

Healthy Food for All Prince Georgians

**An assessment of access to healthy food
in Prince George's County, Maryland**

Accessibility

Affordability

Cultural Variety

Customer Service

Quality Assurance



***Prince George's County Food
System Study***

November 2015



The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission
Prince George's County Planning Department
www.pgplanning.org

Abstract

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- Abstract:** This research study is an assessment of access to healthy food in Prince George's County. It identifies issues related to demand and supply of healthy food through surveys of food retailers, and surveys and focus group discussions with consumers. It includes research findings on areas with limited access to healthy food, food-health connection, school meals, and food insecurity in the County. Based on the study findings and national and international promising practices, policy recommendations are provided for creating a healthy, equitable, and sustainable food system that ensures every Prince Georgian has access to nutritious, affordable, sustainably grown, safe, and culturally appropriate food.

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The Commission has three major functions:

- The preparation, adoption, and, from time to time, amendment or extension of the General Plan for the physical development of the Maryland Washington Regional District;
- The acquisition, development, operation, and maintenance of a public park system; and
- In Prince George's County only, the operation of the entire county public recreation program.

The Commission operates in each county through a Planning Board appointed by and responsible to the county government. All local plans, recommendations on zoning amendments, administration of subdivision regulations, and general administration of parks are responsibilities of the Planning Boards.

The Prince George's County Department of Planning (M NCPPC):

- Our mission is: To promote economic vitality, environmental sustainability, design excellence, and quality development in Prince George's County.
- Our vision: Thriving communities—now and into the future.

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Healthy Food for All Prince Georgians

An assessment of access to healthy food in Prince George’s County, MD

Prince George’s County Food System Study

Introduction	1
Executive summary	5
Part 1: Assessment of the study area	
What do consumers say?.....	13
Food retail outlets and healthy food availability.....	23
Areas with limited access to healthy food	49
Part 2: Broader challenges in accessing healthy food	
Food-health connection.....	69
How healthy are school meals?	83
How is food insecurity a problem?	99
Part 3: Recommendations	
Policy recommendations, strategies, and promising practices....	125
Appendices	
Acknowledgments	

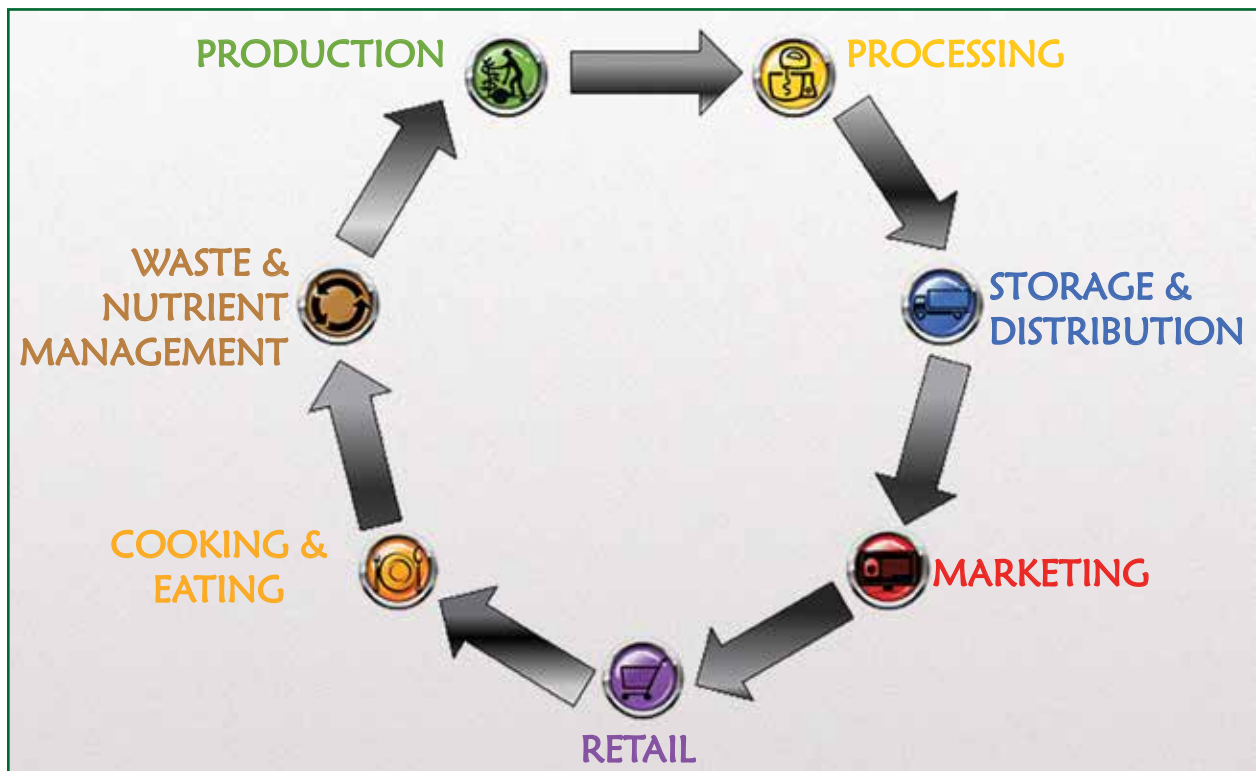
Introduction

Everybody eats! Therefore, food is important to everybody. People usually think about food as a means to alleviate hunger or something to simply enjoy. Relatively few people see food as the nutrition and fuel that our bodies need to function. Even fewer people think or know about the journey food makes to get onto their plates.

Food system and food equity

The journey of food explains what a food system is all about. A community's food system is a soil-to-soil system of interconnected activities that facilitates the production, processing, distribution, acquisition, and consumption of food and the reduction, disposal, and management of food waste.¹

Chart 1: Food system



It is crucial to understand every component of the food system to make it sustainable and to ensure that every member of the community has equal and equitable access to healthy food—a right of every human being. Access to healthy food is one important piece in moving toward a more sustainable and equitable food system.

Ensure food equity to prevent health disparities

Eating healthy food is paramount in having good health. Thus, health disparities between neighborhoods can be reduced through providing equitable food access to all neighborhoods.

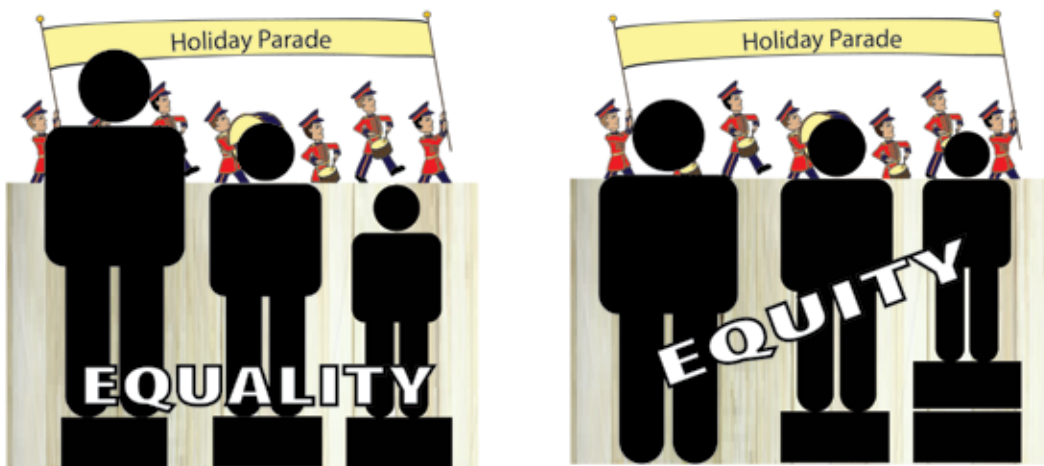
¹ American Planning Association

Prince George's County Food System Study

The Prince George's County Planning Department of The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission initiated a Food System Study to assess the County's food system. The goal of the study is to identify challenges and opportunities and provide recommendations for creating a healthy, equitable, and sustainable food system that ensures every Prince Georgian has access to nutritious, affordable, sustainably grown, safe, and culturally appropriate food.

What is food equity?

- *Healthy, affordable, sustainably grown, culturally appropriate, safe food available to all neighborhoods.*
- *Justice and economic opportunity being built into every step from farm to fork.*



Access to Healthy Food

The report gives special attention to the most urban areas of the County, which includes all communities inside the Capital Beltway plus Greenbelt and Oxon Hill outside the beltway (see Map 1 on page 4). As shown on the map, the study area is subdivided into three subareas (North, Central, and South) where US 50 and MD 4 are the dividing lines. The report includes findings of the research study on access to healthy food in these areas.

The study identified issues related to demand and supply of healthy food through surveys and focus group discussions with consumers and surveys of food retailers. The report includes an analysis of two national food desert studies and research on food-health connections, school meals, and food security in the County. Some of the many programs, initiatives, and services were included to showcase the resources available to County residents. Recommendations pertinent to Prince George's County, based on national promising practices, are included in the conclusion of the report.

This study focuses on only a few pieces of the food system puzzle. A community's food system is very complex and complicated. It requires substantial resources and commitment to be fully assessed and improved.

There are several issues with accessing healthy food in the County. At the same time, there are many efforts by various agencies and organizations to address most of these issues. Despite the

availability of many resources, these piecemeal attempts are only partially successful due to the lack of a coordinated approach to food. The residents of Prince George’s County still face challenges in accessing healthy food, evidenced by the considerable number of residents who are food insecure, the rapidly increasing number of overweight and obese residents, and the many Prince Georgians who are dying from diet-related chronic diseases every year. Too many residents lack basic nutrition knowledge and are thus unaware that the kinds of foods they eat are detrimental to their health. Cheap, processed, unhealthy food—a major cause of these diseases—is abundant, but healthy food is expensive and harder to find. There are more than enough food retail outlets, but most of them lack quality and healthy food. There are disparities in accessing healthy food. Neighborhoods with low-income, minority, and/or immigrant residents have lower quality and unaffordable foods. People without cars cannot easily travel to places where healthy foods are available. There is no equitable food system.

The County needs an overall vision for food. To achieve this vision, overarching food system policies should be created. These policies would allow the existing initiatives—that are overlapping and competing for funding— to fit together for the general good. These policies would provide guidance to develop effective food strategies to substantially improve and, eventually, achieve a sustainable and equitable food system.

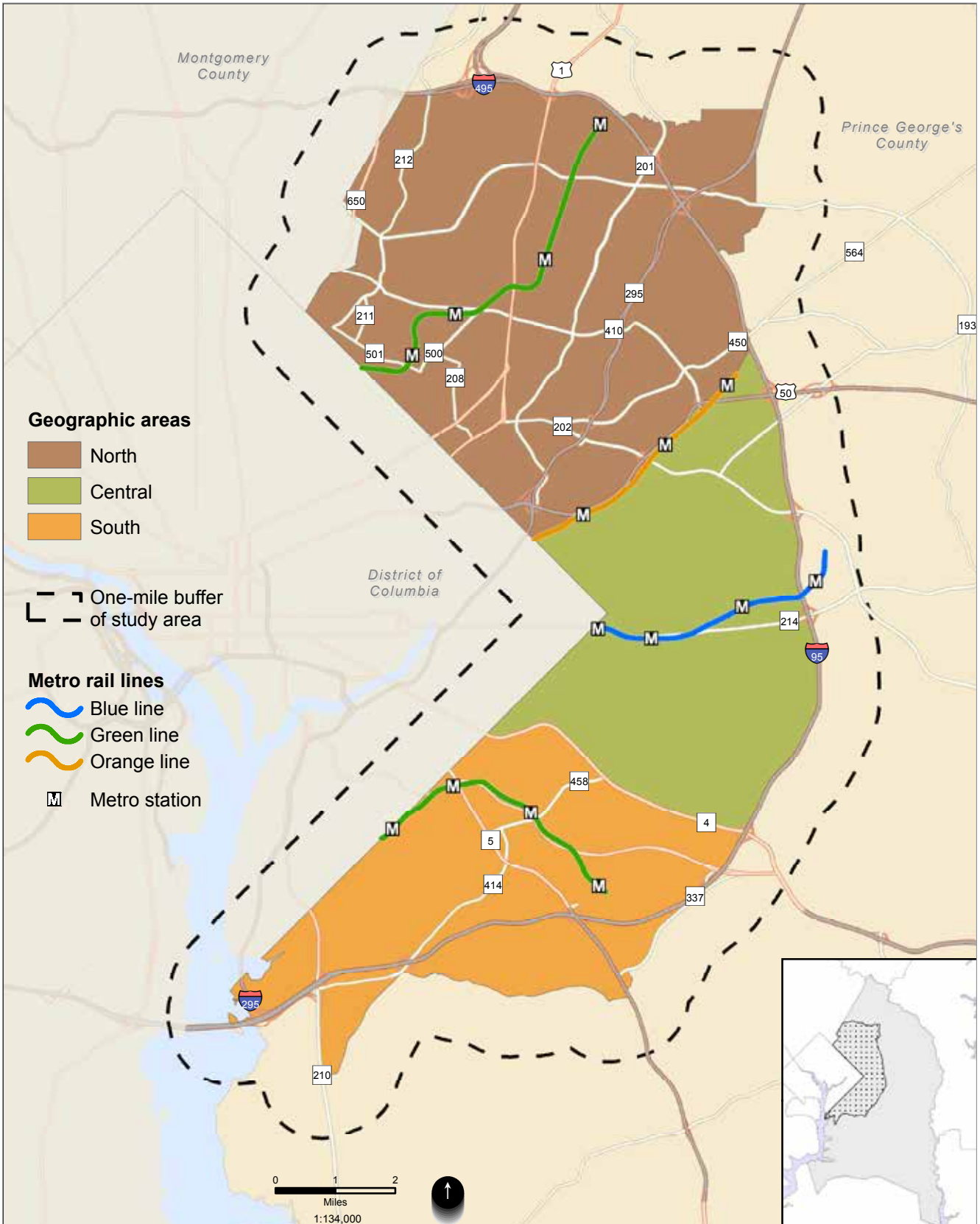
The Prince George’s County Food Equity Council (FEC), in conjunction with the County government, could take the lead in reaching out to the community to create a shared vision. FEC could help articulate this vision for achieving food system sustainability in the County.

The County government has an important role in nurturing a food system that helps improve community health and well-being and local economic development. The County government can be a catalyst in stimulating collaboration and synergy by leveraging its connections. It can also be a catalyst in regulating land uses and encouraging local food production to create a robust local food economy.

This report is the first step in the food system assessment. More work is needed to further assess and understand the food system, with all of its nuances and complexities. Since the food system is dynamic, an ongoing investigation is needed to effectively address key issues and opportunities. An evaluation of existing programs and services is needed to determine their effectiveness. The County should put food on the agenda through the development of a food charter and vision as well as policies and strategies. The County needs to develop and implement a food system plan. Unless there is a coordinated approach to food, equitable access to healthy food cannot be achieved in the County, and due to the alarming obesity epidemic and other diet-related chronic diseases, public health will be in jeopardy.



Map 1: Food system study area



Executive summary

Food is one of the basic necessities for life, and everybody has the right to access healthy food. Healthy food access is not only important for public health but also to build a sustainable and equitable community.

Significant findings

In the most urbanized parts of Prince George's County, equitable access to healthy food is an issue. The findings of a consumer survey of close to 600 residents, discussions with 7 focus groups, and healthy food availability surveys of all 70 supermarkets and 22 percent of the 484 small markets that serve the study area revealed that:

- County residents are having difficulty accessing quality, nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food within a reasonable distance from where they live.
- It is not the lack of supermarkets but the spatial distribution of them and the quality and price of products they carry that create inequity in accessing healthy food.
- There are more than enough supermarkets in the study area; in fact, there are 20 more supermarkets than this market would normally support. Therefore, opening new supermarkets may not solve the problem.
- Food access challenges are more related to the quality of local stores and what they carry than the physical access to food outlets. Many residents do not patronize nearby supermarkets but travel elsewhere, even to other jurisdictions, where more variety and better quality food are sold for less.
- Healthy foods are not widely available in the study area food retail outlets. The Healthy Food Availability Index (HFAI) survey showed that the majority of supermarkets have a "fair" rating, and the average HFAI score for supermarkets is 56 out of 100. The small market HFAI survey revealed an average score of 27 out of 100, indicating not enough healthy food alternatives in small markets.
- HFAI scores of individual stores reveal that there is discrepancy in terms of healthy food availability and/or quality among the stores of the same retailer.

"Food desert" methodologies are of limited utility

An analysis of two nationwide food desert studies, Food Access Research Atlas by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Limited Supermarket Access (LSA) Areas by The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) revealed that these studies have serious shortcomings:

- USDA-identified food deserts, now called "Low-Income and Low-Access" areas, as well as TRF's LSA areas do not reflect the essence of the food access problem in Prince George's County. The methodologies, assumptions, and data they use put the County in an unfair position.
- The study area has more USDA-identified food deserts not because of the availability of fewer supermarkets compared to other low-access areas in the region but due to the presence of areas with lower median family income (MFI) than the Metro area's MFI. If Prince George's County were in a different metropolitan area with less wealthy jurisdictions, these areas would not be identified as food deserts.
- Labeling communities as food deserts based on nationwide studies' outcomes may have adverse effects. Policy decisions at the local level should not be made based on these studies.

Place matters for food equity

- There are geographic disparities in accessing healthy food in the County, which is a sign of food inequity. The cost of acquiring a balanced diet depends on where one lives within the study area. The cost of a typical market basket of healthy foods varies by the location of stores, even between the stores of the same chain supermarket. For every 10 market baskets that an average household in Cheverly buys, households in each of the remaining nine subareas can buy less than nine baskets, and as low as six baskets in Suitland.
- Another reason for difficulty in accessing healthy food, especially for residents who cannot drive, is the location of supermarkets. Supermarkets are generally located along main arteries and cluster at major intersections, leaving most residential neighborhoods without supermarkets. One culprit is zoning regulations; separation of commercial and residential uses does not allow supermarkets to operate close to where people live.

Food retail stores and prepared food service outlets

- In the study area, both the number and location of the prepared food outlets make them more easily accessible than food retail stores where groceries can be purchased.
- There are close to 1,600 food retail outlets, of which about 1,000 are prepared food service outlets (places where food is cooked and made ready for consumption, such as restaurants, cafeterias, and carry-out places), and over 600 are food retail stores (grocery stores and other markets where primarily unprepared food is sold).
- Carry-out places comprise almost a quarter of all food retail outlets; full-service restaurants have the second highest presence (over 12 percent) followed by gas station stores (9 percent) and fast-food restaurants (8.5 percent). Supermarkets, small groceries, and international markets, combined, comprise close to 12 percent of all food outlets.
- While the food retail stores are concentrated along major roads, the prepared food outlets that mostly carry foods high in fat, salt, and sugar are scattered, making unhealthy foods easier to access than healthy foods.

Food and health

There is a strong correlation between the food we eat and our health. Disparities in accessing healthy food may deprive people of a balanced diet and hence affect public health, leading to these alarming health statistics:

- Prince George's County has higher than average rates in diet-related chronic diseases in Maryland.
- More than two thirds of the adult population in the County is overweight or obese. The obesity rate is on the rise; in the last 20 years it increased from 19 percent to 35 percent.
- Most people are aware of the connection between what they eat and their health but keep eating the foods that may cause major health risks due to the following reasons:
 - Insufficient nutrition knowledge.
 - Food insecurity—food insecure people eat inexpensive, high calorie prepared foods, which are also high in salt, sugars, and/or fat.
 - Processed unhealthy food is cheap and healthy food is expensive.
 - Healthy food may not be available.
 - Not everybody knows how to cook.
 - Lack of time to shop for and cook from scratch.

School meals could be healthier

Healthy eating habits may be easier to adopt at an early age. Therefore, what children eat at school is very important. Some facts about meals at Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) include:

- Almost 80,000 lunches and over 53,000 breakfasts are served daily at PGCPS. Close to two thirds of the students participate in the National School Lunch Program, and 64 percent of participating students are enrolled in the federal Free and Reduced Meals program.
- Although the food served at PGCPS meets the federal and state requirements, students are not always offered high quality, healthy food with wholesome ingredients.
- Both school principals and students shared similar opinions about the need to improve school food.
- While PGCPS participates in the Farm to School Program, not enough local foods are served to students. PGCPS spends only 2 percent of its food budget on local foods while Baltimore City Public Schools and Montgomery County Public Schools spent 29 percent and 5 percent, respectively, of their budgets on local foods.
- Results of the evaluation of PGCPS sample school menus and cafeteria observations include:
 - PGCPS Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) provides some nutritional information for school food, but it is limited.
 - Added sugar in school breakfasts exceeds limits recommended by the American Heart Association.
 - Lunch periods are too short.
 - Free drinking water and hand washing stations are not available where students are eating.

Food insecurity is a serious problem


Maryland is the wealthiest state in the country, but there are many Marylanders who are food insecure, of which 17 percent live in Prince George's County. Food insecurity is a serious problem in the County:

- One in seven people in the County is food insecure.
- Participation in the federal food assistance programs are on the rise.
 - The number of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) cases are close to 55,000, and about 112,000 people benefit from this program.
 - Number of Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) participants are about 5,000.
 - A little more than half of the eligible people participate in these programs.
- There are 132 food pantries in the County; 86 of them are located in the study area.
- A survey of participants of the federal nutrition assistance programs revealed that:
 - Almost all respondents run out of their SNAP benefits before the end of the month.
 - A third of the respondents are not able to feed their children enough nutritious food all or some of the time.
 - There was not enough food to eat in the households of almost one-third of the respondents in the past year.
 - More than one in three said that they or their household members had to skip meals in the past year because of not having enough food.
 - More than half of the respondents buy fresh fruits and vegetables only once a month.
 - Almost half of them indicated that if their benefits doubled they would like to spend the difference on fruits and vegetables.

Recommendations



Developing local food policies that can eliminate disparities in food access is critical in creating healthy, sustainable, and livable communities. The following are the policy recommendations to address the issues identified in this research study. For some policies, sample strategies are included. Multiple strategies for each policy as well as related promising practices are presented in the report.

Policy 1: Develop an overarching food policy framework for the County.


 Create a food charter for the County

Policy 2: Support the Prince George's County Food Equity Council.



Policy 3: Launch an integrated healthy eating and food-health connection awareness campaign.

 Expand health and nutrition education programs
 Develop partnerships with faith-based organizations



Policy 4: Encourage local food consumption, and support the local food economy.

 Revise procurement policies, and require that County agencies purchase food from local producers.



Policy 5: Increase sustainable local food production in rural and urban areas.

 Provide incentives to local farmers who produce sustainably grown food for local consumption.
 Establish a farm incubator to help new farmers start farming business.




Policy 6: Establish a food hub in the County to support local and regional food distribution and marketing.

 Partner with the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission to establish a regional food hub.
 Convert the underutilized Cheltenham farmers' market/auction facility into a distribution and processing facility for the food hub.

Policy 7: Promote local food processing and invest in food processing infrastructure.

 Lift barriers for production, distribution, and sales of value-added products by revisiting existing regulations.
 Establish a community kitchen incubator.

Policy 8: Increase sale of quality healthy fresh foods at existing food retail outlets, and decrease unhealthy options.

 Launch a "healthy small markets" program.
 Require all vending machines and concession stands in schools and government owned/operated facilities to carry mostly healthy foods and drinks.
 Create a healthy carry-out program.

Policy 9: Encourage alternative food retail models to improve healthy food access.



Allow and promote mobile healthy food markets, particularly in underserved communities.
Allow and promote healthy prepared food trucks to provide healthy food options.

Policy 10: Ensure good quality food, a safe and clean environment, and excellent customer service at supermarkets.

Policy 11: Launch a “mini healthy neighborhood grocery store” initiative to make healthy foods accessible within residential neighborhoods.

Policy 12: Looking through an equity lens, rethink zoning with food and health in mind to make access to healthy food easier.



Consider creating a floating grocery store zone and/or permit small-scale healthy food retailers in all residential zones.

Policy 13: Improve transportation options to healthy food outlets.

Policy 14: Make healthy food affordable.



Encourage supermarkets to sell imperfectly shaped but fresh produce at a reduced price.

Policy 15: Improve the quality of school meals.



Exceed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 guidelines.
Increase purchasing of local foods.

Policy 16: Ensure that school cafeterias promote healthy and positive eating experiences.



Meet the federal regulation to offer unrestricted access to free drinking water in the cafeteria.

Policy 17: Develop food literacy in the school community.



Offer nutrition seminars and cooking lessons to parents

Policy 18: Eliminate hunger and food insecurity in the County by ensuring access to affordable, sufficient, and healthy food for all food insecure people all the time.



Increase participation in federal nutrition assistance programs
Fund the Prince George’s County’s “SNAP to Health” initiative
Encourage food pantries to offer mostly healthy foods

