By Alexandra Dundore, VISTA

One of the main projects of my AmeriCorps VISTA term was planning for the 2014 Food Summit. Dane County holds the Food Summit annually, alternating each year between full day, conference-style educational events and shorter evening programs. The 2014 Dane County Food Summit held on Friday, October 24, was themed "Digging into the Local Food System: Be a Part of the Solution." October 24 was also National Food Day, a nationwide celebration and movement for access to healthy, affordable, and sustainable food (FoodDay.org).

Hosts for the Food Summit included my service organization Dane County UW Extension, the Dane County Food Council, and the Madison Food Policy Council. Months of planning went into the making of the Food Summit. My primary roles included convening and guiding the planning committee, fundraising through sponsorship requests, recruitment of panelists and breakout session discussion leaders, and program planning for how we would spend the Summit day. A challenge that emerged during planning was figuring out how to reconcile two themes our planning team and others we talked to were most interested in exploring during the Summit. These two themes were working together to make local change, and food system equity and justice. We wanted to support and incorporate conversations around food justice, including racial and economic systems of exclusion, into all of the breakout sessions. But, we also wanted those conversations to be accessible and productive for all, including people who wouldn’t automatically look at local food issues with that perspective in mind.
Fortunately, I was able to attend the local YWCA Racial Justice Summit at the beginning of October and met Multnomah County diversity initiative staff from Portland, Oregon. These presenters had developed an Equity and Empowerment Lens with a Racial Justice Focus for review of county proposals and initiatives. This lens provided a framework for analyzing proposals for unintended or disparate impacts on differently-situated communities. We put the framework into action during a session at the YWCA Summit among groups of people who did not know one another and who came from a broad range of backgrounds. I was impressed with the analysis and depth that came from these short conversations, and it struck me as exactly the sort of tool we needed for the Food Summit.

I contacted the authors of the Equity and Empowerment Lens for permission and feedback as I adapted a tool and facilitation guide to be used at our Food Summit. Thus, we were able to introduce a "Food System Equity and Empowerment Lens" to assist small groups to critically evaluate and problem-solve around specific topics or challenges related to their breakout session theme. I organized a training session for discussion leaders of the breakout sessions to have a chance to practice using the Lens and ask questions that helped me to clarify my facilitation instructions.

The morning and afternoon breakout sessions at the Food Summit focused on the topics of Food Access, Food Justice, Food Production, and Food System Infrastructure. Sessions were very hands-on and put the power to direct conversation with the participants, supported by discussion leaders and the Food System Equity and Empowerment Lens. Major themes, "a-ha's," and suggestions for next steps were shared at the end of the day during a "Harvest" session, giving all participants a sense of the day's discussions. Through the discussion sessions, we hoped to equip each Food Summit attendee with additional personal connections and a critical framework for evaluating issues and ideas by using the Food System Equity Lens. We also wanted to capture proposals from the discussion sessions to pass on to both the Madison and Dane County Food Councils to potentially move some of these ideas forward.
After the Summit, I wrote a summary of the Food Summit and these policy suggestions to share with both the Dane County Food Council and Madison Food Policy Council for review as they set their goals for 2015. The Food Summit felt like a great success. Over 100 community members, farmers, entrepreneurs, organizers, city officials, academics, and non-profit staff attended the Summit. The day began with words of welcome from both Dane County Executive Joe Parisi and Madison Mayor Paul Soglin. Due to emergency cancellations from two breakout session facilitators, I had the opportunity to co-lead the two breakout sessions focused on Food Justice, and was thrilled to see critical conversations come alive with the Food System Equity Lens. Evaluations from the Food Summit included praise for the Lens, the incorporation of concepts of access and justice into all discussion, and the small-group nature of the discussions.

For more information, check out the summary of the 2014 Dane County Food Summit and Food System Equity and Empowerment Lens here: http://danecountyfoodcoalition.com/2014/12/11/2014-food-summit-summary-includes-reflections-proposals-for-next-steps/

(more photos below)