Healthy Food Access in North Carolina

*Improve Our Health, Create More Jobs*

There are too few supermarkets and healthy food options in North Carolina’s lower-income communities. According to the USDA, almost **2 million North Carolina residents** live in communities with low access to healthy food, a number which includes over **450,000 children**. Residents in these communities suffer from **disproportionately high rates of obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related diseases**, conditions which reduce people’s quality of life and negatively impact the state’s economy. The North Carolina Alliance for Health is raising awareness about this issue among policymakers and other civic leaders.

**Food Access, Health, and Jobs**

*The situation is not unique to North Carolina, and has been researched extensively over the past 20 years. Evidence finds that:*

- Access to healthy food is a challenge for many communities, particularly those living in low income neighborhoods, communities of color, and rural areas.
- Living closer to healthy food retail is associated with better eating habits and a decreased risk for obesity and diet-related diseases.
- Healthy food retail stimulates economic activity.

**Health and the Cost to North Carolina’s Economy**

*The burden of disease caused by the obesity epidemic has wide-reaching effects on the state’s economy and healthcare costs:*

- **Excess weight** has been estimated to cost North Carolina more than **$17 billion annually in medical costs and lost employee productivity**.
- **Diabetes** alone costs North Carolina more than **$5 billion annually in medical expenses and lost employee productivity**.
- **Employers bear the heaviest cost burden** and therefore have strong incentive to support policies and practices that diminishes chronic disease due to diet and lifestyle.

For the first time in history, American children are projected to live shorter lives than their parents. The dire circumstances and projections have created urgency about the need to reduce obesity rates and widespread interest in changes in food environments. **Improving healthy food access has been recognized by national agencies and associations including the Centers for Disease Control and the American Heart Association as a necessary strategy to reduce obesity and by extension public and private healthcare expenditures.** Research confirms that while it is not the sole solution to the complexities of the obesity epidemic, access to nutritious and affordable food is an important factor enabling community residents to make easy, healthy choices about their diets.

Improving health outcomes is not the only reason for increasing access to healthy food retail in disinvested communities. An equally important motive is the role of healthy food retail outlets as drivers of economic activity. Even during times of economic downturn and amid threats to established business models, the supermarket and grocery store industry is a powerful economic entity that can create jobs and stimulate growth.

*Contact Pam Seamans, NC Alliance for Health Executive Director at 919-949-5992 or pam@ncallianceforhealth.org about how you can help move North Carolina to a healthier future.*