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Mayor

## **CITY OF HARTFORD ADVISORY COMMISSION ON FOOD POLICY**

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### **2011 Recommendations Point the Way to Increased Food Security in Hartford**



The Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy was established in 1991 by the Hartford City Council to implement the recommendations of the Mayor's Task Force on Hunger that year. 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 the *four goals* outlined in the establishing ordinance:

- 1) *Eliminate hunger as an obstacle to a happy, healthy and productive life in the City.*
- 2) *Ensure that a wide variety of safe and nutritious food is available for City residents.*
- 3) *Ensure that access to food is not limited by economic status, location or other factors beyond a resident's control.*
- 4) *Ensure that the price of food in the City remains at a level approximating the level for the state.*

These goals remain as relevant today as when the Commission started its work. The ongoing recession continues to create hardship for low-income Hartford residents who struggle to obtain healthy food and other basic necessities. Hartford's unemployment rate in October 2010 was 15.4%, almost twice the State rate. Among cities with more than 100,000 residents, Hartford has one of the lowest median household income levels in the nation. For City households, the 2009 median household income was less than \$30,000; in surrounding Hartford County it is more than \$63,000, making the City an island of poverty in a sea of relative affluence. Approximately 30% of Hartford households are enrolled for SNAP benefits, although more are eligible but not enrolled.

Hartford residents suffer disproportionately from the medical consequences of substandard diets. The City's rates of nutrition-related diseases exceed state and national averages, with the prevalence of diabetes 120% higher and hypertension 29% higher than Connecticut overall. The rate of obesity among Hartford's children aged two to five has been estimated at 24%, double the national average of 12%. Among Hartford's schoolchildren, approximately 40% are obese or at risk of obesity.

These factors for Hartford are in the context of deteriorating food security in the state overall. A 2009 USDA study indicated that Connecticut experienced a 34% increase in the number of households with *food insecurity*, meaning not always being able to acquire nutritionally adequate and safe foods due to limited or uncertain resources. The number of food insecure households in Connecticut rose to 11% during the 2006-2008 period. Connecticut's percentage of households with *very low food security*, i.e. those experiencing hunger and skipping meals on a frequent basis, rose 58% between the 2003-2005 and 2006-2008 periods.

The negative impact of inadequate healthy food access for Hartford's residents remains a daunting challenge. The Commission believes, however, 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 achievable recommendations on food and nutrition issues which can be found on the following pages of this report.

# Advisory Commission on Food Policy

## Recommendations for Action in 2011 and Beyond

For 2011, the Commission recommends action on the following items. We are ready to discuss these recommendations and to partner with City agencies and community organizations on implementing them. Some of these have been recommended before and did not see sufficient progress in 2010.

### Continue to Support Food Pantries and Implement Best Practices



The main objective of the Food Policy Commission is to support and advocate for long-term solutions to food insecurity and hunger. We also recognize that there may be short-term needs for more “emergency” food supplies through food pantries. We continue to support local food pantries and encourage them to pursue the “Food Pantry Best Practices” established by Foodshare (text box on page 5). These include offering client choice, offering non-traditional hours of operation, providing healthy food items including fresh fruits and vegetables, and providing additional services and referrals to address the root causes of clients’ need for food assistance.

“THERE IS A NEED FOR HIGHER AWARENESS ABOUT THE SNAP PROGRAM FOR HARTFORD’S SENIORS”

### Increase SNAP Enrollment

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), previously known as the Federal Food Stamp Program, provides monthly SNAP benefits to low income families to purchase food. SNAP participation has increased nationwide in record numbers reaching 43.2 million SNAP recipients in October, or one in eight individuals in the U.S. From October 2009 to October 2010, there were 10 states, including Connecticut, with SNAP participation increases of 20% or higher. Although SNAP participation numbers are increasing rapidly, there are still one of three potentially eligible who are not participating. Currently there are 364,341 individuals receiving SNAP benefits in Connecticut, only 10% of whom are senior citizens. There is a need for higher awareness about the SNAP program amongst the senior population.

There are barriers that prevent seniors from applying for SNAP benefits, including a belief that the benefit is minimal and the paperwork is too difficult. In fact, the average SNAP benefit for seniors in Connecticut is \$134 per month. Applicants can request a phone interview, waiving the face-to-face interview. Connecticut has adopted the Categorical Eligibility Expansion, increasing the SNAP inclusion guidelines from 130% of the Federal Poverty Level to 185%. It also eliminated the asset test as long as the household income is below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level,

streamlining the application process for seniors and families and making the program more accessible.

The Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS) works with End Hunger CT!, the Hispanic Health Council and the Connecticut Association of Human Services, to increase SNAP enrollment. These agencies conduct community outreach statewide to increase awareness about SNAP, focusing on the senior population, the homeless and legal immigrants. This effort has resulted in improved access to SNAP based on a variety of strategies such as media campaigns, culturally appropriate educational materials, organization of web seminars and an E-Fax initiative in Hartford’s regional DSS office. The Hartford DSS office serves the largest number of SNAP recipients in the state with approximately 47,686 individuals and families currently receiving SNAP. We recommend that the City actively support SNAP outreach efforts, especially those targeting Hartford’s senior citizens, as well as the homeless and the legal immigrant population.

### Ban Trans Fatty Acids

Consuming trans fat raises levels of LDL, or “bad,” cholesterol and lowers levels of HDL, or “good,” cholesterol. This can cause the arteries to become clogged and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke. Jurisdictions across the nation are addressing this health risk by banning the use of these products at food service establishments. In the state of California and cities like Baltimore, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Seattle bans have already been implemented. Many other states and cities are considering legislation. Hartford should build on the work and early results from these legislative leaders and enact a ban on trans fats in 2011. In nearby Boston, food service establishments are no longer able to use oils, shortening, or margarines containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oil in the preparation of baked goods, mixes, partially fried items, and all other foods containing artificial trans fat. While a trans fat ban in Hartford would require some food service establishments to change the type of cooking oils, shortening, and margarine they now use, we are aware that many establishments have voluntarily made this change already and, for those that have not, acceptable non-hydrogenated cooking products are widely available. Where these bans have gone into effect, particularly on a phased-in basis, the impact on food establishments has been minimal, while the potential impact on health status of residents is significant.

# Advisory Commission on Food Policy

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## Recommendations for Action in 2011 and Beyond

### **Increase WIC Enrollment and Voucher Redemption**

The WIC Program serves pregnant, postpartum, and breast-feeding women; infants; and children up to five years of age. The program provides services in four major areas to improve birth outcomes and child health: 1) Nutrition Education and Counseling; 2) Breastfeeding Promotion and Support; 3) Referral to outside medical and social services; and 4) Vouchers for healthy foods prescribed by WIC nutritionists (WIC food packages). Eligibility is based on both income and nutritional need based on an assessment of health and dietary information. A statewide analysis of linked birth, WIC and Medicaid records revealed that participation in the CT WIC Program was responsible for preventing the occurrence of more than 300 low birth weights in the year 2000 among infants of women who participated in the program for at least 12 weeks of their pregnancy. The WIC Program's promotion and support of breastfeeding, and efforts to prevent childhood anemia also contribute to childhood health and school readiness.

In October 2009, WIC introduced a new food package in an effort to address the nation's overweight and obesity problem. The new food package includes vegetables, fruits, and food items rich in whole grains. These changes provide more flexibility for WIC nutritionists in meeting individual needs for nutrition, personal preference, and cultural eating habits. The Connecticut Department of Public Health has estimated that 12,000 Hartford residents are eligible for WIC, a significantly higher number than the approximately 10,000 client caseload in recent years. The Advisory Commission recommends, once again, that city officials use local resources to increase the visibility of the WIC program and promote full usage of the available benefits. A modest investment in publicity and media will help ensure that Hartford mothers and children receive all the assistance for which they are eligible.

### **Support the Summer Food Program**

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federal child nutrition program that allows children 18 years or younger to receive free meals during summer vacation. 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. Hartford has two main SFSP programs, one of which is operated by Hartford Public Schools and the other by the City's Recreation Services. These two efforts provided free breakfasts and lunches to more than 70 locations throughout the City. Unfortunately, participation decreased in summer 2010 despite increased need within emergency food programs. Compared to summer 2009, Hartford Public Schools saw a 13% decrease in meals served and the City's Recreation Services experienced a 19% decrease.

In total, 226,876 meals were served over the eight week period, only 8% of the total lunches served to free and reduced-price eligible Hartford students in the 2009-2010 school year.

We urge city and school administrators to promote and publicize the SFSP more aggressively. Families should be notified of SFSP site locations and times, and that all children 18 and under are eligible. High-priority mailings such as the final report card and recorded telephone messages can help market the program. Summer youth programs should be encouraged to partner with Hartford Public Schools or Recreation Services to receive meals or attend services sites. School administrators should be made aware and communicate to their staff that all schools with summer school serve meals and the meals are available to any child in Hartford, not just those attending that school or summer programming. Finally, efforts should be made to align summer recreation programming with meal times since activities act as a magnet in drawing kids to meal sites.

### **Increase School Breakfast Participation**

Like the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program is a federal nutrition program that provides reimbursements to school districts for serving nutritious meals. Any child eligible for free or reduced price school lunch (over 92% in Hartford) is eligible for free or reduced price school breakfast. Studies show that children who eat breakfast have improved cognitive function, attention, memory<sup>1</sup>, and perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast at home<sup>2</sup>. Many Hartford schools serve free meals to all school-children. Hartford Schools currently offer school breakfast at all public schools with many options for students; however, only 39% of those eating free or reduced-price lunch are accessing school breakfast. Barriers to breakfast participation include timing of the breakfast service, timing of buses, and lack of parental awareness.

The Commission encourages the City to make school breakfast a priority in all schools by promoting its connection to learning and encouraging alternative methods of school breakfast like grab-n-go and in-classroom breakfast. These methods have proven highly successful in other districts by heightening program awareness and making breakfast more accessible to students.

<sup>1</sup>Wesnes KA, Pincock C, Richardson D, Helm G, Hails S. "Breakfast reduces declines in attention and memory over the morning in schoolchildren." *Appetite* 2003;41 (3):329-31.

<sup>2</sup> Vaisman N, Voet H, Akivis A, Vakili E. "Effects of Breakfast Timing on the Cognitive Functions of Elementary School Students."

# Advisory Commission on Food Policy

## Progress on Prior Recommendations

Several Commission recommendations from prior years saw progress during 2010. Here are some notable examples.



“FARMERS  
MARKETS  
GENERATE  
ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT  
AND COMBAT  
FOOD  
INSECURITY FOR  
HARTFORD  
RESIDENTS”

### Farmers Markets in Hartford

Farmers markets provide a vital link between farmers, Hartford residents and healthy food. In a 2005 study by the Hartford Food System and Community Food Security Coalition, Hartford ranked 166 out of 169 towns for most food insecure. The City recognizes that Hartford’s farmers markets generate economic development, combat food insecurity, build sustainable community, have unbeatable taste, quality and healthy choices available, are good for our environment and preserve the agricultural heritage of our state.

In 2010, for the first time in almost 30 years, Hartford’s farmers market managers sat down with the City to work together to promote the overall benefit and availability of fresh produce from farmers markets. The group included market organizers from all Hartford’s markets, the City of Hartford Department of Health and Human Services, Hartford Food System and the Knox Parks Foundation. Hartford farmers markets all accept WIC Farmers markets check and many also accept SNAP/EBT. This means greater access to healthy local fruits and vegetable for Hartford residents.

The new partnership between the City and farmers markets is continuing in 2011 and comes at a time when Connecticut has seen an explosion in farmers markets in the state. By sharing in the responsibility for the success of these markets Hartford becomes a competitive destination for farmers and consumers alike to enjoy these vibrant community events.

### Promote Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture on Main Street

The 2009 report highlighted that food production within the city generates large quantities of fresh produce every year through community gardens and urban agriculture programs, and that a major expansion of these efforts could be achieved by growing crops at the vacant lots at Park and Main Streets (formerly known as the Plaza Mayor site.) The recommendation was that the City should partner with the community and bring these lots into production for food to be distributed to people in need. The Commission further recommended thorough soil testing to ensure the safety of all food harvested at the site, as well as sustainable agricultural practices so that a temporary agricultural use of the property would leave the site in an ecologically better state for future development.

In 2010, Hartford Food System made a successful application to the City for Community Development Block Grant funding for agricultural use of a portion of the vacant property, specifically the southwest lot. This development of a "community farm" on Main Street is in the process of implementation for the 2011 growing season and is already drawing strong interest and support from the site’s neighbors.

### Healthy Food Retailers

Shopping for groceries in inner-city communities continues to be a challenging task. Hartford has one large supermarket and a few mid-size markets. Residents often rely on small retailers with very limited selections for some of their grocery needs, or travel regularly outside their own communities to buy food elsewhere. The Healthy Food Retailer Initiative at Hartford Food System has been working since 2006 with certain small stores to improve the nutritional quality of the groceries they sell. The effort was recently evaluated by University of Connecticut researchers, who found some evidence that healthier food is more available across the City than it was a few years ago. Larger corner stores and WIC certified stores were more likely to stock healthy food items. Continuing to work with store owners and to promote healthy food among customers makes sense to improve food access for Hartford’s residents. Support from city administered programs may be helpful to retailers as they seek cost-effective ways to become community health and economic assets.



# Advisory Commission on Food Policy

## Progress on Prior Recommendations

### Show Calorie Counts at Chain Restaurants

Included in the federal health care legislation passed by Congress in 2010 is a provision that requires restaurants with 20 or more outlets nationally to post the calorie counts of menu items. The legislation also applies to vending machines. The provision, championed by Connecticut's 3rd District Rep. Rosa DeLauro, received far less attention than other aspects of the health care overhaul. Public health advocates believe it has the potential to become a powerful weapon in the fight against obesity. While this is a good start, the proposed regulations are not due until March, 2011, and the final law will become effective only after a rulemaking process that does not have a firm deadline for completion.

A study conducted by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University found that people ate considerably less when calorie information was listed on a restaurant's menu. The Center also recommends that states and municipalities consider passing identical legislation in order to have the authority to enforce the regulation themselves, in the event that the degree of federal enforcement is less than optimal.

### Create Transparency in Restaurant Scoring

In 2009, the Advisory Commission recommended posting inspection results at food service establishments to help consumers make informed decisions and give food service establishments greater incentives to comply with state and local health requirements.

The Department of Health and Human Services is currently preparing an ordinance for Council consideration that will create a grading system based on inspection reports for Hartford food establishments. This type of "grading" is currently being done in several cities across the country and is a convenient and easily understandable way to provide information to consumers about the health and safety of the restaurants where they spend their money. We believe that greater transparency will help reduce the risk of food borne illnesses in Hartford. We expect this ordinance to be implemented in 2011.



### Recommended "Best Practices" for Hartford Food Pantries

- 1) *Client choice*: Clients should be allowed to choose the items they want rather than being handed a pre-packed bag of food.
- 2) *Adequate food*: Clients should be trusted to take the amount of food they feel they need. For hard to supply items, the pantry may place limits based on family size.
- 3) *Adequate access*: Clients should be able to visit the pantry as often as needed. Pantries should consider opening evenings or weekends so clients who work are able to access services.
- 4) *Respectful and dignified client intake*: Clients should be asked a minimum number of questions in order to receive food, including no more than annual assessment of residency, household size, special dietary needs and income level.
- 5) *Use of Foodbank products*: Getting inventory from a regional food bank allows pantries to stretch their dollars much farther than if donors purchased food items and gave it to pantries directly. Hartford pantries are fortunate to have Foodshare as a cost-efficient means to stock their inventories and avoid the duplication of separate food drives.
- 6) *Healthy foods*: Fresh fruits and vegetables, meat and dairy products should be available to clients.
- 7) *Referrals and coordination with other agencies*: Clients should be provided with information or services that will help them address the root causes of their need for food assistance. The pantry should coordinate with other agencies in fighting hunger and poverty in its community, and contact local legislators and government officials on food policy issues.

# Advisory Commission on Food Policy

## Future Trends and Areas of Focus

There is much current activity in the City that may form the basis for future Advisory Commission discussion, support, and recommendations. Some of these are listed below.

### **Food-related Uses on Landfill**

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.

### **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.

### **SNAP Strategies to Improve Healthy Food Purchases**

A recent New York City proposal to institute limitations on the use of SNAP benefits for soda purchases generated much controversy. It also sparked much needed discussion on ways to increase the use of Supplemental Nutrition benefits for healthier food choices. The City can take a leadership role in understanding how these benefits are used and figuring out ways to promote healthy food selections for our residents who rely on these benefits to feed their families.

### **Swift Family Factory**

Proposals are being developed for the Swift Family Factory site that include the use of part of the site, including part of the roof, to support commercial agriculture ventures, including the sale of produce and the creation of value-added products. This type of visionary project can provide a testing ground for making agriculture a valuable thread in the economic life of the City, while improving the access to healthy food for Hartford's residents.

### **Food Hubs**

Discovering the ways that "micro" food environments exist or could exist in Hartford could provide valuable guidance on ways to improve food access and even end hunger in our City. Community groups are exploring the concept of what it means to be a "food hub" and what components comprise the food environment at the neighborhood level and City-wide.

### **Healthy Food Zones**

The Los Angeles City Council recently enacted a ban on new fast-food establishments in certain parts of the City. The concept of "Healthy Food Zones" in neighborhoods or potentially around schools may be a concept worth exploration and may be an area where Hartford could be a leader in demonstrating care for the food choices that are provided to our children and families.

### **Hunger-Free Community**

It is feasible to consider that Hartford could become a hunger-free community. In order to do so, however, it is necessary to fully understand the extent of the problem. Efforts are underway in 2011 to pull together existing data and begin to address the knowledge gap about food access in the City. As these materialize, it will also doubtless provide City leadership with opportunities to develop solutions suggested by the information.



"HARTFORD  
COULD BECOME  
A HUNGER-FREE  
COMMUNITY