food System Report 2009-2010 Executive Summary prepared by Kami Pothukuchi, PhD for the Detroit Food Policy Council (May 2011), the Detroit Fresh Food Access Initiative Report of Taskforce Findings by the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation (August 2008), and "Unequal Access: Two Tiers of Food Safety & Sanitation in Detroit's Corner & Grocery Stores" by Doing Development Differently in Detroit, Restaurants Opportunities Center of Michigan, and Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength

It is projected that 2,086 acres could fulfill 76% of Detroit's vegetable supply and 42% of its fruit supply. There are 4,800 acres of publicly owned vacant land in Detroit.

# View the Start of a Revolution:

## “Unapologetically Black and Green”

The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network was formed in February 2006. Malik Yakini, the current Executive Director, convened a meeting of about 40 community members at the Black Star Community Bookstore. These members were from all over the community, some were gardeners and farmers, some raw foodist, and some were even health practitioners. Everyone came together to discuss how to raise awareness around issues of food and find ways to grow food security within the Black community.

Now, six years later, the Detroit Black Community has continued to carry out the mission that was formed that day through six ways:

- ◆ Influencing public policy, as seen by their drafting of a comprehensive Food Security policy that was unanimously adopted by the Detroit City Council, and instrumental role in creating the Detroit Food Policy Council
- ◆ Promoting Urban Agriculture with their 7 acre urban farm in Rogue Park
- ◆ Encouraging cooperative buying with the Ujamaa Buying Club Food Coop, a monthly food buying club
- ◆ Promoting healthy eating habits with various events such as the “What’s for Dinner?” public lecture series
- ◆ Facilitating mutual support and collective action among members
- ◆ Encouraging young people to pursue careers in agriculture and other food related fields through their youth program called Food Warriors that focuses on nutrition education, knowledge about where food comes from, and helps young people to become actors in the food movement

Information obtained from the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network Website , [detroitblackfoodsecurity.org](http://detroitblackfoodsecurity.org) and personal communication from current DBCFSN staff during my time there

**“I think being involved in a black organization—that is not only black in terms of membership, but black in terms of it’s political ideology— that is really fulfilling”**

**Ebony Roberts, 36**  
Member since inception in 2006  
Serves as Treasurer

**First heard of DBCFSN:**

“At the time, I was working with Malik at Nsoroma\*, so we were working closely together at the school. At that time, the school had an organic gardening club, called the Shamba Organic Gardening Club, I think the name of it was. Since that was a school based group, primarily for the parents and staff of the school, Malik had this idea to expand it into the community and create this separate organization. I think we had a conversation about it, since we worked together, and he sent out the initial emails inviting people to come to the very first meeting, and it was a no brainer for me. Not only had I been involved in the gardening club at the school, but had been vegetarian for a while, and had begun in around 2002 eating more healthy.”

“Once I started working at Nsoroma, and got a chance to work more closely with other people who were vegetarians... I got a chance to be exposed to all kinds of ideas that I had, you know, that I previously weren’t familiar with. Even different foods, like kale. Kale was one, I had never eaten or heard of kale before. That was about 2006, so by then I had about eating healthy for about 4 years, and I think I was vegan at that time, because I’ve been vegan and vegetarian off and on. I was already eating healthy, already aware of the importance of growing our own foods and the value of eating organic over chemically processed foods. So when he sent the email invitation for the meeting, it was just sort of a natural fit. And I went, and I’ve been involved ever since.”

**How DBCFSN has impacted her life:**

“It has been a great resource, because many of the members are so knowledgeable about, not just eating healthy, but about the politics of food. And I’ve been exposed to all kinds of information about food security that I wouldn’t have come across otherwise. I just think it’s been a great resource for me. Whenever there’s a hot button topic about food, it comes across my email or my Facebook from friends who are members of DBCFSN, so it has really made me more aware. It has also been a great teaching tool for me, because even though I was involved in the gardening club, I was a novice gardener and wasn’t that familiar with garden techniques, and that sort of thing. So being involved has gotten my hands dirty, and I learned a



lot more about growing food.”

“I think being involved in a black organization—that is not only black in terms of membership, but black in terms of it’s political ideology— that is really fulfilling, because its not in vain. I don’t feel that the work I’m doing is in vain. It’s very fulfilling knowing that the work that we’re doing, and that I’m contributing to, is contributing to a much larger cause that is impacting black people in Detroit, and really all over the country because of the way the organization’s message has been growing. We’ve been able to impact other cities as well, and that means a lot. Even though I’m not a public speaker or anything, I feel like my piece, or my role, in the larger scheme of things helps push the whole thing forward.”

**Why the work of DBCFSN is important:**

“Well, I think this work is critical, not just important, but critical in Detroit because we have so many food related issues. When you have all these issues in regards to access, and of course health issues, it was a growing problem that needed to be addressed, and it needed to be addressed by the people affected by it. It’s very easy for groups to work in Detroit; when they see a problem, they create an organization. But if the mentality is sort of in this “Missionary” mentality, as in we’re coming to save Detroit, then that isn’t coming from a good space. Our organization is sort of, For the people, by the people. These issues really hit home, so we have a vested interest in seeing it move forward.”



## Roxanne Moore

Joined in 2010

Serves on Farm Operations Committee, and Anniversary Planning Committee

### First heard of DBCFSN:

"I first heard about it from Malik Yakini. He invited me out [to the farm] because they were doing a few things. But then, Nefer Ra Barber [Vice Chair of DBCFSN, former Farm Manager] I saw her at another event, and she invited me to come out to a meeting. And those two things combined, with the fact I actually had the time to do it, and I came to a meeting. And what attracted me was that they were doing activities with farming, and I was home gardening at the time, as well as wanting to start a community garden. I had aspirations. I was supposed to take an Urban Roots class here in Detroit about starting and leading a community garden, because I really felt like people needed to start growing their own food. I started because of health reasons, and I just wanted to take more control of my own food and what was put in it, and I felt like that was a really proactive way. Like, 'Oh, I can grow on my own, and I know what I'm going to put in it,' and that was basically the start."

### How DBCFSN impacted her life:

"First off, the choice— I don't know who picked it, but where the farm is in general— just being able to go there, I think it's one of the most serene places in the city. I had been to Rouge Park before, but more on the urban-esque side, just to hang out. But that side [the farm side] is a very serene place and just to be out in that area, even though it is an urban farm, it gives you a sense of being in a rural area in the city. That right there, alone, has changed me, just being able to go out there and work. Also, the commitment that DBCFSN has to increase awareness around food justice, and things like that. And be unapologetically black about it— a lot of people, when they hear the name, they say these

...[T]hat is important for people to know, that it's okay to be out for your people. It's not that you're negating anybody else, but you're just really for your own community, and I think that's a necessity for our community to know that it can be like that."

things like, "oh, why does it have to be the black community?" [DBCFSN] recognizes that need, and are not afraid to share, and that is something that is important for people to know that it's okay to be out for your people. It's not that you're negating anybody else, but you're just really for your own community, and I think that's a necessity for our community to know that it can be like that. Also, the people are great. The amount of knowledge and wisdom that people have about everything— there are just some dynamic kings and queens around here, and it makes me want to elevate myself and keep striving to be like them. That self-determination piece, everybody's got that spirit in them, and that's really what I'm about, and I'm glad to have found it and be a part of it here."

### Why the work of DBCFSN is important:

"I think it is more than important, it is necessary. Paramount, because in this city, I think we need a place that, on a large scale, we can grow real, fresh, organic food. And I think it's important to have this place be available for people to see and use as a model, so that they can replicate it in another area in their home, maybe on a smaller scale. But they can use that as a tool to go and learn so they can be self-sufficient. There's just a lack of fresh food at good prices already, so if they could just have a place where they can go and learn about it, I think it will improve lifestyles. And I think because of the range of people, since it's all ages, it can be somebody that's there in the organization that can attract all people. Youth, Elders, or someone my age that's doing the work so somebody can have someone to relate to as they join the organization... Hopefully as we go on, it can be a tool, and we can come together as a huge force."

**It's like a culture of everybody just seeing what they can give, not necessarily what they can receive or take. It's everybody is giving. With everybody like that, it provides much more than just what it is on paper... It's just been an onslaught of blessings.**

## **Kadiri Sennefer, 33**

**Joined in 2008**

**Serves as the Compost Manager at the D-Town, on the Farm Operations Committee, and the Anniversary Committee**

### **First heard about DBCFSN:**

"I'm a Black Star baby, and that was the bookstore that used to be on Livernois and Outer Drive [bookstore formerly owned by Malik Yakini]. So that was where the organization actually originated, and I was there. I wasn't a part of it, but I saw their first meetings because I used to hang out at the bookstore. I used to be there at their meetings, sometimes to let them in, and that was more my introduction, watching them come into existence."

"How I got involved? Basically, just being a bookstore baby, so I reaped a lot of benefits from the bookstore. So when Mama Jackie, who was a part of the organization and like my mother, she was telling me that they had all this land out at Rouge, and they needed help getting it ready. It was like a sense of responsibility I felt that I owed, so I used to volunteer my time. From the initial tilling of the soil, pulling the trees and the shrubs, all that. We did that., and I was there for that from the very beginning."

### **How DBCFSN has impacted his life:**

"Actually, it's almost like it's given me life. I would have never guessed in 2008 when I just started spending my time out there, that it would impact my life the way it has. In my story, of my many endeavors, I spent time out there based on my free time. So when I was working, my time was shortened, but at a point when I was unemployed, I was volunteering at the farm a lot. And Nefer Ra was the farm manager at that time, and I was networking, and Nefer Ra told me about Earthworks. They were hiring for a Youth Program Facilitator position. And she was very integral, like helped me develop my resume, helped me prepare for my interview, things like that. So that was just one specific benefit that came through me being at D-town.



And then it was just, I think I was gravitating, attracted to DBCFSN because of the people who were involved. Charity Hicks, Baba Malik, Mama Jackie, more than I can even name, but it was a real tight core of people. You could see the bond. Like it was a special type of bond that the members had, it was like a family bond, which was very attractive. And it was just a peaceful place to be. It was very comfortable. And once I came around, everyone was very welcoming. It's like a culture of everybody just seeing what they can give, not necessarily what they can receive or take, it's like everybody is giving. With everybody like that, it provides much more than just what it is on paper, as a nonprofit that's targeted towards food justice or security. It's just been an onslaught of blessings.

### **Why the work of DBCFSN is important:**

"Mainly, I think it's important due to the racism in the food system. As an organization that specifically deals with the majority of the people that's in the community's issues, a lot of times even as the majority of the people in a community, we're still voiceless. Not necessarily of our own account, and we're systemically being distracted. Not having the proper education so that we have the proper awareness so that we can participate. So I think that an organization that specifically deals with that issue, and has the people at the forefront of their concern is very important, simply put.

# View the start of a Resolution:

## Creating the Solution for Ourselves

In August 2011, DBCFSN received the Wallace Center Healthy Urban Food Enterprise Development Grant to fund a feasibility study to see if their Ujamaa Buying Club Food Co-op could be expanded into a Full Service Grocery Store Food Co-op.

Thus far, the qualitative data collection for the grant has been completed, and is in the process of being analyzed. Overall:

- ◆ 379 community surveys were collected
- ◆ 8 focus groups were conducted, with a total of 71 participants from the community

## Preliminary Analysis

### Community Survey

The community survey was created to see current food shopping satisfaction, and receptivity to the idea of a food cooperative

### Demographics

Female— 71%  
Male— 29%

Of the 72% who reported their zip code, 81% lived in the city of Detroit.

African-American— 49%  
Caucasian— 42%  
Multi-Ethnic— 5%  
Asian or Pacific — 3%  
Islander  
Hispanic/Latino(a)-- 1%  
Native American— 1%

18-24— 17%  
25030 — 17%  
31-34— 10%  
35-39 — 9%  
40-44— 5%  
45-49— 17%  
50-54 — 10%  
55+ — 9%

### Climate

Knew what a food co-op was — 75%

Wasn't Sure what A food co-op was — 12%

Didn't know— 13%

Would shop at a Food co-op — 77%  
Not sure — 21%  
No — 2%

Willingness to participate in developing a Food co-op in Detroit

Yes— 62%

Not Sure— 27%

No— 11%

These next three profiles are of Focus Group participants, sharing how they feel about the food shopping landscape in Detroit or about Food Cooperatives. There are maps, with the red arrows depicting Detroit and where the community members live, while the blue arrows depict where they shop the most.

# “Food for People, not for Profit”

## Detroit Food Shopping Landscape in Julie’s eyes:

“In the city of Detroit, it’s desperate. I know that it’s a food desert. I have a car, so I can drive a half hour if I need to... but if you don’t live near Eastern market, or near Southwest Detroit, or near the edge on a suburb, it’s really hard.”

“I try to support Detroit businesses when I can, I really hate to drive out to the suburbs. ... It makes me sad that the first thing you do is get in your car and go OUT of the city to shop.”

## Memories of Cass Corridor Co-op

“I really liked to support a cooperative, where there isn’t somebody getting rich and making a profit. I loved their motto, “Food for People, not for profit.” I loved the fact that I knew everybody there, and everybody knew me. I also put in a few hours a month, and that was fun too, because then you feel ownership. And the prices were great, they had a great variety of stuff. I could 85-90% of my shopping there.

## Is Detroit ready for a Food Coop?

“We had one, and it worked well. And for a while, it was going strong. That tells me it could happen again, there would just have to be enough promotion... enough draw. I think it would be awesome if there were a few little ones, since Detroit is so spread out.”



Julie, 54

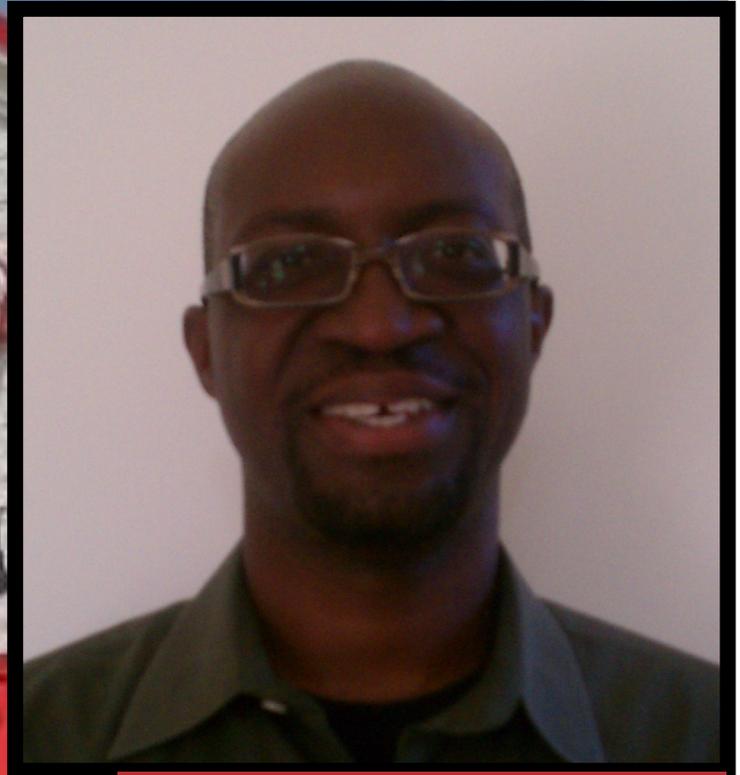
Far Eastside Detroit, MI



“I get the impression that a lot of people are trying to shift their eating, and its not an easy thing.

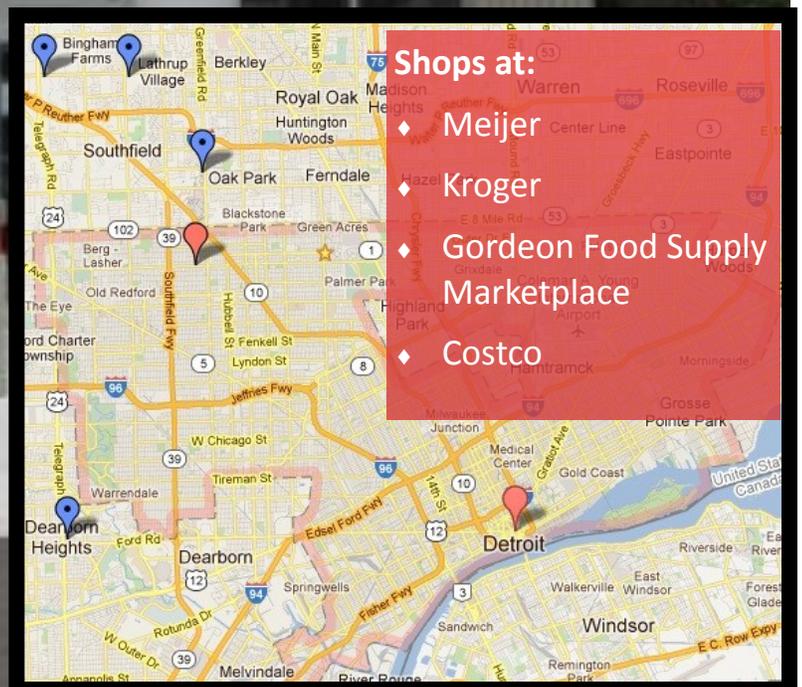
“Because its kind of been set the way it is so long, you make do. I know there are some weaknesses in it, primarily, just the idea that we don’t have another Eastern Market. In other words, if there was an Eastern Market on this side of town, that would be good. And I guess that’s where the whole food co-op could fall in. Or if there was another Eastern Market location a bit more North... but if you consider all the market around all the inner suburbs of Detroit, it’s not that bad. But the only problem is, if you’re required to take the bus to get to a different variety and range, that’d be a problem. The fact that you have to go that far to get there.... Of course, I know it’s changing, Meijers is supposed to be building a place in the city, and so is Whole Foods. As is, some of the produce, some of the things you buy at the city and in the market are good, others are questionable.”

“The idea of being able to reduce your cost in specific area of food, primarily for produce, so that’s a good thing... being able to keep the cost down for something you need and eat regularly. The other reason why it appeals would be the potential that it has for providing the spinoff food industry related services. I’m interested in that, creating other avenues to generate income and getting young people to see other areas that have potential opportunities for them, outside of what they normally see.”



Gibran, 34

Northwest Detroit, MI



“It’s about people being part of something and being able to control and have a say in their food options, that’s what the cooperative is all about.”

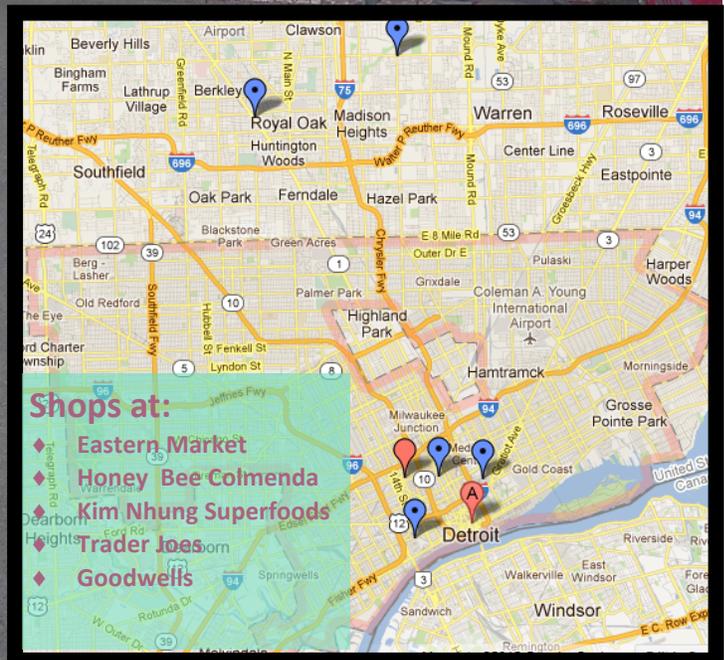
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“... [F]or me, what changed the way that I think about food and the course of my life, was visiting [a] cooperative store and seeing a different way of connecting consumers and producers. Like a different way that they could relate to one another... it was a totally different feeling. People talked to each other more. The lighting’s different. The products are labeled a different way. There are posters on the wall that are related to the sort of social issues and values that I care about— there’s just a whole culture and community around that sort of store, and a sort of relationship that I really appreciated.”

“I think that there are a lot of people that are hungry for a co-op. People of many different colors, and many cultures, and many different levels of income. However, there are lots of people— a large percentage of the population— who is not. I think there will have to be very clear consensus around how do we want to approach that division. Are we going to cater to the people who are already in the choir, and in some ways you have to in order for the co-op to stay alive and afloat, but what are we going to do with the rest?...[Y]ou need to show people. You’re not going to draw them in by just telling them, “You’re going to feel better shopping here.” They want to see that you have better looking produce, or better service, that people are friendlier here... that’s what’s going to get people to come.



Jess Daniel, 26  
Woodbridge, Detroit, MI



## What's Next?

While working with DBCFSN, I was able to help coordinate the gathering of the qualitative data, and help hire a research team to carry out the analysis and write up of the report for the feasibility study. Currently, the research team we put in place is analyzing the collected data, and will have a report ready for the feasibility study by March 2012.

As of now, DBCFSN is moving forward with the Cooperative Buying aspect of their mission. They will continue to encourage members to participate in their buying club to grow interest in the food cooperative, and hopefully will host public listening sessions in the future, to educate the community at large about food cooperatives.

## Research Process and Creation of Hunger Free Community Report

During my the 6 months that I worked with DBCFSN, I designed and conducted a survey instrument to gauge the buying habits of our community, overall grocery store satisfaction, and initial interest and knowledge of food cooperatives. After spearheading the collection of qualitative data through the surveys, I received focus group training by DBCFSN member Ebony Kennedy, and drafted a Focus Group Moderator Guide. After drafting this guide, I helped coordinate the hiring of our current Research Coordinator and Research Assistants in December. Between January and February of 2012, our research team conducted a total of 8 focus groups, gathering 71 participants in all. We also closed our community survey, having surveyed 379 community members. Unfortunately, due to the timeline of the fellowship, I will not be present for the data analysis and report creation. Since I couldn't feature the data I help collect heavily, I decided to get to know members of the community I worked with. I wanted to get the perspective of DBCFSN members and how they felt about their work. I also wanted to get the perspective of community members outside of DBCFSN concerning the project of the cooperative, as this venture would serve the Detroit Community at large. I set up 20 minute interviews with each community member, recorded them, and chose poignant quotes that expressed their unique viewpoints. Most of the pictures that serve as background for this report taken by me, with the rest being obtained from the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network's Facebook Group Page.

## Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network for allowing me to work with them these past 6 months. I would like to thank all the DBCFSN Staff that made my time in the office enjoyable. I would like to thank all the community members that were featured in this report, whether they were in profiles, or I used data from their amazing reports about the state of food in Detroit. I would also like to thank the Congressional Hunger Center for giving me the opportunity to make this happen.



My name is Tavia Benjamin, and I am an Emerson National Hunger Fellow. I am originally from Winston-Salem, NC. I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a Bachelors of Arts in Global Studies and Anthropology. I am 23 years old, and enjoy discussing food, racial, and economic justice. I also love kale.

LOVE