

Increasing Access to Healthy Food

By Stacey Schultz

Access to affordable, healthy food including fresh fruits and vegetables is essential for the health and well-being of Washington families.

Federal and state food programs strive to increase the availability of healthy food to lower income households. Despite these efforts, many people in Washington State experience food insecurity, which means they do not have enough resources to ensure a healthy diet for all family members. Rates of food insecurity are significantly higher in lower income, rural parts of the state.

Distance to grocery stores is one factor in the availability of healthy food to people in Washington. Grocery stores typically sell a larger variety of affordable fresh fruits and vegetables than small corner markets or gas station mini marts. Across the state, there is significant variation in the distance that Washingtonians must travel to reach a grocery store. For residents in certain rural parts of

the state, regular food shopping at a grocery store is not convenient or cost-effective.

Efforts to improve the quality of food sold at corner markets could increase access to fruits and vegetables for lower income households in rural parts of the state. The Healthy Corner Store Network is a public-private partnership that has been successful in other areas of the country and may provide a model for Washington State.

Health Benefits of Fruits and Vegetables

A diet rich in fruits and vegetables has been shown to have multiple health benefits. Studies show that people who eat more than five servings of fruits and vegetables per day have about 20 percent lower risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke compared to people who eat less than three servings per day. Fruits and vegetables have also proven helpful in

reducing the chances of developing cataract or macular degeneration in the eyes as well as gastrointestinal illness.¹

Fruits and vegetables may also offer protection against certain forms of cancer. A report by the World Cancer Research Fund and the American Institute for Cancer Research suggests that certain fruits and vegetables may protect the body against several types of cancer including those of the mouth, throat, stomach, and lung.² Also well known are the advantages of a healthy diet in reducing obesity, which causes heart disease and diabetes.

Across the country, higher income households purchase more fruits and vegetables than lower income households. According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture study, in any given week in 2000 approximately 19 percent of all lower income households purchased no fruits or vegetables, compared to only nine percent of higher income households that bought none.³

Recent Steps to Improve Access to Fruits and Vegetables

Recent changes to federal and state nutrition programs focus on promoting healthier food consumption.

Last June, the federal government expanded the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps) by broadening eligibility, increasing benefits, and providing funding for programs that offer access to fruits and vegetables for lower income school children and seniors. These expansions were well-timed as the economy quickly fell into a recession and the need for assistance programs grew.

The recession and expanded eligibility have combined to increase participation in SNAP, which is called Basic Food in Washington State. Between February 2008 and 2009, SNAP participation in the state rose by over 27 percent, with close to 160,000 additional people

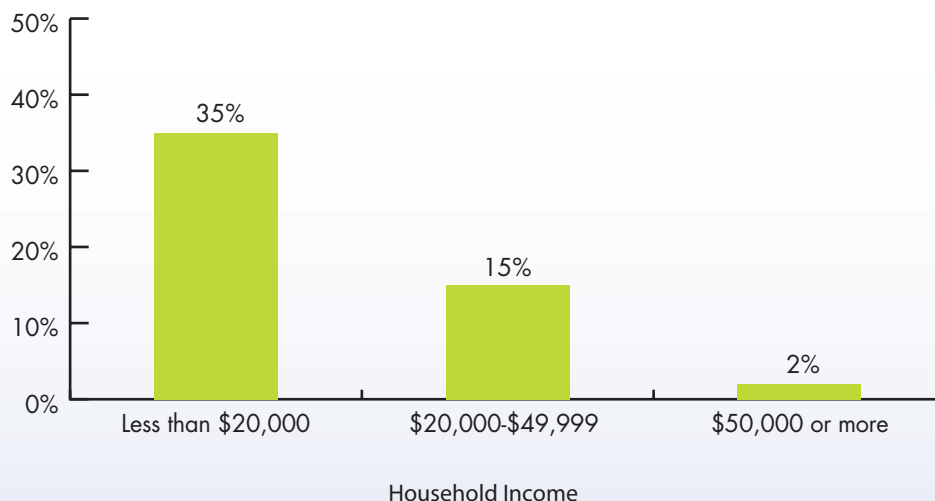
served.⁴ (Part of the increased participation in Basic Food can also be attributed to changes in the state's gross income limit in October 2008, from 130 percent to 200 percent of the federal poverty level.) Efforts to increase outreach can help boost enrollment in the program in areas of the state where participation rates are low. Federal stimulus funding has been aimed at increasing participation further.

There are other federal food programs that work to increase healthy eating and reduce food insecurity. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, for example, provides fruit and vegetable snacks at no cost to all children in participating schools across the country.⁵ In addition, starting in October 2009, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, popularly known as WIC, will amend its approved food list to include fruits and vegetables and whole grain foods. WIC is designed to help pregnant women, new mothers, and children eat well and stay healthy. The program provides participants with supplemental foods that are high in five target nutrients—protein, iron, vitamins A and C, and calcium. Almost half of all babies, one third of pregnant women, and one quarter of children under five in Washington are in the WIC program.⁶

Recent state initiatives have also been implemented. Last spring, Washington passed the Local Farms – Healthy Kids legislation which allocated \$600,000 per year in grant funds to elementary schools with high numbers of lower income students to make locally grown fruit and vegetable snacks available. As of September 2008, twenty-five schools in the state offered the snack program.⁷

The Farmers Market Nutrition Program is a state-wide initiative that allows WIC recipients and lower income seniors to purchase locally-grown fruits and vegetables. Farmers markets in the state are also beginning to accept food stamp EBT cards. Local Farms – Healthy

Figure 1. Food Insecurity Among Adults by Income in Washington, 2007



Source: Washington Behavioral Risk Factor

Kids also provided funds to equip farmers markets with wireless devices for EBT, debit and credit cards.

Food Insecurity in Washington

Despite these efforts, there are still many people in Washington who do not have adequate access to healthy food. According to a report last fall from the USDA in 2007, over 250,000 households in Washington experienced food insecurity, which refers to a shortage of resources to purchase an adequate healthy diet for all family members. Among these households, 90,000 met the definition for hunger, which means at least one member of the family goes hungry at times because there is not enough money for food.⁸

A state survey of over 24,000 families from 2007 found that rates of food insecurity in Washington are significantly higher in rural counties, particularly those with large farm worker populations and communities dependent on resource-based industries such as timber

and fisheries.⁹ The counties with higher percentages of food insecurity compared to the state as a whole include: Adams, Pacific, Asotin, Klickitat, Yakima, Okanogan, Franklin, and Chelan.¹⁰

In Washington food insecurity and poverty are closely linked. As the Figure 1 (above) shows, the highest levels of food insecurity occur in the lowest income group, although hunger does affect moderate income households as well.

Distance to Food Stores Impacts Access to Healthy Food

In rural areas of the state, the average distance to a supermarket or full-service grocery store can be significant. Transportation limitations and the high cost of fuel can impede the ability of lower income rural residents to reach these stores, which are more likely than smaller groceries and convenience stores to sell healthy food at affordable prices.

Figure 2. Average Distance to Full-Service Grocery Stores

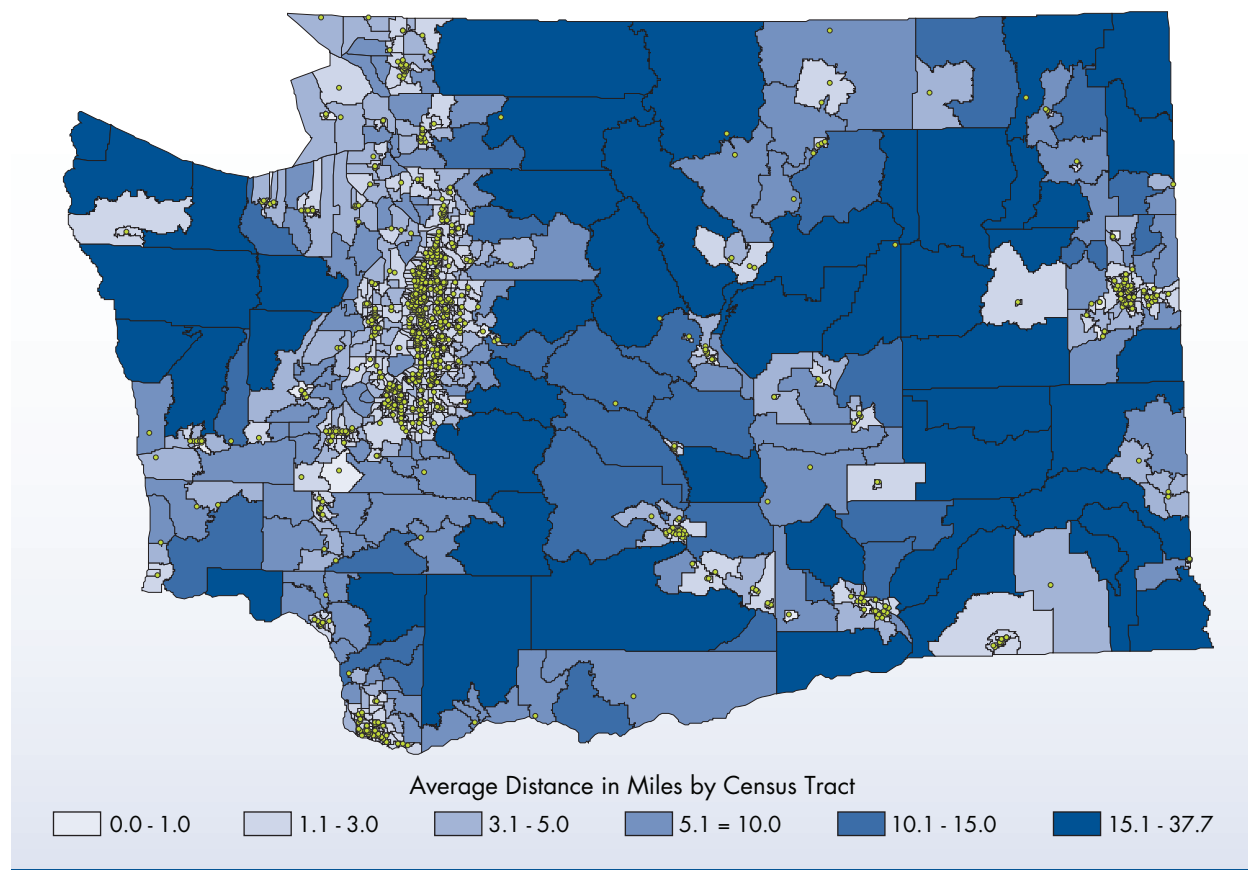


Figure 2 (above) shows the location of every supermarket and large grocery store in the state that accepted Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards in 2008. (EBT cards are debit cards that SNAP participants can use to purchase food.) The map is color-coded based on the average distance in each Census tract to the closest store.

Full-service stores are concentrated in metropolitan areas, where residents frequently live within one mile of such a store. (It should be noted, however, that access is limited in some urban neighborhoods particularly because of the lack of public transportation.)

In many rural areas of the state, residents must travel 15 miles or more to reach a full-service store. These are also often the areas of the country with the highest poverty rates and high rates of food insecurity.

Convenient access to grocery stores can mean better health outcomes for local residents. A recent study in Chicago found the rate of obesity increased as access to grocery stores decreased and that in areas with high concentrations of grocery stores, residents experienced fewer diet-related diseases.¹¹

The Healthy Corner Store Initiative

As shown above, people who live in certain rural communities cannot easily access full-service grocery stores.

Market-based solutions to increase the availability of healthy food in areas where access is low have been successful in other states. Participants in the Healthy Corner Store Network have worked with small retailers to improve the nutritional quality of the food sold in the stores. For example, in Hartford, CT, the Hartford Food System administers the Healthy Food Retailer Initiative, which is a partnership with 40 corner markets that have agreed to shift five percent of their junk food inventory to healthier groceries in exchange for grassroots outreach and technical assistance. Similar efforts are taking place in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Denver.

In Washington, DC, the Healthy Corner Store Program is currently running a pilot corner store initiative. Together with the Department of Health, DC Hunger Solutions has developed healthy food marketing materials and a guide to selling healthy food for store owners. These materials were piloted in three stores in September 2008. Each store also received two weeks worth of fresh fruit and a display stand. The pilot showed that many customers want to buy fresh fruit and vegetables if they are available, affordable, and advertised.¹²

While most existing efforts have focused on urban neighborhoods, these initiatives may point the way for rural Washington. These kinds of public-private initiatives should be considered to help promote access to a variety of affordable, healthy foods to households in every area of Washington State.

Conclusion

For good health, the USDA urges all Americans to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables each day. However, many Washingtonians face barriers of cost and accessibility to healthy food.

Many rural residents in Washington must travel long distances to grocery stores and therefore have less access to affordable fruits and vegetables. By contrast, people who live in more metropolitan areas or in higher income communities are more likely to have access to stores that offer a greater variety of fruits and vegetables.

Washington State can take advantage of existing public programs and work with the private sector to address this challenge. Increased outreach in underserved communities could help raise participation rates in food programs for those who are eligible. Several programs exist to encourage healthy food consumption among lower income people, including WIC, food stamps, and the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. It is important to ensure that retailers participate in these programs. In addition, private sector initiatives can help small retailers provide a variety of fruits and vegetables in a cost-effective manner.

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Endnotes

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