Legislation Would Increase Access to Healthy, Affordable Food

Senate Bill (SB) 1454, by Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr. and House Bill (HB) 2414, by Representative Boris Miles, seek to improve the nutritional health of Texans by exploring ways to increase access to healthy and affordable food. SB 1454 would expand the membership, scope, and focus of the Interagency Obesity Council to enhance the state’s efforts to fight obesity; develop a financing plan to increase the availability of supermarkets in underserved areas; support local farmers and increase the availability of fresh produce in schools and child care centers; and develop incentives to encourage Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamp) recipients to purchase more fresh produce. HB 2414 would continue and expand the work of the Healthy Food Advisory Committee, which was established in 2009 by SB 343, by Senator Jane Nelson, to study the retail availability of healthy foods in underserved areas of this state. This Policy Page explores food access barriers in Texas and the options for increasing the availability and affordability of nutritious food.

Nutritional state of Texas

Texas is plagued by high rates of food insecurity and obesity. Low-income people are at a greater risk for both, since these problems stem, in part, from a lack of financial resources and limited access to nutritious, affordable food.

One in six Texas families struggles to afford food, the second-highest rate of families at risk for hunger in the nation.¹ Children are at the highest risk of hunger, with one in four children in Texas living in a home without enough food.² The health and economic consequences of hunger are significant. Hungry children suffer from two to four times as many individual health problems as non-hungry children, and experience a higher rate of infant mortality, low birth-weight, and stunting (low height for age). Hunger also impacts a child’s ability to learn. Hungry children have higher rates of illness and absenteeism from school, have difficulty concentrating, and do worse on standardized tests. Among the elderly, malnutrition exacerbates chronic and acute diseases and speeds the onset of degenerative diseases. The problems caused by food insecurity result in lost knowledge, brainpower, and productivity for the state.
High rates of obesity also pose a serious risk to Texas. According to the Texas Comptroller’s report, *Gaining Costs, Losing Time: The Obesity Crisis in Texas*, the number of Texans who are overweight or obese continues to grow, as are the obesity-related costs borne by Texas employers. Today, 66.7 percent of adult Texans are overweight or obese, up from 64.1 percent in 2005. A 2007 study by the Department of State Health Services estimated that almost one-third (32 percent) of Texas high-school students were overweight or obese. The increase in obesity and diet-related diseases in Texas are major public health problems that will have substantial economic consequences for our health care system. The comptroller estimates that the cost of treating obesity-related diseases was $9.5 billion in 2009 and could, if left unchecked, cost employers $32.5 billion annually by 2030. And according to the comptroller’s report, obesity-related costs also contribute to rising health care and insurance costs that have forced some Texas employers to reduce insurance coverage.

**Limited Access to Nutritious Foods Compromises Efforts to Improve Nutrition in Texas**

In addition to the struggle to afford food, for too many Texans—especially those living in low-income, urban and rural communities—finding affordable and nutritious food—particularly fresh produce—is not easy. A growing body of studies shows that millions of Americans live in communities that lack access to a supermarket within a reasonable walking distance. Called “food deserts,” these communities lack grocery stores but often abound in fast-food restaurants and convenience stores that sell unhealthy, processed foods and offer few healthy options. Texas has one of the largest “grocery gaps” in the nation, with the fewest number of supermarkets per capita of any state. Limited access to nutritious food and relatively easier access to less nutritious food may be linked to poor diets, food insecurity, diet-related diseases, and obesity.

Food deserts are the result of a convergence of social, economic, and public policy factors, including the flight of supermarkets to the suburbs, inadequate public transportation, and the lack of healthy foods at corner stores. Without access to healthy foods, a nutritious diet and good health are out of reach. And without supermarkets and other fresh food retailers, these communities also lack the commercial supports that make neighborhoods attractive, and fuel local economies.

Improving nutrition and reversing the rising tide of obesity require a solution that includes closing the grocery gap in low-income neighborhoods across Texas. Fortunately, recent studies and experiences indicate that the gaps in healthy food access can be closed through incentives to attract supermarkets to underserved areas and spur the development of sustainable, small-scale grocers in low-income neighborhoods. In addition, expanding the availability of farmer’s markets and Farm-to-School programs in Texas can help bring healthy foods to underserved groups and communities while supporting efforts to build strong regional food and farm systems. Such steps to make healthy and affordable foods accessible to all Texans are most successful when linked to policies that create jobs, increase economic investment and activity in low-income areas, and revitalize neighborhoods.
Food Access in Texas

- Texas has the lowest number of supermarkets per capita of any state in the country.
- Nationally, on average, there is one supermarket for every 8,620 people. In Texas, each supermarket serves almost 11,000 people.
- Texas’ major cities, including Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio, are also underserved compared to most of the nation’s major metropolitan areas. When measured against the national rate of per capita supermarkets, the Greater Houston area, for example, has 185 too few.
- Preliminary efforts to map supermarket distribution in Texas show that supermarkets are not evenly distributed based on population density and that many low-income areas—both urban and rural—lack access to supermarkets. Residents in many of these same communities suffer from higher rates of diet-related diseases.
- Among the southern states, Texas, Alabama, Arkansas, and Oklahoma have the highest percentage of non-metro counties that are classified as food deserts. The largest food desert region in the non-metro South is in the western portions of Texas and Oklahoma.

Policy Implications

For many years, policymakers and communities have been testing a variety of strategies to increase access to fresh produce and other healthy foods, including:

- Incentives or financing to attract or develop grocery stores and supermarkets in underserved areas (see below on Pennsylvania Food Financing Initiative);
- Establishing or expanding the availability of alternative vendors of fresh produce such as farmers’ markets, community gardens, farm-stands, community-supported agriculture programs, and mobile vendors, and ensuring that food assistance benefits like SNAP and Women Infants and Children (WIC) can be used at farmer’s markets;
- Improving transportation to grocery stores and farmer’s markets;
- Increasing the stock of fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods at neighborhood corner stores or small groceries; and
- Farm-to-School programs that connect local farmers to schools to stimulate regional agricultural production and increase children’s consumption of fresh, local produce.

The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative

The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative is a public-private partnership of The Food Trust, The Reinvestment Fund, and the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition. FFFI is an innovative state program that helps finance the infrastructure costs and credit needs of supermarkets wanting to locate in underserved communities across Pennsylvania when conventional financial institutions are unable to meet those needs. The Pennsylvania Legislature appropriated $30 million over three years to the program, and The Reinvestment Fund leveraged this investment to create a $120 million initiative, which has become a model for communities nationwide committed to combating obesity and improving food access. FFFI is being studied by the Institute of Medicine and the National Institute of Health as a national public health model and was named one of the nation's most innovative government programs by Harvard University in 2008. As of December 2009, FFFI has helped finance 83 supermarket projects in 34 Pennsylvania counties, and these projects are expected to create or retain 5,000 jobs. (http://www.thefoodtrust.org/php/programs/fffi.php)
The Healthy Food Advisory Committee

In Texas, the 2009 Legislature established an initiative to tackle the grocery gap and increase the consumption of fresh produce. SB 343 established the Healthy Food Advisory Committee to study the retail availability of healthy foods in underserved areas of this state. The committee issued the following recommendations to the Texas Legislature in fall 2010:

1. Maximize existing grant, loan and other financing programs to ensure food access in the most underserved urban and rural areas across Texas, and to create innovative public-private partnerships to provide incentives for the redevelopment and expansion of fresh and healthy food retail outlets;

2. Encourage and enable the temporary use of existing food assistance programs to close the gaps during periods of individual food insecurity or to enable privately sustainable healthy foods retail investment into communities;

3. Gather and share lessons learned from the community-based outcomes of the Texas-based Fresh Food Financing Initiative project with community/state-level stakeholders and decision-makers;

4. Establish regional, city or county food policy councils to improve policies related to the food system as a whole (farm-to-table);

5. Encourage communities to promote awareness of direct-to-consumer marketing outlets such as farmers markets, community gardens, farm-to-work and community-supported agriculture (CSA);

6. Encourage local-level discussion of changes and improvements in transportation routes and public transportation options needed to increase access to healthy food retail outlets and venues for the purpose of including in long-range community planning; and

7. Encourage participation in national food assistance programs that enable residents to purchase locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables.

This committee made a great start in tackling food access barriers in Texas, but the work is far from over. SB 1454 and HB 2414 would keep these efforts going.

Texas Legislation Complements Efforts to Tackle Food Access at the National Level

The Obama Administration has committed to end childhood hunger in America by the year 2015—just four years away—and to end childhood obesity within a generation. One essential strategy to meet these goals is to make sure all families have convenient access to reasonably priced, healthy food. The President’s 2011 budget called for more than $400 million to establish a national Healthy Food Financing Initiative. This initiative is a key component of first lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign to reduce childhood obesity.

Congress also has taken steps to close the grocery gap and increase access to healthy foods. In December 2009, a bipartisan group of 39 members of Congress issued a resolution in the U.S. House of Representatives recognizing the need for national policy to address limited access to healthy food in underserved communities. Legislation to create a Healthy Food Financing Initiative has been introduced in the House and the Senate.³

SB 1454 and HB 2414 would build upon these national commitments by developing a blueprint for ensuring that every Texan has access to and the resources to purchase nutritious and affordable food. To view the text of these bills and track their progress, go to Texas Legislature Online.
Endnotes


2 2007 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau

3 Texas Comptroller, Gaining Costs, Losing Time: The Obesity Crisis in Texas, Publication# 96-1360, Printed February 2011 http://www.window.state.tx.us/specialrpt/obesitycost/


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