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Advocates and Lawmakers Gather to Pray for Healthy Food Access in North Carolina

Obesity Impacts Military Readiness

Raleigh – North Carolina lawmakers, advocates, airmen and members of the faith community gathered at the North Carolina Museum of History on Wednesday to pray, eat and discuss improving access to healthy food across the state through the Healthy Corner Store Initiative.

North Carolina has more than 349 food deserts across 80 counties, impacting 1.5 million North Carolina residents. Limited food access adversely impacts diet and health and is one of the causes of the state's high rate of obesity.

"With more than 36 percent of our state's children classified as overweight or obese it is essential that we take steps to address healthy food access in our great state," said Morgan Wittman Gramann, Managing Director of the North Carolina Alliance for Health.

After her opening statements, Bishop Hope Morgan Ward of the United Methodist Church led those assembled in prayer. The scripture reading focused on the connection between food access and the living of a full and complete life.

Representative Yvonne Holley (Wake County), who is a primary sponsor on the bill that would establish the Healthy Corner Store Initiative, encouraged the group to keep up efforts to bring healthy food to food deserts. "We have a problem in our state and I encourage you all to keep working to make a difference," she said.

Local farmer Larry Newlin of Peaceful River Farm and Colonel Paul Conner, Commander of the 4th Medical Group at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base also spoke, expressing concern for the growing obesity crisis in North Carolina and its effects on citizens and soldiers alike.

"Obesity is a crisis in our state," said Newlin. "By helping put fresh, local food into corner stores, as well as ensuring stores have the equipment to stock the foods and the tools to market the foods to their customers, we create markets for farmers, like myself, and ensure that communities will have access to healthy, local options," he stated.

According to Colonel Conner, "Our warfighters don't perform to a level that no other armed forces have ever seen in the history of the world because they are just lucky. We are able to do so because of our deliberate, multi-disciplinary and multi-factorial approach to education and training – and this is no different when it comes to our personal fitness and health."

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However, the military faces the same public health crisis affecting the rest of the country, he warned. “The Department of Defense has experienced periods where over four thousand five hundred warfighters had to be discharged, each year, for failing to meet our weight standards.”

At present approximately 68.8 percent of children in the United States are overweight, a crisis of personal and economic health that the Healthy Corner Store Initiative aims to address by connecting those with limited access to healthy food with locally-grown food via locally-owned corner stores.

“They say the best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago, well the next best time is today. Weight and obesity issues won’t be solved with this event, but if we don’t start today we will never arrive at the answer tomorrow,” Conner finished.

The NC House’s version of the state budget contains a \$300,000 appropriation for the Healthy Corner Store Initiative. At present, the Senate version of the budget does not contain any funding for the program. Budget conferees will begin meeting in the coming weeks to iron out the differences between the two legislative chambers. “We are hopeful the General Assembly will fully fund this important Initiative in this year’s budget,” said Gramann.

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BACKGROUND:

A Healthy Corner Store Initiative would assess communities for access to healthy foods, engage interested small retail store owners to offer healthier options, and provide participating retailers with marketing and technical assistance (signage, cooking demonstrations, etc.) to help them promote the healthy foods they sell. The Initiative would work to connect these store owners with North Carolina farmers, benefiting local farmers by expanding their market opportunities. The Initiative coordinates with SNAP and WIC to ensure underserved communities can maximize their utilization of these programs in the healthy corner store locations.

About NC Alliance for Health:

The North Carolina Alliance for Health is an independent, statewide coalition of public, private, professional and nonprofit organizations advocating for obesity and tobacco use prevention policies before North Carolina's legislative and executive branches. Alliance members and partners include the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association, the American Cancer Society, the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, American Lung Association, NC Pediatric Society, Prevention Partners, NC Association of Local Health Directors, NC Public Health Association, March of Dimes, American Diabetes Association, Youth Empowered Solutions, NC Alliance of YMCA's, the Council of Churches and many others. For more information, visit <http://www.ncallianceforhealth.org/>.