Southern States Addressing Access to Healthy Foods

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Three Southern legislatures made progress on laws that could help close the gap on the lack of access that millions of its residents have to healthy, fresh food. But advocates say more work is needed to fund the efforts.

"The movement is gaining steam," said Brian Lang, director of The Food Trust's National Campaign for Healthy Food Access. The nonprofit works with partners across the country on a variety of ways to improve access to healthy, affordable foods, from better loan terms for stores, subsidies, tax incentives, and a host of other financial packages.

"This is a problem you can fight and solve, in part, through community financing options," Lang said. "So it becomes a rallying point for people to address the problem in their states."

Just this past week, and after just one year of winding through the state legislature, Alabama's governor signed the Healthy Food Financing Act that will give incentives to grocery stores and other retailers to develop in areas of Alabama with limited access to healthy food. However, the cash-strapped state hasn't funded the initiative. Because of an impasse, lawmakers will head into special session later this summer to hash out the state budget, but it's unclear whether they will address the new healthy food law.

In North Carolina, lawmakers have built momentum toward passing a Healthy Corner Store Initiative, which would be funded with $1 million. The money would go to local health departments, which would then provide grants to help store owners in food deserts with education about healthy food; buy equipment such as shelves and refrigeration for fresh fruits and vegetables; and connect with local farmers and fisherman. But funding there isn't complete yet. The House version of the state's budget had the provision; the Senate's did not. North Carolina's budget negotiators recently took a summer break from negotiations and won't return until after mid-July.

Louisiana, by contrast, passed a Healthy Food Retail Act six years ago to help grocers and farmers' markets expand into fresh food-needy areas. The state has never provided funding for the law. Despite coming close this year with bipartisan support in the midst of a budget crisis, the governor recently deleted $400,000 for the program from the state's budget.

"We hear time and time again that this was a complicated session and it was just a particularly difficult session to ask for money in," said Emery Van Hook, associate director of Market Umbrella, a nonprofit that runs four Crescent City Farmers Markets in New Orleans and educates and advocates for public markets. "We are still hopeful. And are continuing to work with all our partners, from farmers and doctors to all those in state government, to make something happen next session."

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, between 20 and 25 million Americans lack access to a grocery store and live in "food deserts"—living more than a mile away in urban areas and 10 miles away in rural places.
Studies show this can contribute to a poor diet, which can lead to higher levels of obesity and other diet-related diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease. Researchers In an article published last year mapped areas around the country based on rural poverty, health, and food access. The authors found that "lower access to healthy foods tends to be clustered in the southern United States and a smaller region of the southwestern United States" - the same areas that have higher rural poverty and lower healthy outcomes. Still the report, said more research is needed to directly tie lack of food access to poor health.

In Alabama, a mapping report earlier this year by VOICES for Alabama's Children and The Food Trust showed that every county in the state has at least one neighborhood with limited access to fresh food, and that the reality affects 1.8 million people, nearly half of them children. VOICES, a nonprofit, is a longtime advocacy group on children's issues in Alabama.

Food access is one of the six focus areas for Voices for Healthy Kids®, a joint initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and American Heart Association. Voices for Healthy Kids supported the efforts in North Carolina, Alabama, and Louisiana to increase access to healthy, affordable foods.

Speaking about Alabama, Executive Director Jill Birnbaum said funding is critical to keep the momentum. "To ensure the viability of this initiative, we encourage state leaders to pursue diverse funding sources," she said. "A key to the success of programs in other states has been the dedicated funding stream established through public and private partners committed to improving the health and economies of local communities."

The North Carolina Alliance for Health released a poll funded by the American Heart Association that showed 70 percent of state residents favored the creation of a Healthy Corner Store Initiative. The survey by Public Opinion Strategies included 500 registered voters, and has a margin of error of 4.38 percent. Sarah Jacobson, healthy food access coordinator for the North Carolina Alliance for Health, said funding from lawmakers, who will be negotiating the state budget later this month, will be an important step in food access for the state. About 1.5 million North Carolinians live in 349 federally recognized "food deserts."

"It will also help small food retail owners enhance their businesses and provide new markets for North Carolina farmers," she said. "It will not only benefit public health, it will also benefit local economies and help grow local food businesses."

The ideas around making fresh and healthy food available through financing have been discussed around the country since the 1980s, Lang said. But they didn't truly gain traction until 2004, when Pennsylvania created its fresh food initiative providing flexible community financing to attract supermarkets and groceries to low-income areas. Other places have followed suit. Illinois and New York, and the cities of Detroit, New York, New Orleans, and the District of Columbia have passed fresh food access policies that use financing pools, tax or zoning incentives, or a combination of options.

Pennsylvania's six-year program, Lang said, became a model. The state seeded the initiative with a $30 million grant, which was leveraged with $145 million in additional investment to provide loans and grants for predevelopment, land acquisition, equipment and construction costs, as well as for start-up costs such as employee recruitment and training.
In Louisiana, Van Hook said the issue encompasses health, equity and economics. "In an environment where there is so much division, whether in the legislature or in communities, healthy food is a wonderful uniter," she said. "Food is part of everyone's life. These initiatives are a win-win for the most vulnerable members of our communities, for the urban and rural areas, for agricultural interests and economic development."

The positive movement in the South is welcomed, she said, and it inspires more advocates to keep working for more access to healthy food.

"There is so much need in the South and potentially there is so much good that can come from these initiatives," Van Hook said. "That's what keeps us going. We know and see the good that can come from it."