



Health and Nutrition

FOOD POLICY BRIEF #2

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Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition

The Problem

Cuyahoga County faces what can be termed a “hidden hunger” crisis which particularly affects the residents of Cleveland. Hidden hunger refers to people who are obese, but nutrient deficient. This is the result of the over-consumption of “empty calorie” foods that include high levels of fats and carbohydrates, but little-to-no nutritional value. According to 2006 data, 33.7% of Cleveland residents are obese and an additional 34.8% are overweight. These figures trend higher than the 28.4% of Ohio residents who are obese.

The Facts

Obesity poses a greater threat to limited resource populations, many of whom live in inner-city neighborhoods that have lost full-service grocers. About 197,136 residents of Cuyahoga County live below the poverty level. The poverty rate for Cleveland is 32.4% (compared to 15% for Cuyahoga County). About 51% of Cleveland residents are African-American. Nationwide, there is an average of four times more grocery stores in predominantly white neighborhoods than in predominantly African-American or Latino neighborhoods. As a result, more African-American and

Latino urban populations are reduced to shopping at corner stores, liquor stores, gas stations, or fast food franchises. The incidences of such chronic diseases as Type II diabetes and heart disease also affects these populations disproportionately.

According to the Center for Community Solutions, about 26% of residents receive food stamps in Cleveland, representing a 22% increase from 2002 to 2007. Inner-ring suburban communities such as Lakewood, Parma, and Cleveland Heights saw a 74% increase in food stamp participation during the same time period. This shows an upward trend toward increasing rates of poverty and accompanying threats to the long-term health and welfare of sizable percentages of Cuyahoga County’s residents.

There are neighborhoods here where, within a two-mile radius, there isn't any fresh produce available. Studies have shown that people who live in these food deserts tend to eat fewer fruits and vegetables, irrespective of their income.

-Punam Ohri-Vachaspati, PhD
Nutrition Educator

There is a clear need for increasing the availability of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other whole foods to enhance the health and nutrition of Cuyahoga County residents. Changes in dietary behavior can help to develop new markets for Northeast Ohio growers. According to the

USDA, the U.S. does not currently produce enough fruits and vegetables to provide a healthy diet for every U.S. citizen per the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Most

fruits and vegetables travel 1,500 to 2,500 miles and come from places like Chile, Mexico, Argentina, and Ecuador. Many of these countries lack safe standards for the application of pesticides or other chemical inputs. To meet dietary recommendations, Americans need to increase fruit consumption by 132%, legume consumption by 431% while reducing high-starch foods by 35%. The USDA concludes that not only is food not in the right places for low-income populations, but it is not abundant enough for all populations. This speaks to enormous opportunities for fruit and vegetable production both within urban neighborhoods as well as on rural farms to enhance the health and welfare of county residents.

What's Being Done

Despite this deficiency in the local supply of healthy foods, health and nutrition activities are already being promoted by a variety of government and non-profit agencies. The Cleveland Food Bank has donated more than 5 million pounds of fruits and vegetables annually that include donations from Ohio growers and produce suppliers. The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) is a federally-funded program run through Ohio State University Extension. Cuyahoga County hosts the largest EFNEP program in the state of Ohio, providing a series of nutrition education classes to limited-resource families and 3-6 grade youth. The City Fresh program emerged as a social enterprise established by the New Agrarian Center, OSU Extension, the Cleveland Department of Public Health, and the Ohio Farmers Union. City Fresh organizes Fresh Stops in neighborhoods which combine the distribution of food shares (harvest bags of seasonally available foods) and nutrition education and other community education

services. The Cuyahoga County Board of Health has promoted the installation of community gardens in East Cleveland, Warrensville Heights, and North Randall as a way of increasing education and access around fruits and vegetables while beautifying and enhancing neighborhoods.

What's Next?

The health and nutrition working group is primarily focused on improving healthy food access to under-served communities through a combination of nutrition education to change awareness and improving local food accessibility to improve food choices within urban communities. Immediate projects will focus on improving EBT access at farmers markets to enable food stamp recipients to access locally grown foods. Funding from the county Board of Cardiovascular Health will fund an EBT program at the Coit Road Farmers Market in East Cleveland, the first farmers market to accept Ohio Direction in the county. The working group will also focus on developing a farm-to-school program with local school districts of greatest need. The working group also plans to create a common information clearing house with recipes, nutrition information to improve access to nutrition information across the county.

