Recipes for Change: Healthy Food in Every Community

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Healthy People, Healthy Places

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Recipes for Change: Healthy Food in Every Community

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Contents

Preface

Healthy foods are fundamental to good health and community vitality. The food system—from agricultural production and processing to transportation and marketing to grocery store sales—influences our ability to buy healthy foods and affects our society in profound ways. The food system impacts employment levels, working conditions, and the quality of air and water. This paper examines opportunities to change the food system to benefit our physical, economic, social, and environmental health. Fueled by research, innovative policies, and grassroots energy, the movement to increase access to healthy foods and to create a sustainable, equitable food system can provide a springboard for public action and local activism.

Healthy people require healthy environments—healthy neighborhoods, schools, childcare centers, workplaces, and key community institutions. All these must be structured in ways that allow everyone to obtain healthy foods easily and affordably and to incorporate physical activity into their daily routines. One organization or a single field of study, alone, cannot create healthy environments. The work demands comprehensive, coordinated efforts by advocates, researchers, and leaders from many disciplines and sectors.

As individual funders, each of us is working to expand access to healthy foods and physical activity. Through the Convergence Partnership, a collaboration of funders, we can maximize our impact by coordinating our efforts. The partnership steering committee includes The California Endowment, Kaiser Permanente, the Kresge Foundation, Nemours, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) serves as a critical technical advisor on the steering committee. In 2007, PolicyLink was selected as the program director to develop and implement a strategic plan, identify potential new members, engage with experts and advocates in the field, and seek creative ways to advance the vision of the partnership—**healthy people in healthy places**. Prevention Institute supports the partnership by providing policy research and analysis along with strategic support.

Recipes for Change: Healthy Food in Every Community was originally developed as a learning document for our partnership. The paper outlines organizational practices and public policies to expand access to healthy foods in support of healthy eating and better overall health. Now we are pleased to share the findings with the field. We hope to spur action to make healthy foods widely available, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color, and to build a healthier food system in the United States.

Prevention Institute developed this document based on key informant interviews and a scan of policy and research reports. It is part of a larger effort to identify high-impact approaches that will move us closer to our vision of **healthy people in healthy places**. Our partnership has released *Promising Strategies for Creating Healthy Eating and Active Living Environments* and *Strategies for Enhancing the Built Environment to Support Healthy Eating and Active Living*. We plan to publish a policy brief about strategies to promote physical activity among children and youth to create a lifetime of good health.

We will not act alone. We will foster partnerships among community leaders, funders, advocates, and practitioners, and we will support specific efforts to advance our goals. We are dedicated to encouraging environmental, policy, practice, and organizational changes, with core values grounded in equity and social justice. Motivated by the work underway across the country, we anticipate supporting the growing movement to create environments that facilitate healthy eating and active living.

One organization or a single field of study, alone, cannot create healthy environments. The work demands comprehensive, coordinated efforts by advocates, researchers, and leaders from many disciplines and sectors.

We appreciate the help of the many people who contributed to this policy brief. In particular, we thank the reviewers who provided constructive input in the final stages, including Andy Fisher, executive director of the Community Food Security Coalition; Mary Lee, associate director at PolicyLink; Lynn Parker; Hank Herrera, project manager for HOPE Collaborative; Kari Hamerschlag; Hannah Burton Laurison, senior associate, Economic Development for the Planning for Healthy Places project at Public Health Law & Policy; Michael Hamm, professor of Sustainable Agriculture at Michigan State University; Jim Weill, president of Food Research and Action Center (FRAC); Dottie Rosenbaum, Stacy Dean, and Zoë Neuberger of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; Margo Wootan, director of Nutrition Policy for the Center for Science in the Public Interest; and Milly Hawk Daniel, vice president for Communications at PolicyLink. A special thanks to Linda Shak, Leslie Mikkelsen, and Sana Chehimi of Prevention Institute for drafting the policy brief and ensuring broad input. Prevention Institute would also like to acknowledge Sarah Adler-McDonald, Jesse Appelman, Sam Davidson, Meredith Glaser, and Juliet Sims for their support in preparing this brief.

Sincerely,

Convergence Partnership

Executive Summary

Introduction

The availability of healthy foods—in grocery stores and restaurants, in schools and on the job, at a street-corner stand and at a Saturday morning farmers' market—is the hallmark of a thriving community that supports the health of its residents. Yet in the United States today, access to healthy foods is marked by inequities. In many communities of color and low-income neighborhoods, particularly, it can be difficult if not impossible to find fresh, high-quality fruits and vegetables and other nutritious foods. And when they are available, the quality is poor and the price is often exorbitant.[1] The cheapest, most abundant and heavily marketed foods in disadvantaged communities are the very things we know are bad for health: high-calorie, low-nutrient chips and cookies, sugar-laden sodas, high-fat fast foods. This disparity takes a toll: residents of low-income communities and people of color are more likely to suffer from type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure, compared with white people and residents of affluent communities.

To prevent chronic illnesses and improve health, healthy foods must be available and affordable everywhere people eat, drink, and buy groceries: supermarkets, corner groceries, restaurants, childcare centers, schools, hospitals, office lunch carts, and factory cafeterias.

The connections between foods and community health run much deeper than nutrition. Tremendous natural resources and economic activity are devoted to getting foods from the farm to our plates. Decisions about how we grow, transport, process, market, and sell foods ripple through society. The food system determines what crops we grow and where. It affects greenhouse gas emissions and environmental quality as well as job opportunities and working conditions.

Poverty significantly hinders access to healthy foods; it cannot be eliminated through food system changes alone. In 2009, the faltering U.S. economy—with growing unemployment, depressed wages, a severe credit crunch, home foreclosures, and the financial meltdown—has strained the budgets of all but the most affluent households. Even when the economy was strong, 10.9 percent of households in the United States were "food insecure," meaning they had difficulty meeting their food needs.[2] The numbers are certainly worse today. While the current economic crisis poses major challenges, it also provides an urgent call to action that has captured the attention of policymakers and the public.

The *Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008*—referred to throughout this brief as the *"2008 Farm Bill"*—authorized significant increases in funds for nutrition assistance for low-income people and contained important provisions that could strengthen efforts underway in states and cities to increase access to healthy foods. The $307 billion federal bill also presents clear opportunities to protect farmland and the environment, to promote healthier and sustainable agriculture, and to create markets for fresh foods. Perhaps most significantly, the farm bill—a massive piece of legislation renewed by Congress every five years—was reframed as a "food bill" and contained the seeds for bigger changes in food policy and practices in the future.

By understanding the complex system that limits access to healthy foods, health advocates can find common cause with people dedicated to equity, economic development, and environmental protection. A broad movement to make healthy foods available to everyone provides a focal point for activism that can strengthen our communities and improve the health of all Americans.

Purpose and Methods

This brief was originally developed as a background document for the Convergence Partnership. It outlines organizational practices and public policies to improve access to healthy foods in support of healthy eating and better community health. The paper is based on interviews with practitioners and advocates working on various aspects of the food system, augmented through scans of major policy and research reports.

Its key audiences are community leaders, funders, practitioners, and advocates interested in an overarching strategy to promote healthy eating and active living. The first section covers the **retail food environment**, including grocery stores, restaurants, small stores, and farmers' markets. The second section discusses **institutional environments**, such as schools, work sites, healthcare institutions, and local governments. The third section considers **federal nutrition assistance programs**, established to relieve hunger and food insecurity. These include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs. The fourth section examines **regional food systems** and agricultural production strategies to support healthy food access.

Section 1: Healthy Food Retail Environments

The presence of a neighborhood supermarket, corner stores stocking fresh fruits and vegetables, and local restaurants with healthy menu options plays a key role in determining access to healthy foods. Low-income communities and communities of color often have few businesses selling healthy foods at affordable prices.[3] Changing the retail environment is critical to making healthy foods widely available. Attracting grocery stores to underserved areas, encouraging small shopkeepers to stock healthy foods, pushing restaurants to offer healthier menus, building a sustainable customer base for farmers' markets in low-income neighborhoods—all these strategies can have health and economic benefits for the community.

STRATEGIES

Grocery Stores and Small Stores

- Invest in fresh food financing initiatives, which provide grants, low-interest loans, training, and technical assistance to improve or establish stores in underserved areas.
- Promote community engagement to support healthy food retail.
- Utilize federal resources to support healthy food retail.
- Offer retailers incentives from local government such as site assistance, streamlined development processes, and tax exemptions; balance incentives with requirements for devoting shelf space to healthy foods.
- Consider healthy food retail in general plans and land use decisions.
- Ensure that grocery stores and small stores are equipped to accept SNAP and WIC benefits.
- Provide grants or loans to allow local and regional farms to market and distribute their products to grocery stores and small store owners.

Restaurants and Street Vendors

- Collaborate with restaurants to offer healthy foods and beverages.
- Provide incentives for street vendors to sell healthy foods.

Farmers' Markets

- Designate land and other municipal resources for farmers' markets.
- Leverage federal programs, including WIC and SNAP benefits, to support farmers' markets.

Transportation Access

- Provide public transportation to connect neighborhoods to grocery stores and other food establishments.
- Collaborate with food retailers to provide transportation for customers.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

At the state and local levels, interest is growing in legislation to support small stores and in fresh food financing initiatives—innovative approaches to funding supermarkets, corner stores, and farmers' markets.

New partnerships such as the national Healthy Corner Stores Network are bringing together advocates from across the country to foster peer learning. Cities are beginning to design programs to address the gaps in transit and access to healthy foods. Advocates and policymakers are exploring ways to use transportation funds to link residents to grocery stores and other outlets, through better public transit and improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists. Another prospect may be the federal surface transportation bill, which is due for reauthorization.

Section 2: Institutions and Healthy Foods

Schools, childcare centers, hospitals, work sites, and other major community institutions serve a lot of food. They can use their influence and standing to change social norms around healthy eating and act as a bellwether for improved nutrition in the broader community. They can also use their purchasing power to create a market for healthier products. Improving nutrition standards, buying directly from farms, adopting healthy vending policies, and providing clean and free sources of water in these settings can strengthen and model healthy eating and may mitigate poor food availability and poor quality of foods in the neighborhoods surrounding these institutions.

Another consideration: supporting and encouraging breastfeeding is an essential component of nutrition promotion within institutions, given the importance of breastfeeding in the prevention of obesity in later life and to the overall health of infants. Breastfeeding accommodation can allow women employed by these community institutions to return to work without sacrificing the benefits of breast milk. Healthcare institutions in particular should ensure that new mothers—patients and employees alike—get the backing and encouragement they need to initiate and sustain breastfeeding.

STRATEGIES

Healthcare Settings

- Support successful initiation and continuation of breastfeeding.
- Encourage hospitals to purchase foods that promote health, nutrition, and the environment.

Preschool, School, and After-School Environments

- Set nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold at school that are not part of the federally reimbursable school meals program, including items sold à la carte, in vending machines, at snack bars, and at fundraisers.
- Establish farm-to-school programs to provide students with foods grown locally and regionally.

The national nutrition programs are the "fastest, most direct way to reduce hunger" and provide healthy foods and increased purchasing power to families with low incomes.

- Improve the nutritional quality of meals and snacks served in early childhood and after-school settings.

Government Institutions

- Establish nutrition standards for foods sold in vending machines on government-owned property (libraries, recreation centers, and government work sites).
- Implement laws that guarantee breastfeeding mothers in the workplace regular breaks, a private place to pump, and refrigerated storage for breast milk.
- Establish healthy food procurement policies that encourage government agencies and institutions to purchase foods that promote health, nutrition, and the environment.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

As more institutions connect their interest in serving healthy foods to other priority issues, including climate change, environmental protection, and support for the local economy, they are looking to purchase foods from local and regional suppliers. However, local supply chains often find it difficult to match the quantity, quality, service, and price of larger food distributors relying on conventional channels. Putting local distribution systems in place and making sure that farmers can sustain themselves selling fruits, vegetables, and other healthy products would help large institutions purchase foods that are good for health and for the environment.

Section 3: Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs are designed to provide "children and low-income people access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education," according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).[4] Administered by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), in cooperation with state and local agencies, these programs provide meals, food vouchers, and commodity foods. The national nutrition programs are the "fastest, most direct way to reduce hunger" and provide healthy foods and increased purchasing power to families with low incomes.[5] Over the long term, however, ensuring that essentially all families in the United States have the ability to buy and prepare healthy foods requires addressing the underlying causes of poverty.

STRATEGIES

- Improve benefits offered through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- Expand outreach and simplify application procedures to increase participation in SNAP.
- Establish incentives to encourage SNAP participants to buy healthy foods.
- Ensure Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) access at farmers' markets.[6]
- Expand access to federal child nutrition programs, including the School Breakfast, National School Lunch, Summer Food Service, and Child and Adult Care Food programs.
- Improve the nutritional quality of meals served through federal child nutrition programs.
- Maintain the quality and effectiveness of WIC.
- Leverage WIC food package changes to support greater access to healthy foods.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Local and state governments can spearhead innovations to the federal food programs and make sure that communities take full advantage of new provisions approved in the *2008 Farm Bill*. In 2010, Congress is expected to begin review of the *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004* (H.R. 3873 and S. 2507), which has been

In the United States, the retail cost of fruits and vegetables has increased nearly 40 percent since 1985, while the costs of fats and sugars have declined.

awaiting reauthorization since September 2009. This legislation includes the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and WIC. Key improvements promoted by advocates include increased meal reimbursements tied to stronger nutrition standards, expanded eligibility, and simplified enrollment and administrative procedures for participation. Another priority is updating the national standards for foods sold outside of meals.

Section 4: Regional Food Systems and Agriculture

What farms grow, how they grow it, and how it gets to the consumer affect what we eat in more ways than most people realize. By driving down the price of selected crops such as corn and soybeans, federal farm subsidies have fueled the proliferation of processed foods. In the United States, the retail cost of fruits and vegetables has increased nearly 40 percent since 1985, while the costs of fats and sugars have declined.[7] Industrialized agriculture relies heavily on synthetic pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, and nontherapeutic antibiotics in animal husbandry and must move foods long distances from farms to processing to stores. This system harms our health and our environment. Among the health consequences of our industrialized agriculture system are cancer, birth defects, neurological disorders, and antibiotic resistance.[8]

The system produces abundant cheap foods, but some people pay dearly. Many farm families struggle to earn a living. Farm workers, including many recent immigrants, migrant laborers, and approximately half a million children, are exposed to hazardous levels of pesticides[9] and dangerous working conditions. Wages are generally so low that the very people who plant and harvest our foods often cannot afford to sufficiently feed their own families. These conditions not only hurt farm workers, but also threaten the long-term sustainability of farming and the availability of healthy foods in the United States.

STRATEGIES

- Invest in processing and distribution for regional food systems.
- Support small and mid-sized farmers, particularly farmers of color and women, through grants, technical assistance, and help in marketing and distribution.
- Establish incentives and resources for growers to produce healthy products, including fruits, vegetables, and foods produced without pesticides, hormones, or antibiotics.
- Conserve agricultural land.
- Support community gardens and urban farms by providing municipal land and water, funding and technical assistance, and government oversight.
- Create local or state food policy councils to develop strategies that focus attention on the entire food system.
- Establish policies that support the health and well-being of farm workers.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

At the federal level, the *2008 Farm Bill* presents numerous opportunities to protect farmland and the environment, promote production of healthier products, create markets for fresh foods, and support new and minority farmers. We must ensure that the policies written into the law are put into place on the ground.

The viability of local and regional farming is an important focus of advocacy, bringing together people who care about health, the environment, food access, transportation, economic development, and the future of agriculture. Efficient processing and distribution

models are necessary to get locally grown foods to stores, schools, hospitals, and everywhere else food is sold or served. Local and regional land use decisions are key to preserving farmland.

Conclusion

Making healthy foods available and affordable to everyone can prevent chronic disease, spur economic development, revitalize neighborhoods, and protect our environment. Healthy foods are part of a larger system of agricultural production, processing, transportation, marketing, and sales. Decisions about every step can either diminish or expand access to healthy foods. The issues addressed in *Recipes for Change: Healthy Food in Every Community* transcend any single field or advocacy agenda. Rather, they go to the heart of environmental justice, anti-hunger advocacy, public health, agriculture, equity, regional planning, and community development. There is a tremendous opportunity, indeed an imperative, for leaders and advocates with varied yet intersecting interests to find common cause in securing the most elemental human need—food—for everyone in America, particularly low-income people and people of color, and to push for change at the local, state, and federal levels. At stake is the health of our nation.

Introduction

Few things are more fundamental to life, community, and society than food. It fulfills a biological need. It stimulates our taste buds, evoking pleasure. Food draws family and friends together and reflects cherished cultural traditions. The foods we eat are directly linked to our health as individuals and to our strength as communities.

Tremendous natural resources and economic activity are invested in getting food on our plates. The food system—from agricultural production to processing and transportation, to marketing and retail sales—has far-reaching impacts. It influences employment levels and working conditions, including the health of farm workers and the livelihood of farmers; it affects air and water quality, including greenhouse gas emissions. The food system determines what winds up in school vending machines, factory cafeterias, and neighborhood stores.[10] The availability of healthy foods influences the pulse of a community, determining where people walk, shop, and socialize.

We have an obligation to make decisions about this food system that benefit our social, economic, environmental, and physical health. Fueled by research, innovative policies, and grassroots energy, the movement to expand access to healthy foods and create a sustainable, equitable food system can provide a springboard for public action and local activism.

The ubiquity of unhealthy foods is one reason why most people in the United States eat too few fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and too much fat and sugar.[11] The link between which foods are available and what we eat is especially pronounced among children. The Institute of Medicine report, *Preventing Childhood Obesity*, identifies "the availability and affordability of healthful foods" as an important influence on children's food and beverage intake.[12]

Kelly Brownell, director of Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, calls our nation's food environment "toxic."[13] One of the nation's foremost weight-loss researchers, Brownell notes: "Unhealthy food is cheap. It is also convenient, fast, packaged attractively, and tasty … Healthy foods are more difficult to get, less convenient, and more expensive."[14]

His observation is particularly true in communities of color and lower-wealth communities. Compared with predominantly white, affluent communities, poor black and brown neighborhoods have lower-quality foods and less variety; when healthy foods are available, they often cost more.[15] These disparities exact an enormous toll. Residents of low-income communities and communities of color are more likely to suffer from type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure than white people and those living in wealthier communities.

To promote better health, the food environment must change so that "the healthy choice is the default choice," advises Brownell.[16] A key way to accomplish this is to make healthy, high-quality, culturally appropriate options available and affordable wherever people reach for food and drinks—in supermarkets, corner stores, restaurants, childcare centers, schools, after-school programs, healthcare facilities, and workplaces.

But these settings represent only the tail end of the food system, and expanding access to healthy foods requires change all along the way. Food production in the United States often runs counter to public health goals for healthy eating. For example, while prices for fruits and vegetables have gone up, the prices of certain grains and corn-based sweeteners—the essential ingredients of high-calorie snacks and drinks—have declined. This is why, as Brownell notes, chips, candy, and fast foods are so cheap.

The USDA Economic Research Service estimates that the United States would need to increase fruit and vegetable

"Unhealthy food is cheap. It is also convenient, fast, packaged attractively, and tasty…Healthy foods are more difficult to get, less convenient, and more expensive."

production by approximately 13 million acres to grow enough for everyone to meet the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, issued by the USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services. Yet 86 percent of land now used for fruits and vegetables is under threat of development. In response to this finding, Michael Hamm, the C. S. Mott professor of Sustainable Agriculture at Michigan State University, emphasizes the importance of linking agricultural production to public health goals so we can "begin to target both quality and quantity of consumption."[17]

The food system has health consequences beyond nutrition.[18] Pesticide spraying, air pollution from Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), and diesel exhaust from trucking food an average of 1,500 miles are linked to asthma; livestock production and diesel transport also are associated with climate change.[19] Agricultural chemicals are linked to cancer and birth defects.[20] A precarious agricultural economy has contributed at times to high rates of depression and suicide among farmers and ranchers.[21] Wages for agricultural workers are so low that the people who grow our foods often struggle to feed their own children.

While broad changes in the food system would make it easier for poor people to obtain fresh, nutritious foods, poverty—ultimately the biggest barrier to healthy food access—cannot be eliminated through food system changes alone. In 2009, the faltering U.S. economy—with growing unemployment, depressed wages, a severe credit crunch, and a record number of home foreclosures—has strained the budgets of all but the most privileged households. Because food is one of the most elastic family expenses, competing with fixed costs such as rent or mortgage payments, utilities, childcare, and transportation, many people will find it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to buy healthy, nutritious foods. Even before the recession, in 2006, 10.9 percent of households in the United States were "food insecure," meaning they struggled to meet their food needs due to lack of access, availability, or affordability.[22] This number will certainly increase. While the current economic crisis poses major challenges, it also provides an urgent call to action that has captured the attention of policymakers and the public.

The Obama administration has brought increased attention to the issue of healthy food access. Extensive media coverage of the White House organic garden and Michelle Obama's focus on healthy eating has raised public awareness about the importance of making fresh, nutritious foods available in all communities. President Obama has created a working group on food safety. In his March 14, 2009, radio address he said, "No parent should have to worry that their child is going to get sick from their lunch."

Making healthy foods available to everyone will require collaboration among government agencies, influential institutions, and communities. Food cuts across many issues and interests, including agriculture, economic development, land use, transportation, housing, public health, and the natural environment. The movement to increase community access to healthy foods presents an opportunity to link nutritional, environmental, social, and economic concerns while addressing the basic inequities in how foods are produced, distributed, and sold.

Purpose and Methods

This issue brief presents organizational practices and public policies to improve access to healthy foods in support of healthy eating and better overall health. It reflects diverse perspectives of practitioners and advocates working on various aspects of the food system. It was developed as background for the Convergence Partnership. Experienced practitioners and advocates were interviewed to capture the breadth of strategies, policies, and political opportunities to create healthy food environments, with special attention paid to low-income communities and communities of color. This information was augmented through scans of major policy and research reports.

The key audiences for this brief are community leaders, funders, practitioners, and advocates interested in an overarching strategy to promote healthy eating and active living. It is also intended for readers who are deeply focused on one aspect of improving access to healthy foods and who would benefit from seeing the broad array of approaches and their impact.

The first section covers the **retail food environment**, including grocery stores, restaurants, small stores, and farmers' markets. The second section discusses **institutional environments**, such as schools, work sites, healthcare institutions, and local governments. The third section looks at **federal food and nutrition assistance programs**, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP); and the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs. The fourth section examines **regional food systems** and agricultural production strategies to support healthy food access. Although each section presents promising programs and policies, all four broad areas must ultimately be addressed to make healthy foods available and accessible to everyone. Further, while we focus on access, health research and practice suggest that education about nutrition, health, meal planning, and food preparation can encourage more people to choose healthy foods.

DEFINITION OF HEALTHY FOODS

Our definition of "healthy foods" is based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the USDA My Food Guide Pyramid, and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Policy Statement on Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk,[23] which recommends exclusive breastfeeding as ideal nutrition for the first six months of life. Healthy foods are high in naturally occurring nutrients (vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients) and fiber and are low in saturated fat, added sugars, and sodium. In keeping with concerns raised by many nutritionists and health advocates, we have included an additional criterion: healthy foods are minimally processed, prepared with whole food ingredients—fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, low-fat dairy, eggs, poultry, and lean meats. This paper also maintains that healthy foods are produced by sustainable methods that protect the environment and human health. Such methods include farming without pesticides, hormones, and antibiotics, and providing living wages and safe working conditions for farmers, ranchers, and agricultural and food industry workers.

SECTION 1

Healthy Food Retail Environments

The food retail environment of a neighborhood—the presence of grocery stores, small markets, street vendors, local restaurants, and farmers' markets—plays a key role in determining access to healthy foods. Low-income people and people of color, in particular, face well-documented challenges to buying fresh fruits and vegetables and other nutritious foods: either they're not available in the neighborhood or the quality is poor and the price is often exorbitant.[24] Research suggests that the scarcity of healthy foods makes it more difficult for residents of low-income neighborhoods to follow a good diet, compared with people in wealthier communities.[25]

Several studies in the United States have shown an association between proximity to supermarkets and healthier eating.[26] In the United Kingdom, researchers found that 75 percent of people with the poorest diets doubled their fruit and vegetable consumption after a large-chain supermarket opened in their community.[27] A 2008 California study found that the higher the ratio of fast-food outlets to grocery stores in a neighborhood, the more likely residents are to suffer from obesity and diabetes.[28]

Many residents of low-income communities and communities of color do not live within walking distance of a supermarket and must travel farther than higher-income residents to buy groceries.[29] Surveys of food stamp participants suggest that low-income households are six to seven times less likely to own a car, yet more likely to need one to buy food.[30] Safety concerns also limit access to healthy foods. In a national survey, twice as many low-income people as moderate-income people said they worry about safety in their neighborhoods.[31] When residents feel threatened on their own streets, they are more likely to shop outside the community.[32] In financially strapped households, transportation expenses cut into food expenditures, and some parents face the added challenge of having to maneuver children and grocery bags on the bus.

Healthier diets are more expensive than high-fat, high-calorie, low-nutrient diets,[33] and price can influence what people buy and eat. A 2005 study found that higher fruit and vegetable prices were associated with increases in the BMI (body mass index) among elementary school children.[34]

Public policy and environmental change efforts can help expand healthy food retail in communities and forge connections between local shops and regional agriculture. The availability of healthy foods in local stores not only fosters better eating habits, but also strengthens the economy and social fabric of neighborhoods.[35] Grocery stores, along with other essential services such as banks and pharmacies, form the backbone of livable communities. As one food retail expert observes, "Healthy food retail is about health and access to food, but also creates healthy communities. [Healthy retail establishments] are a powerful symbol [that] we live in a healthy, thriving community."

While this section focuses on ways to improve retail offerings, particularly in communities where healthy foods are scarce, the success of these efforts depends in large part on broadening food access through the other overarching strategies highlighted in this report: serving healthier foods at key community institutions, expanding and improving federal nutrition programs, and supporting a sustainable food system.

Strategies and Policies to Expand Healthy Food Access At Grocery Stores and Small Stores

Grocery stores are a primary source of foods for most families. Fewer grocers mean less access to fresh, high-quality, affordable foods. Attracting large supermarkets and mid-sized grocery stores to underserved neighborhoods can not only increase access to healthy foods, but also bring new jobs and stimulate economic development.[36] Cities and states are beginning to explore financing mechanisms for such stores, among other opportunities.

Small neighborhood stores, including "mom and pop" shops and corner liquor stores, also serve as a regular source of foods, particularly in neighborhoods without a supermarket. Improving the quality, price, and selection of healthy foods (and decreasing the availability of unhealthy items) in these stores builds on a neighborhood's retail infrastructure. Because they often lack the space, staff expertise, or equipment to carry fresh produce or handle perishable foods, changing the stock of small stores requires a strong commitment from owners. Public policy and programs can provide incentives and valuable assistance.

Developing and improving grocery stores requires significant time, money, and government support. As more people recognize the importance of healthy food retail to the well-being of a community, investments can provide opportunities to link new partners, including advocates working in economic development, community revitalization, violence and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), transportation, and health. It is important to note that, ultimately, making healthier foods available in a community will be ineffective as a singular strategy if residents cannot afford to buy them. The following retail strategies go hand in hand with efforts to increase food purchasing power, some of which are outlined in "Section 3: Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs."

INVEST IN FRESH FOOD FINANCING INITIATIVES FOR GROCERY STORES AND SMALL STORES

Government investment can provide financing for supermarkets, grocery stores, and other healthy food retailers that plan to operate in underserved communities. The first statewide policy, passed in Pennsylvania in 2004, committed $21.9 million in grants and loans. As of December 2008, the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative had provided $38.9 million in grants and loans for healthy retail projects, resulting in the creation of 50 stores that offer fresh foods; 3,723 jobs; and 1.2 million square feet of floor space.[37]

The Pennsylvania experience has led to growing interest in fresh food financing among advocates from across the country. In 2007, advocates fought to pass a similar bill in California, which would have encouraged retail innovation (supermarkets, grocery stores, farmers' markets, and mobile markets) in underserved areas of the state. The bill did not pass due to a lack of state funds. Fresh food financing initiatives are beginning in other parts of the country, including New York State, Illiniois, Louisiana, and Detroit.[38]

Growing interest has also led to consideration of federal legislation. A resolution in support of a national fresh food financing effort was introduced in the House in December 2009 with bipartisan support. President Obama proposed $345 million for a Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) to dramatically improve access to healthy foods in underserved communities across the country. (HFFI is also one of the four pillars of The First Lady's Let's Move initiative to reduce childhood obesity.) The HFFI combines one-time loan and grant financing to leverage private investment with public funds. HFFI is modeled after the Pennsylvania program. Legislation

"Healthy food retail is about health and access to food, but also creates healthy communities. [Healthy retail establishments] are a powerful symbol [that] we live in a healthy, thriving community."

similar to the President's proposal is expected to be introduced in the Senate and the House in Spring of 2010.

Fresh food financing can also support small stores in low-income neighborhoods to carry produce and other nutritious foods. Such initiatives can train owners in how to purchase, display, and market perishable products[39] and assist them with pushing distributors and wholesalers to offer healthier products at realistic prices.

PROMOTE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO SUPPORT HEALTHY FOOD RETAIL

Some communities have found that grassroots action is the most effective way to improve food options. Residents and community-based organizations in Hartford, Connecticut; South Los Angeles, California; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and other communities are pushing retailers, large and small, to stock and promote healthier products. These efforts serve as a model for national and corporate advocacy to promote changes in product mix, store design, and advertising.

Community food enterprises, in which residents (or a neighborhood organization) own property and lease it to a retail operator, empower communities to make sure that a grocery store remains and serves local needs. Residents of the Northside neighborhood of Kalamazoo, Michigan, a predominantly low-income community without a full-service grocery store, took this approach. In partnership with the Northside Association for Community Development (NACD), they secured $2.7 million, including $1 million from the state and a $1 million loan from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). After eight years, in November 2003, a 26,000-square-foot, full-service grocery store—owned by NACD and operated by Felpausch (a Michigan-based chain)—opened its doors to the community.[40] In May 2009, the chain closed the store, but the community association remains committed to opening another grocery at the location.

UTILIZE FEDERAL RESOURCES TO SUPPORT FOOD RETAIL

Federal tax credits can stimulate investing in supermarkets by rewarding companies that invest in distressed communities. Advocates of tax credits say they make development attractive in neighborhoods that developers perceive might not guarantee investors sufficient returns. One of the most common federal tax credits used to support healthy food retail is the New Markets Tax Credit. Enacted by Congress in 2000, this program makes $15 billion available to increase investment in low-income communities. Typically, nonprofit and for-profit developers create partnerships that use the tax credits for community and economic development projects.[41] In Minneapolis, New Market Tax Credits were used to finance the city's public market. Investors were also able to leverage Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits because plans for the market involved rehabilitating the city's historic Sears building. The Midtown Global Market, opened in May 2006, serves as a source of fresh produce, meat, poultry and fish, and fresh breads for Minneapolis residents.

Federal designations such as Enterprise/Empowerment Zones and Renewal Community Zones also can improve retail in underserved areas. These designations, placed on economically depressed communities, offer loans and grants for development and business improvements, which can include healthy food retail establishments.[42] A similar strategy at the state level is the establishment of commercial rehabilitation districts. In August 2008, Michigan passed a law allowing property tax abatements in underserved areas for food stores that carry fresh meat and poultry, fruits and vegetables, and dairy.[43]

OFFER RETAILERS INCENTIVES FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local political leadership, the active involvement of key decision makers, and responsive action by city planning and economic development agencies can bolster store development. Public agencies that aggressively recruit

Estimates show that 48 cents of every food dollar spent in the United States go to the restaurant industry.

stores and provide financial and regulatory incentives and site-related assistance can make potential locations more attractive investments. The following strategies can also stimulate grocery store development and improvements:

Provide retailers with land. In a public/private partnership in Rochester, New York, the city provided $6 million and four acres to develop a shopping center. The deal attracted the Tops Supermarket chain to a neighborhood that previously had no grocery store. Cities can also "bundle land," promoting several sites to a single supermarket chain to entice it to move into both affluent and low-income neighborhoods.

Expedite the development process. Cities can speed up grocery store development by simplifying applications and permitting procedures. For example, Boston, Baltimore, and Chicago have incorporated practices that facilitate grocery store development into their development strategies. A Chicago ordinance, passed in 2005 to combat blight, limits the ability of supermarkets and drugstores to use the restrictive land use covenants that are an industry standard. By restricting the use of vacated property for years, even after the land is sold, these covenants make it difficult for a new supermarket to move in after an old one moves out. Limiting restrictive covenants along with other strategies to "fast-track" healthy food retail development can entice businesses to invest in underserved neighborhoods.

Provide tax exemptions. Tax exemptions can attract businesses to distressed communities. In Washington, DC, the *Supermarket Tax Exemption Act* gives supermarket developers in underserved neighborhoods a property tax exemption for 10 years and an exemption on sales tax for the equipment and materials used for store construction or rehabilitation.[44]

Offer additional business incentives. Loans, training, special permitting provisions, and local advertising can be attractive incentives, especially for small businesses. The Good Neighbor Food Project in the Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood of San Francisco gives businesses, including restaurants, markets, and corner stores, free energy efficiency retrofits, co-operative buying opportunities, in-store promotions, and other inducements to carry healthy products. The initiative involved collaboration among the San Francisco health department, the redevelopment agency, and the small business development center, as well as a community organization, Literacy for Environmental Justice.

Balance incentives with requirements for healthy foods. Local governments can require businesses to take steps to promote community health, for example, by using Conditional Use Permits (CUPs). These allow businesses to operate only if they meet specific conditions. CUPs are most commonly given to businesses perceived to have a negative impact on a neighborhood, such as liquor stores.[45] To broaden community access to healthy foods, particularly in neighborhoods where corner stores are the only source of food retail, local governments can require small shops and liquor stores to devote a percentage of shelf space to fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods.

CONSIDER HEALTHY FOOD RETAIL IN GENERAL PLANS AND LAND USE DECISIONS

A general plan, also known as a comprehensive plan, guides local development by addressing such issues as land use, noise, housing, open space, safety, and conservation. According to Public Health Law & Policy, general plans are the "constitution" of a community, legally requiring all future land use decisions to meet the goals and principles of the plan.[46] Communities can use general plans to establish priorities that promote access to healthy foods and better community health. For example, general plans can emphasize the importance of healthy food retail and require mixed-use development or full services, including grocery stores, in all neighborhoods.

General plans can also protect farmland, ensure transportation to stores, promote farmers' markets, and limit fast-food outlets and liquor stores.[47]

Land use and zoning codes can also be used to expand access to healthy foods. San Francisco, for example, created a special use district to encourage supermarket development when rezoning threatened food retail outlets.[48] Zoning "determines what is permissible to build on a given parcel of land," according to the Public Health Law & Policy *General Plans and Zoning* toolkit, which provides advocates with an introductory understanding of how land use decisions are made.[49] While codes do not usually focus directly on food retail, they often include regulations, such as square footage restrictions, which discourage grocery stores.[50] Codes can be written to make allowances for retail establishments or to support certain uses such as food stores.

ENSURE THAT GROCERY STORES AND SMALL STORES ARE EQUIPPED TO ACCEPT SNAP AND WIC BENEFITS

Storeowners can gain from training and help to become certified to accept SNAP and WIC benefits. Making sure that small grocers accept these benefits serves two purposes: it provides convenience for low-income customers, and it brings in revenue to local shops. In addition to helping stores become certified, owners should be urged to stock high-quality produce and other healthy foods.

PROVIDE GRANTS OR LOANS TO IMPROVE DISTRIBUTION OF LOCAL FOODS TO STORES

Resources that help local and regional farms sell their products to small storeowners can increase neighborhood access to healthy foods while strengthening local food systems. The *2008 Farm Bill* includes two useful provisions on this front.[51] The Rural Business and Industries Loan and Loan Guarantee program provides financing for rural groups engaged in local or regional marketing, processing, and distribution. The Healthy Urban Food Enterprise Development Center, to be established within the USDA Cooperatives State, Education, Extension, and Research Service, will provide outreach, technical assistance, and feasibility grants to enterprises that market healthy and locally produced foods to underserved neighborhoods.[52]

Strategies and Policies to Improve Foods Offered by Restaurants and Street Vendors

Estimates show that 48 cents of every food dollar spent in the United States go to the restaurant industry.[53] With Americans consuming so many meals outside the home, offering healthier choices, especially on children's menus, and keeping the prices of healthy items affordable can encourage better eating.

COLLABORATE WITH RESTAURANTS TO OFFER HEALTHY FOODS AND BEVERAGES

Government assistance and incentives can entice restaurants to improve their menus. For instance, as part of the Shape Up Somerville initiative, the Somerville Massachusetts Health Department worked with 20 restaurants to offer and promote low-fat dairy products, smaller portion sizes, fruit and vegetable side dishes, and other healthy options. Participating restaurants are deemed "Shape Up Approved" and receive window stickers to advertise this recognition.[54] In California, the Monterey County Health Department, a recipient of the CDC's Steps to a HealthierUS grant, provides technical assistance to local taquerias (restaurants specializing in Mexican foods) to promote healthy menu offerings

and to modify dishes to make them healthier. For some restaurants, "healthy" is more than a matter of nutrition. Rudy's Tacos in Waterloo, Iowa, purchases locally and sustainably produced chickens and meats and—unlike many high-end restaurants—works to keep organic options economically priced.[55]

PROVIDE INCENTIVES FOR STREET VENDORS TO OFFER HEALTHY FOOD ITEMS

Street vendors selling groceries and lightly prepared foods thrive in some neighborhoods. Government programs can build on these indigenous enterprises and support the safe preparation and distribution of authentic traditional foods. For instance, in the MacArthur Park Sidewalk Vending District Program in Los Angeles, the health department agreed to grant legal permits for the operation of healthy tamale carts, with the stipulation that bones and lard be omitted from the tamales.[56] The Green Cart Initiative in New York City calls for 1,000 new permits for carts selling fresh fruits and vegetables; vendors must operate in designated neighborhoods where produce consumption is low.[57] The Kansas City, Missouri, Parks and Recreation Department created nutrition standards and designates certain vendors as "Healthier" and "Healthiest." The "Healthier" designation means at least 50 percent of the foods and drinks sold meet certain nutrition guidelines; for "Healthiest," it's 75 percent. Participating vendors receive a discounted permit and need only one permit to operate in multiple parks.[58]

Strategies and Policies to Expand Access to Farmers' Markets

When low-income people have access to farmers' markets, they eat more fruits and vegetables.[59] Although such markets have struggled to survive in low-income neighborhoods where the customer base may be limited, they have been more successful on the edges of low-income neighborhoods or in places that draw people of all incomes. Several features can attract low-income consumers: familiar products at good prices, community ownership, transportation, flexible hours, employing sales staff from the neighborhood, and discounts. Local, state, and federal governments can help cultivate and sustain farmers' markets, particularly in underserved communities.

DESIGNATE LAND AND OTHER MUNICIPAL RESOURCES FOR FARMERS' MARKETS

Local governments play the most direct role in supporting farmers' markets. Often, they can start by eliminating zoning regulations that inadvertently prevent markets from opening.[60] A local government can designate land for a market, help prepare the site, keep parking and traffic flowing smoothly, facilitate cleanup, sponsor advertising, and provide prominent signs.[61] In colder climates, local governments can help farmers develop environmentally sound strategies to extend the growing season, for example, hoop houses, which convert solar energy into heat. Such strategies allow markets to operate longer and sell a broader selection of crops.[62]

State governments can provide money to promote and operate farmers' markets. For instance, a policy in North Dakota allows the Department of Agriculture to administer grants to promote the creation of new markets.[63] At the federal level, the *2008 Farm Bill* expands the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, which provides funds for states to support projects in research, marketing, and production of fruits and vegetables.[64] These funds can be used to promote farmers' markets.

LEVERAGE FEDERAL PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT FARMERS' MARKETS

The federal government oversees programs and funding streams that aid farmers' markets.[65] The Special

Hartford, Connecticut, designed a bus route to link low-income residents to jobs, shopping, and medical services. After a year, ridership doubled, and one-third of the riders cited grocery shopping as their primary reason for taking the bus.

Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) provide direct federal support, for qualifying individuals, in the form of special coupons to be used specifically at farmers' markets. In addition, new WIC regulations give state agencies the option to authorize farmers to accept WIC vouchers for fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets.[66] WIC state agencies had until October 2009 to implement changes to the new food package.

The federal farm bill also provides resources for farmers' markets. The *2002 Farm Bill* authorized the creation of the Farmers' Market Promotion Program (FMPP) to provide federal grants to establish, expand, and promote local farmers' markets as well as roadside stands, community supported agriculture (CSA), and other forms of direct farmer-to-consumer markets. The *2008 Farm Bill* reauthorized the FMPP, allocating $33 million over five years, 10 percent of which is required to fund implementation of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) systems for SNAP.[67] These will ensure that vendors can accept SNAP, thus allowing lower-income consumers to buy high-quality, healthy produce that they might not otherwise afford.

Strategies and Policies to Improve Transportation to and from Food Retail Destinations

People with limited income are less likely to own a car and more likely to depend on public transit. This can make it difficult to transport groceries, especially perishables, and almost impossible to save money by shopping in bulk. Improving public transit systems, which are frequently set up to help commuters get to work rather than to help families reach supermarkets,[68] can greatly increase access to healthy foods.

PROVIDE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION TO CONNECT NEIGHBORHOODS TO GROCERY STORES

Providing high-quality public transportation includes eliminating gaps in transit routes and services and ensuring seamless pedestrian routes, accessible for all mobility levels, to food outlets and other essential services. Hartford, Connecticut, designed a bus route to link low-income residents to jobs, shopping, and medical services. After a year, ridership doubled, and one-third of the riders cited grocery shopping as their primary reason for taking the bus.[69]

COLLABORATE WITH RETAIL BUSINESSES TO PROVIDE TRANSPORTATION FOR CUSTOMERS

Studies show that stores can profit from providing transportation to consumers. Some supermarkets have boosted revenues by running shuttles in low-income neighborhoods. Researchers at the University of California at Davis looked at supermarket-sponsored shuttles in selected low-income, urban areas in California and estimated that stores could generate $545,700 to $1,514,700 a year in revenues if 20 percent of households without cars used the service for weekly shopping.[70] The programs offer customers who make a minimum purchase of $25 a free ride home. In the Knoxville, Tennessee, "Shop and Ride" program, residents who spend more than $10 at a participating supermarket get a validated ticket for a free bus ride. Knoxville Area Transit created the program, and supermarkets reimburse the city for the fares.[71]

Policy Opportunities

GROCERY STORES AND SMALL STORES

At the state and local levels, there is growing interest in fresh food financing initiatives to fund supermarkets, corner stores, and farmers' markets, and in legislation to support small stores. Advocates are forging partnerships

to learn from one another how these strategies can be effectively implemented. For instance, the Healthy Corner Stores Network—an initiative headed by The Food Trust, the Community Food Security Coalition, Public Health Law & Policy, and Urbane Development—brings together advocates interested in developing strategies to help corner stores increase neighborhood access to healthy foods.[72] Several communities have been grappling with how best to work with corner stores for many years. Network participants include more than 250 people and organizations with a wide range of experience working with corner stores. Fresh food financing initiatives represent a key opportunity for converging the interests of diverse groups. Public health advocates can link efforts with community activists, local and regional farmers and food producers, economic development advocates, and others concerned with the health of communities, farming, and the public.

FARMERS' MARKETS

Farmers' markets have garnered attention from both health advocates and the general public over the past several years as they gain popularity throughout the country. Studies by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) reveal that the number of farmers' markets in the United States increased from 1,755 in 1994 to 4,685 in 2008.[73] Much of the impetus for new markets has come from the sustainable agriculture community and from advocates for small and mid-sized farmers. Both community food security advocates working to ensure that sustainable food systems provide all residents with a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet, and anti-hunger advocates working to end poverty are also exploring how to create viable markets in disadvantaged communities. While there have been some models of success, many farmers' markets in low-income communities struggle to be profitable.

One method to address market viability in disadvantaged communities is enabling EBT access, which would allow SNAP recipients to use their benefits at farmers' markets. Although several states have adopted EBT systems for SNAP users, more local, state, and federal investments in widespread EBT capabilities at farmers' markets would make it easier for SNAP participants to shop there. Additionally, as part of the 2007 WIC food package changes, state agencies have the option of authorizing farmers to accept WIC vouchers for fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets.[74] Because the federal government allows states some flexibility, advocates can work with their state agencies to ensure that this WIC provision is implemented.

TRANSPORTATION

Traditionally, transportation monies have been allocated to government agencies largely to fund roads and highways. This practice heavily favors automobile travel. But there is an opportunity to evaluate how state and federal transit dollars can help link community residents, particularly those in underserved communities, to healthy food retail establishments. Progress has been made recently in including funding for alternative forms of transportation (including public transit and sidewalks) as part of state and federal transportation programs. Yet funding for alternative forms of transportation continues to be an area of great need. While locales have begun tailoring programs to address the gap in transit and food access, advocates and policymakers should explore alternative allocation options for transportation funds. One prospect may be the federal surface transportation bill, which is currently up for reauthorization; it offers an opportunity to improve public transit as well as connections for pedestrians and bicyclists.

SECTION 2

Institutions and Healthy Foods

Schools, childcare centers, work sites, and other community institutions serve a lot of food. They can change social norms about healthy eating and inspire better nutrition in the broader community. As large purchasers, influential institutions can create a market for healthier foods. Improving nutrition standards, buying directly from farmers, adopting healthy vending policies, and providing clean and free sources of water in these settings can model healthy practices and may mitigate food deficiencies in the neighborhoods surrounding these institutions.

Growing evidence suggests that when institutions offer healthier foods, people will eat them. A series of studies by researchers at the University of Minnesota determined that increasing the variety and lowering the price of healthy foods in school and work-site cafeterias and in vending machines led to increased purchase of these items.[75] The Child and Adolescent Trial for Cardiovascular Health (CATCH)—the largest school-based health promotion study ever done in the United States—has shown that children eat less fat when cafeterias offer healthier menus.[76] A replication in El Paso, Texas, for low-income elementary schools with predominantly Latino populations demonstrated better weight outcomes among students at the schools with healthier cafeteria fare, compared with the control group.[77] Likewise, a comprehensive, school-based intervention in Philadelphia that included education for students and staff and created nutrition standards for all foods sold on campus resulted in a 50 percent reduction in the incidence of overweight among individuals in the intervention group compared to the control group, which did not receive the intervention.[78]

Creating environments that support and encourage breastfeeding is another important element of nutrition promotion, given the importance of breastfeeding in the prevention of obesity in later life and to the overall health of infants. As we discuss next, for women employed by community institutions, breastfeeding accommodation can allow them to return to work after childbirth without sacrificing the benefits of breast milk. Healthcare institutions in particular can influence infant feeding practices by supporting and encouraging new mothers—patients and employees alike—to initiate and sustain breastfeeding.

Strategies and Policies to Improve Foods in Healthcare Environments

As places of health and healing, hospitals and clinics can adopt food practices that serve as models for the community. And as large employers, hospitals and their food culture can influence not only patients and visitors but also staff.

IMPLEMENT POLICIES TO SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL INITIATION AND CONTINUATION OF BREASTFEEDING

Healthcare institutions influence food choices starting at birth. The American Academy of Pediatrics maintains that breast milk is the healthiest food for newborns and infants and may protect them from becoming overweight later in childhood.[79] Research shows that giving new mothers free formula and formula gift packs discourages them from exclusively breastfeeding their infants.[80] By discontinuing this common marketing practice, hospitals can encourage women to nurse longer and exclusively. In 2005, Massachusetts became the first state to prohibit hospitals from giving to new parents these free gift bags, provided by formula companies, under a policy adopted by the Department of Public Health. But Governor Mitt Romney asked the state Public Health Council to repeal the ban, saying women should be free to choose whether they want a gift of formula. The following year, the Council honored the governor's wish and repealed the ban.[81]

Hospitals across the country are working to promote breastfeeding by restricting their own use of free formula

from manufacturers, by helping mothers initiate breastfeeding within an hour of birth, by giving newborns breast milk exclusively unless other nourishment is medically indicated, and by providing 24-hour lactation consultation. The World Health Organization also urges hospitals to allow mothers and infants to room together and to offer lactation support to all mothers, even if their infants stay in the nursery.[82] Like all employers, hospitals can support breastfeeding among their workforce by giving nursing mothers time off and a clean, private space to express milk.

ADOPT HEALTHY FOOD PROCUREMENT POLICIES

In 2004, the American Medical Association passed a resolution recommending "healthy food options be available, at reasonable prices and easily accessible, on hospital premises."[83] Numerous healthcare facilities are changing what they serve and sell: They are removing trans fat from kitchens, adding salad bars to cafeterias, and requiring that a certain percentage of products in vending machines meet specific nutritional guidelines. Kaiser Permanente Health System has implemented the "Healthy Picks" program in several facilities throughout California, Hawaii, and Oregon. The program helps staff, patients, and visitors identify healthy choices on cafeteria menus and in vending machines by labeling them with a "Healthy Picks" symbol.[84]

As environmental concerns grow, more healthcare administrators are interested in buying local, sustainably produced foods. Many administrators see this as a way not only to protect the planet, but also to support farming methods that increase access to healthy, nutritious foods and protect human health. The California Medical Association's 2007 resolution calling on hospitals to buy more foods that promote health and prevent disease recommended that they purchase meats and dairy produced without nontherapeutic antibiotics, meats derived from non-Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO) sources such as free-range animals, foods grown on small and medium-sized local farms, and foods grown by organic methods or other techniques that emphasize renewable resources.[85] (CAFOs are industrialized farming operations that confine large numbers of livestock, such as beef cattle, hogs, or broiler hens, in an enclosed area.)

The Health Care Without Harm campaign—a global campaign of medical, environmental, and public health organizations working to promote sustainable healthcare practices—has gotten more than 200 health facilities across the country to sign its Healthy Food in Healthcare Pledge.[86] The hospitals that sign on promise to adopt food procurement practices that are ecologically sound and environmentally sustainable and that support justice and promote health.

Buying better foods is an important first step, but hospitals must also make sure they have the capacity to cook and serve healthy meals. Retrofitting kitchens and hiring and training food service staff are essential investments.

Strategies and Policies to Improve Foods in School, Early Childhood, and After-School Settings

Serving healthy meals and snacks in schools, childcare centers, and after-school programs offers two important benefits: it helps children meet their immediate nutritional needs, and it cultivates healthy habits for a lifetime. Estimates suggest that children consume 19 percent to 50 percent of their foods at school; healthier selections there can significantly improve their overall diet.[87]

Money, however, often poses a challenge to schools trying to upgrade meals. In most states, schools are paid no more than $2.57 for each free lunch they serve under the National School Lunch Program.[88] Schools without

The American Academy of Pediatrics maintains that breast milk is the healthiest food for newborns and infants and may protect them from becoming overweight later in childhood.

well-equipped kitchens and food service staff must rely on prepackaged foods. (See "Section 3: Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs" for more information about improving school meals.) Nevertheless, innovative programs and policies are changing the culture around eating in schools.

SET NUTRITION STANDARDS FOR COMPETITIVE FOODS IN SCHOOLS

Foods and drinks sold in vending machines, at snack bars, and through fundraisers—in other words, foods sold outside the federally reimbursed school lunch, breakfast, and after-school snack programs—are known as "competitive foods." Unlike school meals, competitive foods are not required to meet federal nutrition standards. Current USDA statutory authority to regulate competitive foods is limited.[89]

The *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004* required all 14,383 school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program to adopt local school wellness policies that set standards for **all** foods in the schools, and to do so by July 2006. Consequently, more schools are implementing guidelines for competitive foods that call for healthier items. As of February 2007, 27 states had adopted legislation on competitive school foods and beverages that are more restrictive than USDA standards, according to the Institute of Medicine report *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools*.[90] This report urges schools to establish standards for the nutritional value of competitive foods (e.g., amount of fat, sugar, and calories) and to limit products with caffeine and nonnutritive sweeteners. It also urges schools to set rules about when competitive foods may be sold during the day and how they may be used at fundraisers and as student rewards.[91] In January 2008, the West Virginia Board of Education adopted many of the recommendations, issuing the nation's strongest state regulations on competitive foods. The Massachusetts legislature considered a similar bill in 2008. Although it died in committee, state Representative Robert M. Koczera planned to reintroduce the bill in 2009.

At the federal level, the bipartisan *Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act*, S. 771 and H.R. 1363, was introduced in March 2007 but was not considered. The bill was reintroduced on March 6, 2009 by Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey (D-CA). The policy would require the USDA to update nutrition standards for foods sold outside of meals (à la carte, in vending machines, and at school stores) to bring them in line with current science and apply them to the whole campus for the entire school day.

ESTABLISH FARM-TO-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

The farm-to-school movement of securing locally grown fruits and vegetables to serve in school cafeterias is gaining popularity as more people recognize the importance of feeding children fresh, high-quality fruits and vegetables. The Center for Food & Justice estimated in 2006 that there were more than 950 farm-to-school programs nationwide.[92] Many of these programs were at the school-district level; 17 programs were in place at the state level, many of them supported by legislation. More states are following suit, and in 2008, 13 states introduced farm-to-school bills.[93] While such legislation is not necessary for states to operate farm-to-school programs, a bill can garner support from legislators and help ensure that programs have the resources needed to continue. States use a range of policies to support farm-to-school initiatives:

- Requiring state departments (notably education and agriculture) to work together to implement programs (New York, Connecticut, New Mexico, and Oklahoma).
- Hiring state coordinators who help farmers sell to schools and help schools buy local products (Washington).
- Providing mini-grants to schools and farmers for education, processing equipment, product costs, and other expenses (Vermont).

In New York City, low-fat milk, water, and six-ounce servings of 100 percent juice are the only beverages allowed at public and private day-care programs for children under age six.

- Allowing preferential purchasing of local products. Some states permit schools to pay a premium for foods produced in the state (5 percent above the lowest bid in Maryland, 10 percent in Massachusetts).[94]
- Embedding farm-to-school staff within the state department of agriculture and/or the department of education (Oregon).

The *2008 Farm Bill* makes it easier than ever for schools to buy local products. The law establishes a clear **local** preference for such purchases and allows schools to specify "local" as a bid requirement for foods bought with federal funds.[95] Previously, schools were caught between the *2002 Farm Bill*, which allowed them to use geographic preferences in selecting fruit and vegetable suppliers, and USDA regulations, which prohibited such preferences.

As a complement to farm-to-school initiatives, many schools are starting gardening programs to help children understand where their foods come from. Gardening can inspire young children to eat fresh foods, help cultivate lifelong healthy habits, and teach them about the natural world. School gardens provide experiential learning that can be integrated with math, science, ecology, and other academic subjects. The Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit as well as the Edible Schoolyard programs at Martin Luther King, Jr., Middle School in Berkeley, California, and at Samuel J. Green Charter School in New Orleans are teaching city children to grow, harvest, and prepare nutritious seasonal produce.

ESTABLISH NUTRITION STANDARDS FOR MEALS AND SNACKS SERVED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND AFTER-SCHOOL SETTINGS

The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, which licenses day-care facilities, amended its health code to eliminate sweetened beverages. Low-fat milk, water, and six-ounce servings of 100 percent juice are the only beverages allowed at public and private day-care programs, which serve children under age six.[96] Several cities, including Los Angeles and Baldwin Park, California, have enacted ordinances that establish nutrition standards for meals, snacks, and vending machine selections at city-sponsored programs and facilities serving children and youth.

The State of Delaware adopted childcare nutrition policies, effective July 1, 2008, that are thought to be the strongest in the nation. The policies cover childcare facilities for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children. In addition to beverage rules similar to those in New York City, Delaware requires a whole-grain serving to be offered every day. Pre-fried foods such as chicken nuggets are not recommended and may be offered only if they contain less than 35 percent total fat; and processed meats such as baloney and hot dogs, and high-sugar baked goods including donuts and cookies may be served no more than once in a two-week period and are discouraged altogether.[97]

These standards build upon meal requirements established by the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). The Delaware Department of Education received approval from the USDA to institute stronger state standards for all organizations receiving meal reimbursements under the guidelines of CACFP; the Department of Education then extended these requirements to all licensed care providers in the state. Like Delaware, all states implementing CACFP can strengthen their standards, with approval from the USDA, to improve the nutritional quality of the foods served in their programs.

New York City and Delaware have invested in training for day-care and childcare staff, which officials believe is critical to the success of these initiatives. Some early childhood advocates say that healthy eating and physical activity could become standard in childcare programs if training in best practices was required for facility

licensing, early childhood certification, and degrees in early childhood education.

Strategies to Establish Nutrition Policies for Government Institutions

As a major employer and a standard setter, government must clean up its own house: If healthy eating became the norm in local, state, and federal government offices and institutions, huge numbers of workers would benefit and other employers would take note. For the most part, government agencies have been slow to change, but some promising initiatives are emerging.

HEALTHY VENDING POLICIES

In California, at least a half-dozen cities and counties have adopted policies that support healthy vending machine standards in government-owned and -operated facilities. Chula Vista has one of the most stringent, requiring that vending machines in city facilities sell only healthy foods and drinks.

LACTATION ACCOMMODATION LAWS

Forty-three states have laws allowing women to breast-feed anywhere in public or private, and 23 of those states explicitly address the workplace.[98] The strongest laws (e.g., those in Illinois, Minnesota, Tennessee, and California) require work sites to permit reasonable breaks, unless they would disrupt operations, and to try to provide a place to pump. Less stringent policies say employers "may" provide breaks to pump or may not prohibit employees from using their regular breaks to express milk.[99]

HEALTHY FOOD PROCUREMENT POLICIES

Policies in Colorado and Kentucky maintain that for all state institutions, when price and quality are equal, local products shall be purchased.[100] In San Francisco, the Environmental Commission, the Board of Supervisors, and the mayor have endorsed resolutions urging city agencies, including hospitals, jails, and schools, to buy more local and sustainably produced foods.[101] The Marin County, California, plan calls for using locally sourced or organic foods in county services, including in cafeterias and jails, and at county-sponsored events.[102] A policy in Woodbury County, Iowa, requires county departments that serve foods in their usual course of business to purchase locally produced organic foods through the county's food service contractor. When locally grown organic products are unavailable, the policy further supports the local economy by giving preference to locally grown non-organic foods over foods grown and produced outside the region.[103]

Policy Opportunities

As more institutions connect their interest in serving healthy foods to other priority issues—climate change, environmental protection, and support for local jobs and the local economy—they are looking to buy foods produced in the community or the region. Local supply chains often find it difficult, nevertheless, to match the quantity, quality, service, and price of larger conventional distributors. Putting local distribution systems in place and making sure that farmers can make a viable living growing fruits, vegetables, and other healthy products would help schools, hospitals, and other key institutions to purchase foods that are good for health and for the environment.

HEALTHCARE

The Health Care Without Harm campaign has been building momentum for hospital food procurement that supports a healthy, just, and environmentally sound food system. In Portland, Oregon; Minnesota; Boston; Northern California; Philadelphia; Detroit; and Seattle, hospitals have made significant progress toward that end. They are buying dairy products without Recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH), organic and other certified foods (such as fair trade), and foods from local or small to mid-sized farms. Farmers' markets and gardens also are sprouting on hospital premises. In 2006, Health Care Without Harm hosted Food Med, the first international conference on healthier foods in healthcare, in Oakland, California. The campaign hosted its third FoodMed conference in Detroit in 2009.[104]

The shift toward healthier foods is putting pressure on food distributors to change their practices. As a Health Care Without Harm organizer notes, food distributors—the intermediary between producers and food service operators—were set up to supply institutions and therefore to rely on an industrial food system that can make and move mass quantities. As hospitals demand better foods, however, distributors are exploring ways to provide them. In some regions, nonprofit organizations are establishing alternative distribution systems to serve local and small to mid-sized farmers. (See "Section 4: Regional Food Systems and Agriculture.")

The Global Health and Safety Initiative (GHSI)—a collaboration that promotes safe and sustainable healthcare design, construction, and operations—is working with several of the country's largest healthcare systems to leverage its collective purchasing power to demand healthier products from suppliers.[105] GHSI also is convening a working group to develop strategies for healthy food purchasing and operations. The initiative demonstrates that by joining together, institutions can exert tremendous influence in the marketplace.

The Green Guide for Health Care—a best practices healthcare toolkit that has traditionally focused on continuous improvement in facility operations, construction, and design—was updated in 2008 to include eight overarching strategies related to food service, including nutrition standards and sustainable food purchasing. Hospital systems are beginning to use this tool to develop metrics and benchmarking on nutrition, promotion of breastfeeding, sustainable food procurement, and hospital-community linkages. The United States Green Building Council (USGBC), the third-party certifier of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System, is adopting the *Green Guide for Health Care* as a guidance document for healthcare facilities. Advocates believe that after the USGBC uses the food standards for healthcare, the council will eventually incorporate these standards into the LEED certification for all buildings.[106]

SCHOOLS

All school districts were federally mandated to adopt school wellness policies by the start of the 2006 school year, but such policies have yet to be fully implemented. The policies vary in their nutritional requirements and states and locales have been left to determine implementation, tracking, and monitoring. One advocate notes, "The state-by-state approach to implementation can be seen as both positive and a challenge … [D]istricts and states will each go about it differently as they attempt to put policies into a set of practices. The challenge remains making sure that districts have resources and support for implementation when schools face many competing demands."

School food advocates agree that the nutrition aspects of wellness policies have been easier to implement than the physical activity provisions. "Schools were already further along on the nutrition side," states one advocate. Among nutrition elements of wellness policies, components that fall under the authority of school food service

The shift toward healthier foods is putting pressure on food distributors to change their practices.

have made the greatest strides towards implementation.[107] Policies affecting foods outside the jurisdiction of school food service, such as treats served at classroom parties, snacks offered as rewards or sold at fundraisers, and products sold in vending machines operated by other school departments (e.g., athletics), are at various phases of implementation, which remains a challenge as these efforts may not be coordinated. Advocates can work to ensure that schools implement wellness policies to the fullest extent, given such competing demands.

The 2007 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way Toward Healthier Youth*, has already changed the public conversation about competitive foods in schools;[108] it has also led to regulation in West Virginia and other states are likely to follow suit. As school districts and other government agencies take action to improve school foods, many will look to the IOM as the gold standard.

The *2008 Farm Bill* contains clarifying language concerning geographic preference for schools interested in purchasing local foods for farm-to-school programs. This clarification gives schools and districts the opportunity to spend childhood nutrition dollars on locally produced goods. Sustainable food system advocates see this as a big win in the bill, as the change can have a systemic impact.

As next discussed in "Section 3: Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs," many school-related issues will be considered as Congress approaches the *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act* in the near future.

GOVERNMENT

More and more local and state government officials see a role for government in creating and sustaining healthy communities and in setting an example by promoting healthy work-site policies. Government leaders are interested in sharing their successes and learning from one another about how to best support healthy eating (as well as other healthy behaviors, such as physical activity) in communities and the workplace. Several national associations of elected and appointed officials have spearheaded efforts to inform their members about challenges and policy solutions related to healthy food access. In these forums, elected officials have highlighted their efforts to ensure that government agencies become models for supporting health and have provided examples of innovative food policies. This work is not yet widespread and remains a largely untapped area for policy action.

SECTION 3

Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs are designed to provide "children and low-income people access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education," according to the USDA.[109] By devoting tax dollars to programs that provide meals, food vouchers, and commodity foods, the United States has publicly committed to make healthy foods widely available. Administered by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the programs have evolved since the Great Depression in response to the public's concern about hunger and malnutrition. FNS estimates that, in total, these programs reach nearly one in five people in the United States at any given time.[110]

The national nutrition programs are the "fastest, most direct way to reduce hunger" and to provide healthy foods and increased purchasing power to families with low incomes.[111] Food stamps reach approximately half of all Americans at some point in their lives, according to a longitudinal study.[112] The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) serves nearly half of all infants born in the United States.[113] The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provided low-cost and free lunches to more than 30.5 million school children each school day in 2007.[114] As one nutrition advocate observes, the enormous reach of federal food programs "means an opportunity to improve the nutritional quality of millions of people's diets."

The core federal food and nutrition programs—the Food Stamp Program (renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the *2008 Farm Bill*), the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)—are **entitlement** programs. This means that every person who meets eligibility requirements is guaranteed participation. Enrollment levels rise or fall based on need, which is influenced by larger economic trends and particularly by shifts in employment. Entitlement programs are the best available mechanism to address income gaps that make it difficult for people to afford healthy foods. The largest non-entitlement program is WIC. Other non-entitlement programs that reach a much smaller set of participants are commodity distribution through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) for WIC recipients and the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program.

States and counties benefit when all eligible residents participate in the programs, which bring in federal dollars to support low-income families and stimulate local economies through increased food purchases. The federal government generally covers the entire cost of the programs, not just a share as it does, for example, with Medicaid. As one advocate puts it, the federal dollars "take the burden off of local resources. They are an amazing resource, an extraordinary amount of money devoted to buying food and supporting family incomes and nutrition and institutional budgets." In 2008, approximately $37.6 billion was expended on food stamps and $6.2 billion on WIC benefits.[115] The final FY2007 figures were $8.7 billion for the National School Lunch Program and $2.2 billion for the School Breakfast Program.[116] With greater purchasing power, a low-income customer base may be able to sustain grocery stores and other food merchants. Revenues from SNAP, WIC, and the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program have helped some farmers' markets survive in poor neighborhoods.[117]

Evaluation studies suggest that children who participate in the lunch, breakfast, and childcare food programs frequently consume more nutrients at meals than do nonparticipating children.[118] SBP participation reduces breakfast skipping, which is associated with an increased risk of being overweight among children and adolescents.[119] School-age girls who participate in the National School Lunch, School Breakfast, or Food Stamp programs are less likely to be overweight.[120] WIC

participation is associated with lower rates of low-birth weight and improved health outcomes for babies.[121]

In the long run, food assistance programs alone will not give all low-income families the means to buy and prepare healthy foods; the root causes of poverty also must be addressed. *A Blueprint to End Hunger*, a report from the National Anti-Hunger Organizations (NAHO), examines the connections between economic and social opportunity and healthier eating. The report argues for a broad set of policy objectives, from creating more jobs that provide living wages to improving the education system to expanding affordable housing, childcare, healthcare, and public transportation.[122]

Strategies and Policies to Boost the Impact of Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs

IMPROVE BENEFITS PROVIDED THROUGH SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is by far the largest of the federal nutrition programs. It provides monthly benefits through an Electronic Benefit Transfer card, which can be used to buy foods and beverages at authorized outlets. The program, established in the 1940s, has greatly expanded since the 1960s: In 2008 an average of 28.4 million people participated each month, up from 2.9 million in 1969.[123]

The benefits, however, were never bountiful or fully indexed to keep pace with inflation. Purchasing power has fallen by 4 to 8 percent since 1996, due to inflation and benefit cuts enacted in the federal welfare law that year.[124] The average monthly benefit was about $96 per person and about $215 per household in FY2007.[125] A complex formula determines how much a family receives. The maximum benefit is derived from the estimated market basket cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, the most restrictive of four USDA food plans and one originally conceived as nutritionally adequate for short-term or emergency use.[126] A family's benefit is then prorated, based on household size, income, asset limits, and allowable deductions. Only families with no net income receive the maximum benefit.

New rules adopted in the *2008 Farm Bill* made an 8.5 percent cost-of-living adjustment to the Thrifty Food Plan, increasing the maximum allotment for a four-person household from $542 per month to $588 per month.[127] The new rules also apply more generous formulas to calculate what families will receive. With these changes, the program will fully account for annual inflation for the first time, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.[128] Benefits will be greater by a few dollars per month per household, and more people will be eligible for SNAP through measures such as indexing the allowable asset limits to inflation, excluding retirement and education accounts as assets, and allowing for full deduction of dependent care (childcare) costs.[129] These revisions are important steps toward providing improved benefits to more households in need. The *Economic Recovery Bill of 2009* also includes a one-time boost of 13.6 percent to maximum benefit levels, which will be phased out over time.[130] Studies have revealed that SNAP contributes to stimulating the economy, as every five dollars in new SNAP benefits generates nearly twice as much in total community spending.[131]

The broad benefit formula, set in the early 1960s, assumes that families can devote one-third of their income to food. This formula does not reflect the reality of today's costs for rent, utilities, transportation, childcare, and healthcare. Anti-hunger and nutrition advocates believe the program benefits need to be increased to reflect "a realistic measure of what poor households need [in order] to buy food for an adequate diet."[132] The Food Stamp Diet Challenge, initiated by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), recruits Americans to

The 2008 Farm Bill recognizes the "growing role that the more than 4,300 farmers' markets and 1,200 community-supported agriculture (CSA) enterprises across the country play in providing

try living on the average SNAP budget to raise national consciousness about how difficult it is to feed a family at current benefit levels. High-profile policymakers as well as students, journalists, and religious leaders have taken the challenge.[133]

EXPAND OUTREACH AND SIMPLIFY APPLICATION PROCEDURES TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION IN SNAP

States and counties can make it easier for people to obtain benefits. Some communities offer simplified application forms, longer office hours, and eligibility interviews by phone. Efforts like these have helped boost participation: In 2006, 67 percent of potentially eligible people actually received benefits within 30 days, up from 52 percent in 2002.[134]

Additional modifications would build on this progress: permit people to file SNAP applications at convenient community locations, make sure SNAP offices are accessible by public transportation, and eliminate counterproductive practices such as fingerprinting applicants or conducting unwarranted or intrusive family investigations.[135] Another action that can help boost participation is ensuring that states adopt a simplified reporting option, included in the *2008 Farm Bill*, that extends income reporting from every six months to every 12 months for households in which all members are elderly or have a disability and where no one has any earnings.[136]

The 1996 welfare law also placed severe restrictions on benefits to legal immigrants and unemployed people without children. Restoring these benefits would help SNAP reach families in dire need. Although some categories of legal immigrants are eligible for the program, many families fear that participation would hurt their immigration status. It is important to extend eligibility to all categories of legal immigrants and to inform them that SNAP participation has no bearing on applications for permanent resident status. Unemployed people without children may receive benefits for a maximum of three months in a three-year period, even if no jobs are available. Eliminating this arbitrary time limit would help some of the poorest people in this country to obtain food.[137]

ESTABLISH INCENTIVES TO ENCOURAGE SNAP PARTICIPANTS TO BUY HEALTHY FOODS

The *2008 Farm Bill* calls for a pilot program to encourage SNAP participants to buy healthy foods.[138] This can be done in a variety of ways: allow people to earn additional benefits when they use EBT cards to buy fruits or vegetables; provide increased access to farmers' markets; offer retailers incentives to sell healthier items or require that they do so; and provide integrated communication and education programs, including school-based nutrition coordinators.[139] The pilot program gives state and local governments an opportunity, working with communities, to craft innovative strategies to improve the diets, and ultimately the health, of SNAP participants.

ENSURE ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFER ACCESS AT FARMERS' MARKETS

The *2008 Farm Bill* recognizes the "growing role that the more than 4,300 farmers' markets and 1,200 community-supported agriculture (CSA) enterprises across the country play in providing access to fresh, healthy, and local foods to all Americans, including those who participate in federal food assistance programs."[140] As of 2006, however, only six percent of farmers' markets had EBT systems, according to USDA estimates in the Farm Bill Conference Report. As mentioned earlier in this section, the bill included support for making EBT machines more widely available. Congress has directed that at least 10 percent of Farmers' Market Promotion Program funds in the *2008 Farm Bill* be spent on EBT implementation at markets and in CSA projects.

access to fresh, healthy, and local foods to all Americans, including those who participate in federal food assistance programs."

EXPAND ACCESS TO CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Because the meal and snack programs boost healthy eating and support good health, expanding participation is a central healthy eating strategy as well as an anti-hunger and antipoverty strategy. Virtually all public schools in the country offer the National School Lunch Program. In 2007, 30.5 million children from all income levels at more than 101,000 public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare facilities participated.[141] Children from low-income households can readily qualify to receive free or reduced-price meals. Even more children would participate if schools made sure that parents and children knew that free or reduced-price lunches are available; more, still, if students were automatically enrolled in the program when they qualify for other programs such as SNAP, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and Medicaid, which have similar eligibility requirements.

The School Breakfast Program is offered in fewer schools, serving approximately 10.1 million children in 2007.[142] Staff and program costs as well as the logistics of having the cafeteria open before the school day are among the reasons more schools do not offer the program. There is a wealth of experience about how to make it easier for schools to offer this program and for more children to participate: Offering free breakfast to **all** students, regardless of income, is one of the most effective ways to increase participation.[143] This approach significantly reduces not only the paperwork burden for schools and families, but also the stigma of receiving free breakfast at school. In many cases, children who might otherwise participate in the program simply cannot get to school in time because of parental schedules, late buses, and lines at school security. Experience has shown that incorporating breakfast into the school day, serving it in the classroom or between periods rather than before school begins, can increase participation.

Changes to the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), made by the 1996 welfare law, have caused numerous providers to leave the program. The changes included lower reimbursements, means testing for families, and more paperwork for program sites and sponsors. Participation by family day-care homes has dropped 42 percent, and sponsoring agencies that administer the CACFP for individual sites are off by 26 percent.[144] Increasing meal and snack payments and adequately supporting administrative and nutrition education costs are among the key improvements advocates propose to ensure that more children receive nutritious meals in childcare settings.

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) was established to ensure that low-income children receive free, healthy meals and snacks during school vacations. The program pays schools, community organizations, and government agencies to feed children (up to age 18) at approved sites in low-income neighborhoods. The program can be paired with physical activity to offer children one safe place where they can play, exercise, and eat well. Complex reporting requirements, however, discourage many organizations from participating, and in 2007 the program reached only 17.5 percent of children receiving lunch during the school year.[145] Simplified reporting for the SFSP was piloted in 13 states; from 2000 to 2007, participation in those states increased 54 percent, compared to a 14.4 percent decline during the same period in states that used conventional reporting procedures.[146] In December 2007, Congress expanded the simplified program to all states, effective in the summer of 2008. Advocates recommend further improvements: increased reimbursements and grants for startup and expansion, to attract potential sponsors and encourage current sponsors to serve more children.[147] Another potential regulatory change would lower the eligibility threshold for sites. Currently, 50 percent of children in the area or applying for the program must be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Advocates would like to see that bar set at 40 percent, which is especially important for improving access for children in rural areas.

IMPROVE THE NUTRITIONAL QUALITY OF MEALS AND SNACKS PROVIDED THROUGH CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

A primary consideration for the child nutrition meal programs is whether reimbursements are adequate for improving the nutritional quality of the foods. In 1981, the base reimbursement for school meals and the CACFP was reduced. While reimbursements have since kept pace with inflation, the base has never been restored. An Institute of Medicine report and a recent USDA analysis both suggest that reimbursement rates for nutritious school meals do not cover the full costs incurred in producing those meals.[148] Childcare providers report similar concerns.

Furthermore, school meals are exceeding the federal guidelines for fat, saturated fat, and sodium.[149] As school food service and childcare providers strive to go beyond these standards to offer more freshly prepared meals and serve more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes, more funds are required than those provided through federal reimbursements.

Many schools are adding fresh foods and making other nutritional improvements, but cost pressures have inhibited such initiatives, which will become even more challenging in the current economic climate. "School food service is afraid to experiment because of the bottom line. A lot of people stick with what works because they know they could lose their job if they can't stay in the black," a school nutrition advocate explains. Further, she has observed that highly publicized reports of food poisoning from fresh fruits and vegetables, coupled with high labor costs, push schools toward prepared and frozen products rather than on-site preparation of fresh foods. Some districts have phased out kitchens or eliminated them in newer schools. Further, many kitchens lack equipment for preparing meals from scratch. As previously mentioned, farm-to-school programs are vehicles for improving nutritional quality. The *2008 Farm Bill* reverses previous restrictions on establishing geographic preferences for purchasing, thus permitting school districts to emphasize purchases from local, regional, or state vendors.

Numerous schools depend on the USDA commodities to keep costs in line. The USDA has tried to improve the offerings to schools and other charitable institutions. An arena for advocacy is continuing the push for better foods on the federal list and ensuring that states—which determine the commodities offered to schools in their jurisdictions—include the newer, more nutritious items.

The *2008 Farm Bill* also expanded the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program to all 50 states. This program gives money to states to offer free fruit or vegetable snacks to students at selected elementary schools each school day. Priority is given to those schools with the highest proportions of students receiving free or reduced-priced school meals.

Efforts to improve school meals may also occur at the state or local level. Some states provide supplements to federal meal reimbursements, which can be tied to improvements in meal quality. States and localities may implement standards more stringent than the federal standards, as Delaware has done for childcare meals[150] and as the Los Angeles Unified School District has done for sodium, added sweeteners, fat, and trans fat.[151]

MAINTAIN THE QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF WIC

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides free nutritious supplemental foods, nutrition education, and access to health and social services to low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women and to children up to five years old. Although funding is capped, the program has rarely turned away substantial numbers of

WIC participants bought and ate more fruits and vegetables when they received fruit and vegetable vouchers redeemable at a farmers' market or grocery store within a half-mile walking distance.

eligible applicants. Its success has occurred in the face of annual appropriation battles. WIC participation has been steadily growing since 2003. The National WIC Association (NWA)—a membership organization of the 90 Geographic, Territorial, and Native American State Agencies and more than 2,000 Local Agencies—is advocating for funding increases to meet a surge in demand, especially in light of the current recession and the rise in unemployment.[152] The association is also calling for enough administrative funding to support the management information system necessary for implementing WIC food package changes, vendor and cost containment measures, and conversion to EBT.

LEVERAGE WIC FOOD PACKAGE CHANGES TO SUPPORT INCREASED HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

WIC participants receive vouchers monthly for specific foods. Changes to the WIC food package were finalized in December 2007. The new package, phased in by state WIC agencies in 2009, provides purchasing power for fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and culturally appropriate healthy choices like tofu. The revisions align the WIC food packages with the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and infant feeding practice guidelines of the American Academy of Pediatrics, largely reflecting recommendations made by the IOM in its report, *WIC Food Packages: Time for a Change*.[153] A pilot study found that WIC participants bought and ate more fruits and vegetables when they received fruit and vegetable vouchers redeemable at a farmers' market or grocery store within a half-mile walking distance.[154] WIC-certified stores will be required to offer these products. Because the rules now allow states to authorize the use of the fruit and vegetable vouchers in farmers' markets, WIC clients can help increase the customer base necessary for market feasibility in underserved neighborhoods. WIC advocates are joining with anti-hunger activists, farm advocates, and food retailers to look for opportunities to support farmers' markets, expand healthy food access, and ensure that women and children actually find produce to buy with the new vouchers.

Policy Opportunities

The nutrition programs are perhaps the most successful and politically viable federal legislative mechanisms to financially help low-income households. A veteran of federal policy efforts offers this perspective: "As a country, we appear to be reluctant to give people money for healthcare or housing. Food is where there is bipartisan support. More money goes to food than to any other income support program."

Historically, a bipartisan alliance representing agricultural and urban-poor constituents formed the support base of these programs. Advocates report even greater bipartisan support in recent years, as more members of Congress recognize that the programs also serve working families. As previously discussed, the *2008 Farm Bill* contains many notable provisions to expand access to the programs and to increase benefits. The task ahead is to ensure that these changes are fully implemented. It is important to track and comment on federal rulemaking. Advocates also must work with state and county governments to implement new regulations and to embrace opportunities to boost program participation and quality.

Congress is expected to review soon the *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act*, which determines guidelines and funding for the National School Lunch, School Breakfast, Summer Food Service, Child and Adult Care Food, and WIC programs. The bill, which Congress is expected to reauthorize in 2010, provides an opportunity for collaboration among a wide variety of organizations concerned with children's issues to address many of the strategies for program improvements herein described.

The Child Nutrition Forum has convened advocates for child nutrition reauthorization since 1978. Co-chaired by staff from the Food Research and Action Center[155] and the School Nutrition Association,[156] the forum has a broad-based membership: national organizations representing agricultural producers, the education community, seniors, consumers, community food security advocates, health and nutrition professionals, religious groups, teachers' unions, and anti-hunger organizations. Key issues are increased meal reimbursements tied to stronger nutrition standards, expanded eligibility rules, and simplified enrollment and administrative procedures.

Another key coalition working on this legislation is the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (NANA), representing more than 275 national, state, and local health and education groups.[157] In the 2004 reauthorization, NANA played a crucial role in securing the requirement for local school wellness policies. NANA is now considering a variety of policy options to improve nutrition in schools: strengthen implementation of school wellness policies, help schools upgrade the nutritional quality of meals, update the national standards for competitive foods, apply the standards to the entire campus for the whole school day, and increase funding for nutrition education.

The USDA has commissioned the Institute of Medicine to recommend criteria for revising nutrition standards for the School Lunch and Breakfast programs to bring them in line with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. The USDA will eventually use this report as a springboard to propose higher standards for school meals that reach millions of children.

There is also much room for action at the local and state levels. Many of the improvements contained in the *2008 Farm Bill*—from simplified application procedures to EBT access at farmers' markets—were initiated as innovations by states and local communities. Working with city, county, and state agencies, advocates can identify new opportunities to ensure that more households have access to valuable benefits that would improve their families' diets. Now that the *2008 Farm Bill* is finalized, states and localities can implement and take advantage of the options provided through its new regulations. Overall, the food purchasing power provided through SNAP, the child nutrition programs, and WIC provide a base of common interest among program participants, schools, farmers, distributors, and the retail sector. By coming together to advocate for improvements in these federal programs, these groups can maximize the availability of healthy, regional foods and support the economic and environmental viability of the regional food system.

SECTION 4

Regional Food Systems and Agriculture

What farmers grow, how they grow it, and how it gets to the consumer have a profound impact on what we eat, on our health, and on our environment. Federal farm subsidies have fueled the proliferation of candy, chips, soda, cheap fast foods, and other processed foods by driving down the price of selected crops, notably corn and soybeans, which are used to produce high-fructose corn syrup (a sweetener) and hydrogenated vegetable oil (a fat).[158] In the United States, the retail cost of fruits and vegetables has increased nearly 40 percent since 1985, while the cost of fats and sugars has declined.[159] Recent studies have shown that refined grains, added sugars, and added fats are some of the cheapest sources of dietary energy sold in grocery stores, while healthier options—lean meats, fish, fresh fruits, and vegetables—generally cost more.[160] This may help explain why so many Americans live on high-calorie, low-nutrient foods linked with obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease. Nowhere are such foods more visible than in low-income communities and neighborhoods of color, where fast-food restaurants and liquor stores often vastly outnumber supermarkets.[161]

The abundance of cheap raw ingredients for processed foods costs us dearly in other ways as well. The industrialized agricultural system that produces them requires heavy use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers that contribute to cancer, birth defects, neurological disorders, and asthma; they also kill wildlife.[162] Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) are major sources of air and water pollution.[163] Seventy percent of antibiotics in the United States are used on livestock to promote faster growth and prevent illnesses that develop and spread like wildfire in the confined spaces in which livestock is raised.[164] The widespread nontherapeutic use of these drugs has been linked to the dangerous rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria among humans.

Because foods are transported an average of 1,500 to 2,100 miles to get from the farm to our plates,[165] trucks choke our roads and pollute our air with diesel exhaust, which is linked to cancer, asthma, and other respiratory illnesses. The highways that carry these foods often run through the poorest neighborhoods in cities, putting residents at particularly high risk of asthma and lung cancer.[166]

Our food system has also contributed to the social and economic decline of rural communities. In 1990, farmers received nine cents of every food dollar; by 2000, that number had dropped by seven percent, while farming costs had risen by 19 percent. Small farming families rely on additional, non-farm employment to earn the majority of their income, often working an extra job to make ends meet.[167]

Farm workers, many of them recent immigrants or migrant workers, pay a particularly high price for all our cheap foods. Farm workers spray the pesticides or pick the crops that have been sprayed, and studies show they are more likely than the general population to develop many forms of cancer, including stomach, brain, cervical, and uterine cancers and leukemia.[168] Sources estimate that 400,000 to 800,000 children work as seasonal or migrant farm labor in the United States;[169] like adults, many are exposed to dangerous levels of pesticides.[170] Runoff from fields carries chemicals into the groundwater supplies, and sprayed pesticides often blow into nearby communities, compounding the health risks for farm worker families.

Perhaps the cruelest reality of industrialized agriculture is that the very people who plant, pick, and pack our foods can barely afford to feed their own families. A 2002 survey by the U.S. Department of Labor found that the income of a farm worker was $10,000 to $12,499; 30 percent of the farm workers surveyed reported family incomes below federal poverty levels.[171] Healthy food retail is sparse, at best, in poor rural communities, and without cars or decent public transportation, farm workers cannot get to grocery stores. Many of them live in substandard housing, with no place to store or prepare foods. These

Perhaps the cruelest reality of industrialized agriculture is that the very people who plant, pick, and pack our foods can barely afford to feed their own families.

conditions not only hurt the workers and their families, but also threaten the long-term sustainability of farming and the availability of healthy foods for everyone.

Strategies and Policies to Improve Regional Food Systems and Agriculture

INVEST IN PROCESSING AND DISTRIBUTION

As schools, hospitals, grocers, and restaurants look to purchase foods from local suppliers, the challenge becomes how to get those products from the farm to store shelves and cafeterias. Distribution and light processing infrastructure are needed to create a seamless, convenient process for everyone in the chain. For instance, a major hospital system may need to purchase foods in far larger quantities than a small community hospital, alone, would buy. A school without the food service staff to chop fruits and vegetables may require light processing of foods. Local, state, and federal governments, as well as businesses, can mitigate these challenges by investing in production, processing, and distribution for local farms.

Several provisions in the *2008 Farm Bill* offer support for distribution and processing. The Value-Added Producer Grants Program dedicates $15 million in grant funds for producers to process the foods they grow to create "value-added products" (for instance, making strawberries into jam).[172] Community Food Projects (CFP) provides matching grants for community-based organizations to create innovative solutions that address food access issues; many CFP grant recipients develop programs that connect low-income residents with fresh foods direct from the farm. The Healthy Urban Food Enterprise Development Center—to be established within the USDA Cooperatives State, Education, Extension, and Research Service—will provide outreach and technical assistance to enterprises that distribute and market local foods to underserved communities.[173]

Several states—among them Hawaii, Montana, and Wisconsin—considered legislation in 2007 to create and support regional distribution and processing. Hawaii's HB 80 would have appropriated $3.25 million for constructing a terminal market facility on the island of Hawaii to start a coordinated statewide network for agricultural processing, consolidation, marketing, and shipping facilities. Montana's HB 716 would have appropriated $1 million for a local foods grant program to develop relationships between food producers and schools in the state. The program included $250,000 for grants to food processors and cooperatives that process locally grown farm products for institutional markets, and funding to rent processing equipment to local farmers and food producers. Wisconsin's SB 89 would have created a grants program to expand facilities for processing and distributing foods for local consumption. The bill also would have supported networks of producers and strengthened connections among producers, retailers, institutions, and consumers. While these bills did not become law, the fact that legislatures are considering issues of regional distribution and processing demonstrates a growing interest at the state level in exploring alternatives to the current food system.

Over the past five years, several nonprofit groups have spearheaded regional marketing and distribution initiatives. In a popular model, an organization buys fresh food from family farms and sells it to large institutions and supermarkets. By combining their output, growers are able to reach important markets that lie beyond the grasp of a single small farmer. Red Tomato, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit, helps small family farmers to market and distribute foods to supermarkets, grocery stores, co-ops, and restaurants.[174] Similarly, Community Alliance with Family Farmers' (CAFF) Growers Collaborative, based in California, aggregates products from small farms and

distributes them to public schools, hospitals, and corporate cafeterias.[175] Initiatives like these create lucrative opportunities for small farmers while giving consumers access to healthy, fresh foods.

SUPPORT SMALL AND MID-SIZED FARMERS, PARTICULARLY FARMERS OF COLOR AND WOMEN

While agricultural land is lost to development, the number of farmers in the United States is declining, and small and mid-sized farmers find it harder to make a living. While most small and mid-sized farmers are struggling, women and farmers of color face particular difficulties obtaining help. The Civil Rights Action Team, formed in 1996 by the USDA, found that farmers of color were more likely than white farmers to be denied loans. These discriminatory practices have contributed to the rapid decline in African American-owned farms over the past several decades.[176]

Public policy can address the legacy of racism and guarantee help to the farmers who need it most. The *2008 Farm Bill* includes new funding and programs to support beginning and minority farmers. For instance, the bill enhances the USDA's Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (OASDFR) program, which provides technical assistance to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers so that they can successfully acquire, own, operate, and retain farms and ranches. The bill also includes provisions to strengthen farm and ranchland protection and contains other strategies to assist disadvantaged farmers.

Policies that open new markets for small and mid-sized farmers can help them to compete and succeed. The *2008 Farm Bill* expands market access for small state-inspected meat and poultry processors by allowing them to ship across state lines.[177] State policies can also broaden marketing opportunities. For example, recently passed legislation in Kentucky allows small farmers to process, in their home kitchens, certain products containing home-grown ingredients and to sell them at farmers' markets and roadside stands.[178] The law also allows farmers to expand their product lines without having to obtain a commercial permit.

Several projects around the country, including in Holyoke, Massachusetts; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Lincoln, Nebraska, give immigrant farmers crucial help, even without policy change. These initiatives provide training, marketing assistance, and access to land and infrastructure; they also help in obtaining credit. Combined with supportive and equitable policies, such efforts are critical to preparing, launching, and sustaining a new generation of farmers.

ESTABLISH INCENTIVES AND SUPPORT FOR GROWERS TO PRODUCE HEALTHY FOODS

Our current federal food policy provides incentives for commodity crops such as corn, soybeans, and cotton. Encouraging growers to produce fruits and vegetables instead and to farm without synthetic pesticides, hormones, or antibiotics would boost the supply of healthy foods.

Incentives and support for fruits and vegetables. Public policies influence what farmers and ranchers grow and produce. According to the U.S. Farm and Food Policy Project, "most farmers and ranchers don't benefit from current farm policies." In fact, the Environmental Working Group estimates that 10 percent of America's largest farms collect almost three-fourths of federal farm subsidies.[179]

Several of the strategies outlined in this document incentivize farmers to grow healthier items by increasing demand for products, such as fruits and vegetables. Strategies that link farmers to large institutions or other larger-volume buyers, such as stores, schools, and hospitals, help to create a viable market for local and

regional farmers. Policy support for farmers' markets helps to ensure that smaller growers can sell their products locally. Ensuring that food stamp participants can use their EBT cards at farmers' markets further expands the customer base of local farmers, especially in underserved communities. State or local policy can also facilitate the processing and distribution of local farm products, making it easier for farmers to promote and sell their foods. A Washington State law enacted in 2007 grants sales- and use-tax deferrals for fruit and vegetable processing and storage, reducing the tax burden for local growers and producers.

Research and technical assistance can also increase the viability of fruit and vegetable production, and increase the capacity of small and mid-sized fruit and vegetable producers. The U.S. Specialty Block Grant Program provides grants to states to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops, which includes fruits and vegetables. Administered by state departments of agriculture, the program supports marketing, research, education, pest management, production, and food safety.

Incentives and support for foods produced without pesticides, hormones, or antibiotics. The *2008 Farm Bill* Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) sets aside funds for organic conversion. At the state level, the Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force, established by the *Food, Farms, and Jobs Act of 2007*, is charged with developing a plan to increase the farming and consumption of local and organic fruits and vegetables through land preservation, farmers' market expansion, and other tools to create a local food system and economy. Locally, the Organic Conversion Resolution in Woodbury County, Iowa, provides property tax rebate incentives to farms that stop using pesticides and adopt methods that meet the standards of the USDA National Organic Program.

CONSERVE AGRICULTURAL LAND

The United States loses about two acres of farmland to development every minute.[180] Immediate action is needed to preserve agricultural land and protect open spaces.

Sixteen states have laws supporting agricultural district programs, which provide tax breaks to farmers and limit development in designated areas. Seven states have growth management laws, designed to control urban growth while saving farmland.

City and county policies can also conserve farmland. Agricultural protection zoning designates areas as primarily for farming and can include explicit protections: prohibit land uses that might pose problems for farms, limit the density of residential development, and allow growers to sell their produce at roadside stands. Comprehensive plans can designate land for agriculture and allow development somewhere else. Mitigation ordinances can help balance farmland preservation and development. For example, an ordinance in Davis, California, requires one acre of farmland to be permanently protected for every acre of agricultural land developed for commercial or residential use. King County, Washington, and Yolo County, California, have similar requirements.[181] Agricultural conservation easements—voluntary agreements between landowners and land trusts or other conservation organizations—can also protect farmland.

The Conservation Title of the *2008 Farm Bill* includes several provisions concerning farmland protection and environmental protection. Of particular relevance are improvements to the Farmland Protection Program, formally the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), and expansion of the EQIP.[182] The Farmland Protection Program helps farmers and ranchers to keep their land by providing matching funds to state and local governments and to nongovernmental organizations such as land trusts to protect productive land from other forms of development.[183] The bill also includes provisions to

Urban farms can bring fruits and vegetables to underserved communities and spare residents the hassle and expense of traveling to the nearest supermarket.

assist producers with adopting environmentally sound agricultural practices to preserve and protect our nation's natural resources.

ENHANCE URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS

Community gardens, urban farms, and community-supported agriculture (CSA) make farm-fresh products available to city residents and connect them with the source of their foods. Urban farms, in particular, can bring fruits and vegetables to underserved communities and spare residents the hassle and expense of traveling to the nearest supermarket. Innovative strategies are making CSAs more feasible in low-income neighborhoods.[184] For example, Just Food, a CSA in New York City, has a sliding-scale payment option that accepts SNAP benefits and offers revolving loans and installment plans.

Government strategies to promote urban food systems include:

Providing municipal land and water. Several cities—Seattle, Boston, and New York among them—allow publicly owned vacant lands to be used for community gardens.[185] Some states and municipalities have laws or language in their codes that explicitly recognize community gardens as an acceptable use of public land. Other municipalities provide services, such as water, free or at a discount. Intermediaries such as land banks, land trusts, or land reserve agencies can help community gardens with the complexities of clearing title and holding public land.[186]

Providing funds and technical assistance. Local Cooperative Extension Services, funded by the USDA, assist community gardens and other urban agriculture projects.[187] The Community Food Project, also administered by the USDA, funds initiatives designed to build community food security through neighborhood agriculture as well as projects such as CSAs linking farmers and low-income neighborhoods. An amendment in the *2008 Farm Bill* would have created a grant program to assist in purchasing and operating organic gardens or greenhouses in urban areas for growing fruits and vegetables. While the provision was dropped from the final version of the bill, advocates may attempt to address this issue in the next farm bill. Municipalities can also fund gardens through general revenues and grants.

Providing government oversight. New York State has created the Office of Community Gardens within its Department of Agriculture to identify vacant public lands, determine their suitability for urban agriculture, and coordinate the establishment of community gardens.[188] Washington, DC, has created the Food Production and Urban Gardens Program, which maintains a publicly accessible list of vacant lots, including locations and dimensions, for making those lands available to the public.[189]

CREATE LOCAL OR STATE FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

To make healthy foods available and affordable to everyone, city, county, and state governments must look at the entire food system, from farm to plate. Typically, however, governments take a piecemeal approach, with different agencies responsible for various aspects of food policy.[190] Local and state governments can create and support food policy councils to focus attention on the entire system and foster collaboration among groups interested in public health, nutrition, sustainability, farmland preservation, healthy food retail, community gardens, farm worker rights, and economic development. The nonprofit Community Food Security Coalition estimates that more than 50 councils operate across the country. Some, sponsored by government agencies, provide policy guidance. Others, run by grassroots groups or nonprofit organizations, focus on advocating for policies and operating programs.[191]

ESTABLISH POLICIES THAT SUPPORT THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF FARM WORKERS

Farm workers have one of the most essential jobs in our nation—producing our foods—yet they are among the most economically insecure and socially vulnerable people in America. Fair treatment of farm workers—providing living wages, decent housing, and safe working conditions—is an issue of social justice, but it also has a direct impact on the sustainability of farming and the capacity for healthy food production. In fact, policies that support farm worker health and economic security are fundamental to a sustainable food system.

Traditionally, most farm labor advocacy has focused on organizing workers to collectively pressure agribusinesses to improve their labor practices. For example, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a Florida-based organization that advocates for low-wage immigrants, successfully pressed Taco Bell in 2005 to improve wages and working conditions for Florida tomato pickers in its supply chain.[192]

Yet governments represent another important advocacy target because they can set standards and launch programs to improve farm worker safety and health, according to a report by the California Institute for Rural Studies.[193] For example, the USDA National Organic Standards can include farm labor practice standards. Among other government strategies: (1) amending the *Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act* to reduce grower liability associated with nonfarm housing and to encourage growers to provide housing for laborers, and (2) enforcing existing state laws that require county general plans to include provisions for adequate farm worker housing.[194]

Government agencies can aggressively protect farm workers by enforcing occupational safety and health laws and regulations and by banning pesticides that may pose health risks. Federal and state governments can also facilitate wage increases for farm workers by providing grants and incentives for growers to engage in labor-sharing strategies with other growers. In turn, labor sharing and coordination among growers can provide more stable employment for farm workers.[195]

Policy Opportunities

The farm bill, which Congress renews every five years, is perhaps the most critical legislation shaping every aspect of our food system—from how foods are produced to what ends up in grocery stores and on our kitchen tables. Specifically, it presents opportunities to protect farmland, promote production of healthier products, create new market opportunities for farmers, support beginning and minority farmers, and protect the environment. As discussed in previous sections, the legislation also includes provisions concerning healthy food retail and federal nutrition programs. While advocates have had a voice in shaping the farm bill for many years, many interest groups have previously worked in silos to ensure that their issues were heard on Capitol Hill. The most recent farm bill, passed in June 2008, was a chance for new partners to come together to determine mutually beneficial goals that address the needs of farmers, rural and urban communities, and all people who depend on a healthy food system.

The *2008 Farm Bill* also benefited from the groundswell in public conversation about making it a healthy farm **and** food bill. This led to an upsurge of interest from new groups that felt they could get behind a broader agenda. More than 300 doctors signed a letter demonstrating their support for a healthy farm bill, while the U.S. Conference of Mayors passed a resolution at its June 2007 annual meeting calling for reform of farm and food policies. The National Urban League also expressed an interest in getting involved, and members of Congress

Food advocates say it is important to establish a steady drumbeat—for the next farm bill. "We need to be focusing on the opportunities, not just the legislation."

representing urban districts were more engaged than ever. While increased collaboration among new partners has been a success of the *2008 Farm Bill*, opportunities remain to broaden the collaboration, to bring new voices and interests to the discussion, and to shape an agenda that recognizes diverse priorities and reflects our collective stake in health food policy.

The focus is now on implementation, to ensure that resources are used effectively and equitably and that the policies written into the law are put in place on the ground. Farm bill implementation can also solidify alliances and the political support needed to build on the substantial gains made in 2008. Food advocates say it is important to create a more even and constant process of issue development and capacity building—in essence, establish a steady drumbeat—for the next farm bill. The bill usually drops off people's radar for awhile after its passage. "We need to be focusing on the opportunities, not just the legislation," states one advocate. The new alliances that formed around the *2008 Farm Bill* can look for additional federal opportunities to address food system issues. The same advocate notes, "With the upcoming childhood nutrition reauthorization, what issues can we continue to move forward? Because we faced some roadblocks around urban retail access, are there other ways to move this issue forward? What can we do with tax credits or loan programs from other agencies? Working with various stakeholders to work collaboratively has taken time. It would be a shame to see it lost and not carried over into a more sustained campaign."

Beyond the farm bill, opportunities abound to advance regional and sustainable food systems. As noted earlier, linking regional food system strategies to efforts to change institutional procurement practices can address multiple food system priorities. The emerging movement to promote healthy retail through a national Healthy Food Financing Initiative, state and local efforts—supermarkets, smaller grocery stores, corner stores, and farmers' markets—can be part of this nexus. Healthy food retail advocates and institutional purchasers are already working to get healthier foods into stores, hospital cafeterias, and the like; local and regional farms are an obvious potential source for such foods. For farmers, these markets can serve as an economic lifeline. Support for light processing of and distribution for locally and regionally grown foods is also crucial.

Lastly, local land use decisions are critical to preserving agricultural land. More local jurisdictions are focusing on the concept of "healthy people, healthy places" and looking closely at the impact of land use decisions on health. This creates an opportunity to ensure that farmland preservation is at the core of those conversations and that decision makers see regional agriculture as a fundamental element of community health. Local land use planning provides an opportunity to engage not only representatives of agriculture and public health, but also people from transportation, environmental justice, economic development, and other vital areas.

Conclusion

The ability to provide everyone in America with access to healthy foods has major implications for preventing chronic disease, for improving community health through economic development and neighborhood revitalization, and for protecting our environment and natural resources. Healthy food access is part of a larger food system of agricultural production, processing, transportation, marketing, and retail sales.

Yet numerous systemic challenges create barriers to access, particularly for low-income people and people of color. On the other hand, these challenges offer many leverage points for advocacy and activism. The issues addressed in this paper span multiple sectors, disciplines, and advocacy agendas: environmental justice, anti-hunger, public health, agriculture, equity, and economic development. There are tremendous opportunities for people committed to all these areas to forge effective alliances to press for healthy food policies at the local, state, and federal levels.

Ultimately, it is the convergence of efforts, interests, and partnerships that will create and sustain the momentum necessary to achieve the larger vision of community health.

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