The City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy was established by ordinance in 1991 to implement recommendations from the Mayor’s Task Force on Hunger. Its purpose is to integrate all City agencies 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:

- 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 continue to be relevant. Significant socioeconomic and health disparities, including limited and inconsistent access to affordable, healthy foods, are present in Hartford. As of December 2013, the unemployment rate in the City was 13%. The median income for City households is less than $30,000—not even half that of Hartford County overall. The percent of people in poverty (33.9%) in Hartford is three times as high as that for the state, and 45% of Hartford’s children under the age of 18 live in poverty.

Food insecurity, a consequence of poverty, significantly impacts Hartford residents. A 2012 report released by the University of Connecticut identified Hartford as the city with the greatest risk of food insecurity in the state. Many residents in Hartford live where access to fresh, quality fruits and vegetables is limited. Inadequate access to healthy foods affects health. Many of the 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 are another symptom of a troubled food system. A study conducted in 2012 by the University of Connecticut found that 37% of preschool children in Hartford are overweight or obese, a prevalence more than double the national age and gender body mass index guidelines. Given these and other factors, the importance of good food policy cannot be overstated. The recommendations that follow reflect the critical need for action to improve Hartford’s food environment.
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; these programs include the School Breakfast Program, the At-Risk Afterschool Meal Program or “Supper Program,” and the Summer Food Service Program. These programs are operating in Hartford through sponsorship by the City of Hartford and the Hartford Board of Education. The Commission recommends that the City support efforts to increase and maximize participation in these programs that provide healthy meals to Hartford children.

School Breakfast

Breakfast participation increased from 40.18% in 2012 to 45.62% in 2013. Hartford Food and Child Nutrition Services is exploring strategies to supplement cafeteria breakfast in order to reach more students, the most promising being a “Grab-and-Go” option where breakfast is available at school entrances to be brought to the classroom. The number of schools with this option more than tripled from 2012 to 2013 from two to seven schools. Schools only serving traditional/cafeteria breakfast show an average student participation rate of 39%, while schools with alternative service models, like Breakfast in the Classroom or “Grab-and-Go” breakfast, show an average student participation rate of 67%.

Commission Objectives for 2014:
- Support the increase in the number of schools offering Grab-and-Go by five additional schools
- Conduct a survey of parents and students in each school to better understand breakfast eating habits and the impact of school breakfast

Afterschool Meal Program

The majority of Hartford Public Schools serve snacks to children after school. The number of schools with supper service increased from five to ten schools, feeding approximately 800 children daily. Unfortunately, the programs only allow the feeding of enrolled children, adult caregivers and siblings cannot be fed as well, potentially discouraging participation.

Commission Objectives for 2014:
- Support the expansion of supper service to more schools
- Connect organizations and departments running afterschool programming to schools currently offering suppers
- Explore ways to feed families of children in afterschool programs through partnerships with outside organizations

Summer Nutrition

All summer meals programs, both those run by the City and those run by Hartford Public Schools, saw a decrease in meals served without a corresponding decline in levels of poverty. Collectively, 21.5% fewer meals were served. The underutilization requires action.

Commission Objectives for 2014:
- Conduct a study to understand the underutilization of the summer meals sites around the City and convene a meeting with organizations throughout the City to address the findings of the report
- Ensure all summer youth programs either receive meals (breakfast and/or lunch) on-site or can direct their participants to a off-site location where meals are being served
- Promote the End Hunger CT! Summer Location finder (ctsummerfood.org) by putting information on the City website home page and asking partnering community agencies to do the same
- Utilize the Board of Education’s 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
- Find new locations for summer feeding programs to occur when appropriate

Recommendations for the City to Increase Participation in Child Nutrition Programs

- Capitalize on existing funding streams to support the initiation of school breakfast programs that incorporate breakfast into the school day, removing timing as a barrier to participation
- Explore Universal Feeding option for Hartford Public Schools (free to all students regardless of income)
- Explore sources of funding for afterschool programs at more schools
- Explore sources of funding for concurrent adult and family feeding programs
- Explore expanding the Food and Child Nutrition Services central warehouse into a commissary kitchen
II. Improve Nutrition Standards for Licensed Child Care Facilities

The New England Journal of Medicine published a study in January of 2014 showing that children who entered kindergarten overweight were more likely to become obese as they got older. A similar trend of overweight and obesity among preschoolers holds true in Hartford. A 2012 study of Hartford's preschool children (three to five years old) showed that 17% of the children were overweight and 20% were obese. Focusing efforts on childcare centers represents an excellent opportunity to address childhood obesity, since approximately 73% of three to five year-old children participate in center- or school-based child care.

Commission Objectives for 2014:

- Determine how many childcare centers participate in the federally-funded Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and increase enrollment among eligible centers
- Develop nutrition standards which equal or exceed CACFP standards
- Work with city preschools and childcare to initiate activities that familiarize children with the fruits and vegetables featured on the Hartford Public School menus
- Determine how many childcare centers and preschools participate in farm-to-preschool
- Determine how many childcare centers and preschools have gardens

Recommendations for the City to Improve Nutrition Standards for Licensed Child Care Facilities:

- Make adopting standards in nutrition, nutrition education, physical activity, and limited screen time part of the facility licensing requirements
- Include consideration of nutrition, physical activity, and screen time practices as part of the facility evaluation process
- Continue to monitor obesity rates among preschool children to measure effects of policy changes

III. Increase Participation of Hartford Residents in Federal and State Assistance Programs

In 2013, more than 66,300 Hartford residents used Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to purchase food for themselves and their families and received over five million meals from local food pantries and soup kitchens. With the elimination of long-term unemployment benefits and dramatic cuts to the SNAP program, we expect more Hartford families may find it difficult to provide adequate food for their households. Many of these Hartford families may be unaware of programs and services that are available to assist them. We recommend developing and implementing a comprehensive approach that ensures all federal and state programs designed to lift families out of poverty are being fully utilized.

Commission Objectives for 2014:

- Bring together agencies and organizations in the City to offer residents a comprehensive suite of services in multiple locations (e.g. provide SNAP enrollment and job assistance at food pantries, etc.)
- Endorse scholarship opportunities for residents on food assistance to assist in employment
- Leverage extant programs, such as Bridges Out of Poverty/Getting Ahead, to address food insecurity

Recommendations to the City to Increase Participation of Hartford Residents in Programs:

- Encourage partnerships between City agencies and area organizations to take a comprehensive approach to poverty in the City
- Promote all federal and state assistance programs to increase enrollment
IV. 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. Encouraging children to choose fresh fruits and vegetables at school and at home helps them maintain a healthy lifestyle that supports academic achievement. Gardening can be incorporated into classroom curriculum for teaching lessons about health, nutrition, science, and the environment. Growing food also helps impart to children a sense of responsibility, environmental stewardship, and community. As of the time of this report, nineteen Hartford Public Schools have gardens and six additional schools are interested in building gardens.

Commission Objectives for 2014:
- Support efforts to install gardens in the six schools with interest
- Develop interest in remaining schools
- Establish partnership with Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, other local or regional organizations, farmers, and other professionals to help the remaining schools start their own gardens
- Increase size and maximize yield of existing school gardens

Recommendations for the City to Plant More School Gardens:
- Ensure zoning codes allow schools to plant gardens
- Develop guidelines to allow students to sample, sell, and/or donate garden produce
- Encourage curriculum development that uses the gardens as educational space
- Encourage year-round school, staff, and community support for the gardens

V. Implement Zoning Ordinances that Support Urban Agriculture

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. A model urban agriculture ordinance has been drafted and is being reviewed by the City.

Commission Objectives for 2014:
- Support extant community gardens, home gardening, and other farming, including aquaponics
- Support City adoption of the drafted urban agriculture ordinance

Recommendations for the City to Support Urban Agriculture:
- Amend the zoning ordinances to include supporting the practice of urban agriculture

VI. Implement Zoning Ordinances to Create “Healthy Food Zones”

Zoning ordinances can be implemented to limit fast-food restaurants from being established in certain areas and/or encourage retailers to carry a baseline inventory of perishable and non-perishable food, which would both promote healthier “corner stores” and deter criminal activities. Cities that have enacted such ordinances include Los Angeles, CA and Detroit, MI.

Commission Objectives for 2014:
- Research ordinances related to Healthy Food Zones and explore the feasibility of implementation in Hartford
- Create a model “Healthy Food Zone” ordinance for Hartford

Recommendations for the City to Create “Healthy Food Zones:”
- Amend zoning ordinances to slow the spread of fast-food outlets
- Provide incentives and marketing of “Healthy Food Zones” that meet nutrition standards
- Pilot “Healthy Food Zones” in city buildings by applying nutrition standards to beverages and food sold
- Enforce existing ordinances that regulate food vendors near schools during school hours
**VII. Develop Tax Incentives and Economic Benefits for Healthy Food Businesses**

Food production and food retailing account for a significant portion of Hartford’s economic activity. Encouraging the development of healthy food production and increased access to healthy food contributes to the economic health of the City and the physical health of its residents.

**Commission Objectives for 2014:**
- Explore national best practices for supporting healthy food businesses and report findings

**Recommendations for the City to Support Healthy Food Businesses:**
- Explore the ability to provide tax incentives to private property owners who allow nonprofits to establish gardens on their land
- Explore City-sponsored purchasing arrangements that would allow retailers to get favorable pricing on equipment to display and sell healthier food selections

**VIII. Improve the Quality of Mid-Sized Grocery Stores**

In 2012-13, Hartford Food System partnered with researchers at the University of Connecticut and the University of St. Joseph to examine the accessibility, affordability and quality of produce sold at grocery stores in Hartford and within a two-mile radius of the City. Results show that there are no significant differences in availability and price between Hartford and suburban stores, but the quality differs significantly. Medium-sized stores had significantly lower prices than small or large supermarkets. Large stores had better internal, external and produce quality. Most Hartford residents live within a 0.5 to 1 mile distance to a grocery store. Classifying urban areas with few large supermarkets as food “deserts” may overlook the availability of healthy foods and low prices that exist within small and medium-sized groceries common in inner cities. Improving the quality of food and store appearance in Hartford stores will improve healthy food access and support businesses typically owned by local residents.

**Commission Objectives for 2014:**
- Encourage partnerships between local farmers and small and medium-sized groceries to improve the quality and availability of fresh local produce
- Support work with mid-sized markets to improve their overall healthy food offerings

**Recommendations for the City to Improve the Quality of Mid-Sized Grocery Stores:**
- Explore the possibility of 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
IX. Develop a 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, increased numbers of young farmers and farms, and increased numbers of certified farmers markets. Concurrently, the state of Connecticut is developing a plan to dramatically revamp the state-owned and Hartford-located Regional Market in order to increase the capability of the market to serve more customers and promote more Connecticut grown food. In 2013, a feasibility study was completed and supported the renovation of the Hartford Regional Market, which could serve as the area’s food hub, while creating additional business vibrancy in Hartford and employment opportunities for residents.

Commission Objectives for 2014:
- Engage key stakeholders and community organizations in supporting the establishment of a food hub and the renovation of the Hartford Regional Market

Recommendations for the City to Develop Hartford Food Hub:
- Based on the results of the feasibility study and the state of Connecticut work on the Market plan, develop an action plan to fully support the creation of a food hub in Hartford at the Regional Market

References:

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