Mississippi has the highest rate of food insecurity in the nation. Nearly 22 percent of the state’s residents live in households that lack adequate access to healthy food. To address the issue, 17 community organizations in DeSoto County came together to participate in the first-ever Hunger Summit on April 26, 2017. The all-day conference united local businesses that help feed the poor and hungry, and educated them about the full extent of the problem and its repercussions on neighborhoods. The gathering also raised awareness about the services and resources provided by summit participants. They shared best practices and collaborated on plans to ensure that their various food-assistance programs would complement each other to benefit those in need. The inaugural DeSoto County Hunger Summit will become an annual gathering until everyone in the community is guaranteed easy access to healthy, affordable food.

The Challenge
The steeply rising rates of obesity and chronic, diet-related diseases such as diabetes and heart disease are major public health concerns across the country. In Mississippi, the obesity rate among adults has more than doubled since 1990 and currently stands at 35.6 percent, the second highest rate in the nation. Research has shown that low-income and food insecure Americans are especially vulnerable to becoming obese because of the unique challenges they face in adopting healthier behaviors. For instance, limited resources, lack of healthy and affordable foods, and fewer opportunities for physical activity are just a few examples of challenges one faces when trying to adopt healthier behaviors. The national food insecurity rate during 2013-2015 was 13.7 percent; in Mississippi, the rate was a shocking 21.5 percent, the highest in the nation. In DeSoto County, 13.6 percent of the residents are food insecure.

“We encouraged champions and leaders to think outside of the box. We weren’t trying to recreate the wheel. We just wanted to come up with new ideas to solve a very common problem in our community.”

– Anna Dickerson, the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi
The American Heart Association partnered with 16 community organizations and businesses to hold the first-ever DeSoto County Hunger Summit. The event brought together a broad variety of local networks that provide food assistance throughout the region. Summit partners included not-for-profits, food banks, hospitals, religious organizations, restaurants, farmers, grocers, and city leaders. Partners and collaborators worked together to recognize the biggest needs of food insecure households. With the aim to build efficiencies, the Hunger Summit focused on identified gaps areas of duplication that could be eliminated and identified opportunities to better utilize community resources to help end hunger in DeSoto County.

Sustaining Success
The summit participants helped create a website, [www.hungernomics.org](http://www.hungernomics.org), to serve as a portal that will help connect DeSoto County food providers with community members in need. The website also allows restaurants and retailers to donate food to area food banks or meal programs. In addition, several partners offered to sponsor grants for summit participants who are working on local hunger-alleviating projects.

All of the summit’s efforts will be documented by a University of Mississippi data collection center that is creating a “hunger atlas,” which is a guide to help communities throughout the state replicate DeSoto County efforts.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The 2017 DeSoto County Hunger Summit kicked off what will become an annual conference dedicated to overcoming the challenges faced by food insecure individuals and families. Future summits will review existing plans to reduce hunger in DeSoto County, identify new or emerging opportunities, and assess elements needed to be built, changed or fine-tuned to address hunger challenges in DeSoto County.

Results
About 140 representatives of 17 area businesses, organizations and farmers united for the first-ever DeSoto County Hunger Summit on April 26, 2017. A pediatrician presented on the impact hunger can have on children as research shows they perform poorly academically and have more psychological problems when they experience chronic hunger. The physician also described the domino effect a child’s hunger has on parents and an entire community. Summit participants learned about the roles each of the organizations and businesses play in attempting reduce hunger and food insecurity. The participants shared ideas on how to best collaborate and move forward on a common goal and build a system-wide approach to addressing hunger and food insecurity. Collectively, plans were made to build upon the momentum generated at the Summit to help ensure that all county residents have sufficient access to affordable and nutritious food.

Get Involved
To learn more about this initiative, contact Anna Dickerson, community education director for the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, at adickerson@cfnm.org. Or visit the Hunger Summit’s website, [www.hungernomics.org](http://www.hungernomics.org), to learn about food assistance programs and providers in DeSoto County.