Legislation Fights Obesity, Heart Disease in "Food Deserts"
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RALEIGH, N.C. – There are approximately 349 "food deserts" in North Carolina. The term describes a community that does not have healthy food retailers.

That's according to research by The Support Center, a community development nonprofit. This summer, North Carolina lawmakers are considering legislation that would create a fund to use the existing retail-outlet infrastructure in the state to increase access to nutritious foods.

Rochelle Sparko, policy director for the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, says state involvement is needed at this time.

"Many of the stores that are shutting down were profitable, so we're not really sure what's happening there," says Sparko. "So we're seeing the free market not working and that's why it's important for the state to step in and invest in figuring out how do we get healthy food, local food, to these communities."

The Healthy Food Small Retailer/Corners Store Act (HB 250) passed the state House, but must now be funded in the final budget and passed by both the House and the Senate in order to be implemented. Food deserts are found in 80 counties across North Carolina, including 31 counties considered the most economically distressed counties by the state's Department of Commerce.

Sparko says just as important as funding a program to increase access to healthy food in food-desert communities is the research the legislation would fund to validate the difference healthy food can make in the health and well-being of the communities.

"We are really excited about the possibility of a pilot program where we can see, with a relatively small investment by the state, what are the outcomes," says Sparko. "One of the things that will happen here is data collection and analysis so we can see if something like this results in healthier population."

According to the Support Center, an investment in food deserts would create 100 to 200 permanent jobs for every new supermarket that is developed, the creation of construction jobs, growth of existing businesses and renovation of commercial districts.

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