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ADVISORY COMMISSION ON FOOD POLICY

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ANNUAL REPORT

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2013 Recommendations Point the Way to Increased Food Security in Hartford

The Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy was established by City ordinance in 1991 to implement recommendations from the Mayor's Task Force on Hunger. Continuously operational since then, its purpose is to integrate all agencies in the City in a common effort to improve the availability of safe and nutritious food at reasonable prices for all residents, particularly those in need. The Commission's work is guided by four goals outlined in the establishing ordinance:

- To eliminate hunger as an obstacle to a happy, healthy and productive life in the city.
- To ensure that a wide variety of safe and nutritious food is available for city residents.
- To ensure that access to food is not limited by economic status, location or other factors beyond a resident's control.
- To ensure that the price of food in the city remains at a level approximating the level for the state.

These goals remain very relevant today. Significant socioeconomic and health disparities, including poor access to affordable, healthy foods, are still apparent in Hartford. About one out of three adults 25 years or older in Hartford have not earned a high school diploma, compared to around one out of seven adults in Hartford county. The unemployment rate in the City exceeds 16% and the median household income is still estimated to be under \$30,000, which is less than half of the estimated median household income for Hartford County. The percent of people in poverty (31.6%) in Hartford is three times as high as Hartford County and almost 43% of children in the city of Hartford live in poverty.

A symptom of these conditions of poverty is food insecurity, or lack of access by all people at all times to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious foods for an active, healthy life. Between 2008 and 2011 almost 12% of households in Connecticut were food insecure, of which almost 40% experienced very low food security. A report released by the Zwick Center for Food and Resource Policy and the University of Connecticut's Cooperative Extension System ranked 169 towns in Connecticut according to population risk of food insecurity, based on income and socioeconomic factors. Hartford was ranked last in this index, meaning it was the city with the greatest risk of food insecurity in the state. Hartford is also ranked as eighth worst city in the nation, among cities with a population between 100,000 and 250,000 people, for providing low-income residents access to healthy foods. Approximately 30,000 residents in Hartford, an average of one out of every four residents, live in a food desert -an area where access to fresh fruits and vegetables is especially limited.

This inadequate and insufficient food environment leads to adverse public health outcomes. According to a Community Health Needs Assessment completed by the Hartford Department of Health and Human Services, many of the top leading causes of death in Hartford are influenced by diet, including heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and kidney disease. Elevated rates of obesity in the City undoubtedly contribute to these trends and can be ameliorated through proper nutrition and an improved food system. Even the youngest members of the Hartford community are not protected from the adverse health effects of neighborhood food environments. A study conducted in 2012 by the University of Connecticut's Center for Public Health and Health Policy found that 37% of preschool children in Hartford are overweight or obese, over half of which are classified as obese. The prevalence of childhood obesity among preschoolers is therefore over twice as high as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention age and gender body mass index guidelines.

There is increased public awareness of the health and environmental impacts of our food system, bringing discussions of food and environmental justice to the forefront. Anxieties are rising over the methods used to produce food, with concerns centering on food safety, genetically modified crops, fair labor practices, and humane treatment of farmed animals. A new generation of college-aged, young adults are interested in pursuing careers in farming and agriculture. Our current food system is unsustainable, and all stakeholders in this complex system are sensing an urgent call to action. In this context, the Connecticut Food System Alliance (CFSA) was formed at the end of 2012. The CFSA advocates for an alternative food system that minimizes harm and maximizes community benefits by relying on local systems to meet food needs, while holding all stakeholders accountable for their impacts. The group envisions a more resilient and sustainable food system, where there is responsible stewardship of environmental resources and a commitment to local businesses. By building a better food system, we can ensure that everyone has access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food. The initiatives and insights of this group will help inform the future direction and recommendations of Hartford's Advisory Commission on Food Policy.

Advisory Commission on Food Policy

Recommendations for Action in 2013 and Beyond

The negative impact of inadequate healthy food access for Hartford's residents remains a challenge. However, the Commission believes that progress can be achieved with practical strategies that can alleviate hunger and provide Hartford residents with greater food security. As part of its advisory role to City officials, each year, the Commission prepares several recommendations on food and nutrition issues. For 2013, the Commission recommends action on the following items. The Commission is ready to discuss these recommendations and partner with City agencies and community organizations in implementing them.

I. Ensure Hartford Maximizes Use of the Federal Child Nutrition Programs

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers federally funded food programs to address childhood hunger during and after school, and in the summer when school is out. These programs include the School Breakfast Program, the At-Risk Afterschool Meal Program or "Supper Program", and the Summer Nutrition Programs. The City of Hartford and the Hartford Board of Education participate in each of these; however, more can be done to increase the number of providers and children benefitting from nutrition services. The Commission recommends the City support efforts to increase and maximize participation in these programs that provide healthy meals to Hartford children while also bringing additional federal funds into the City.

Status:

School Breakfast: Currently, 38.6% of students eating a school lunch in Hartford are also eating breakfast at school. Hartford has the second lowest participation for its District Reference Group (DRG), a state categorization related to factors including size and socioeconomics.

Afterschool Meal Program: Through sponsorship by Hartford Food & Nutrition Services, Hartford has the largest and quickest expanding supper program in the state. Five schools currently run after school programs and receive meals through this federal funding stream. Over 500 children benefit from a healthy supper each day after school in Hartford.

Summer Nutrition: The summer meals program run by Hartford Food & Nutrition Services saw a 42% increase in the number of meals served last year due to extended the number of operating days of summer school and meal service to more community programs. Unfortunately, the City operated program experienced a 9% decrease; making this the third year in a row the City saw a decline in meal service.

Specific Actions the City can take to support child nutrition program use in Hartford:

School Breakfast Priorities

- Promote positive results of the Hartford High School Grab n Go pilot program, slated to begin in February 2013, and support expansion to other schools with low breakfast participation.
- Make increasing school breakfast participation a priority within City-wide efforts to decrease the incidence of childhood obesity and overweight in Hartford.
- Capitalize on funding streams for cities to support the initiation of school breakfast programs that incorporates breakfast into the school day, removing timing as a barrier to participation.
- Encourage the Board of Education to emphasize the health and academic benefits of school breakfast with Hartford principals and solicit their support in encouraging breakfast and making it more accessible to students.

Afterschool Meal Program Priorities

- Support the efforts Hartford Food & Nutrition Services to expand the number of school or community based afterschool programs receiving an after school meal.
- Connect City departments running after school programming to schools currently offering suppers.

Summer Nutrition Priorities

- Ensure all summer youth programming either receives meals (breakfast and/or lunch) from one of two of the sponsors of summer meals or is directed to a site/location where meals are being served.
- Promote the End Hunger CT! Summer Location finder (ctsummerfood.org) by putting information the City website home page and asking partnering community agencies to do the same.
- Utilize the Board of Education automated phone system to alert families of summer meal site locations by promoting the Location Finder and texting campaign.
- Pilot a parent meals program that allows parents to receive a free meal at select sites to increase student participation and awareness of the program

Advisory Commission on Food Policy

II. Improve Nutrition Standards for Licensed Child Care Facilities

It is important for children in Hartford to have lifestyles that promote health, wellness, proper development and learning. A 2012 study of preschool children shows that not all young children in the City are meeting these criteria. A representative sample of children under the age of six showed that 17% of the children were overweight and 20% were obese. Hartford's mayor has stated that these relatively high rates of overweight and obesity among preschool aged children require immediate attention. Offering healthy meals and snacks, and nutrition education at childcare centers is a great opportunity to prevent childhood obesity. In Hartford, approximately 73% of three to five year-old children participate in center- or school-based child care. The Commission recommends that the Hartford Department of Health and Human Services revise its guidelines for licensed day care facilities regarding meals and snacks for children to emphasize fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Priorities:

- Review and revise current regulations for food service in licensed child day care centers.
- Educate day care providers about changes to regulations and provide reference materials and guidelines.
- Monitor obesity rates among preschool children to measure effects of policy changes.

III. Plant More School Gardens in the City

School gardens are a great way to teach urban youth about how food is grown and provide students with the skills to harvest and prepare healthy foods at home. Encouraging children to choose nutritious foods at school and at home helps them maintain a healthy lifestyle that supports academic achievement. Gardening can be incorporated into a classroom curriculum for teaching lessons about health, nutrition, and the environment. Growing food also helps impart children with a sense of responsibility, environmental stewardship, and community. The Commission recommends that all of Hartford public schools consider planting a school garden. Hartford Public Schools could partner with the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) in developing initiatives to establish more gardens at interested schools. The amendments and additions to current zoning codes described below could also be written to explicitly allow for gardens to be planted on school property.

Priorities:

- Ensure zoning codes allow for gardens on school properties.
- Identify public schools in Hartford interested in planting a school garden and establish a partnership with professionals at DEEP, and other local or regional organizations, to help these schools start their own gardens.

IV. Implement Zoning Ordinances Supporting Urban Agriculture & Healthy Food Choices

Urban agriculture is a broad term that describes a range of food-growing activities, including the raising, harvesting, processing, marketing, and distribution of locally grown food. Home gardens, community gardens, and urban farms are common examples of urban agriculture. Communities benefit from urban agriculture in many ways. Gardening and farming in urban areas improve health and combat food insecurity by making fresh produce more accessible; promote environmental sustainability and create more green spaces; revitalize neighborhoods and support economic vitality; and build stronger communities. Many cities across the country have taken steps to amend, abolish, or propose zoning ordinances that allow for urban agriculture activities. Municipal zoning ordinances, originally written to ensure the health, safety and welfare of residents by regulating land use, may present barriers to urban agriculture. The Commission encourages the City of Hartford to take action to update current codes to permit urban agriculture to occur in more sections of the City.

Similarly, zoning ordinances can be implemented to ban fast-food restaurants from being established in certain areas of urban centers or could require that retailers carry a baseline inventory of perishable and non-perishable food, which would both encourage healthier grocery inventories in "corner stores" and deter criminal activities. These "Healthy Food Zone" ordinances have been successfully introduced in Los Angeles and Minneapolis, respectively. Healthy Food Zones, or better definitions of what qualifies as a grocery store, may be concepts worth exploring and may be areas where Hartford could be a leader in demonstrating care for the food choices that are provided to our children and families. It is recommended that the City research model Healthy Food Zone ordinances and draft strategically written municipal codes that would create healthy food environments in Hartford neighborhoods.

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Advisory Commission on Food Policy

Recommendations for Action in 2013 and Beyond



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Priorities:

- Assess Hartford's current zoning ordinances related to urban gardening and farming.
- Discuss and decide on which types of urban agriculture activities would be appropriate for and beneficial to Hartford.
- Draft, adopt and implement amendments and additions to zoning codes to remove barriers to urban agriculture and permit agricultural activities.
- Research ordinances related to Healthy Food Zones and explore the feasibility of implementing such ordinances in Hartford.



V. Develop a Compost "Pick-Up" Program

Composting is a simple, inexpensive way to dispose of and recycle food scraps and yard waste to create a material that helps improve the health and quality of soil. When organic material is composted rather than thrown away into the waste stream, the volume of garbage and the cost of its disposal decreases. The Commission recommends that the City encourages residents to compost in safe and effective ways, by establishing a composting campaign to promote the practice. In addition, we recommend that the City help make use of excess compost by developing a "pick-up" program that would transport collected compost for use off-site. A composting program would complement initiatives to increase urban agriculture in Hartford.

Priorities:

- Educate residents about how to compost properly and safely.
- Develop and implement a compost "pick-up" program that would facilitate the transport of compost from residential areas to areas off-site.
- To encourage composting, a "drop off" site could also be set up. This site could be staffed with volunteers who would educate participants.
- This operation would remove compostable organic material from the waste stream. This would result in a reduction in weight and bulk of the refuse that contractors process, saving the city money.

VI. Tax Incentives and Economic Benefits for Healthy Food Businesses

Food production and food retailing account for a very significant portion of Hartford's economic activity. To encourage the development of healthy food production and increased access to healthy food in the City, the commission recommends that incentives for healthy food production and sale be explored and implemented. The Commission would be pleased to work with City leadership to explore whether the following options might work for Hartford.

Priorities:

- Amend the City tax code to provide tax incentives to private property owners who may collaborate with Hartford nonprofit organizations to develop a community garden or urban farming/agricultural operation on their property. To be eligible for a tax incentive, a property owner might deed the property to a 501c3 organization that will develop a garden on the property. Language in the deed would state that if the property ceases to be used as a garden, ownership would revert back to the donor of the property.
- Implement City-sponsored purchasing arrangements that would allow retailers to get favorable pricing on equipment to display and sell healthier food selections.

VII. Respond to Results of Grocery Store Price Survey

Researchers at the University of Connecticut have partnered with the Hartford Food System for several years to evaluate the availability and quality of healthy food in Hartford corner stores. This evaluation showed that stores certified to accept vouchers for the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program carry significantly more fruits, vegetables and whole grain products compared to similar stores that are not WIC certified. As part of this evaluation, researchers surveyed 372 customers who shop at corner stores. Researchers found that when stores have a larger variety of fruits and vegetables available in their stores, customers are more likely to buy them. Results indicate that demand is related to supply, which may encourage store owners to stock a larger supply of produce.

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In the fall of 2012, the Hartford Food System partnered with researchers at the University of Connecticut to examine the accessibility, affordability and quality of healthy food sold at grocery stores in a two mile radius of Hartford. The goal of the study is to compare Hartford to suburban stores, and to compare food access based on store size. Preliminary results show that there are no significant differences in availability and price between Hartford and suburban stores, but the quality differs significantly. There are also significant differences between small, medium and large stores on all variables. Improving the quality of food, and store appearance in Hartford stores will improve healthy food access. Many of the store owners for small and medium-sized markets in Hartford live locally. Therefore, efforts to improve the business infrastructure and sales of these markets will help support the local economy. This is compared to large supermarkets owned by national or often international companies where the revenue will not be reinvested into the city.

Priorities:

- Provide tax breaks or credits for store infrastructure improvements, such as internal and external lighting, improvements for parking lots, and refrigeration for produce to make existing stores more appealing and safe.
- Create liaisons between local farmers and small and medium-sized groceries to improve the quality and availability of fresh produce. This could be between community gardens, farmers' markets or regional farmers to sell their produce in local markets.

VIII. Support Development of Hartford Food Hub

A food hub is a centrally located facility offering production, aggregation, distribution, and marketing services to small and mid-sized food producers. Connecticut has experienced an upward trend in agriculture, as evidenced by increased numbers of college students interested in pursuing a degree in agriculture and natural resources, certified farmers markets and farms. It is recommended that Hartford take this opportunity to support small farmers by working with community organizations to explore developing a food hub. The City's Community Development Block Grant Program recently awarded funds to Hartford Food System to conduct a feasibility study for a food hub in Hartford. Results from this study should inform future steps taken by the City to pursue the creation of a food hub.

Priorities:

- Conduct feasibility study for the establishment of a food hub in Hartford.
- Based on the results of the feasibility study, develop an action plan to prepare for and create a food hub in Hartford.
- Engage key stakeholders and community organizations in supporting the establishment of a food hub.

IX. Evaluate and Improve Disaster Preparedness Impacting Hartford's Food Supply

In 2012, Hurricane Sandy and Winter Storm Alfred swept through Connecticut causing power outages and property damage. Though these storms had a weaker impact on Hartford than on the suburbs, it would be prudent to evaluate the City's response to these weather events in order assess the resiliency of the local food system under emergency circumstances and to improve the response to a future disasters that have the capacity to affect the food supply. The Commission recommends that the City undertake an evaluation of food system readiness for a disaster and report their findings to the community.

Priorities:

- *Grocery stores* – How many are equipped to operate if the power is out? Can we help more stores be equipped for such an emergency? Can we establish transportation systems to help people get to the stores that are open?
- *Food pantries* – Many food pantries were without power and closed for an entire week. People who rely on food pantries do not have a supply of food at home. How can we ensure that people who rely on food pantries are served in time of disaster, either by keeping the pantries open or by providing an alternate means of service?
- *Storm related shelters* – Did the shelters that were open have access to enough food and other supplies to meet the needs? What lessons did we learn? What can we do better next time?
- *Communications* – With landline phones, mobile phones, and internet connections down or limited, how do we communicate with people during an emergency to share information about food or other resources? What did we learn from this disaster and what could we do better next time?
- *Food safety* – With power out, food safety becomes a major issue for both households and institutions. What safeguards are in place and what can be improved to ensure a safe food supply in a time of emergency?

The recommendations in this report will help improve the health of all Hartford residents and make progress towards achieving the goals of the Commission.

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Progress on Prior Recommendations & Commission Activities

In 2012 it was recommended that the City increase the utilization of The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). This federal child nutrition program allows kids 18 years or younger to receive free meals while school is out for the summer. Without this program, youth who rely on subsidized school lunches would risk a gap in healthy eating during the time that school is not in session. There are two sponsors/meal providers in Hartford, Hartford Public Schools and the City of Hartford through the Families, Children, Youth and Recreation Department. Both provide free breakfast and lunch to more than 70 locations throughout the city. Both programs served fewer meals in summer 2011 than in the summer of 2010, which also had a decrease from the year before. However, **in summer 2012 there was a 42% increase in the number of meals served through Hartford Public Schools, with over 55,000 more meals served.** The City of Hartford still served fewer meals in summer 2012 than in 2011, but the percent decrease in meals served was 6%, which is less than previous years. The Commission strongly encourages the City to build on this positive trend and make increasing the number of children participating in Summer Food a priority to ensure children receive good nutrition year round.

The Commission continues to recommend that the City take a leadership role in efforts to improve access and decrease barriers for SNAP among those who are eligible. The Food & Nutrition Service of the United States Department of Agriculture ranked the state of Connecticut **last** in the nation regarding timeliness of issuing SNAP benefits. Timeliness is defined as granting benefits within 30 days of the application date and seven days for expedited (emergency) benefits. The Commission recommends that the City monitor state policy and advocacy efforts aimed to decrease barriers, increase efficiency at state and local CT Department of Social Services offices, and facilitate access to improve timeliness of SNAP applications. Focus should be paid to populations with the most barriers to participation including; older adults, homeless individuals and non-English speaking populations.

A recent report from the Food Research and Action Center "*SNAP and Public Health: The Role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Improving the Health and Well-Being of Americans*" found that SNAP not only reduces food insecurity and improves dietary quality, but the program also helps to improve other health outcomes.

The findings included:

- Young, food insecure children who participated in SNAP had fewer hospitalizations than comparable non-participants and were less likely to be in poor/fair health, based on responses from more than 17,000 caregivers in six urban centers.
- National food consumption data (as measured by USDA's Healthy Eating Index) show that each additional SNAP dollar increased a household's score for overall dietary quality.
- And increasing participation in the federal nutrition programs – including SNAP – was recommended in two Institute of Medicine (IOM) reports focused on child obesity prevention.

With the recent release of Hartford pre-school obesity rates, officials should look at increasing SNAP participation as an obesity prevention strategy and incorporate its adoption in activities intended to address childhood obesity in Hartford.

Early in 2012 local press brought increased awareness to the quality of food offered in corner stores. Results of the study, conducted by researchers at the University of Connecticut, showed that there is a demand for healthy foods in the city. When corner stores stock a variety of fruits and vegetables, and display them attractively, produce sales go up. This study lends support to initiatives in the City to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Lastly, data collection for the evaluation of Freshplace, an innovative food pantry in Hartford founded by Foodshare, the Chrysalis Center, and the Junior League of Hartford, was completed in January 2013 by researchers at the University of Connecticut. Freshplace opened in 2010, offering fresh foods and individualized case management to monitor goals for becoming food secure. Early results indicate significant decreases in food insecurity, and significant increases in self-sufficiency. Interviews with Freshplace members have provided positive feedback and suggestions for improving the program. The evaluators now look forward to sharing their findings and developing a manual to guide the replication of the Freshplace model in other food pantries by incorporating case management services into their programs. This may be a key component in the fight to end hunger in Hartford.

Future Trends and Areas of Focus

Understanding Economic Impact of SNAP, WIC, Urban Agriculture, Corner Stores, and other Food Security Strategies

Ensuring access to healthy food for all Hartford residents is not just a social and public health good. It's also good for the economy. It is a useful economic development activity to understand the business impact of various food security activities, such as WIC and SNAP usage, small markets that are more successful offering healthier selections, and commercially successful farmers markets and city farms. Doing so could lead to more effective strategies to ensure that these activities operate at their maximum potential in the City.

Food-related Uses on Landfills

Potential uses for the completely covered landfill are being proposed. Among the suggestions that have been advanced is the construction of commercial greenhouses. We believe that food growing in these greenhouses is a logical use of a portion of any greenhouse capacity.

For questions about this report, please contact Martha Page, Hartford Food System at (860)296-9325 or mpage@hartfordfood.org