Cooking Holiday Meals is a Challenge in N.C.’s Food Deserts

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More than a million North Carolinians live in areas without access to fresh food.

By Rose Hoban

Nothing says “holiday” more than a festive meal – perhaps a ham or a turkey with all the trimmings.

But for people who live in areas without ready access to food, preparing those meals can be complicated by limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Spread across 80 North Carolina counties are 349 areas that fit the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s definition of a food desert. In rural areas, that’s a region with low-income residents who have to travel more than 10 miles to find a place to purchase healthy food. In an urban area, a food desert is a neighborhood where the purchase of fresh food requires travel of more than a mile.

“I’ve been living in my neighborhood for decades, and we once had a Winn-Dixie but we no longer do,” said Linda Riggins, a social worker who lives in Southeast Raleigh with her husband and three teenagers. “Smaller grocery stores have tried. We had two for a while, but they just didn’t survive.”

Riggins said her neighborhood does have an abundance of corner stores, convenience stores and lots of fast food, a situation the USDA says is also typical of a food desert.

For Riggins, the nearest place to get a quart of milk takes 15 to 20 minutes by car. One of the only grocery stores near her has what she described as “wrinkled, tired or wilted food.”

“You can’t just walk in there to pick up a box of those little Cuties – you know, the clementines. You have to make sure there’s none that are rotting,” said Riggins. “Turnover is slow and they’re slow in switching stuff out.”

Long-distance runaround

Riggins’ daughter goes to a school in a neighborhood near a decent grocery store, and Riggins shops when she goes to pick her up. But many people are not so advantaged to have reliable transportation, said Betsy Vetter, vice president for government relations for the North Carolina chapter of the American Heart Association.

“It’s a much bigger issue than people realize,” Vetter said.

“If your physician encourages you to make healthy choices, and everywhere you go you’re just drawn to unhealthy ones, it makes that task, that life choice, that much harder,” she said.

That’s the message Vetter conveyed to members of the General Assembly during the last legislative session. She worked on an initiative to improve the quality of corner stores in food deserts throughout the state, particularly in rural areas.

Many people have no access to transportation, she said. “If you’ve ever tried to get on a bus and have a child in tow and have to go pick up your groceries that way, it can be extremely difficult and can limit what you can do.”

But sometimes there’s not even a bus to board.
Transportation can be a vexing issue in rural communities, like the one in which Yolanda Dickerson lives, in an annexed area of Raleigh contiguous to Knightdale.

A working mother, Dickerson and her daughter, Ilana Adlee, live with Dickerson's mother, a stroke survivor. Dickerson has congenital heart disease. For her, eating healthy is serious business.

"The closest store is maybe a 12- or 13-minute drive; there's no where I can walk to," she said.

"If I didn't have a car, it'd be impossible."

There's one country store that's been there since she was a girl, but Dickerson said they have only a small meat counter where the prices are “two to three times what you'd pay anywhere else.”

It's not unusual to find higher prices in remote stores, Vetter said, and lower quality too. “People in those situations can face choices between, 'Do I have the gas money to go back and get this item, or do I have to do without it?'

"And the time!"

She returned to the example of someone on a bus.

“You may really need a gallon of milk, but you may be forced to buy half a gallon,” she said. “That means you have to make more trips, which takes more of your time and resources every single week.”

Vetter, who lived in a rural area for 15 years, said if you need something to prepare a meal you could end up "really stuck."

That’s happened to Dickerson, who said there have been times when she is getting ready to cook and finds she doesn’t have an ingredient.

“I’ve completely changed a meal because I didn’t want to run out to get one item,” she said. “I just refuse.”

**Rural economic benefit**

When asked why not live in an area where it’s easier to shop, Dickerson countered that sometimes a person doesn’t have an option about where to live. She took up residence with her mother because her mom wasn’t doing well. Less than a week after she moved in, her mother had a massive stroke.

“She can’t get to the store on her own,” Dickerson said.

Vetter pointed out that sometimes to find affordable housing people have to go where they can get it, and that can be in the rural fringes of urban areas.

She also said that North Carolina is a state with deep rural traditions.

“Do we want to just say, 'Well, they're expendable, these rural areas?" Vetter said. “Is that a decision we want to make?"

She noted that food deserts aren’t just about proximity to grocery stores, whether rural or urban – that access to food is intertwined with affordable housing, poverty, the survival of rural communities. Without easy access to food," Vetter said, “companies and businesses don’t want to come there, people don’t want to move there, people try to move out of there."

She called food a "core component" of what a community needs to survive.

Vetter's bill, [HB 250](https://www.ncleg.gov/BillStatus/BillStatus.cfm?Bill=HB250), passed the state House of Representatives but is still in the Senate. The measure would provide a million dollars in small loans and grants to corner stores to buy refrigerators and display units for healthier options.

She believes that it’s a “positive thing that you can do with a minimal amount of state investment that can really make an impact.”
Vetter admitted feeling some discouragement that two of her legislative champions will be out of the mix. Rep. Brian Brown (R-Greenville) strongly supported the bill, but resigned in October. And Rep. Chris Whitmire (R-Rosman), who chaired a 2014 committee looking at food deserts, announced he will not run for re-election.

Nonetheless, she’ll keep pushing the issue.

“In our polling, people want to see change happen and want to see the ability to make more choices in their daily lives,” Vetter said.

“It really is a situation where everyone can get a win out of this one, and it’s a minimal investment.”