In Cincinnati, 3 in 10 people don't know the source of their next meal. That's not because there is a shortage of food. It's because of logistical challenges, getting fresh produce, meat and dairy to people who need them most — or getting the people to sources of food — before it spoils.

Take Todd Davis and Theresa McCalley of Walnut Hills, for example. They have an apartment on Oak Street, about three blocks from the Kroger grocery that closed in March 2017. The couple lives on a fixed income and in one of the city's most prominent food deserts.

"I don't drive, she don't drive, and them closing the store made it a lot harder on everybody," said Davis, who walked with McCalley on a recent Friday afternoon to buy vegetables and pasta at the Freestore Foodbank's Healthy Harvest Mobile Market. It pulled into the former Kroger parking lot along McMillan Street.

"Our building is mostly senior citizens. They can walk from their apartments for this," Davis said.
'Rescuing' the food

Improving healthy food options available in food deserts – defined as areas with a predominance of low-income residents who have limited access to affordable and nutritious food – is commanding a lot of attention locally these days.

The Soup Kitchen Summit formed a year ago and brings together soup kitchen operators, major social service agencies such as the Freestore Foodbank and Cincinnati’s St. Vincent de Paul Society, philanthropy organizations and corporate partners, such as the Kroger Co., to find ways to work together to rescue more food and redistribute it more efficiently and quickly to people in need.

Nonprofit leaders in Walnut Hills and Avondale, another food desert neighborhood, are coming up with creative solutions to fill grocery spaces that are unlikely to ever be filled again by a traditional large store.

Community gardens and neighborhood- and school-based cooking and nutrition classes have received renewed focus as part of the solution to food deserts and poor diets and negative health outcomes that often accompany them. No idea or effort, big or small, it seems, is being dismissed or disregarded.

"It's the dumbest problem we have on the planet," said Jeffrey Miller, chief operating officer of Cincinnati-based Last Mile Food Rescue, which seeks volunteers using apps to get food that would go to waste to big food pantries. The idea is derived from Food Rescue Hero of Pittsburgh, which was founded in 2016 and continues to be refined.

Volunteers use an app that alerts them to a match between a food donation and a nonprofit who would like to receive it. They then "rescue" the food.

"Hunger in Cincinnati is solvable. It's just people learning how to not throw out food," Miller said.

The need is great. So is the opportunity.

- **290,000 people, 80,000 of them children, are food insecure**, the Freestore Foodbank estimates of its 20-county service region.
- **6.6 million pounds of produce** is distributed by the Freestore, enough food to make 27.3 million meals. Forty-two percent of its food is donated.
- **200,000 pounds of rescued food** was recycled by Our Daily Bread in 2017, employing a small staff and volunteers to turn it into 96,000 meals and 21,000 second-helpings. It is a nonprofit soup kitchen and social center founded in 1985 in Over-the-Rhine that serves a free breakfast and lunch to anyone who walks through its doors Monday through Friday.
- **60 million pounds of food is wasted a year** in Hamilton County, which has a population of 814,000. That comes out to almost 74 pounds of food wasted a year per person in the county.
Food waste happens in many ways and to varying degrees, said Georgine Getty, executive director of Our Daily Bread.

"It's not eating a crust of bread to forgetting about the strawberries in the back of the refrigerator," she said. "It's the vendors at Findlay Market preparing food for New Year's Eve, which ended up being really cold, and them needing to give it to us. On the largest scale, it's realizing that way too much food is sitting in the factory and is going to go to waste if they don't do something fast."

Soup Kitchen Summit

Getty is one of three chairs of the summit, which formed about a year ago to try to fix the problem, Getty said, "that we had all these hungry people."

In a short time, however, its members realized "we were part of something a lot bigger, an environmental problem, how do we save food that's being wasted and get it quickly to people who need it," she said.

Its themes are:

1. Food rescue.
2. Sharing the most relevant information on community resources that lead to solving what summit members see as a "logistics problem."
3. Creating a system for distribution that is sustainable.
Getting healthier food to people in need

Several organizations in Greater Cincinnati are working to rescue and redistribute food. Among them:

**Last Mile:** It recently partnered with United Way of Greater Cincinnati to tap into its volunteers who can serve as drivers, said Last Mile President and CEO Thomas Fernandez. "They have lots of volunteers. We have a shared mission to fight poverty," he said. Last Mile is targeting its first deliveries for July 2019.

**Freshmen:** Through a $10,000 People's Liberty Grant from the Haile Foundation, Eban Taylor seeks to fill a need at the grassroots level. Freshmen is a community delivery service that offers grocery pickup to Avondale residents limited by access to healthy food, reliable transportation and technology.

"Our shopping behavior in the grocery store is now starting to interact with some form of technology," Taylor said. "How do we still continue to create these experiences for people who are on assistance, and how do we make sure that they get the same experience where they are not missing out on the benefit of a convenient service model, service, whether it be online grocery ordering or delivery."

**Produce Perks Midwest:** The Sharonville-based organization is a regional nonprofit that helps people in underserved communities get access to healthy fruits and vegetables. Produce Perks provides a dollar for dollar match to those using SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) cards, which are honored by farmer's markets and grocery stores. Recipients can purchase up to $10 per day in grocery stores and $20 a day at farmer's markets.

**Bloc Ministries:** In Price Hill, Bloc is working with Cincinnati State Technical and Community College to train chefs who can cook at home and get a job with those skills.

**Gabriel's Place:** In Avondale, this food ministry offers a farmer's garden and cooking classes, among its other food-based programs.

Those are smaller, community-based programs. Then there is a large-scale effort, the $10 million Zero Hunger/Zero Waste Innovation Fund, announced in February by Cincinnati-based Kroger Co. Foundation.

Innovators sent in letters of intent on proposals to prevent food waste. Grants will be awarded that range from $25,000 to $250,000.

The goals are ambitious:

- Accelerate donations of nutritious food that provide 3 billion healthy meals by 2025.
- Advocate for public solutions to address hunger and divert food waste from landfills.
- Achieve internally that Kroger will be a zero-waste company by 2020 and prevent all food waste within all of its stores by 2025.
A smaller grocery store will go on the left side in the new Avondale Town Center. A larger variety store will be on the right. (Photo: Albert Cesare / Enquirer)

Food desert, Part I: Avondale

Avondale has not had a grocery since Aldi closed in November 2008. Its departure left the neighborhood of 12,500 people, the largest predominantly African American community in the region – without a source of fresh, healthful food.

A major component of the $29.5 million federal Choice Neighborhood grant of December 2012 was a grocery. Cincinnati Mayor John Cranley and city administration have promised a grocery in Avondale.

Nonprofit developer the Community Builders had a fully negotiated lease with Missouri-based grocery chain Save-A-Lot. But the lease was not signed because of a pending sale of the discount chain to a private equity investor that was finalized in October 2016.

For many years, corner stores have been the only sources of food in the neighborhood.
Community Builders and its partners, including the Avondale Community Council, had to adjust on the fly. Development of the Avondale Town Center at the corner of Forest Avenue and Reading Road began in 2017 without a grocery plan.

Slowly, though, it has taken shape. The vision is for a 15,000-square-foot grocer split into two spaces. Most of the space, about 9,000 square feet, will be a higher-end variety chain that will offer dry goods and benefit from professional on-site management and security. The adjacent 6,000 square feet will be a new concept that focuses solely on fresh produce, meat, baked goods and dairy products.

"The model is the old neighborhood butcher shop," said Jeff Beam, project manager for Community Builders. "We're interested in customer loyalty, something that will establish the community-grocer relationship."

The variety store will open first, and Community Builders is close to signing a contract on that space, Beam said.

The grocery is part of 80,000 square feet of commercial space on the ground floors of two new buildings and 119 units of mixed-income housing – market rate, low-income and workforce rental, Beam said. A model is open. Agents are leasing apartments. Residents are beginning to move in.
Mixed-income apartments ride above storefronts on Reading Road in the new Avondale Town Center. A grocery and variety store will open to the west onto a parking lot in the rear. (Photo: Albert Cesare / Enquirer)
Food desert, Part II: Walnut Hills

When the Walnut Hills Kroger shut its doors in March 2017, the area became a food desert that was particularly hard on senior citizens and low-income families that did not have a way to access the new Corryville Kroger about a mile and a half away.

"It crushed the neighborhood," said one resident, Todd Davis, who now gets his vegetables and fruit during a two-hour time slot on Friday afternoons from the Freestore Foodbank's Healthy Harvest Mobile Market.

"Warmer weather brings more people out," Israel said as a couple of shoppers moved through the trailer, which offers refrigerated milk, eggs and juice, a full display of produce and even spices, spaghetti and marinara sauce.

"The people are heartfelt. They tell us thanks for caring and for being here."

Neighborhood leaders have tried a number of temporary solutions to bridge the gap between the Kroger closing and the expected opening later this year of a smaller grocery tailored to community needs, said Gary Dangel, Healthy Outreach Coordinator for the Walnut Hills Redevelopment Foundation and a Walnut Hills resident.

The smaller store, expected to be created in a 4,000-square-foot space near the former Kroger store – which was 33,000 square feet – received a major financial boost in June 2018 with receipt of a $100,000 grant from Gannett Co. Inc.’s A Community Thrives program. Gannett is the parent company of The
Later in 2018, the neighborhood redevelopment foundation received another $100,000 grant to use toward the grocery project from the Aetna Foundation.

Besides the mobile market, which visits Walnut Hills and nine other local food desert communities during a week – Walnut Hills is the most frequented stop, Dangel said – the neighborhood has brought in three different farmers’ markets.

"Adaption had to happen," Dangel said. "Besides losing a grocery store, we lost a social meeting place."

The new space Walnut Hills grocery space will be similar to the one planned for the Avondale Town Center. It will focus on fresh food options: produce, meat, dairy and baked goods.

"We want it to be pedestrian scale," Dangel said. "This is a walkable neighborhood."

New neighbors moving into Walnut Hills

The new grocery space also will offer community events, many of them food-related, such as cooking classes. It will benefit from other planned additions to the Peoples Corner area.

Taste of Belgium will open a restaurant on McMillan Street. Nearby will be the expanded headquarters of La Soupe, a nonprofit that will be moving into a 6,000-square-foot space. It will be moving from a 900-square-foot building on Red Bank Road in Anderson Township.

Cooking classes and food-based events for Walnut Hills residents and those living in neighboring communities are part of the plan for the new space, said La Soupe Board President Mimi Dyer, "events
that blur the lines between volunteers and the people who come to see us. We're moving into Walnut Hills purposely because it's a food desert."

**MORE:** Here's how [La Soupe turns potential waste](#) into good food

La Soupe's focus is on food access. Beyond its food-rescue efforts that engage chefs, its programs create community cooking events, teach cooking and bring a van into neighborhoods under a "pay-from-your-heart" model. Its food runners get leftovers to agencies such as Our Daily Bread, Anna Louise Inn and others who can use it before it goes bad. Its suppliers include Jungle Jim's, the Crossett Co., Kroger and local farmers. About 1,600 pints of soup are donated each week. It is frozen in donated ice cream containers.

"There is more than enough food," Dyer said. "We try to make it as easy as possible to get food to the people who need it most."

Those additions to the neighborhood can't come fast enough for nearby Walnut Hills residents Davis and Theresa McCalley.

They appreciate the Freestore's mobile market. They walked home north on Gilbert Avenue to their apartment on the recent Friday. They carried vegetable greens, bell peppers and pasta in their bag.

The plan was to cook up some vegetable pasta for dinner.

McCalley smiled, looked at Davis and said, "His recipe. He taught me."