



## **POLICY BRIEF: OPTIONS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS, AFFORDABLE FOOD**

### **THE CHALLENGE**

Nutrition has lifelong consequences. It affects a child's growth and development, and the ability to learn in school. Too many children face daily conditions that challenge their healthy development and future. By increasing the availability of affordable healthy food in all communities and promoting better food choices, the city could make it possible for more children to grow into adulthood ready to meet the demands of society and fully engage in the 21st century economy.

Many families in New York City have limited access to healthy and affordable food in their community. Studies suggest that poor access to healthy foods is a contributing factor to the growing obesity rates and related health problems that disproportionately affect children and families in low-income communities. Large grocery stores are unavailable in many low-income communities and are typically located outside walking distance. Many neighborhoods have few food retail options and residents have to rely on fast food restaurants and corner stores with limited inventory and unreasonably high prices. These neighborhoods are known as food deserts.

Healthy eating is not solely a matter of personal responsibility or individual taste; nor is a better diet achieved by increasing access to emergency food programs or expanding enrollment in government benefits programs alone. It is also a matter of making healthy, affordable food accessible and available in all New York City communities and of incentivizing the consumption of nutritious food. By promoting healthy eating increasing the supply of affordable food retail options and expanding local transportation alternatives in underserved communities, the health outcomes and quality of life of all New Yorkers can be improved.

Government has begun to take a more active role in developing policies that increase affordable fresh food retail options in New York City, stimulating the supply of and demand for healthy nutritious food and promoting wholesome eating. Yet there is still a need for government to develop a strategic and coordinated plan to increase access to affordable nutritious food and help families with children eat healthier. Whether New York City invests in new markets or enhances existing ones, the right combination should exist for each and every neighborhood in a city otherwise abundant with food.

The following proposals will make a healthy diet more affordable and accessible to all New Yorkers, promote local markets and foster New York's regional economy:

## **Increase Access to Nutritious and Affordable Food**

- **Lift the cap on street food vending cart permits, increase the number of vendors selling fresh fruits and vegetables in underserved areas, and create small business-entrepreneurship microlending opportunities.** Street fruit and vegetable vendors offer a flexible, low cost alternative to bringing quality fresh produce at affordable prices to underserved communities. The City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene should lift the cap on food cart permits and increase the number of permits available, and the New York City Economic Development Corporation should create small business-entrepreneurship microlending opportunities to incentivize the placement of fruit and vegetable food carts in neighborhoods with limited food access. (DOHMH)
- **Post information online on supermarket inspections.** The Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) should coordinate with the State Department of Agriculture and Markets to post the latest information on supermarket and grocery store inspections on the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and DCA's websites in an effort to inform the public on food quality and safety. This will help the City achieve and maintain the highest standards in the city's supermarkets and grocery stores. The information should also be made available through 311. (DCA, DOHMH and NYSDAM)
- **Encourage supermarkets to provide free shuttle services to consumers residing in underserved areas.** Under this proposal, consumers with purchases exceeding a set amount would receive a free ride home with their groceries. The New York City Economic Development Corporation could incentivize supermarkets to expand their home delivery catchment areas to include underserved neighborhoods. Studies show that supermarkets that offer free shuttle services to residents in low-income areas experienced increased sales resulting from an expanded customer base, larger purchase volume, and free publicity (see Mohan V & Cassady D. *Supermarket Shuttle Programs: A Feasibility Study for Supermarkets Located in Low-Income, Transit Dependent, Urban Neighborhoods in California*. Center for Advanced Studies in Nutrition and Social Marketing, University of California, Davis, CA, 2002). (DSBS, DCA)
- **Stimulate development of new supermarkets/grocery stores in underserved areas in the City.** Create a Trust Fund to stimulate and encourage supermarkets to build in low-income areas and to help existing stores improve and monitor the quality of what they sell. In addition, consider licensing, siting, land-use, rezoning and tax abatement programs to encourage development of small and mid-size grocery stores in food deserts. (EDC, HPD)
- **Fund local needs assessments in low-income neighborhoods** and develop a business plan to stimulate the sale of healthy affordable food in new and existing grocery stores. (DCA, DSBS)
- **Enhance the capacity of small independent grocers/bodegas to carry nutritious, affordable food.** Offer incentives, small business loans and technical assistance to small grocers to aid in the purchasing, storage, refrigeration and display of healthy foods. In

addition, create mechanisms to link small grocers to local and regional farmers, and promote collaboration for joint bulk purchases of fresh produce to obtain lower prices. (DSBS, DOHMH)

- **Foster the creation of year-round public markets** where independent vendors may rent a booth in which to sell fresh produce and quality pre-made meals/food. City funds could be provided to support outreach, start-up and technical assistance costs. Public markets could be established in enclosed spaces that may be available in NYCHA and other public buildings/areas in the community. (DSBS, NYCHA, DOHMH)

### **Increase Consumer Demand for Nutritious Food**

- **Expand public education in underserved communities** to foster demand for healthy, affordable food and help consumers make healthy food choices by increasing daily consumption of fruits and vegetables, as well as healthier meals and packaged frozen food, and inform consumers about where to access good, nutritious food in their neighborhoods. (DOHMH)
- **Develop initiatives that subsidize food purchases and reduce the price of nutritious food for low income New Yorkers**, including price adjustments, food discounts, coupons, and expanding the DOHMH “Health Bucks Program,” among others.

### **Maximize the Use of Government Food Programs**

- **Improve the nutritional value of government subsidized foods** by establishing and supporting partnerships and collaborations between the City, State and USDA nutrition assistance programs in an effort to increase the daily consumption of properly prepared and tasty fruits and vegetables in school cafeterias, after-school programs, head start and child care programs. Lift all regulatory barriers that prohibit children from taking food from the school cafeteria home. (DOE, ACS)
- **Improve the take-up rate in government food programs:** Food Stamps and WIC and improve participation of Child Care/Day Care, Head Start and After-School Programs in CAFR, and require that a free supper be provided to children in all after-school programs that are eligible for CAFR reimbursement. (HRA, DOE, NYS DOH)

### **Promote Locally-Grown Produce and Facilitate its Distribution in Food Deserts**

- **Promote the expansion of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in low-income neighborhoods.** The city could make food coops/ buying clubs more accessible by providing start-up costs to help local non-for-profits organize CSAs and a revolving loan fund for shareholders in low-income food deserts. Revolving loans would enable low-income consumers who lack the resources to participate to pay for their share in installments rather than upfront. Under the CSA model, regional farmers are partnered with community groups whose members pay an upfront fee to the farmer for the upcoming harvest. Once a week, the farmer drops-off the merchandise at a central neighborhood locations where members

(shareholders) pick-up their food. Because the program requires an upfront fee, it may not be as accessible to low-income families in the absence of revolving loans. (DSBS)

- **Support State Legislation to Make Healthy Food Available in Food Deserts**

**Support the creation of a Wholesale Farmers' Market in New York City** that would expand opportunities for farmers to sell their products directly to wholesale buyers in the city, in particular to small grocers and other food service establishments. The State Enacted Budget for FY08 allocates \$500,000 for the design phase of this project.

**Pass A05024 to facilitate transportation and distribution of fresh foods in underserved communities.** The bill would finance the transportation and distribution of New York farm grown products to schools, restaurants, schools, and other underserved food service markets. Introduced by A. Ortiz, co-sponsored by Aubertine and Zebrowski and multi-sponsored by Benedetto, John and Towns. 2/12/07.

### **Further Readings**

*Anti-Hunger Policy Platform for New York State and City 2007-2012.* NYS and NYC anti-Hunger Organizations. New York: 2005.

<http://www.foodbanknyc.org/download.cfm?DownloadFile=6AE1E3E5-3048-2A6C-8D82FE687EE33893>

Drewnowski A, Darmon N. "Food choices and diet costs: an economic analysis." *Journal of Nutrition.* 135, 4 (2005): 900-4.

Drewnowski A, Darmon N. "Replacing fats and sweets with vegetables and fruits—a question of cost." *American Journal of Public Health.* 94(9) (2004): 1555–1559.

Hunger Action Network of New York. *A Community Food Security Agenda for New York.* (New York: 2005). <http://www.hungeractionnys.org/CommunityFoodPaper.pdf>

Hunger Action Network of New York. *Growing a Healthy New York. Innovative Food Projects that End Hunger and Strengthen Communities.* (New York: 2004). <http://www.hungeractionnys.org/GrowingHealthyNY.pdf>

Kimberly Morland and others, "Neighborhood Characteristics Associated with the Location of Food Stores and Food Service Places," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 22, 1 (2002): 23–29.

Latetia Moore and Ana Diez Roux, "Association of Neighborhood Characteristics with the Location and Type of Food Stores," *American Journal of Public Health* 96, 2 (2006): 325-331.

Mari Gallagher Research & Consulting Group, *Examining the Impact of Food Deserts on Public Health in Chicago* (Chicago, 2006).

<http://www.lasallebank.com/about/pdfs/report.pdf>

Marilyn Lavin, *Supermarket access and consumer well-being: The case of Pathmark in Harlem,*” International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management 33, 5 (2005): 388-398.

Michael Porter, *The Changing Models of Inner City Grocery Retailing*, Boston: ICIC, 2002.  
<http://www.icic.org/vsm/bin/smRenderFS.php?PHPSESSID=3d9f8fc55d848836b5e8c9bc21fb036e&cerror=>

New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. *A Study on Development of New York City Wholesale Farmer’s Market* (January 2005).  
<http://www.wholesalefarmersmarketnyc.com/res/NYCWFMMFinalReport.pdf>

New York City Coalition Against Hunger. *Mapping an End to Hunger*. (New York: 2006)  
[http://www.nyccah.org/research/map\\_report.pdf](http://www.nyccah.org/research/map_report.pdf)

Rebecca Flournoy and Sarah Treuhaft, *Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: Improving Access and Opportunities Through Food Retailing*, PolicyLink Team (California: 2005).  
<http://www.policylink.org/Research/HealthyFood/>

Street Vendor Project/Urban Justice Center and the Food Vendors’ Union Local 169V, *Street Vendors Unite! Recommendations for Improving the Regulations on Street Vending in New York City*. (New York: 2006).  
[http://streetvendor.netfirms.com/public\\_html/files/PDFs/VendorsUnite.pdf](http://streetvendor.netfirms.com/public_html/files/PDFs/VendorsUnite.pdf)

The Food Bank for New York City and City Harvest. *Hunger in America 2006: The New York City and State Report*. (New York: 2006).  
<http://www.foodbanknyc.org/download.cfm?DownloadFile=294BF288-3048-2A6C-8D968589B9FE1D0B>

The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. *Eating Eat, Eating Out, Eating Well: Access to Healthy Food in North and Central Brooklyn*. 2006.  
<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/dpho/dpho-moove.shtml>

Vidhya Mohan and Diana Cassady, *Supermarket Shuttle Programs: A Feasibility Study for Supermarkets Located in Low-Income, Transit Dependent, Urban Neighborhoods in California*. Center for Advanced Studies in Nutrition and Social Marketing (Davis: 2002).  
<http://socialmarketing-nutrition.ucdavis.edu/Downloads/ShuttleReport.pdf>