



# HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

A lack of access to fresh, healthy foods can contribute to poor diets and higher levels of obesity and other diet-related diseases. A growing number of children in the United States—one in three between the ages of 2 and 19, according to peer-reviewed studies collected by the [White House’s Task Force on Childhood Obesity](#)—are overweight or obese. Overweight children may experience higher rates of heart disease, diabetes and other chronic conditions as adults and must bear the costs of treating them. First Lady Michelle Obama’s [Let’s Move! initiative](#) was launched in part in response to these troubling findings.

Food access is about more than just whether there are grocery stores in a community. It also has to do with whether households can afford to purchase food—and affordability is closely related to rates of employment and job quality.

Increasing food access nationwide can help address the problems of unemployment and lack of access to healthy food simultaneously. When underserved communities connect with regional producers and food businesses, the connection expands marketing opportunities, drives the growth of new local businesses



## FAST FACTS

- In 2010, USDA helped nearly 900,000 seniors and 2.15 million WIC recipients access fresh fruits and vegetables directly from local farmers at farmers’ markets.
- Between 2010 and 2011, the number of farmers’ markets and farm stands authorized to accept EBT grew by 51 percent, to over 2,400.

and jobs, and increases food access. Farmers’ markets, mobile produce vendors, farm to school initiatives, food hubs and other community-based methods for selling local food are already gaining an impressive track record on these fronts.

But even in communities with sufficient food access, families are not eating as many fruits and vegetables as recommended in the 2010 [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#). The

*Chef JuJu Harris, Capital Area Food Bank, chops cabbage for an Apple, Bulgar and Cabbage Salad recipe during a “Healthy Garden” workshop at the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s The People’s Garden.*

new USDA food icon, called *MyPlate*, illustrates the Guidelines' recommendation that we all fill half of our plate with fruits and vegetables. As families improve the health of their meals, demand for produce will undoubtedly increase. American farmers and food businesses have an opportunity to meet this demand with expanded local production and processing—or else they may lose out to other parts of the country or to other countries. A 2010 study in **16 counties in Northeastern Ohio** models what would happen if 25 percent of local demand was met with local production and finds that 27,664 new jobs would be created, providing work to about one in eight unemployed residents. Annual regional sales would rise by \$4.2 billion.

#### **ON THE GROUND: KYF AND HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS**

Because so many different factors impact a family or community's access to healthy food, many USDA agencies have a hand in supporting efforts on the ground. With the launch of the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative, USDA gained a forum to examine how stronger local and regional food systems relate to and influence healthy food access. Some of the efforts supported by KYF include:

##### **Assessing the state of food access in America.**

USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) **reported** in 2009 that 23.5 million Americans, including 6.5 million children, live in low-income areas more than one mile from a supermarket. ERS developed the **Food Desert Locator**, an online mapping tool designed to give communities a snapshot of food access in their region and a place to start their own investigations, which had over 320,000 page views between its launch in April 2011 and the end of the year. The **Food Environment Atlas**, another tool developed by ERS in a cooperative



*Livia Marqués and Juanita Ewell stand in front of the tool shed at Eat Healthy Live Healthy Urban Garden in Baltimore, Maryland. The mural was painted by Towson University student John Rice.*

agreement with the Agricultural Marketing Service and Food and Nutrition Service, maps food stores and provides data on food insecurity, food assistance, local food availability and other socioeconomic metrics, often at a county level. The role of the KYF initiative in these efforts has been to provide a forum to discuss analysis and presentation of data and to publicize these resources in a centralized **website**.

KYF has also helped **bring visibility** to relevant USDA resources of which the food access community may not be aware. For example, in 2011, the **Agriculture and Food Research Initiative** of USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture was heavily involved in supporting research on local foods and food access. Among other projects, it helped North Dakota State University establish a program to increase food

security for Native people on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation; provided Penn State with funds to evaluate regional food systems in the Northeast and enhance food access in underserved populations; supported a Virginia Tech initiative to improve food security and local food economies in the Appalachian region; and helped the University of Wyoming identify community organizing strategies to increase food access through local food systems. These efforts will provide models and evidence for other communities around the country.

##### **Helping farmers connect directly with underserved communities: Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) at farmers' markets.**

When farmers' markets and farm stands can accept electronic benefits such as SNAP (food stamps) and coupons from participants in the Women, Infants and

**Know Your Farmer in Action: Retail outlets that redeem SNAP benefits must be certified as SNAP retailers.** Farmers' markets have long participated in SNAP, but with the conversion from food stamp coupons to EBT, farmers' markets faced unique challenges. For example, the infrastructure (electricity and telephone lines) necessary for accepting EBT debit does not exist at most open air farmers' markets. In 2009, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service streamlined requirements for SNAP certification to allow farmers' markets and farmers and non-profit entities operating Community Supported Agriculture programs to more readily participate in EBT. At the same time, the Agricultural Marketing Service began making grants through the Farmers' Market Promotion Program to fund the installation of wireless point-of-sale devices so that outdoor markets could participate. And in 2010, AMS and FNS collaborated on a handbook for farmers' market operators interested in participating in SNAP, helping them navigate the process and take advantage of available resources.

Children (WIC) program, beneficiaries gain access to healthy, local food while farmers and ranchers increase their customer base. USDA is helping to connect low-income consumers with local producers through the expansion of EBT at farmers' markets and farm stands. That work has accelerated in the past three years due in part to the emphasis that the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative placed on expanding access to local foods.



In 2008, Congress targeted 10% of funds in the **Farmers' Market Promotion Program (FMPP)** to increase EBT access at farmers' markets. USDA has awarded approximately \$5 million in FMPP grants to EBT projects in 18 states since then, well over the 10% requirement. In 2011, Congress **doubled funding for FMPP** and priority funding was given to projects associated with increasing healthy food access. As a result, over 40 percent of the projects funded by FMPP in 2011 will serve one or more food deserts. Leveraging Congress' investment even more, USDA has partnered with private philanthropies and other groups that match each dollar that SNAP recipients spend at farmers' markets, effectively doubling their benefits.

Two related programs to increase healthy local food access are the **WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program** and **Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition**

**Program**, both administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. In 2010, these programs served nearly 900,000 seniors and 2.15 million WIC recipients, helping them purchase fresh fruits and vegetables directly from local farmers.

Using **Specialty Crop Block Grants** from USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, states are expanding the availability of locally grown specialty crops to low-income buyers by supporting EBT in farmers' markets and pilot-testing incentives. In 2011, 41 Specialty Crop Block Grant projects across the country targeted healthy food access in underserved communities, up from 30 projects nationwide in 2010. The grants are requested by states.

The results of these combined efforts have been significant. Between 2010 and 2011, the number of farmers' markets and farm stands authorized to accept

EBT grew by 51 percent, to over 2,400. This increase doesn't just translate into increased food access; it also means increased revenues for farmers selling at the markets.

**Supporting brick-and-mortar retail infrastructure to boost healthy food access.** Food and Nutrition Service's **Hunger-Free Communities grants** are one source of support for infrastructure to expand local food access. In El Paso, Texas, one of the poorest communities in the nation, dozens of warehouses were left empty after the garment industry moved south. **Centro del Obrero Fronterizo** received a Hunger-Free Communities grant in 2011 to establish a community market in one of the

empty warehouses, providing local producers with a place to sell fresh produce, grains, meat and tortillas. Community members, many of them with roots in Mexico, can now access healthy, culturally-appropriate food and take nutrition and cooking classes. This grant is helping producers tap into a market that was not being served, benefiting all involved. The challenge of increasing food access is also an opportunity to create jobs, putting our communities back to work and opening up new markets for farmers and ranchers.

Expanding other supply chain infrastructure. USDA Rural Development's **Community Facilities Grant and Loan Program** has been used to construct new local food

infrastructure in underserved areas, including **kitchens** to help schools prepare more local foods, cold storage to help food banks store local produce, and refrigerated trucks to distribute fresh, local food to needy families.

For other USDA resources that support urban agriculture, see **this memo** from Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan.



In Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley, the town of Easton is using EBT to expand food access and support local jobs in agriculture. An FMPP grant is supporting this work. A town with limited supermarket access, Easton's market is one of only 15 in Pennsylvania that accepts EBT. The market has seen concrete impacts from its investment: between 2010 and 2011, use of EBT cards at the market increased by 32 percent; vendor sales increased by 20 percent; and use of benefits through the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program grew three-fold. The result has been more money in farmers' pockets and more healthy food on the plates of low-income consumers.

**IN RURAL CALAVERAS COUNTY, CA, A DIRECT LOAN FROM RURAL DEVELOPMENT'S COMMUNITY FACILITIES PROGRAM HELPED THE RESOURCE CONNECTION BUILD COLD STORAGE TO TAKE IN FRESH PRODUCE FROM LOCAL FARMS AND DISTRIBUTE IT TO NEEDY FAMILIES**

[Click here to watch the video](#)



# CASE STUDY

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## Beginning Farmers in Cleveland, Ohio

Since 2005, northeastern Ohio has lost 20% of its farms and 29% of its farmland. High rates of unemployment continue to plague the area, falling particularly hard on minorities and people with disabilities. Increasing rates of chronic disease exacerbated by urban food deserts speak to the need for healthier food options for all residents.

In 2011, The Ohio State University (OSU) received a grant through the **Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program**, run by USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, to address these related issues. The BEAN Project (Beginning Entrepreneurs in Agricultural Networks) offers training opportunities and workshops to women, minorities, refugees and limited-resource adults with developmental disabilities and will utilize vacant land in the City of Cleveland to develop small farm enterprises. This project is a unique partnership of the university Extension system, government agencies, local and state legislators, and several civic groups.

Since receiving the grant, OSU Extension has conducted classes, workshops and field trips to develop a more vibrant local food system. The 12-week Market Gardener Training Program helped launch 7 new local farm enterprises involving 11 new farmers. A 6-acre farm business incubator, the Kinsman Farm, makes land, fencing, water, storage and soil amendments available to participants. Additional farm sites are giving twenty recent refugees and immigrants an opportunity to start farming in the city of Cleveland, while farm business classes

help them market their produce locally. An agricultural training program with the Cuyahoga County Board of Developmental Disabilities has already led to new jobs on urban farms for 26 socially disadvantaged individuals.



*Participants in The Ohio State's BEAN project learn about developing small farm enterprises, including growing crops in a hoop house.*

**Bringing food to where it's needed.** Finally, the **Healthy Urban Food Enterprise Development Center**, a project of the Wallace Center at Winrock International supported by USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, has funded many projects to connect low food access populations with local foods. In **Minnesota**, the nonprofit group Peta Wakan Tipi ("Sacred Fire Lodge" in the Lakota language) used this grant in 2009 to purchase and develop a mobile farmers' market, improving healthy food distribution to American Indian communities. The truck will deliver food from an American Indian-owned organic farm to four distribution sites in the St. Paul area, increasing sales revenue for the farm while expanding food access.

**Linking food access, agricultural education, and communities.** In the 2008 Farm Bill, Congress explicitly identified community gardens as one solution to hunger. In Nebraska, United Methodist Ministries took that connection to heart and secured a three-year **Community Food Project grant** administered by USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture in 2008 for its **Big Rural Garden Project**. It is developing a network of community gardens in 11 rural, underserved counties. Nearly 600 Nebraskans now volunteer in one of 15 gardens, growing food for their own consumption, for sale at farmers' markets, and to donate to local food pantries. Participants also receive nutrition and health education classes. "When we began this project," says Project Director Rev. Stephanie Ahlschwede, "we asked people how far they were driving for fresh produce. In some cases the answer was 45 minutes each way. Our goal became clear: grow fresh produce locally and get it to the people... The net outcome has been a tremendous increase in the amount of produce grown and consumed locally." This project is a follow-on to **urban Big Garden**,



*Participants in the Big Rural Garden project in Nebraska, coordinated by United Methodist Ministries, harvest crops.*

a project that has developed 32 gardens in low-income areas of Omaha.

USDA's Forest Service is another partner in efforts to increase healthy food access through gardening. Through the Baltimore Ecosystem Study, the Forest Service's Northern Research Station is a major partner in efforts to expand urban agriculture as a desired land use in Baltimore's sustainability plan. Forest Service staff helped the city identify opportunities for revitalized landscapes, including vacant lands and park land that could be used for orchards, grain production and other crops to supply local food businesses. The Forest

Service's **Urban and Community Forestry Program** is helping cities all across America transform the urban landscape and boost healthy food access by growing and harvesting orchards in public spaces; learn more [here](#).

Successfully increasing healthy food access will take a variety of creative, localized approaches. Local and regional foods play an important role, and through the Know Your Farmer initiative, USDA has a space to coordinate and publicize these win-win approaches for producers and consumers. To see projects that are expanding healthy food access across the country, visit the [KYF Map](#).

# CASE STUDY

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## Farmers' Market Promotion Program

In Forest Grove, Oregon, a rural community west of Portland with a 27 percent poverty rate, Adelante Mujeres is working with the Hispanic population to increase economic and social equity and boost healthy food access. The group provides an intensive 22-week land-based training program called Adelante Agricultura that runs throughout the year. By increasing producers' knowledge of local growing conditions, training participants in farm/business management, and providing market mentoring, Adelante Mujeres helps farmers successfully grow and market their produce. Products have a guaranteed market outlet: the Forest Grove Farmers' Market, managed by Adelante Mujeres, and three local apartment complexes. The market is now drawing additional customers through the introduction of EBT technology. By using USDA funding as leverage, Adelante Mujeres was able to secure support from Pacific University and others for a SNAP incentive program, which provides a \$5 match per customer using SNAP to purchase food at the market.

Adelante Mujeres secured a **2009 Farmers' Market Promotion Program grant** through USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service to conduct an outreach and marketing campaign targeting senior and low-income customers, who represent 40 percent of the local population. During the FMPP funding period, foot traffic at the Forest Grove Farmers' Market nearly doubled, increasing from 800 customers per week to 1,500. EBT redemption increased 422 percent. 25 farmers now regularly sell within Adelante Mujeres' guaranteed markets, which represent approximately 80 percent of their sales.



*With 2009 funding from USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program, Adelante Mujeres in Forest Grove, OR is helping Latino and new immigrant farmers access land and markets.*