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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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Community Organizes Around Healthy Food: Brown County Hosts FEAST Event
by Chhaya Kolavalli & Cole Cottin

On Monday, September 24, 2012, over 70 people gathered at Highland Community College's historic Klinefelter Barn to engage in Kansas' first ever "Community FEAST." [FEAST \(Food, Education, Agriculture Solutions Together\)](#) is a model for community organizing created by the Oregon Food Bank to help involve people in addressing regional food systems issues.

According to the Brown County Healthy Foods Coalition (BCHFC), the primary goal of Brown County Community FEAST was to unite a broad range of community members under one roof to discuss challenges to and opportunities for responding to regional health issues and food access needs.

FEAST participants included: local farmers, school workers, food business owners, tribal representatives, government employees, and food bank staff members.

With one of the highest food insecurity rates in Kansas and a health status ranking of 89 out of 100 Kansas counties, the Brown County Healthy Food Coalition identified FEAST as a tool to generate greater community involvement in improving the availability of and access to healthy foods. It was supported by a grant from the Kansas Health Foundation to the Community Foundation of Northeast Kansas.

FEASTs held elsewhere in the nation have resulted in increased nutrition education efforts, farm-to-school partnerships, local food hubs, new farmers markets, food producer networking groups, community gardens, food policy councils, and more.

After attending a FEAST Facilitator's Training, held at Kansas State University (K-State) in June, BCHFC partnered with the Kansas Rural Center, K-State's Center for Engagement and Community Development (CECD), Kansas Farm Bureau, and Glacial Hills Resource and Conservation Development (RC&D) to make this event happen.

The evening featured presentations from local and state agencies, plus small group discussions. Karla Harter, of the Brown County Health Department, kicked off the evening with a presentation on the challenges to community health in the area.

Just four grocery stores serve all of Brown County's predominantly rural population. Harter asked participants: "What do you do when you can't even afford to get to the grocery store? Then, if you do get there, the only food you can afford is highly processed, high sodium, calorie dense, and nutritionally poor." In order for healthy food to become a regular part of residents' lives, Harter says it must be available, reachable, affordable, and prepare-able. "The days of grandma in the kitchen teaching you how to prepare wholesome foods are gone, folks," she emphasized – pointing to the need to educate people about healthy foods identification and use.

Next up, from the Kansas Department of Education, Cheryl Johnson and Barb Depew shared information on the many programs public schools can choose to offer to respond to issues of access and education. Often, they said, healthy eating "starts with the kids." Just getting kids excited about different types of healthy foods can have a great impact on how families eat. "October is national Farm-to-School Month," they pointed out, "We hope Brown County will be a shining example for the state!" In fact, later that evening, connections were made between farmers and school food service directors interested in purchasing healthy, local food for their schools.

Other speakers included: Matt Young, Brown County Extension Agent, who encouraged participants to use his office as a resource for increasing the local food supply. Brown County farmers, Mark Ward and Jake Johannes, emphasized the economic potential of marketing farm products locally and regionally. Annarose Hart, Agribusiness Development and Farmers Market Specialist for the Kansas Department of Agriculture, spoke about creative models for improving food access in communities. Hart pointed out that programs like Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT), which facilitates vision card (food stamp) and credit card sales at farmers markets, have doubled the income of some farmers markets: "It's a huge way to be able to capture the food dollar, to help make sure that farmers can keep farming and that people can have access to healthy foods."

After the presentations, participants enjoyed a locally-sourced meal followed by small group discussions on a variety of topics, which included access, education, production, and distribution of healthy foods in Brown County. Driven by the premise that sustainable solutions to community challenges must be community-based, the groups submitted their ideas to the Brown County Healthy Food Coalition with a list of allies and resources that might be useful for addressing different areas of concern.

Some of these ideas included “mobile food trucks” as a solution to the challenge of physical access to food. “Brown County has limited grocery stores and only one farmers market,” they said, “but a mobile food truck operation, perhaps run through a local grocery store and in collaboration with area farmers, could deliver food to outlying communities.” Others suggested that a virtual food store, in which customers order food online and receive a delivery to their door, could increase food accessibility.

In his closing speech BCHFC Chair, Steve Smith, addressed the FEAST participants: “The things we are discussing tonight are not easy fixes. They are total societal changes. We have a lot in front of us.” His sentiments echoed Harter’s opening statement, “We can change history. We can change the course of Brown County.”

For photos and story about the Brown County FEAST, visit www.kawrivervalley.org/2012/10/feast-on-this-community-organizes.html. If interested in organizing community around food and agriculture, or learning more about hosting a FEAST-like event, you can download a “FEAST Planning Guide” from the Oregon Food Bank’s website at: <http://oregonfoodbank.org/Our-Work/Building-Food-Security/Community-Programs/> Also, keep an eye out for the Kansas Rural Center's soon-to-be released “FEAST Toolkit,” full of resources from the planning of Brown County Community FEAST, at: <http://www.kansasruralcenter.org/publications.html>.

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Chhaya Kolavalli & Cole Cottin work with the Kansas Rural Center’s Our Local Food Project, and helped coordinate the Brown County FEAST event.