This project developed a community assessment of both the food environment and the physical activity environment for Elizabeth, New Jersey through a series of Geohealth Workshops. The primary method for conducting this assessment was an innovative Geohealth Workshop format that allows local students to learn to use geospatial technology, empowering them to make a spatial assessment of healthy eating and physical activity components in their own community.

The participating students (both high school and college) were organized through a partner non-profit group in Elizabeth, Future City Inc. The workshop gave students the opportunity to experience a college environment, learning how to use geospatial technologies in the computer lab at Rutgers’ Center for Remote Sensing and Spatial Analysis (CRSSA). The training also included a series of pre-workshop meetings at the Historical Society of Elizabeth’s Bonnell House (1648), just a short walk from the Elizabeth train station as well as Elizabeth High School.

The final products have included a map-rich report for each year’s workshop and 2 interactive story maps online for public access to the student products.

The City of Elizabeth is located in Union County, Northern New Jersey, United States. With a population of 124,969, the City of Elizabeth is New Jersey’s fourth largest City. The City of Elizabeth was founded in 1665 and became the first capital of the State of New Jersey.

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With its close proximity to Newark Liberty International Airport, the New Jersey Turnpike, the Garden State Parkway, Routes 1 & 9, and Metramart, the City has become a regional hub for the East Coast. Elizabeth has two NJ Transit train stations that connect to New York City and the rest of the State. The Port of Newark and Elizabeth 2,000-acre marine terminal hosts over 150,000 jobs and is the World’s largest containership port and the largest Foreign Trade Zone in the United States.

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Some recommended actions that came out of the Physical Activity Assessment:
1. Complete a full D50T based assessment of the physical activity in Elizabeth.
2. Creation of an information dataset that can be shared and be publicly accessible.
3. Expanded access to gyms to avoid “gym deserts”.
4. Creation of complete streets policies allowing more walkable streets and better access for different modes of transportation.
5. Increased connectivity between public transit systems and parks.
6. City events that can promote using city space for physical activity i.e. Ciclovia.
7. Enhanced public data (including geospatial) describing parks and public activity spaces.

Some recommended actions developed based on the Food Environment Assessment of Elizabeth, NJ:
1. Recruiting participants interested in learning about GIS and health
2. Identifying food environment issues specific to community being studied
3. Training participants in basic geospatial technology applications
4. Collect data on permanent food environment features - e.g., supermarkets
5. Collect data on temporary food environment features - e.g., farmer’s markets
6. Conduct spatial analysis of food environment data
7. Represent food issues with multi-feature maps that tell the story of the issue, not just locations

Lessons Learned
1. Students (both high school and college) are much more aware of their community than they are sometimes given credit. Tapping into their energy and creative perspectives demonstrates an important alternative to a simple expert approach to mapping or assessing a community.

2. Community groups (like our partners at Future City, Inc.) are essential in assessing a diverse urban landscape. Their local knowledge was invaluable in ensuring that the completed assessment was relevant for the community and its leaders.

3. Maps (particularly the story maps made by students) can engage an audience much more than technical reporting. The maps sparked discussion that might not have happened otherwise, including one with the mayor.

4. Sharing the results as publicly as possible can have unanticipated impacts. The students posted their food environment maps online without a clear audience. The staff at the VMCA found the materials to be useful and integrated them into their ongoing efforts to address food access disparities in Elizabeth.

Partners
NJ Healthy Communities Network: http://www.njhcn.org/ 
Future City Inc.: http://futurecityinc.org/