



National Association of County & City Health Officials

The National Connection for Local Public Health

13-04

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Healthy Food Access

Policy

Many residents of urban and rural areas lack access to affordable healthy foods within their communities. Inadequate healthy food sources have perpetuated chronic diseases in low-income and vulnerable populations. Local health departments have developed initiatives that aim to reduce the availability of unhealthy foods in communities and increase the accessibility, affordability, and availability of healthy foods. Increasing access to healthy food and reducing the availability of unhealthy foods will require the following:

- Healthy food and beverage procurement practices.
- Food system design.
- Healthy community design.
- Local healthy food policies.

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) makes the following recommendations to enhance the accessibility, affordability, and availability of healthy foods as a means to prevent and reduce chronic diseases:

- The Department of Agriculture (USDA) should allow and expand state/local projects designed to promote healthier food and beverage purchases by beneficiaries of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) program. With its expressed authority, USDA should expand projects to evaluate innovative approaches to optimizing SNAP purchases and restrict the purchase of unhealthy foods or beverages with SNAP benefits.
- Local communities should increase community access to healthy foods by enhancing incentive programs and policies to increase access to affordable healthy food options.
- Local governments and planning agencies should integrate healthy food accessibility considerations into the community design process (land use planning, zoning, and the design of new community developments); communities should be designed to include fresh produce grocery stores, healthy corner stores, community/school/worksites gardens, food marts, and farmers' markets.
- Local governments should implement food procurement policies that discourage the consumption of sugar sweetened beverages, increase healthy vending options, and include healthy eating guidelines.

- Local health departments should collaborate with public and private programs that support small business development to promote providing incentives to retailers that promote produce and nutritious foods to SNAP beneficiaries.
- Local governments and/or financial institutions should integrate healthy food accessibility considerations into micro-loan and/or enterprise zone policies.

Justification

A growing body of research reveals a strong relationship between consumption of unhealthy food and a wide spectrum of public and individual health issues such as obesity, diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease, and social and health inequity. The lack of access to healthy food is believed to be a key factor contributing to the obesity epidemic. Healthy foods can be defined as those recommended in the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans¹ and include lower calorie foods with high nutritional value such as whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, and lean meats. Unhealthy foods are those that are calorie-dense and nutrient-poor, commonly in the form of items with high sugar or fat contents. Laws and policies promoting access to healthy food and limiting access to unhealthy food are critical tools in addressing the obesity epidemic.

The availability of retail food outlets that sell high quality, nutritious foods at affordable prices is an important factor for encouraging individuals to select a healthy diet and subsequently reduce their risk for chronic disease.^{2,3} Studies have shown that poor nutrition and overconsumption of calories and fat are linked to diabetes, hypertension, cancer, high mortality rates, and years of potential life lost.^{4,5,6,7}

Affordability

Affordability means that healthy food is priced low enough to be purchased and consumed on a regular basis. The quality of available food means that the food, particularly fresh produce, is fresh, in a good condition, and free of contamination, spoilage, blemishes, or damage.⁸ SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamps Program, is a federal government program that provides food assistance to low-income individuals and families in the United States. SNAP is one of the largest federal assistance programs in the country, giving aid to more than 45 million Americans in 2011. The program is one of the most important programs in place to prevent hunger and food insecurity in the United States.⁹ The program has also been shown to have economic benefit for the nation, increasing consumer spending in supermarkets, grocery stores, and farmers markets.

Access to Healthy Food

“Healthy food access” describes the availability and affordability of high quality, healthy food in local communities across the United States. Millions of Americans, especially people with low incomes, the elderly, people with disabilities, and other transit-dependent populations, have difficulty accessing fresh, nutritious food. Food insecurity and hunger have stubbornly persisted, even during periods of economic growth.¹⁰ Transportation policies and programs can make it easier for low-income families, the elderly, and others with mobility challenges and particular nutrition needs to access supermarkets, farmers’ markets, and other sources of affordable, healthy food.¹¹ Over 48 million U.S. residents (15.4% of the population) faced food insecurity in 2014.¹² Many of these people were obliged to pay higher prices for lower quality and less fresh food. Local governments can consider health equity in providing access to healthier options to ensure that all residents have equitable access. Local governments can prioritize transit accessibility to stores in areas that are identified as food deserts to provide for low-income and

communities of vulnerable populations. Local governments can also provide incentives or design considerations for new grocery stores to be located on public transit routes.

Availability

In addition to transportation issues, healthy food access also addresses the availability of nutritious foods in communities. Availability means that healthy food is physically present on store shelves, in vending machines, on restaurant menus, in farmers' markets, and in school and organizational food facilities. Across the United States, there are communities that are "food deserts" and "food swamps," which can contribute to the lack of healthy foods and rise of obesity. In general, "food deserts" refer to areas with few or no grocery stores that provide healthier items at lower prices than smaller corner stores. Food deserts usually have large numbers of convenience and corner stores, which tend to have a limited availability of healthy food and higher prices for healthier food.¹³ A "food swamp" is defined as "a geographic area where the overabundance of high-energy food (for example, caloric snacks sold at convenience stores) inundate[s] healthy food options."¹⁴

SNAP flexibility will allow beneficiaries to use SNAP resources to gain access to healthier food options in areas where there is inequitable access. Evaluating innovative projects and testing restrictions will demonstrate the impact of restricting unhealthy foods and beverages and will help determine whether this approach increases the promotion of healthy behaviors among SNAP beneficiaries.

Strategies for Healthy Food Access

Healthy Corner/Convenience Stores

To improve the quality and quantity of produce in small neighborhood stores, local health departments across the country have developed initiatives that aim to replace junk food with healthier choices. The initiatives focus on reducing advertising promoting unhealthy foods; increasing customers' awareness through healthy choice marketing materials, nutrition education, and cooking demonstrations; connecting store owners with distributors for produce, proper refrigeration units, and display stands; and assisting with marketing and promotion activities to let the neighborhood know about changes to the store. A group of small convenience stores could combine their purchasing power in order to lower prices from food and equipment vendors.

Local health departments can increase the capacity of store owners through leveraging resources; and engaging a variety of stakeholders and communities to create more systematic changes. With the help of local government, stores could apply for grants like the Fresh Food Financing Initiative, a program to increase the number of supermarkets and other grocery stores in underserved communities across Pennsylvania. Under this program, The Reinvestment Fund provides predevelopment grants and loans, land acquisition financing, equipment financing, capital grants for project funding gaps, and construction and permanent financing. The Reinvestment Fund also provides technical assistance and workforce services to its borrowers and grantees through this initiative, ensuring cultural and linguistic competency in these efforts.

Farmers' Markets

Local health departments could implement policies that support and promote access to fresh fruits and vegetables (e.g., farmers markets). Local health departments should engage with

community partners to identify community champions, entrepreneurs, and social enthusiasts. Local health departments should consider (1) the technology needed to redeem food assistance funds (EBT); (2) incentive programs that match the WIC and SNAP funds; (3) conducting outreach to recipients of federal benefits; and (4) partnering with local agencies that distribute WIC/SNAP/Farmer's Market Nutrition Program benefits.

Community/School/Worksite Gardens

Local governments can provide or lease vacant and private lots to make land available for community gardens. Funding for community gardens can come from private grants from foundations, nonprofit organizations, and businesses. Localities can provide grants and loans to urban farmers to invest in infrastructure development and incentives to promote access to healthy foods for low-income and/or underserved communities. Local health departments and community organizations can use the funding to purchase essential items for gardens and develop and promote nutrition programs for residents.

Healthy Vending

Local governments can provide healthy food and beverage options through healthy vending policies that would impact schools, government parks, and service agencies. Nutrition standards for foods and beverages found in vending machines can positively impact people's eating habits, help shape social norms, and influence the practices and formulations of food companies.

Healthy Food and Beverage Procurement Practices

Local health departments can encourage adoption of nutritional standards for healthy food and beverage procurements by public and private employers and service providers, especially those serving populations with poor access to healthy food choices and/or high rates of diet-related diseases. Local health departments can institute local government procurement policies in many ways to encourage access to healthy foods. Local health departments should work with school districts to review district-level school wellness policies to ensure they include nutrition guidelines that make healthy foods and beverages available during each school day.¹ Some local health departments have implemented healthy catering guidelines and prohibited the vending of sugar-sweetened beverages at government-supported functions or events. Others have encouraged hospitals and local government buildings to limit the number of vending machines containing high caloric snacks and sugar-sweetened beverages.

Zoning

Local governments, including towns, cities, and counties, have the power to control and regulate the use of land within their borders through land use planning and zoning initiatives. Zoning laws are increasingly being used to improve the food environment in communities by regulating the location and density of fast food restaurants in neighborhoods and near schools; eliminating barriers to community gardens and farmers' markets; eliminating barriers for Community Food Producers/Farmers for selling or providing whole uncut fruits or vegetables and up to a specified amount of unrefrigerated shell eggs per month if they meet specified requirements;¹⁵ and creating sign codes to eliminate excessive advertisement of unhealthy food.

Incentives

State and local governments often issue permits and licenses to regulate different types of food establishments and food vendors. The authority of a state or local government to issue a license

or permit regulating a food establishment depends on the state and local jurisdiction and the type of food establishment being regulated. Generally, some type of permit or license is required for most food establishments and food vendors, including vending machines, farmers' markets, mobile food vendors, restaurants, and corner stores. Local licensing and permitting requirements can be used to promote access to healthy food.

Financing and tax incentives can be used to increase access to healthy food through small loans and grants to corner stores to purchase refrigeration for fresh produce; financing for start-up costs for grocery stores in food deserts; funding to farmers' markets to increase the use of EBT; reductions in real estate; creation of enterprise zones; sales taxes to developers and store operators to encourage new grocery stores; and exemptions from property taxes for community gardens. State and local governments can implement elements from the Healthy Incentives Pilot, which tested whether financial incentives provided to purchase fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods can influence food purchasing and consumption behavior among SNAP recipients.^{16,17} For every dollar spent on eligible fruits and vegetables, participants receive 30 cents credited to their EBT card, effectively reducing the price of these food items and incentivizing increased purchases. Local governments can develop policies that allow retailers to use financial incentives, including price promotion, in their stores as a strategy to reduce the cost of healthy foods for SNAP recipients. SNAP recipients would pay a discounted price on items compared to what non-recipients pay.

Strengthening Local Food Systems

Local health departments can promote a more sustainable, healthier, and more equitable food system by engaging and educating key local food systems stakeholders, including policymakers, the media, and the food industry, about public health issues and solutions associated with the food system, including issues related to sustainability, nutrition, and justice. Local health departments can support establishment of food policy councils with representatives from diverse food-related sectors to examine how the local food system is operating and to develop recommendations on how to improve it.

Local health departments have the opportunity to reduce the access and availability of unhealthy foods that increases the burden of chronic disease. Local public health practitioners are conveners and brokers; they know what partners and what issues need to be at the table and they are uniquely positioned to facilitate dialogue among diverse partners. The local health department often serves as a connecting force in the community and is able to reach out to everyone. Local health departments have the credibility to speak for the community and are concerned with community health. Local health departments know their communities, have access to local data, and are aware of the ongoing problems and the dynamics to changing problems. In addition to knowing their communities, local health officials stay abreast of current literature and are able to share resources and information and suggest evidence-based strategies.

Local health officials and their community partners and stakeholders should take the lead on increasing access to fruits, vegetables, and healthy foods to protect the public's health. Strategies must remain flexible and adaptable so that each locality can respond to new scientific knowledge or changes in priority areas. None of these laws, policies, or actions stands alone; all are part of comprehensive strategies intended to protect the public from what is a leading contributor to preventable death and disease in the United States.

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Record of Action

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