Knoxville Food Deserts: Why They Matter and Strategies for Meeting Neighborhood Food Needs

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Abstract

The United States Department of Agriculture has identified at least 20 "food deserts" in Knoxville—neighborhoods without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Instead of supermarkets and grocery stores, these communities are served only by fast food restaurants and convenience stores that offer few healthy, affordable food options. Lack of access contributes to a poor diet and can lead to higher levels of obesity and other diet-related diseases. Access, however, can lead to a better quality of life and drive economic development for the city. There are numerous efforts afoot in the city that are attempting to address this problem. The Knoxville movement mirrors ongoing efforts statewide and around the country, in that solutions being developed are coming from within the community. In 1982, Knoxville created the country's first official food policy council to target food access inequalities. Recently, the City of Knoxville has been reviewing its policies and overlapping zoning regulations regarding urban agriculture and land use. This study includes interviews with various members of the Knoxville community who are involved in addressing the food desert issue. It also features efforts local and nationwide that are tackling the food desert problem and next steps in dealing with this issue.

On a recent Saturday, a mother of two and a resident of the Walter P. Taylor Homes housing complex in East Knoxville harvests lettuce and asparagus from her plot at the Knoxville Botanical Gardens and Arboretum just a mile away. She spies budding strawberries and other delectable spring fruits and vegetables as she prepares to take her produce back to her housing complex to sell them. Her goals are twofold: bring affordable healthy foods to people in her community who don't have access to a nearby grocery store while creating a steady source of income to support herself and her family.

At least this is the vision of Robert Hodge, director of the botanical garden's new Center for Urban Agriculture, which comprises nine acres of community gardens destined to produce food for Knoxville residents and for market. He hopes soon to make that scenario a reality. Hodge is among a group of Knoxvillians who are actively tackling the issue of inaccessibility to healthy foods that's prevalent in at least 20 Knoxville neighborhoods. The United States Department of Agriculture identifies these 20 communities as "food deserts"—urban neighborhoods and rural areas without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Instead of supermarkets and grocery stores, these communities are served only by fast food restaurants and convenience stores that offer few healthy, affordable food options.[1] As a result, the lack of access to these food suppliers contributes to a poor diet and can lead to higher levels of obesity and other diet-related diseases such as diabetes and heart disease—two of the leading causes of death in Knoxville.[2] Access to healthy foods leads to a better quality of life and healthier communities, and can subsequently drive economic development—motivations for local and statewide lawmakers to address the issues of food deserts and health disparities.[3]

The Knoxville effort mirrors those taking place statewide and around the country, in that solutions being developed are coming from within the community. "We as a community have to

change the way we think about food, the way we act and our attitude about food," Hodge said. "There are a lot of problems but the solutions have to be local."

A Look Back, A Look Forward

Inaccessibility to fresh fruits and vegetables is "a complex issue," said Jake Tisinger, project manager in the City of Knoxville's Office of Sustainability.[4] It is caused by more than one's income or socioeconomic status. Topography and business investment in that neighborhood also play a role. In 1982, Knoxville created the country's first official food policy council to target food access inequalities and economic and social pressures that exacerbated these issues.[5] In 2002, the council expanded to include Knox County and became the Knoxville-Knox County Food Policy Council. Its primary focus is finding innovative solutions that will promote sustainability, economic development, and social justice within the local food system.[6] The board is comprised of members with various backgrounds, from health officials and city/county lawmakers to academics and food industry leaders. "We lean on them to drive what needs to happen," said Tisinger, who sits on the council board.

For residents of identified food deserts, a lack of nearby supermarket to purchase healthy foods may not be the only problem. Some communities have grocery stores but residents don't have vehicles or nearby public transportation to get there, said Michelle Moyers, director of community development and planning for the Knox County Health Department.[7] In other communities, the high price of healthy foods may be a deterrent to purchasing them. To address the transportation issue, the food policy council worked with the Knoxville Transit Authority to establish and promote a grocery bus that would take residents to local food markets for $1 round trip. It also requested that bus lines be extended so riders in impoverished areas would be able to

get to grocery stores. The bus routes were subsequently altered as a result of the council's recommendations.[8]

In 2008, the food policy council commissioned a market basket survey to determine whether there was a disparity in the quality and price of fresh produce being sold in disadvantaged neighborhoods compared to more affluent areas of the city. The survey, conducted by graduate students in the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Department of Nutrition, found that the price of the standard market basket of food being offered in supermarkets and corner stores in the poorest neighborhoods was $20 higher than the price in more affluent neighborhoods. The council shared these results with policy makers.[9] When asked about the difference in food price, some grocers indicated, anecdotally, that they were able to get a return on their investment in more affluent neighborhoods so they could afford to make the produce cheaper, Moyers said. In poorer neighborhoods, they didn't earn as much so they increased the price to make up for the lack of revenue. "We're interested in those kinds of findings that are focused on data," said Tisinger, because they help the food policy council better direct its work.

Recently, the City of Knoxville has been reviewing its policies and overlapping zoning regulations regarding urban agriculture, land use and whether residents can grow and sell food on their properties. The move was prompted largely by a request from residents who want to use the site of the Standard Knitting Mill in Northeast Knoxville as a small urban farm called Abbey Fields. The site would sell community supported agriculture shares to about two dozen residents.[10] "We understand that before we can do any facilitating and promoting, we need to understand our own regulations," Tisinger said. That includes examining zoning ordinances, state legislation and building permits and it involves many agencies, from the city's legal department to the Metropolitan Planning Commission "The way a city ordinance works is this: if

it's not mentioned, it's not allowed," Tisinger said. "We want to make sure all the different pieces are aligned and are not contradicting one another."

The Access and Health Equation

Dealing with food access inequalities and food security issues go hand-in-hand with combating health problems. "If we're talking to folks about accessing healthier foods, we want to make sure it's available," Moyers of the health department said.

The medical community especially has an interest in those small policy changes that can make a big difference in issues of health, said Kristen Slusher, a registered dietitian at East Tennessee Children's Hospital.[11] She is the advocacy chair for the Knoxville Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and state policy representative for the Tennessee Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. "People have asked us, 'why does food access matter to you as a dietitian?'" she said. "We can counsel people all day about the benefits of fruits and vegetables but if they can't get them, it might be tough to follow our recommendations. If I can help make policy changes that would give families greater access to healthy foods, it will help the families follow the recommendations that we're making."

Slusher and a group of other dietitians traveled to Washington, D.C. in April for public policy workshops. They also visited Tennessee lawmakers this spring to advocate for changes in food served in schools. They want to be a resource to legislators and educate them about the role they play in establishing healthier communities all over the state. "Long term, I want local and state legislators to keep health in mind as they make decisions about road changes, walkability, parks, housing and business developments," she said. "It all connects."

Making Inroads

Nationwide, efforts such as the Healthy in a Hurry initiative in Louisville, Kentucky,[12] and Healthy Corner Stores program in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,[13] aim to connect residents in food deserts to healthy foods. In Knoxville, the efforts are as diverse as the neighborhoods they serve and target food access, cooking and education. The Tennessee chapter of the National Women in Agriculture Association recently started a small farmers market off Magnolia Avenue in East Knoxville. Small business Knox Urban Homesteads aims to turn homes, apartments and other buildings into urban oases through sustainable agriculture and resource conservation. It helps clients obtain raised beds, rainwater catchment systems, compost systems, edible landscapes and urban hen houses.[14, 15] Several farmers markets, including the Market Square Farmers Market downtown and the New Harvest Park Farmers Market in Northeast Knoxville accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits as payment. The Beardsley Community Farm in Northwest Knoxville teaches methods of organic and sustainable urban farming, provides resources to community members to help them grow their own food and donates its fresh produce to people in need through several community organizations.[16]

At the Knoxville Botanical Gardens' Center for Urban Agriculture, about 80 community residents, from Rwandan refugees to area church members, work different plots and employ various farming methods. They empower themselves in the process because they learn how to grow their own food. "It's a holistic approach," said Hodge, the Center's director. Participants also realize they can one day sell their produce and feed others. "We're pushing people into the market," Hodge said. "Market doesn't have to mean a building. It can be a road side stand or a 17-year-old girl taking the produce back to her housing complex. These are alternative solutions."

Hodge has experienced similar success so he knows this method works. Prior to his work at the botanical gardens, he was director of El Puente, an organization that served Latino immigrants through discipleship, social work, and social and economic development through gardening. He helped established a community garden in Lonsdale and now, every third to fourth house has a small personal garden. "The food desert is solvable," Hodge said. "Growing potatoes, onions and greens is something every KGIS (Knoxville, Knox County, Knoxville Utilities Board Geographic Information System) lot is capable of."

Knoxville Mobile Market?

Knoxville might one day have a mobile market serving food desert neighborhoods. HealthCare 21, a local non-profit committed to improving the quality and cost of healthcare in Tennessee and the surrounding region,[17] recently applied for a grant that would bring a mobile market in the form of a food truck into identified food deserts. "They wanted to do a community project to help people who were falling through the cracks and who were not getting information about nutrition," said Tracey Wiggins, the organization's grant writer.[18] "They were thinking they were going to do health coaching for underserved neighborhoods." Through her research, she discovered that health educators and city officials were promoting the consumption of more fruits and vegetables as a path to a healthier lifestyle for people in disadvantaged neighborhoods who also had persistent health problems. "We realized there was an access issue," Wiggins said. "We wanted to marry the two ideas—health coaches going into the community to address chronic disease and taking the food in there to combat these diseases. It speaks to the heart of community health. Chronic disease in food desert neighborhoods increases faster than in

neighborhoods that have access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The mobile food market was HealthCare 21's project to reach out to the community to curb those numbers."

Beardsley Farm and the Knoxville Botanical Gardens agreed to partner with HealthCare 21 to provide the foods. Food City would assist with educational activities for the communities to be served. But the project proved to be a hard sell for grant funders. The funders wanted evidence that the Knoxville project would be self-sustainable beyond the first year. Wiggins spoke with 15 other mobile markets across the state and the country—including those in Nashville, Memphis, Chattanooga, Washington State, New York, Alexandria, Virginia, Portland, Oregon, and Baltimore, Maryland. She learned that while most markets could make money back from produce sale, volunteers were needed to staff the program—a benefit or detriment depending on what kind of volunteers chose to participate. There also was the concern of extending the life of perishable items being offered through the mobile market.

The first mobile food market, an-Oakland, California-based initiative that made the idea popular around the country, doesn't use grant funding anymore and is no longer a mobile food market. It raised enough money to build a brick and mortar store in one of its food desert communities.[19] It's a move that many food market organizers would like to model—or at the very least, they hope their mobile market presence will attract more permanent stores into neighborhoods.[20]

"It was hard for us to show that we could keep it going without further grant money," Wiggins said of Knoxville's mobile market effort. "With all the markets we talked to, they do still rely on grant funding from year to year." HealthCare 21 also learned that addressing the food access problem wasn't just about driving a truck of vegetables into a neighborhood. "You have to pair it with education," Wiggins said. "There's a generation that is used to eating packaged food.

You have to have enough time to pass and enough education and motivation for people's food behaviors to change. It doesn't change overnight. There are a lot of cultural differences around Knoxville that we have to understand."

The education must extend to children and adults alike, said Moyers of the health department. "It's not uncommon for us to go do a talk with people about heart health and they're serving ham biscuits and birthday cake or bacon and highly processed and nitrated meats," she said. She noted that nutrition education also is very weak in schools.

Perhaps one of the most overlooked topics in the food desert discussion is food appeal. The food policy council has discussed how to present fresh fruits and vegetables to people in underserved communities in a way that's attractive. It has brought the Second Harvest food bank into the conversation because the organization provides a lot of donated foods to food deserts, Moyers said. "It's trying to open up people's eyes to things beyond what they've experienced," she said. "It's hard to break habits and ingrained ideas about what's acceptable."

Going into the neighborhoods with a mobile market might help address the education aspect, Wiggins of HealthCare 21 said. The organization hasn't given up on the idea of the mobile food market. It has applied for another grant and will use lessons learned from the first process to inform its next application. "It's a great idea and with the right people behind it, it will work," Wiggins said. "But it's got to work in unison with some education. It's got to be coupled with something else to make it more effective. You really need the community's support."

Next Steps

In spring 2013, the food policy council embarked on a research project targeting two health and economic issues in Knox County: food access and insecurity issues, and farm to fork

(economic/food system) development efforts. It held a series of community sessions and from that, developed a set of policy recommendations for the city and county. The recommendations, which were presented to Knoxville City Council and the Knox County Commission in fall 2013, address zoning, improving connections between food producers and the consumer marketplace and developing a local food hub—a central facility that would serve as a location for storing, processing, distributing and marketing regionally-produced food.[21]

The council had a retreat this past January to discuss how to implement the recommendations. The conversation is ongoing, Moyers said. Meetings will continue into this spring and summer. In May, the Coalition on America's Poor Health and Poverty hosted a seminar on Knoxville's food deserts at the Morningside Community Center East Knoxville. The film "Food Access 2012: Food Insecurity" was shown, and a discussion followed on ways to address the 20 food deserts in Knox County.[22]

Back at the botanical garden in East Knoxville, Hodge[23] of the Center for Urban Agriculture casts a bold vision: neighborhoods that once were food deserts will become a flourishing havens of agriculture and help transform Knoxville into a place of refuge. He anticipates the budding gardeners will begin to reap the fruits of their labor in the weeks and months to come. "East Knoxville will feed the rest of the city," he said.

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