A Menu for Food Justice

Strategies for Improving Access to Healthy Foods in Allegheny County

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About Just Harvest
Founded in 1986, Just Harvest educates, empowers and mobilizes people to eliminate hunger, poverty, and economic injustice in our communities by influencing public policy, engaging in advocacy, and connecting people to public benefits. We are guided by the understanding that hunger is a symptom of poverty and that poverty is a product of social and economic injustice. Rather than charity, public policies which respond to these conditions and to the needs of poor people are the best approaches to the elimination of hunger and poverty.

June 2013
The Soup- A Light Intro to Food Deserts

In Allegheny County 161,787 individuals received SNAP benefits in April 2013, representing a 43.6 percent increase in participation in six years. Yet despite increased enrollment, many more families still face tough decisions between paying for food and paying for other necessities such as housing, heat, or health care.

According to a 2012 federal report, among cities with populations of 250,000-500,000, Pittsburgh has the largest percentage of people residing in communities with “low-supermarket access” (LSA). Approximately 47% or 145,245 Pittsburgh residents experience low access and 71% of city LSA residents are low-income.

Communities with low supermarket access are also known as “food deserts”. Residents of these communities often travel well over a mile to access healthy foods most commonly available at grocery stores and supermarkets. Food deserts are most commonly populated by vulnerable low-income and communities of color who experience food insecurity at higher than normal rates.

This report recognizes that in changing a food desert to a food oasis “one size doesn’t fit all.” Some communities might benefit from stronger corner stores with a better selection of healthy foods; others might be good locations for farmers’ markets. In others a new supermarket might be economically viable. The report draws on local and national programs to lay a framework of policy recommendations for city and county officials, businesses, foundations, non-profits, and community leaders to pursue while improving food access throughout Allegheny County.

The Salad- A Food Justice Mix

The report profiles several current initiatives underway in Allegheny County to improve food access in various communities. These include:

- The development of a new Shop ‘n Save market in the Hill District
- A major research study by the RAND Corporation ’s focused on measuring the impact of changes in local food retail on residents the Hill and Homewood.
- Proposed developments in Homewood-Brushton of a community “Food Hub”
- Urban Agriculture projects led by Grow Pittsburgh and others, including Landslide Community Farm in the Hill District, and expansion of urban gardening support by the City of Pittsburgh’s Office of Sustainability
- Seasonal Farm Stands and Produce to People distributions led by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank
- Zoning code improvements for urban agriculture advocated by a coalition led by Grow Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council
- The recent launch by Just Harvest of acceptance of electronic food stamp purchases at Citi-parks Farmers Markets
- The Loaves and Fishes Buying Club in Hazelwood, and expansion of food cooperatives and nonprofit models for grocery store operation.
The Main Course: A Taste of the Region

The report provides detailed profiles of several impacted communities in and around Pittsburgh. These profiles contain useful demographic data, and relevant estimates grocery retail demand and access to supermarkets. Maps of SNAP (Food Stamp) authorized retailers overlaid with poverty data are provided along with assessments of numerous small food retailers in the selected communities. Of a total of 64 stores assessed across these neighborhoods, fewer than 1 in 4 had fresh produce available to shoppers. Only about 70% had even the most basic variety of foods available.

Profiled communities include:
- Clairton
- Millvale
- McKees Rocks and Stowe Township
- East Hills, Homewood, Larimer, Lincoln-Lemington-Belmar
- Fineview, Perry South, and Manchester
- Northview Heights, Spring Hill, Spring Garden, and Troy Hill
- Arlington, Arlington Heights, South Side Slopes, St. Clair, Mt. Oliver, Knoxville, Allentown

The USDA defines food deserts as low-income communities with a poverty rate of 20 percent or more that are located one mile from a supermarket or grocery store (or ten miles in a rural setting). The report raises substantive concern about the failure of this definition to account for unique community factors such as Pittsburgh’s steep hills and physically isolated neighborhoods, and the issue of adequate mass transit access to grocery stores. The analysis deepens our understanding of the complexities of the food access problem and focuses on the need for many different types of localized, customized, community-based solutions.

Dessert not Deserts: Opportunities and Recommendations

The collective lesson of existing food desert problems and of many creative solutions being implemented in our communities is that one size does not fit all: solutions must include and engage neighborhood residents and businesses together with more influential stakeholders and must reflect actual conditions in each community.

In this report, Just Harvest has identified four key processes and four key areas of public policy action that point the way toward success:
Process:
1. Investigate – More detailed community level information and insight from residents is needed to respond to dynamic changes over time.
2. Policy Framework - Cooperation among public and private sectors and community stakeholders can best flow from existing partnerships such as the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council.
3. Cross-Sector Cooperation – Every sector of the community – residents, business and labor; government and private sector; academic and health care institutions; anti-hunger groups and social service providers; wholesalers and retailers; farmers and processors – has a role to play and must work side-by-side.
4. Leadership from Within – Inclusiveness is critical to success. Top-down solutions without community-level participation and leadership are doomed to failure.

Policy:
1. Healthy Corner Stores (HCS) Pittsburgh and Allegheny County should actively devote economic development resources to enabling existing small stores to expand their product mix to become Healthy Corner Stores. Investment in Healthy Corner Stores should be incorporated into broader neighborhood planning and commercial revitalization strategies. Local government and nonprofits should partner in aggressively pursuing federal funding and private capital for a comprehensive Healthy Corner Store initiative. Technical assistance should be made available to assist stores with links to local farmers or other suppliers of high-quality produce.
2. Mobile Markets Public and private capital should be “mobilized” to invest in creative start-ups with business plans to provide these services especially in isolated City and County communities. Regulatory agencies should assist such start-ups in meeting compliance requirements to prevent sound rules from becoming insurmountable barriers to success. Linkages to farmers and other suppliers are also a critical ingredient.

Stands can only operate in warm seasons. Another advantage of the program is the relatively low-cost of operation, modest stat-up capital needs, and the ability for one mobile vendor to tackle several food deserts.
3. Seasonal Solutions – Farmers’ Markets and Farm Stands Local farmers’ markets should adopt EBT accessible payment systems as rapidly as possible and our community should launch a fundraising campaign to finance an EBT Bonus Value service at local markets.
4. Full-scale Grocery Store Development Public economic development agencies and food retailers should cooperate to develop viable business plans that can better serve communities with low access to food. More experimental initiatives such as the nonprofit grocery in Hazelwood led by community groups and the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank should be actively supported by the public and private sectors.