

Improving Access to

# Healthy Foods

A GUIDE FOR POLICY-MAKERS

FALL 2007



## Policy-making for Healthy Communities

The places where we live, learn, work and play have a strong influence on our ability to maintain a healthy diet and engage in regular physical activity, which are two of the most essential components of good health. This guide focuses on healthy eating and highlights why a healthy diet remains out of reach for many Americans. It explores how officials at the state and local levels can facilitate healthy eating by adopting policies that help communities improve access to affordable, healthy foods for all residents. This guide also outlines proactive steps that policy-makers are currently taking in

schools and government institutions across the country to help increase access to nutritious food options.

A companion guide, *Increasing Active Living: A Guide for Policy-makers*, focuses on the importance of physical activity and describes how state and local policy-makers can help create healthier environments that support and encourage physical activity for students, families and communities. This guide is available online at: [www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org/activeliving\\_guide.htm](http://www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org/activeliving_guide.htm).



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



**QUICK FACT** Eating habits are shaped early in life. Healthy habits formed during childhood and carried into adulthood decrease future risk for chronic diseases.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, only a quarter of children ages 2 to 11 consume three daily servings of vegetables, and less than half of those children consume two daily servings of fruit.<sup>2</sup>

## What Can Policy-makers Do?

As a government official, you're in a unique position to improve the health of your constituents by advancing state and local policies that have a significant impact on the availability of healthy foods, such as policies related to land use, transportation, comprehensive planning, and community and economic development. Officials can use these policies to:

- 1 support the production and marketing of healthy, fresh foods;
- 2 make healthy foods affordable;
- 3 increase access to healthy foods;
- 4 purchase healthy foods for public schools and other government institutions; and
- 5 limit access to unhealthy foods.

## The Costs of America's Unhealthy Diet

Today, one-third of American children and adolescents are either overweight or obese.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the incidence of overweight and obesity among adults increased steadily from 47 percent in 1980, to 56 percent in 1994, and 66 percent in 2004.<sup>4</sup>

Unhealthy eating not only contributes to obesity, it also is linked to a variety of health problems, including high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.<sup>5</sup> For young people, the consequences are particularly striking:

- Overweight and obese children are at a higher risk for a host of serious illnesses, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, asthma and certain types of cancer.
- For children born in the U.S. in 2000, the lifetime risk of being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes is estimated to be 30 percent for boys and 40 percent for girls; the risk is even higher among African-American, Hispanic and Native American children.<sup>6</sup>



**If we don't reverse these trends, we are in danger of raising the first generation of American children with a lower life expectancy than their parents.**

In addition to the toll on our nation's health, obesity also poses a tremendous financial threat to our economy and our health care system. Lifetime medical costs attributable to five conditions (high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, stroke and high cholesterol) are \$10,000 higher for the moderately obese than for those at a healthy weight.<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that the direct and indirect health costs associated with obesity are \$117 billion per year. These costs are shouldered by employers, workers and states in the form of worker absenteeism, loss of productivity, health care premiums, out-of-pocket expenses and co-payments.<sup>8,9</sup>

## Benefits of a Healthy Diet

The benefits of a healthy diet are well documented. Eating a healthy diet helps control weight, reduces risk of obesity and heart disease, and is associated with a lower risk of mortality in all age groups.<sup>10</sup>

Studies also have shown a direct link between academic performance and nutrition. For instance, participation in school breakfast programs is associated with increased test scores, improved attendance and reduced tardiness.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, healthy adults do better on the job. Employees are more likely to perform well and take fewer days off when they are in optimal physical and psychological health, resulting in increased productivity.<sup>12</sup>



## Healthy Foods Remain Out of Reach for Many Americans

Consumption of fruits and vegetables often serves as a good indicator of a healthy diet. While the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend eating five to nine servings of fruits or vegetables every day, only one in five Americans actually consumes this amount.

For many Americans, poor diet and related health problems appear to be tied to income. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, people with incomes of less than \$15,000 are the least likely to consume any fruits or vegetables at all.<sup>13</sup>

Many low-income neighborhoods lack healthy, affordable retail food options. Buying healthy food often involves transportation that is inconvenient or unavailable to many residents.<sup>14,15</sup>

**QUICK FACT** Upper- and middle-income neighborhoods typically have three times as many supermarkets per capita as do low-income neighborhoods.<sup>16</sup> Fast-food chains, corner markets and bodegas are often the only sources of food in low-income neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup>

## How State and Local Officials Can Improve Access to Healthy Foods

### Producing and Marketing Healthy Foods

# 1

A variety of local and state policies can support the production and marketing of fresh, nutritious and affordable foods. Many cities, counties and states are now taking action to ensure the availability of good land for farming and a market for fresh, locally grown produce. They are implementing land-use and economic development policies designed to:

- preserve farmland for local farmers and steer development away from open space;<sup>18</sup>
- provide farmers with a reliable market to distribute their produce year-round;<sup>19</sup>
- help small farm owners create viable marketing and business plans;<sup>20</sup>
- provide grants and free marketing opportunities to roadside markets, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture and direct-delivery programs;<sup>21</sup>
- create grant programs and economic incentives to fund construction and renovation of farmers' markets or roadside markets;<sup>22</sup> and
- develop affordable, available food processing/kitchen space in economically distressed areas. Combined with marketing and distribution assistance, these facilities can support home- or farm-based small businesses, such as street vendors and specialty food producers.<sup>23</sup>

**EXAMPLE 1** Local growers and producers who join the state-run *Kentucky Proud* program benefit from a statewide advertising and promotional campaign. Through a partnership with the Kentucky Department of Parks, *Kentucky Proud* farmers also receive marketing assistance selling agricultural products to park restaurants and resorts. The program helps keep farmers' costs low and opens a guaranteed market for their products.<sup>24</sup>

## 2

### Making Healthy Foods Affordable

Cost is a primary barrier to healthy eating for many Americans because fresh produce is generally more expensive than processed or high-calorie fast foods. A study by the University of Minnesota School of Public Health found that individuals will choose to eat healthier foods when given a price incentive.<sup>25</sup> Local and state governments can help make healthy foods more affordable by:

- providing refunds or discounts on fresh produce to individuals using food stamps;<sup>26</sup>
- adopting price reductions on healthy foods in government institutions where food is served, such as in schools, universities, hospitals and government offices;<sup>27</sup>
- paying farmers for surplus produce and distributing it to social service agencies and food banks;<sup>28</sup>
- working with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) *Farmers' Market Nutrition Program*, which allows Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) participants to use food stamps at farmers' markets;<sup>29</sup> and
- working with the USDA *Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program*, which provides coupons to low-income seniors for the purchase of fruits and vegetables from farmers' markets, roadside stands and community-supported agriculture programs.<sup>30</sup>

**EXAMPLE 2 The Health Bucks Program, run by the New York City Health Department, includes special incentives for food stamp recipients. Anyone spending \$5 worth of food stamps at a farmers' market receives a \$2 Health Buck coupon. The Health Buck coupons are redeemable at more than 30 farmers' markets citywide for fresh produce purchases. In July 2007, the health department reported that New Yorkers used more than 40 percent of the 9,000 Health Bucks distributed in 2006. Approximately 15,000 more coupons were distributed throughout the summer.<sup>31</sup>**



## 3

### Increasing Access to Healthy Foods

Lack of convenient access to fresh fruits and vegetables is also a barrier to healthy eating. Supportive policies related to economic development, land use, water and transportation can help. Strategies that increase access to healthy foods include:

- creating economic stimulus programs and public-private partnerships to promote the creation of farmers' markets and the expansion of retail grocery operations in low-income neighborhoods;<sup>32</sup>
- developing land-use policies and joint-use agreements that support the creation of community gardens in areas lacking supermarkets;<sup>33</sup>
- seeking funding for federal programs that support at-home food production, such as delivering raised-bed backyard gardens to low-income families and providing training on planting and maintaining the garden;
- developing transportation policies that ensure urban bus lines and other public transit conveniently connect riders with supermarkets or farmers' markets, and creating economic incentives for free or low-cost transportation;<sup>34</sup> and
- creating local zoning ordinances to support the development of mixed-use neighborhoods and the creation of small markets that offer healthy foods.<sup>35</sup>

**EXAMPLE 3** The city of Hartford, Conn., designed the L-Tower Avenue bus route in 2000 as part of the *Jobs Access* program to link residents from the north end of town with jobs, shopping and medical services. Convenient access to grocery stores was a major and immediate benefit of the new line. Ridership doubled to 10,249 passengers by the end of the first year, and 33 percent of riders cited grocery shopping as the primary reason for taking the bus. When funding was threatened, the City of Hartford Commission on Food Policy showcased the route's role in increasing access to healthy foods. It is now a permanent transit line.<sup>36</sup>



## Purchasing Healthy Foods for Schools and Government Institutions

By leveraging their purchasing power, government institutions can protect public health, support local agriculture and serve as models for healthy-eating practices. Cities, counties and states are working to achieve these goals by implementing programs and policies, such as:

- farm-to-school programs that provide a profitable market for local farms and nutritious ingredients for school lunches;<sup>37</sup>
- farm-to-hospital programs that offer farms an excellent marketplace and help supply healthy foods to patients;<sup>38</sup> and
- school garden programs that provide produce for school cafeterias, allowing children to grow and eat their own foods and learn firsthand about nutrition.<sup>39</sup>

**EXAMPLE 4** In New Mexico, state and local school districts partnered with Farm to Table, a farm-to-school nonprofit organization, to create the *Local Harvest Pilot Program*. Partially funded by the USDA, the three-year program helps schools purchase and incorporate fresh, locally grown produce into school meals.<sup>40</sup>

## Limiting Access to Unhealthy Foods

In addition to promoting access to healthy foods, policy-makers can help limit access to unhealthy foods. Two key settings for this approach are low-income neighborhoods that are saturated with fast food restaurants and schools that offer few healthy food options. Possible initiatives include:

- enacting school nutrition policies that replace junk foods with healthier options in vending machines, snack bars and school cafeterias;<sup>41</sup> and
- zoning to limit the number of fast-food restaurants per square mile or prohibit their development near schools.<sup>42</sup>

## Start Today

Communities must provide reliable access to affordable, nutritious foods for all residents. By focusing on policies that address the five categories highlighted in this guide, policy-makers can immediately impact the affordability and accessibility of healthy foods at the state and local level.

In addition to the recommendations outlined throughout, government leaders also may want to consider developing a nutrition or food policy council to assess community needs and recommend policies to ensure a reliable and equitable food system.

Learn more about what other cities, counties and states are doing to promote healthy eating at:  
[www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org](http://www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org).



**Leadership for Healthy Communities** (formerly known as *Active Living Leadership*) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation designed to engage and support state and local policy leaders in efforts to promote policies that enable active living and healthy eating in their communities. This program gives special emphasis to policy approaches that focus on reversing the childhood obesity epidemic in states and communities, as well as among vulnerable populations disproportionately affected by the problem.

The **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. For more than 35 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information, visit [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org).

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