

Improving Access and Affordability to Nutritious Food in Low-Income Communities

During recent years, there has been a special emphasis on the importance of adequate and proper nutrition for all people. Several reports have identified a lack of proper nutrition as related to child birth defects, low school performance, food insecurity and poor health outcomes. Barriers continue to limit access to healthy nutritious foods in low-income communities. Access and affordability are often cited as barriers to obtaining nutritious food.

Children, working age adults and seniors who live in these communities are more often negatively impacted by inadequate nutrition than persons who live in high income areas. The lack of proper nutrition is a leading cause of diet related diseases and chronic medical conditions. A number of national, state and local efforts are underway to address the lack of access and affordability of healthy food choices in low-income communities.

Federal programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly called Food Stamps), Women, Infant and Children Program, National School Lunch Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Older Americans Act Title III-Senior Nutrition Program funding are efforts to improve the nutritional needs of low-income persons. Senior Nutrition is funded through the Administration on Aging of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, while the others are funded through the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Recipients of these program funds are being encouraged to promote healthy eating, increase nutrition education outreach and place emphasis on improved health outcomes for communities that have limited access to healthy food choices.

Food Access

According to *Food for Every Child: The Need for More Supermarkets in Tennessee*, in many parts of Tennessee, the lack of access to supermarkets that sell fresh food is a growing problem, particularly for low-income communities. The report highlights the uneven distribution of supermarkets in Tennessee. The report shows the uneven distribution of supermarkets in Tennessee's two largest urban areas, Davidson County and the city of Memphis. In both areas there are large areas where there are fewer supermarkets than in other parts of the county or in some cases nonexistent.

Large areas of the state lack supermarket access resulting in persons having to travel long distances to obtain healthy foods. Many of these areas have limited or no public transportation options for low-income families to get to supermarkets that have nutritious food options. Persons living in zip codes that lack supermarkets are relying on corner stores for most of their food purchases. Corner stores tend to have fewer healthy food options and are more likely to sell alcohol and tobacco products.

[http://policylinkcontent.s3.amazonaws.com/Tennessee_mappingHighRes%20\(2\).pdf](http://policylinkcontent.s3.amazonaws.com/Tennessee_mappingHighRes%20(2).pdf)

Three food deserts have been identified in Davidson County: Edgemoor, North Nashville near Charlotte Pike and parts of East Nashville. Food deserts have been defined as areas with little or no access to

stores that offer fresh and affordable foods needed to maintain a healthy diet. Nashville's food deserts are located in areas with higher poverty rates and more chronic health conditions than other parts of the city.

Affordability

Food Cost have risen more than 13% over the past five years, leaving many low-income families with having to make choices among food purchases, medicine, rent, utilities and other household necessities. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), benefits average \$1.30 per meal per person. The recent recession and its slow recovery have resulted in a decline in incomes that affect not only housing, utilities, medical needs and transportation but also for healthy food purchases.

Health Implications

Access to fresh, affordable and nutritious food plays a role in determining what people eat.

Families with limited access to healthy foods are often left with purchasing foods that have high sodium and sugar contents and are less nutritious than families with easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables.



In *The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why it Matters* published by Policylink and The Food Trust, it is reported that low-income communities with limited access to healthy foods have higher diet related diseases such as obesity and diabetes than other areas. As a result, decreased availability of healthy foods contributes to higher medical costs for persons who are already paying more for basic living needs and have fewer options to increase their incomes.

http://www.policylink.org/site/c.lkIXLbMNJrE/b.5860321/k.A5BD/The_Grocery_Gap.htm

Environmental Impact

The Grocery Gap report explains that where people live affects not only access to healthy food but also can have a detrimental environmental effect on overall health in the community. Examples in the report demonstrate that African and Mexican American children are disproportionately obese compared to white children. Children in low-income families are twice as likely to be overweight than children in high-income families. Also for the first time a generation of children can expect to live shorter lives than their parents, due to the health consequences of being overweight partially related to limited access to nutritious food.

Impact of limited healthy food access

The negative impact of an improper diet affects people of all ages. Studies have shown that limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables can cause diet related deficiencies which affect prenatal care, can cause babies to be born with low-birth weights, limits a child's development, and affects brain development for Pre-K and kindergarteners and learning in grades one through six.

For working age adults, food insecurity is linked to a variety of negative health outcomes such as hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, and the lack of exercise, diabetes and obesity. Food insecurity is a labor and workforce issue for adults. Working adults whose families are food insecure may have higher absenteeism rates, lower productivity and higher medical costs.

For seniors who have limited incomes, choices between healthy foods and medical costs are often being made. ***The Causes, Consequences and Future of Senior Hunger in America*** by the Meals on Wheels Association of America Foundation, a lack of access to healthy food for seniors can result in nutritional deficiencies in their diets. As a result of these deficiencies seniors may have diminished immune responses, impaired physical functions, longer hospital stays, reduced activity levels and premature institutionalization.

<http://www.mowaa.org/document.doc?id=13>

Studies have shown that increased access to healthy food corresponds to healthier eating and lower rates of obesity and diabetes. African Americans who lived in a census tract with a supermarket were more likely to consume the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables. Mississippi residents who lived in counties with a supermarket were more likely to meet guidelines for healthy eating than those who live in counties with no supermarket. In Indianapolis the study demonstrated that a new grocery store in a low-income neighborhood partially resulted in adults nearby losing weight.

<http://www.healthyfoodaccess.org/get-started/making-case>

http://www.policylink.org/site/c.lkIXLbMNJrE/b.5860321/k.A5BD/The_Grocery_Gap.htm

Pennsylvania's Model to improve access to nutritious food

The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) a public private partnership to encourage development of fresh food retail in underserved communities in Pennsylvania has been recognized by the National Governors Association, the Centers for Disease Control and the National Association of State Legislatures as a model for other states. The FFFI provides funds for retail food projects throughout the state of Pennsylvania to improve access to healthy food and provide jobs in low-income communities. Through the FFFI, fresh food access has been improved for over 400,000 residents, created over 5,000 jobs and has created over 80 additional retail markets in low-income communities. More information on the Pennsylvania Initiative can be found at the following link:

<http://www.healthyfoodaccess.org/policy-efforts/pennsylvania?destination=node/469>

Tennessee's Initiative

In a report published by the Food Trust an initiative funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *Food for Every Child: The Need for More Supermarkets in Tennessee* highlighted the lack of access to healthy food in low-income communities in Tennessee. The Food Trust and the Tennessee Grocery Access Task Force made up of leaders from state and local governments, civic organizations, American Heart Association, public health and the supermarket industry has developed a set of policy recommendations to improve healthy food access. The recommendations include:

- Encouraging state and local governments to work with community organizations and retailers to develop affordable and efficient transportation services for neighborhoods without access to supermarkets
- Encouraging state and local governments to partner with the grocers, community organizations and public health professionals to support best practices for promoting healthy foods
- Modifying economic development programs to encourage affordable, healthy and fresh food options in underserved low-income communities
- Encouraging state and local governments to develop a comprehensive food access approach to include a focus on supermarket access

http://policylinkcontent.s3.amazonaws.com/TN_recommFINA_webL.pdf

Local Efforts

Several local efforts have been initiated in the past few years to address the need to improve nutrition in low-income communities. These include:

- The Mobile Market Program
- Incentives for corner stores to carry more fruits and vegetables
- Emphasis on community gardens and improving school food for students
- Second Harvest Food Bank's student backpack program provide food during school breaks for students who receive free or reduced price lunches have access to food
- Second Harvest Food Bank has developed a senior backpack program to provide seniors who receive meals on wheels service during the week with nutritious meals on weekends
- Nashville's Farmers Market has assisted vendors with obtaining the equipment to accept EBT food stamp cards along with offering discounts to seniors and other food stamp recipients
- The Women Infant and Children (WIC) program has opened a satellite site in the southeast portion of the county to make it easier for eligible families to receive vouchers
- Additional Summer Food Service sites are being opened by Metro Action Commission and Second Harvest Food Bank to serve eligible students when schools are not in session

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