Hunger often gets associated with poor developing countries, but millions of Americans live with hunger every day. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, more than 48 million Americans – including 15.3 million children – lived in food insecure households during 2014. Memphis, Tennessee, nicknamed the “Bluff City” for its location along the Mississippi River, consistently ranks high in national surveys measuring poverty and food insecurity. In response to the problem, a group of community-based organizations is creating a directory of food pantries, community gardens and other local food sources where hungry households can find help in Memphis. This resource, which will be available in print and online in spring 2016, will complement the Bluff City Farmers Market Guide that the same group of partners developed a year earlier.

The Challenge
Food assistance requests have overwhelmed Memphis soup kitchens and food pantries, which are already strapped financially. As a result, such centers have been forced to reduce the amount of food they give away to needy recipients. According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors annual hunger and homelessness survey, about 46 percent of requests for emergency food assistance in Memphis went unfulfilled in 2014. About 29 percent of Memphis residents live below the poverty level, in part because of low wages and an unemployment rate that is higher than the national average. Health officials expect requests for food assistance to increase. The higher demand could bring with it higher rates of obesity, heart disease and other health problems closely linked to poor diets and a lack of healthy food.

“The Memphis Local Food Guide, in addition to the Bluff City Farmers Market Guide, is one of many steps towards positive change.”
- Marchel Ebron, Food Advisory Council’s food policy coordinator

Work made possible with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
The Solution
The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program is working to support healthy living around the country. In Memphis, the ANCHOR campaign is supporting local efforts to address food access issues in the community. While numerous organizations, charities and businesses throughout the Memphis area provide emergency food assistance as well as retail sites where nutritious, affordable food can be purchased, many people do not know about these resources. The key is making their availability better known to Bluff City residents. The Food Advisory Council for Memphis and Shelby County is developing a local healthy food guide with the help of ANCHOR Memphis and a coalition of local organizations. The guide will help connect hungry, low income Memphis residents with local producers and distributors of healthy food. The future “Memphis Local Food Guide” lists community and school gardens, area farmers markets, hunger relief organizations and retail sites that sell healthy and affordable food, including sites where food can be purchased using supplemental food assistance or SNAP benefits. The guide will complement the Bluff City Farmers Market Guide developed in 2015 by the same coalition of groups.

Sustainability Efforts
ANCHOR Memphis continues to work with local organizations to educate the public about the availability of healthy and nutritious food in the area that can be purchased through government food supplement programs such as SNAP and WIC. The coalition has since partnered with Cooperative Memphis, a networking resource group, to plan a series of training sessions to teach community partners and residents about local initiatives related to healthy food access. They also will be encouraged to utilize the Memphis Local Food Guide and the previously published Bluff City Farmers Market Guide.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
ANCHOR Memphis and other coalition members are supporting efforts to increase community awareness about retail stores that offer healthy food in under-served communities. The alliance also is working to create an environmental change aimed at eliminating food deserts, or areas that have a limited availability of affordable and nutritious food.

Results
With help from community organizations, including the Shelby County Health Department and the American Heart Association, the Food Advisory Council of Memphis and Shelby Council has compiled a directory highlighting the excellent food options available locally for homes in need. The ANCHOR coalition aided the Food Advisory Council by assembling a list of area food banks and soup kitchens to be included in the guide. Communication activities were undertaken to educate the public about the Memphis Local Food Guide, including a communication campaign that targeted recipients of food assistant benefits from SNAP. SNAP beneficiaries were encouraged to make healthier food purchasing choices, decisions that could be shaped through the use of the Memphis Local Food Guide. That directory, along with the Bluff City Farmers Market Guide, will increase residential and overall community awareness of healthy food options throughout the area.

Get Involved
To learn more about the Food Advisory Council of Memphis and Shelby County, visit http://growmemphis.org/food-policy/. To support the creation of a local food directory, or share a related success story, contact Twanda.Wadlington@heart.org.