

Strategies to improve access to healthy food in Minnesota

The rise in obesity and growing awareness of its related health risks has motivated communities across Minnesota to take action to reverse this concerning trend.

A forum hosted by Wilder Research brought together more than 100 people from around the state working in health, education, community programs, youth programs, and foundations to share how their communities are working to reduce obesity through healthier eating. Discussions centered on ways to increase access to affordable healthy food, especially among low-income populations and communities of color, who are disproportionately impacted.

This brief summarizes strategies identified by participants as having potential to make the greatest community impact.

Promote healthy eating among youth

The following strategies were seen not only as a way to help youth develop healthy eating habits, but also to encourage parents to eat healthier:

- Create more comprehensive school wellness policies focused on access to healthy foods; include students on school wellness committees
- Engage youth in learning about healthy foods through school gardens or farm-to-school programs
- Encourage districts to add/increase physical activity and health/nutrition graduation credits
- Advocate for improved school breakfast/lunch standards
- Use school lunch time for taste tests and learning about healthy foods
- Include parents in advocating for improved school nutrition policies
- Provide parents with healthy snacks during school/preschool meetings, to align with healthy options offered to students

Educate residents about nutrition and increase access to healthy food

Strategies identified to educate residents about nutrition, food preparation, and existing community resources include:

- Expand the Minneapolis “resource hub” model to provide materials and resources to residents interested in growing their own food
- Teach residents to prepare and preserve fresh fruits and vegetables through in-person training or through cooking shows on local access TV
- Educate residents about resources that may be available to them (e.g.; fresh produce from Fare for All food shelves; community kitchens)

The following were suggested as ways to increase access to healthy food:

- Increase the number of farmer’s markets and community gardens
- Expand the growing season by using community greenhouses
- Deliver food to residents who participate in a food subscription service
- Encourage distributors and local growers to sell food in smaller quantities
- Use policy/zoning regulations to secure land for community gardens
- Create carpools for residents traveling to/from farmer’s markets
- Use a community-organizing approach to engage residents in local activities around healthy eating and access to foods

Participants also felt it important to consider the care and maintenance of initiatives funded through short-term projects. One option may be working with college students in agricultural programs to maintain school gardens during the summer.

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Some participants suggested food support programs, such as the Women, Infant, and Children's (WIC) program, are underused because residents don't know whether they meet eligibility requirements. Strategies suggested to increase participation in these programs and improve the quality of food:

- Encourage more farmer's markets to accept EBT cards (e.g., food stamps)
- Advertise/promote local farmer's markets to food support program recipients
- Create incentives for program recipients to purchase fresh produce
- Offer low-cost healthy food options for residents who do not qualify for food support programs (e.g., Fare for All)

Engage the community

Participants suggested both grassroots and "grasstops" (e.g., policy makers, corporation leadership) efforts are needed to create environments that support healthy eating. To encourage grassroots efforts, participants suggested building resident advocacy skills. Residents also play an important role in electing officials who are willing to take a strong leadership role to increase access to healthy foods. Communities could also consider devoting the time of a city planner to focus on improving food access. Examples of policy changes to pursue include:

- Incorporate infrastructure enhancements to development/transportation bills to improve access to healthy foods
- Use tax breaks or other benefits to incent small business owners to sell more fresh produce
- Advocate for a state-wide tax on soda
- Follow New York's example of banning trans fat in restaurants
- Convene local food policy councils to examine and recommend policy changes

Many complementary efforts are taking place around Minnesota. More networking and collaboration is needed, however, to avoid duplication and to better leverage resources. Participants suggested a number of ways to improve collaborative efforts:

- Engage in multi-disciplinary partnerships that include nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses, and government agencies
- Ensure representation of the diverse perspectives of all community residents
- Create a statewide networking hub
- Consider how production systems and incentives influence access to healthy foods
- Participate in policy discussions at all levels (local, state, national)

Engage and address needs of cultural communities

One group noted that eating habits of many immigrants change after they arrive in the United States. Participants suggested promoting family meals and teaching residents how to prepare healthy, multicultural meals. Additional outreach to cultural communities is needed.

Additional Resources

Community kitchens

<http://www.cias.wisc.edu/economics/community-kitchens-key-elements-of-success/>

<http://www.communitykitchensnw.org/cook-with-us/>

Advocacy for school nutrition changes

www.angrymoms.org

White Earth Land Recovery Project and Native Harvest Online Catalog

<http://nativeharvest.com/>

Resource Hubs for community gardening

<http://www.gardeningmatters.org/hubs>

Food Policy Councils

<http://www.statefoodpolicy.org/>

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