

PROMOTING ACCESS TO HEALTHY, LOCAL FOOD

A Guide for Local Governments
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INTRODUCTION

Within cities, residents face stark disparities in their access to fresh, healthy produce, with low-income communities often the most affected by this limited access. Inequitable access to food perpetuates poor health outcomes among low-income populations and undermines efforts to improve public health and promote community. The increase in diet-related diseases such as diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease and some cancers have put us on a path to change modern history: many children born today will have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. In addition to nutritional and health impacts, the flow of food dollars out of the region represent a significant loss for local economies. Yet there are bright spots of innovation, where local policies promote and increase residents' access to healthy food. While there is no single solution to address this large and interconnected system of access to affordable, healthy food, there is a range policy strategies that can help develop local food capacities, enhance public health and improve urban economies.

CONNECT FARMERS TO URBAN CONSUMERS

Connecting local farmers directly to consumers in their region increases freshness, quality, and accessibility for consumers, as well as increasing profit margins for local small farmers. Starting a new farmers' market is far less complex and costly than developing permanent retail space in food desert communities. Broadening participation in local food markets re-circulates food dollars within the region, which are reinvested in local farms and job-creating businesses, rather than in national food distributors. Promoting the link between farms and city residents also helps ensure the food security of cities by supporting the viability of local farms. Cities can also help create opportunities for local farmers to sell produce wholesale, via packing hubs and contracts with public institutions, which will be covered in the regional planning section of this paper.

The United States has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of farmers' markets in recent years, from under 2,000 markets nationwide in 1994, to well over 7,000 currently, according to the USDA directory.¹ Over three million consumers shop at markets weekly, purchasing from about 30,000 small to mid-sized farms and local entrepreneurs. The USDA estimates annual spending of \$1 billion at farmers' markets. Farmers' markets vary in size from a few vendors to hundreds, and are operated by volunteers or professional management teams in urban, suburban, or rural areas. Similarly, community supported agriculture (CSA) is another farm-to-consumer model that has skyrocketed in popularity. Under CSA arrangements, "members" pay a fee for their "share" of a local farm's produce, which is then delivered or held for pickup each week during the growing season. The Robyn Van En Center (RVEC) national CSA database now includes over 1,650 CSA farms.²

SUMMARY

Within cities, there are stark disparities in resident's ability to access fresh, healthy food

City governments can use a number of strategies to reduce these disparities and increase access

Direct to consumer methods like farmers markets and community supported agriculture can bring fresh produce into underserved neighborhoods

Supporting local retail to expand their offerings can be successful as well

Transportation plays a key role in access

Programs to assist individuals in growing their own food and/or participate in urban agriculture businesses are an innovative approach to increasing access

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POLICY OPTIONS

Diversify farmers' market and CSA customers via the use of Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT) and nutrition program vouchers.

Cities should support local markets' efforts to establish and promote the use of EBT at markets or similar venues that carry fresh food. Electronic benefits are issued by each state as part of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps). According to the USDA, over 46 million people now receive SNAP benefits, and over half of these are children. The USDA has greatly expanded the technology, funding and technical assistance for the use of EBT at farmers' markets and for community supported agriculture. Many markets accept paper vouchers for nutritional programs as well. A recent study showed that markets adopting EBT technology saw sales rise almost 40% in a year.³ The USDA offers supplemental funds to provide wireless EBT equipment, service and training to farmers' markets.

- » New York City reported a 25% increase in SNAP use at farmers' markets in 2011, following the Greenmarket program to establish widespread use of EBT at markets.⁴ Greenmarket is the largest and most diverse market network in the country, managing almost 60 NYC markets, with the dual goals of promoting access to healthy food among city residents and supporting local farmers. Greenmarket was among the first network to support EBT, and has expanded its use beyond markets, to green carts and CSA farms as well.



Source: USDA.gov, CC BY-ND 2.0.

Farmer's Market near Plant City, Florida accepts SNAP benefits with an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card.

- » A key funder and supporter of EBT use at markets is Wholesome Wave, a national nonprofit dedicated to improving access to healthy food. Wholesome Wave's Double Value Coupon Program (DVCP) is an EBT purchase "matching" program available at more 300 farm-to-retail vendors in 26 states. Cities can work with local nonprofits to apply for funding via competitive grants. Two examples of DVCP funded efforts are Michigan's Double Up Bucks program, which will match the amount spent on market produce up to \$20 when using EBT, and the Philly Food Bucks program, which offers an additional \$2 for every \$5 spent by EBT.

Diversify market vendors.

Many communities use micro loan programs to support minority and immigrant farmers, benefiting the farmers and satisfying the diverse range of tastes and cultures among customers. Some cities have added cultural celebrations to recognize the unique foods available at the markets and to promote diversity in attendance.

- » The Webb City, MO market created a Market Roots event to both promote community-building and boost market attendance and participation. To recognize the diversity among farmers and market customers, including Hmong, Latino, Irish and Native American cultures, vendors displayed signs showing their countries or origin.⁵
- » The vast majority of customers at the Broad Street Farmers' Market in Providence, RI come from the neighborhood, as the market promotes specialty vendor products not available elsewhere. Notably, this neighborhood has the third highest redemption of WIC vouchers in the state.⁶
- » Crop Circle Kitchen in Boston, MA provides an excellent model for supporting inner city vendors of value-added local products. This program serves as an incubator for businesses producing local food, such as catering, bakeries, ethnic food cards, and specialty products like chocolate and popcorn. The Kitchen provides access to cold and frozen storage, processing equipment, and one-on-one mentoring, including business and legal planning.⁷ Cities could promote similar initiatives by

providing free or low cost storage space for a business incubator, or negotiating access to city food preparation facilities in their off-hours (such as evenings and weekends in school kitchens).

Promote new farmers' markets and expand customer base of existing markets.

Cities can promote a range of policies to support markets, such as offering affordable and dedicated market space on public land, keeping a share of market proceeds to cover operating expenses; providing free advertising through city sources; ensuring zoning code allows and protects markets; and offering free parking, electricity, and signage.

- » Burlington, VT provided space to open a new market in a parking lot that borders the local food cooperative. At least one-third of all markets in Vermont receive some municipal support for operations.⁸
- » Fresno, CA recently modified their zoning code to explicitly allow farmers' markets in city limits. The City is also partnering with public schools to host free markets on school grounds.
- » Minneapolis, MN facilitates the creation of "mini markets," with five or fewer vendors, by requiring a simpler, less expensive zoning process.⁹

Promote employer-based CSA programs.

Local governments can help lead the CSA movement by example through their buying power.

- » New York's City Hall launched the city's first government-sponsored CSA program in April 2011, available to participating city employees.
- » Both Rutgers and Colorado State University have CSA farms managed by students, with CSA shares easily accessible to campus employees.



Source: Franco Folini, CC BY-SA 2.0.
Fruit cart in NYC.

IMPROVE CONSUMER ACCESS TO FRESH FOOD IN URBAN AREAS

In the absence of full-service grocery stores, many city residents turn to alternative sources for fresh food. Corner stores and bodegas are often the only source of easily-accessible food in low-income communities, yet the food available is often highly-processed and unhealthy. While simply locating food within a community does, on its own, directly enhance health outcomes for neighborhood residents, it is a critical component of a comprehensive initiative to improve health, along with opportunities for physical activity and nutrition education.¹⁰

Policy Options

Establish accessible transit routes to farmers' markets and other fresh food vendors.

Farmers' markets and other fresh food outlets should be priority destinations for local bus routes and stops. Pedestrian friendly sidewalks, walkways and bike paths are also vital to connecting citizens to food markets.

- » Hartford, CT added a cross-town bus route that cuts travel time in half for low-income residents trying to reach jobs and stores, particularly a major supermarket. A survey showed ridership increased by more than 100 percent in the first year, and that a third of riders were using the line to reach a major supermarket.
- » Knoxville Area Transit, in TN, developed the highly successful Shop & Ride program in 1990, which provides shoppers who spend a minimum of \$10 at a number of participating supermarkets a free

one-way ticket on any city bus. Shoppers get their ticket validated at the store and present it to the bus driver. The city provides the bus service and bills the stores each month for the fares.

Create or improve retail opportunities for fresh foods in neighborhoods.

Recent studies have found that low-income youth and adults make as much as 60-80% of their food purchases at local corner stores, also known as bodegas.¹¹ Cities can help provide education and support for corner store bodega owners to expand their existing selection to include healthy options, which is quicker and easier than advocating for a full-scale grocery store.

- » New York City's Healthy Bodegas project has worked with over 1000 vendors, bringing healthier food options, such as fruit salad kits, to participating stores for a 6-month period. The 600 members of the national Healthy Corner Stores Network now offer fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meats, and whole grains.¹² San Francisco, CA used tobacco prevention funds to promote this effort, and other cities have helped connect corner stores to lower cost health options via the Special Supplemental Food Program, now part of the Women Infants and Children program.¹³
- » Cities can work with nonprofits and local vendors to bring fresh food directly to under-served areas. In Chicago, IL Fresh Moves transformed a Chicago Transit Authority bus, donated by the City for \$1, into a mobile produce market that travels to targeted food desert neighborhoods on a set schedule. They began with \$40,000 raised from private funders, and now have a broad funding base of foundations and investors. The USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program provides competitive grants for organizations that provide nutritious foods to communities. In Camden, NJ, the Greensgrow Program uses their grant to operate a mobile food delivery service to low-income neighborhoods.¹⁴

PASS LAND USE POLICIES TO PROMOTE GROWING LOCAL FOOD

Urban food-growing programs provide a source of fresh, healthy food for neighborhoods, and can in some cases provide job training. Broadly speaking, urban agriculture could be considered as any effort to grow, process and distribute foods by people living in urban areas, including community gardens, farms, raising animals and farmers' markets.¹⁵ In practice, there is a distinction between urban farms, where produce is grown for sale, and community gardens, where residents or community groups garden for their own consumption, and any produce sales are not for profit. For urban agriculture efforts to be viable and sustainable, cities must adopt zoning and land use policies that authorize and protect them. Supporting and promoting community gardens and urban farms help local growers access commercial opportunities and provide education and skill-building.



Source: TCDavis, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.
Mom and sons weeding in Wilmington, DE. .

Policy Options

Update zoning codes to remove restrictions on urban food production and sales.

Many communities' land use plans do not protect—or even actively restrict—food-growing activities, due to outdated zoning ordinances and lack of policy coordination. Where zoning ordinances do not explicitly allow or support “urban agriculture,” these activities may be considered illegal or extra-legal.

- » The most basic policy here is to make it legal for residents to garden in their front yards, which, surprisingly, may be illegal under some property maintenance codes. Madison, WI went one step further and passed an ordinance that makes it legal to garden in the terrace – the strip of land between the street and sidewalk – in residential areas.¹⁶

- » San Francisco, CA Mayor Ed Lee signed an ordinance, known as the “Salad Law”, rewriting the city Planning Code to allow urban agriculture in all areas of the city. The new code lifts a longstanding prohibition on selling homegrown produce without a costly business permit. The Salad Law allows for the sale or donation of fresh food and horticultural products grown in the city and for the sale of “value-added products” such as jams or pickles.
- » Chicago, IL recently adopted zoning code changes to allow land to be used for agricultural purposes, expanding allowable urban growing areas to 25,000 square feet. The new code also relaxes rules for parking and fencing, and allows farmers to use aquaponics for growing.
- » Many cities have progressive policies that support urban animal food production. In Madison, WI the city council worked closely with the Dane County Beekeepers Association to pass an ordinance that encourages bee-keeping, a key part of urban agriculture and efforts to produce locally-grown food. The new law, a model for beekeepers around the country, defines the distances for locating hives in private yards, and requires keepers to obtain a \$10 license from the city.¹⁷ In Portland, a city with a long-standing law protecting urban chicken-keeping, residents may keep up to three chickens, ducks rabbits or pygmy goats without obtaining a permit or paying fees.¹⁸ Many cities have implemented provisions specifying humane practices for raising chickens, and establishing set distances for locating chicken coops and runs.

Support community gardens.

Somewhere between 7 and 18 million Americans lack an appropriate space to garden.¹⁹ Community gardens help reduce household food costs, create green spaces in urban neighborhoods, and can improve public safety by putting vacant spaces into productive, monitored use. In a low-income neighborhood, community gardens provide outdoor space for many residents who otherwise have no access to growing their own food, including immigrant populations with agricultural backgrounds. Some cities provide financial support for community gardens; some make municipal land and access to water available at low or no cost; and others act as partners in operating community garden programs.

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- » Managed by the Seattle, WA Department of Neighborhoods and a nonprofit land trust, the P-Patch Program plans, finds sites, negotiates, sets rules, and protects gardens throughout the city. They support over 2,000 families via their 75 gardens on both public and private land, with special programs for youth, low-income and underrepresented populations. Seattle has the highest number of community gardens per capita in the US. The City Council passed a resolution in support of community gardens, recommending they be located on city properties, and setting a target of one community garden for every 2,000 households in high-density neighborhoods. In Seattle, anyone can grow food on plots of less than 4,000 square feet and sell their produce on-site or at a farmer’s market.²⁰
- » Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits can be used to purchase seeds and plants for recipients to grow their own gardens. This little-known provision, created in 1973, can support community garden efforts, and, in particular, is an excellent means of connecting urban immigrant farmers to low-cost growing opportunities. Local governments can promote this policy during SNAP screening and enrollment. Suffolk County, NY for example, passed a resolution to include a cover letter to all SNAP recipients on seed and plant purchases.²¹

- » Local governments can also facilitate the planning of perennials – Madison, WI is starting a program for residents to plant and care for fruit trees in parks²², and Seattle, WA will be home to the first urban food forest.²³

Encourage and sustain urban agriculture programs via public-private partnerships.

Urban farms operate on a larger-scale than community gardens, with the key distinction that most of the food produced at farms is intended to be sold, in some cases for profit. Urban farms typically require a business license to operate. Urban agriculture programs are a natural way to bring together city resources and community groups' expertise and community involvement. Agencies involved in land use, such as public works, planning, and parks and recreation, can identify ways to promote existing urban agriculture programs. Cities can support urban farms by making public land available (for free or at nominal cost), supporting zoning to allow for agricultural innovation, such as rooftops and vertical farms; and encouraging or authorizing urban farmers to sell produce locally.

- » Growing Power in Milwaukee, WI is a well-known model non-profit, large scale, community-based urban farm. The farm uses sustainable farming techniques, promotes job growth and green economic opportunities, provides education and training opportunities for youth, and produces food for sale and donation. The City of Milwaukee has modified specific zoning codes to permit innovative growing technologies at Growing Power, such as the Vertical Farm, which will create year-round indoor growing space.



Source: Ryan Griffis, CC BY-SA 2.0.
Will Allen, of Growing Power in Milwaukee, WI catching tilapia.

- » Red Hook Farms in Brooklyn, NY also runs a model urban agriculture program. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation worked closely with Red Hook Farms to convert a city-owned block into a vibrant farm.
- » New York City made rooftop gardening and greenhouses feasible via a significant zoning change, adding approximately 1,200 acres of private rooftop growing space in the city.²⁴

PURSUE REGIONAL FOOD POLICY AND PLANNING EFFORTS

In recent years, cities such as New York City, Vancouver, BC, Baltimore, MD, Minneapolis, MN, Seattle, WA, and Portland, OR have developed comprehensive food system plans, coordinating policies and programs across agencies in support of local food production, processing and distribution. This high-level coordination greatly benefits both the health of the community and sustainability of local food producers. According to an estimate from Maine, if every family in that state spent \$10 weekly on locally produced food, it would put \$104 million back into local economies.²⁵

Policy options

Establish a local food policy council.

Over 100 states, counties, and cities now have food policy councils that bring together policy makers, for-profit and non-profit companies, farmers, gardeners, and urban agriculture advocates to contribute their expertise to make food systems healthier, more sustainable, and more beneficial to local economy. Where regional coalitions have already formed around food planning, appropriate local government agencies should proactively seek involvement in these. New York City and Baltimore, MD have appointed food “czars” to be held accountable for coordinating the multi-agency and partnered effort required to implement these plans.

- » The Toronto, ON Food Policy Council (TFPC), originally founded as a subcommittee of the City of Toronto Department of Health, now serves as an independent advisory group to Public Health. Uniting people across multiple sectors, the TFPC develops policies and projects to support a health-focused food system. The TFPC has been critical in efforts to ensure healthy, affordable and culturally acceptable food in Toronto.²⁶
- » The New York City Council released a comprehensive blueprint for creating jobs, improving public health, and protecting the environment through a comprehensive local food system.²⁷ The plan involves expanding farmers' markets, creating city-sponsored CSA programs, encouraging local businesses to procure regional food products, revitalizing wholesale food markets and distribution centers, and pursuing legislation to allow the city to prioritize local producers to keep more food dollars in the local economy.
- » Baltimore, MD's Food Policy Task Force established the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative (BFPI) within the Office of Sustainability. This innovative BFPI has four staff (one is city-funded and three are grant-funded) to coordinate food policy efforts, monitor policy changes at the federal and state levels, leverage grant funding for local programs, and support implementation of programs across four city departments.²⁸
- » Seattle, WA's Community Food Security Coalition, commissioned by the City Council, identified preserving and protecting the infrastructure of the regional "foodshed" (likened to the concept of a "watershed") as a key priority. City agencies are charged with aligning their policies to reflect this.²⁹

During World War II, when local governments and civil society groups provided seeds and gardening resources, up to 40 percent of vegetables consumed by citizens were grown in backyard Victory Gardens. Local food production is no less critical today than in the 1940s.

CONCLUSION

There are many ways local governments can provide support for efforts to increase access to healthy, local foods. Favorable land policies open the door to sustainable urban agriculture and community gardening programs that offer communities food self-sufficiency, while empowering innovative responses to shared challenges. The potential of urban agriculture as a food source should not be underestimated: during World War II, when local governments and civil society groups provided seeds and gardening resources, up to 40 percent of vegetables consumed by citizens were grown in backyard Victory Gardens. Local food production is no less critical today than in the 1940s. In the face of health epidemics, rising food costs and shrinking food choices, supporting local food is critically important for local governments.

GETTING STARTED

1. Assess your city's local food strengths and weaknesses, focusing on neighborhood access and existing food local food producers.
2. Review and update your city's ordinances on establishing and managing farmers' markets, land use for urban agriculture, raising animals, and community gardens.
3. Convene stakeholders to discuss establishing a food policy council to assess local food access.

RESOURCES

- » Real Food, Real Choices - Connecting SNAP Recipients with Farmers' Market: http://farmersmarketcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/EBT-SNAP_Final_Web.pdf
- » Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/EBT) At Your Farmers' Market: Seven Strategies for Success: http://www.pps.org/pdf/SNAP_EBT_Book.pdf
- » Supporting Your Farmers' Market. A Guide for Municipalities: <http://nofavt.org/sites/default/files/FM-municipaloutreach.pdf>
- » Diversifying Farmers Markets: New Opportunities for Farmers, Communities and Consumers: <http://nofavt.org/sites/default/files/Kellogg%20Diversifying%20Farmers%20Market%20Report.pdf>
- » Establishing Land Use Protections for Farmers Markets : http://www.phlpnet.org/sites/phlpnet.org/files/Establishing_Land_Use_Protections_for_Farmers_Markets_FINAL_WEB_20091203.pdf
- » Getting to Grocery: Tools for Attracting Healthy Food Retail to Underserved Neighborhoods: <http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/getting-grocery>
- » Green for Greens - Finding Public Financing for Healthy Food Retail: <http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/green-greens-finding-public-financing-healthy-food-retail>
- » Seeding the City. Land Use Policies to Promote Urban Agriculture: http://changelabsolutions.org/sites/changelabsolutions.org/files/documents/Urban_Ag_SeedingTheCity_FINAL_20111021.pdf
- » Funding Opportunities for Community Gardens: <http://communitygarden.org/learn/resources/funding-opportunities.php>
- » Food Policy Councils Lessons Learned: http://foodsecurity.org/pub/Food_Policy_Councils_Report.pdf
- » Missoula Food Policy Council, Draft Resolution: http://www.foodsecurity.org/FPC/FPC%20Resolutions_CFAC.pdf

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About us

The Mayors Innovation Project is a learning network among American mayors committed to "high road" policy and governance: shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democratic government. We are a project of COWS (Center on Wisconsin Strategy). This work is generously supported by the Surdna Foundation. We can be contacted at:

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