

# FOOD IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

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How New York City's Food Policy Holds the  
Key to Hunger, Health, Jobs and the Environment



Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer  
February 2009

## **About Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer**

Scott M. Stringer was sworn in as Manhattan's 26th Borough President in January of 2006 after serving 13 years in the New York Assembly, where The New York Times credited him as having "a sterling reputation as a catalyst for reform."

During his first two years in office, Borough President Stringer helped breathe new life into Manhattan's Community Boards, ensuring that every neighborhood has a strong voice in decisions that impact local residents' lives. He revamped the Borough President's Land Use Division and effectively weighed in on crucial development projects that will shape Manhattan's future. His continued advocacy for development that reflects neighborhood values has resulted in victories for local residents from Battery Park to Washington Heights.

Since taking office Borough President Stringer has emerged as one of the City's leading voices on the need for comprehensive transportation reform. He has continued his career-long fight for affordable housing by conducting the first ever borough-wide survey of vacant lots and abandoned buildings to identify sites for the creation of more affordable housing in Manhattan, and working with legislators in Albany and on the City Council to introduce laws that will further that goal.

The Borough President has authored a number of ground-breaking policy reports on issues of importance to every New Yorker, including parental involvement in our public schools, nursing home emergency preparedness, public safety, transportation and paid leave for employees.

In 2007 Borough President Stringer launched the Go Green East Harlem initiative, a multi-faceted campaign to improve residents' health in East Harlem, and to serve as a model for other environmentally neglected neighborhoods. Go Green initiatives to date include a new asthma center, the planting of hundreds of street trees in East Harlem, a new farmers' market on 106th Street, a "green building" conference for developers, planners and community advocates, and the Go Green East Harlem Cook Book, which features healthy, mouth watering recipes for appetizers, soups, salads, entrees and – yes – desserts. The bilingual cook book is given free of charge to East Harlem residents, and sold nationwide, with proceeds going to the Community Fund for Manhattan, a nonprofit organization created by the Borough President's office, which funded the book's publication.

Borough President Stringer worked to secure a \$900,000 grant from the federal Justice Department in order to crack down on domestic violence in Northern Manhattan and followed through on his pledge to create the Manhattan Borough President's Youth Sports league which serves more than 1,000 children across the borough by providing much needed after school activities.

During his thirteen years in the State Assembly, Mr. Stringer authored landmark legislation to protect victims of domestic violence, led the fight against repeal of the commuter tax, voted against every attempt to weaken rent regulations and sponsored legislation that ended "empty-seat voting" in Albany.

Borough President Stringer was born in Washington Heights where he graduated from local public schools and went on to graduate from John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

## Acknowledgments

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Problems associated with obesity and overweight have reached epidemic proportions in the United States. This trend has increased with such alarming momentum that the Surgeon General has urged communities to address the problems through a formal ‘call to action.’<sup>1</sup>

New York City is outpacing the nation in obesity and its related health issues. Both obesity and diabetes rates rose by 17 percent between 2002 and 2004 among city residents.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that New Yorkers gained more than 10 million pounds collectively during this same period.<sup>3</sup> A rise in the risk of heart disease, hypertension, depression, type II diabetes, among other health problems, often accompanies a rise in obesity and overweight. Residents of low-income neighborhoods and Black and Latino adults are disproportionately affected, thus overburdened by the related health, social, and economic problems.

The causes for this trend are generally oversimplified, often described as the result of changing lifestyles or overeating. The scope of the problem, however, is a great deal more complicated. Highly processed, fatty, and sugary foods are easily accessible, both by proximity and price, whereas fresh produce is not. This is particularly true in many low-income neighborhoods and communities of color.

There is currently a dearth of stores selling fresh fruits and vegetables in many of the city’s poor neighborhoods. The Department of City Planning recently found that three-quarters of a million New Yorkers live in areas with limited access to fresh produce.<sup>4</sup> Many of these same neighborhoods have an overabundance of fast food options: one in six restaurants in East and Central Harlem serves fast food compared to one in 25 on the more affluent Upper East Side.<sup>5</sup> These unhealthy options often cost less calorie-to-calorie.<sup>6</sup>

Public health advocates believe that this trend may be reversed through increased availability of healthy food, nutrition education, physical exercise, and healthcare.

Traditionally, food policy has largely been determined by decision-makers in the federal government and private sector. This should not devalue city and state leadership in reducing hunger and increasing the availability of healthy food. Yet, the food system – the continuum of activities ranging from production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal – stretches well beyond the jurisdiction of any one official or city agency. To create a paradigm shift that results in empowering the city and state to expand their role in food policy, every relevant government agency’s policies must be informed by and strategically focused on a shared goal: to create a sustainable food system which provides economic, social, environmental, and health benefits.

To address some of the existing challenges and to leverage new opportunities in New York City’s food system, this report’s recommendations are organized under the following subjects:

- Hunger
- Urban and Regional Agriculture
- Food Distribution
- Economic Development
- Food and Nutrition Education
- Steps Toward Implementation

## INTRODUCTION

On November 19, 2008, Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer hosted a conference on “The Politics of Food” at Columbia University’s Lerner Hall. The event was created in partnership with Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs, Earth Institute Urban Design Lab, and Office of Environmental Stewardship. More than 600 food advocates, community activists, social service providers, and policymakers attended.

Borough President Stringer invited the conference attendees to help “begin the urgent work of creating a...practical and innovative food policy for New York that puts our great city at the front of this debate where it belongs.”

The speakers featured at the conference’s morning session were Mayor Michael Bloomberg, United Nations General Assembly President Father Miguel D’Escoto, and Maya Wiley, the Director of the Center for Social Inclusion, along with the many members of the Borough President’s steering committee who were essential in planning the conference. The keynote speakers deserve special thanks for their participation.

Although this report emerges from that conference, you will find neither a summary of conference proceedings nor an edited transcript. Instead, this report sets forth six sets of recommendations developed from the conference proceedings. The richness, quality and sheer number of policy ideas produced at the conference simply demanded that such a document be created. This report’s comprehensive yet strategic approach has the benefit of moving us closer to the goal of concrete changes in law, policy and government organization that animated this project from the outset. A synopsis of the conference would not be in keeping with Borough President Stringer’s aspiration that November 19<sup>th</sup> not be an end in itself, but a starting place for a larger effort.

More information about the conference can be found online at: [http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/news\\_events/special\\_events/politics\\_of\\_food/schedule.html](http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/news_events/special_events/politics_of_food/schedule.html)

The job of turning the conference’s work product into this report required a considerable amount of review and cataloguing, as well as the inevitable whittling down of recommendations produced at seven breakout sessions. Those judgments and the categories employed in this report are the work of the Borough President’s office, accomplished with the support of our deeply committed steering committee members.

We present these findings amidst a severe economic recession and all of its predictable consequences. Government faces an extraordinary number of challenges when it comes to food issues, and Americans are paying more attention to food. Last year alone, 1.3 million New Yorkers used a soup kitchen, food pantry, or emergency food program.<sup>7</sup> These numbers are rising as more families, middle-income earners, and educated professionals seek assistance.

These problems have not gone unnoticed by state and city officials. Governor Paterson has expanded access to food stamps. The New York State Department of Agriculture has promoted and supported local farms. Mayor Bloomberg has increased the availability of healthy food in bodegas. City Council Speaker Quinn has helped ensure that food can be purchased with food stamps at many farmers markets. City Health Commissioner Dr. Frieden has taken extraordinarily bold steps by banning trans fats and requiring fast food chains to post calories. The list goes on and on.

Although New York City recognizes the importance of fighting hunger, food policy has held too small a place in the urban agenda. Food policy has been primarily left to federal and state policymakers. While there have been successful

efforts to create anti-hunger and nutrition education programs at the federal level, there also has been a perpetuation of a system that subsidizes inexpensive, low-quality food. The arrival of President Obama offers reason for hope, but food is unlikely to be the administration's first priority.

It is time for New York City to play a stronger role in influencing food policy and the food system. We are a city known for our abundance of restaurants, which are regulated by the Department of Health. Every day, city schools feed more people than any other school system in the nation.<sup>8</sup> And thousands of New Yorkers make their living in food production and service jobs. Yet there is no plan to ensure that New York City is supported by a sustainable food system, one designed to provide economic, environmental, and health benefits for years into the future.

This report's goal is to contribute to the creation of such a plan.

## I. HUNGER

The importance of government's role in preventing hunger and malnutrition has been widely acknowledged since the 1930s, when federal responses to the Depression included the creation of a food safety net. More than seven decades later, there still remain many questions about the best way to provide universal access to healthy food.

The need for a food safety net is still relevant in New York City today. From 2003 to 2007, the number of New Yorkers threatened by hunger or malnutrition grew by 300,000, from one million to 1.3 million people.<sup>9</sup> Most of these New Yorkers are vulnerable populations: children, seniors, people with disabilities, and the working poor. Increasingly, middle income New Yorkers are seeking food assistance as well.<sup>10</sup>

The reasons for the worsening situation are straightforward. Food prices for urban consumers rose faster in 2008 than any year since 1980. In addition, the current recession will most likely result in a greater need for food assistance, shrinking philanthropic support for emergency food programs, and tightening city and state budgets.<sup>11</sup>

The federal food stamp program, the federal lunch program, and the Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) are all vital elements of assistance provided by Washington to New York City. The most important program, the food stamp program, provides limited benefits to this city, because many eligible families are unaware that they qualify and the assistance falls short of many recipients' needs. New Yorkers face the additional burden of the federal poverty gauge, which is used to determine eligibility. This gauge fails to adequately account for the high cost of living in our city.<sup>12</sup>

Changes to federal policy are crucial, but there also must be more local attention focused on food issues. Local communities must become more informed, educated, and engaged in these issues – and residents, advocates, workers, and business owners must work collaboratively to recognize that they can help strengthen 'food security.' 'Food security' refers to an individual's ability to access nutritious and affordable food, while 'food justice' emphasizes the role that race and class discrimination has played in creating many of the food inequities today. Public and private policymakers must involve the community in planning, decision-making, and advocacy to ensure their access to healthy, affordable food.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Lobby for more federal funding for food programs, particularly Food Stamps, National School Lunch Program, and the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), because they affect a vast number of New Yorkers.
- (2) Increase the number of eligible New Yorkers using food stamps.
  - Eliminate the existing state and local finger-imaging requirement.
  - Streamline enrollment by: equipping senior and community centers as enrollment offices; limiting the requirement for face-to-face interviews; permitting telephone certification; shortening the time period between application and receipt of benefits; and increasing the time period for re-certification from 6 to 12 months.
  - Develop a public education campaign that coordinates efforts by community organizations and city agencies to inform heads of households about the full range of nutrition programs available to children and adults.
- (3) Expand the number of places where food stamps can be used:
  - Offer reduced rates or subsidized membership fees for people seeking to use food stamps at "warehouse clubs" or "food co-ops."
  - Expand acceptance of food stamps at farmers' markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA's) through Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) collection and other means, including the expansion of a NYS Federation of Farmer Market pilot program, creating a match by state government, and expanding the city's Health Bucks programs.
- (4) Coordinate social service programs so that clients can apply for several simultaneously, including public health insurance, childcare subsidies, and nutrition programs, and ensure that enrollment is available at soup kitchens and food pantries.
- (5) Explore options to discourage the number of unhealthy fast food options in certain areas by eliminating their eligibility for Industrial Commercial Abatement Program (ICAP) funding, placing a cap on the number of outlets, and restricting the development by new fast food establishments.
- (6) Bolster the federal, state, and local food safety net for people with life altering diseases, including advocacy to reinstate food and nutrition as a core service covered by Ryan White funding.
- (7) Pass a local Food Donation Act which, like the federal act, requires state and municipal agencies to modify their food service and space rental contracts to ensure that surplus food is donated to non-profit organizations.
- (8) Connect '311' to City Harvest and the Food Bank for New York City to increase the amount of food that reaches food pantries.

## II. URBAN AND REGIONAL AGRICULTURE

The average New Yorker may think that all food is grown in the Midwest somewhere, but this is not the case.

One third of America's two million farms are located in metropolitan regions.<sup>13</sup>

Both the New York metropolitan area and New York State, as a whole, are rich in agriculture. The state is one of the nation's five top producers of milk, pears, and tart cherries.<sup>14</sup> Even though there is an abundance of regional farm products, that doesn't mean these crops are consumed locally. For example, New York is the second largest apple producing state in the United States.<sup>15</sup> During her keynote speech at the Politics of Food Conference, Maya Wiley described the oddity of a state which produces ten times the number of apples eaten in it, while 75 percent of apples consumed by New Yorkers are imported from the West Coast or overseas.

A food policy that harnesses regional agriculture for urban consumption and encourages local farming would address three of the most pressing challenges facing the city and the nation – the environment, public health, and the economy.<sup>16</sup>

- **The environment:** Common commercial farm practices, such as using chemicals and raising large numbers of livestock in confined spaces, can contribute to air pollution.<sup>17</sup> Further, food that travels extraordinarily long distances from farm to plate requires more fuel, storage and refrigeration, all of which consume energy.<sup>18</sup>
- **Public health:** Locally grown and distributed food is likely to be fresher, more nutritious, less subject to intensive pesticide use, and less processed.
- **The economy:** The more self-contained New York's food system is, the more opportunities there would be for local employment. Increasing the demand for locally-produced food, for example, could trigger the creation of more local food processors.

The city and state must work together to promote greater urban and regional food production. Greater prominence of local food also helps strengthen the city's cultural identity and connection to history. Just as the value of parks or museums is not solely justified by measurable criteria, the cultural benefits of local food should not be discounted.

In addition to creating necessary manufacturing and distribution infrastructure, this means supporting urban farms, community gardens, greenhouses, and backyard and rooftop gardens.

An important first step involves identifying and maximizing our regional 'foodshed,' the 200-mile or so radius of farmland surrounding the city.<sup>19</sup> The foodshed will never provide the volume or variety of food necessary to feed every New Yorker, but it certainly can be strengthened and preserved for the future. There are some challenges, from the high cost of land to the limited availability of trained agricultural workers. In fact, we do not know how extensive the challenges are.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Conduct a foodshed analysis by determining where New Yorkers' food comes from and how it gets here, the amount of food produced in the foodshed across all commodities, and the extent to which the foodshed can serve the needs of local residents.

(2) Identify ways to protect and expand the regional foodshed by identifying threats, including development and contamination, and opportunities, enhancing farm supporting infrastructure and increasing land under cultivation.

(3) Meet with the major distribution companies to determine the demand for, obstacles, and capacity to source food grown locally.

(4) Convene a roundtable of regional food producers, processors, and distributors and institutional food providers (e.g. the Department of Education, hospitals, universities) to identify best practices, obstacles, and replicable models to increase the procurement of locally grown food. Identify administrative, policy, and legislative means to increase the amount of regionally produced food served by institutions, using as an early model of success the Department of Education, which has already increased regional purchasing, particularly for apples, carrots, and yogurt.<sup>20</sup>

(5) Identify land in the five boroughs and in the foodshed that can be used for agriculture, including suitable public properties (e.g. right of ways, easements, parks), private land (e.g. rooftops, backyard gardens), and underused land. Create policies to streamline the process for agricultural land use that benefits the public.<sup>21</sup>

(6) Promote local agriculture in neighborhoods with limited access to fresh foods through new farmers markets, food cooperatives, CSA's and local building clubs (with universal EBT machine access and targeted advertising), as well as community gardens in parks, schools, NYCHA, and other city-owned land.<sup>22</sup>

(7) Promote urban food production in NYC.

- Conduct a review of policy obstacles that discourage urban agriculture, such as brownfield identification, the beekeeping ban,<sup>23</sup> and land use priorities.

- Conduct comprehensive research on sustainable urban farming methods to identify which techniques, scale, and locations are most appropriate for the city's urban conditions.

- Encourage new development projects to include gardening in neighborhood development plans, using guidelines such as LEED® Neighborhood Developments (ND) as a reference.<sup>24</sup> Consider creating incentives for edible landscaping, green roofs, and backyard gardening, particularly in new large-scale residential and mixed use development projects.

(8) Identify gaps in online information on urban and regional agriculture, including school curriculum, current locations, and green roof standards, and fill in these gaps.

### III. FOOD DISTRIBUTION

Ask a child where an apple comes from and she will probably say an apple tree. Neither she nor her parents are likely to reply that an apple is harvested from an orchard, stored in a commercial refrigerator, transported by a series of trucks many miles, and then unloaded at the Hunts Point Food Cooperative in the Bronx, the world's largest wholesale food distribution center, where it is picked up for distribution to a local grocery store or restaurant.<sup>25</sup>

The trip that our food takes once it leaves the farm may be invisible to most customers, but our food distribution system greatly influences the quality and type of food that we consume. It also has a great impact on our society.

Though the food distribution system was devised and maintained largely by private enterprise, government faces a pressing need to help change the system.<sup>26</sup> Farmers, distributors, and retailers all strive to be profitable and provide quality goods, but their business approaches often do not align. The approaches culminate in a system that could better serve the public.

Many residents in low-income neighborhoods are suffering from diet-related illnesses.<sup>28</sup> In response, community leaders and health advocates have demanded that fresh produce be available throughout the city, either through traditional outlets like grocery stores and bodegas or new models such as green carts.<sup>29</sup>

There are approximately one hundred farmers markets operating in New York City, and more than 200 upstate farmers travel to the city to participate in Greenmarket alone.<sup>30</sup> Initiatives such as CSA's have also grown exponentially throughout the five boroughs and help connect rural farmers with urban demand. Some of the key challenges for these farmers include difficulty in getting around the city (e.g. parking and transportation), a lack of infrastructure at markets (e.g. water, storage space, and electricity), and a sense of impermanency in the market location.

Further, there is no current mechanism to get substantial product volume to institutions that have expressed an interest. Many institutions have asked to purchase produce in bulk from upstate farmers, but there is nowhere to store it. A study commissioned by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets showed that both producers and buyers have a strong interest in a New York City wholesale farmers' markets.

Finally, Hunts Point is 40 years old and in dire need of renovation, which can only be achieved through a major investment by the public and private sectors. There is growing pressure to support capital infrastructure improvements to improve the city's distribution system.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Create a comprehensive map of the city's distribution food system, with the aim to establish the infrastructure necessary to encourage local sourcing and processing.

(2) Create a targeted promotional campaign to promote local produce options, particularly advertising for farmers markets that accept EBT access and Health Bucks in low-income communities.

(3) Improve upstate farmers' access to New York City as a market destination.

- Establish a wholesale farmers market and storage facility at Hunts Point Food Cooperative to serve the needs of upstate farmers and local buyers. In addition, identify refrigerated space for storage in neighborhoods across the city.<sup>31</sup>

- Create long-term leases for farmers markets to create a sense of permanency, as well as infrastructure needs such as electricity.

- Facilitate the coordination of deliveries to farmers markets and CSA's by exploring the provision of 'green EZ-passes' and micro-loan programs that subsidize local farmers to convert their trucks to waste-based bio-diesel.

(4) Identify opportunities to expand food processing facilities to ensure that crops harvested locally and destined for New York City are also processed locally.

(5) Establish a composting facility to dispose of commercial food scraps, which should be differentiated from rescued food. In the absence of a facility, explore onsite food waste reduction technologies for commercial venues. A suitable technology may separate waste water, leaving the residual waste for carters, but substantially reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transportation needs. A pilot program and incentives should be implemented if an appropriate technology is identified.

(6) Support efforts to require that corrugated wholesale transfer packaging is coated with a moisture barrier, certified as recyclable, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and potentially saving money.<sup>32</sup>

(7) Explore freight options that reduce reliance on vehicular traffic in conjunction with a model to reward distributors and truckers who use hybrid technology and clean fuels when they enter New York City and Hunts Point Food Coop.<sup>33</sup>

(8) Advocate for federal transportation funding to reduce pollution created by food transportation, potentially through a subsidy shift or tax benefits for distributors that use clean fleets or shorten the supply chain to source food locally.

## IV. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

New York State has a robust agriculture sector – and clearly, most people eat every day.

At a time when a worsening recession forces policymakers to focus on job creation and retention, there is an opportunity to expand our workforce around this fundamental human need. Food manufacturing, the city’s most stable manufacturing sector, supports 33,800 local jobs.<sup>34</sup> These jobs are in just one industry within a vast continuum that includes farmers, truck drivers, restaurant workers, nutritionists, and sanitation workers.

An important first step is to find ways to capture local food dollars. The Department of City Planning found that New York City residents spend approximately a billion dollars on food in suburban stores.<sup>35</sup> However, there is a shortage of healthy food outlets in low-income communities and communities of color. Some three million New Yorkers are caught in ‘food deserts’ - areas with limited access to fresh produce.<sup>36</sup>

There are opportunities for profitable investing in these communities.<sup>37</sup> Often, a store does not fully capture the value of residents enrolled in public nutrition programs – Food Stamps and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). These programs funnel federal anti-hunger dollars into the hands of local residents and businesses, which helps to stimulate the economy and create jobs.<sup>38</sup> The benefits of healthy food outlets should prompt government intervention, and like most market failures, there must be ways to correct these problems in order to ensure that healthy food is available in every neighborhood. At the least, food outlets funded by the government, must accept food stamps and WIC.

Yet all jobs are not created equal. Some retail outlets, including many of the gourmet grocers which have proliferated in Manhattan, are widely criticized for failing to provide living wages, health benefits, and pensions.<sup>39</sup> If businesses were to pay a living wage, which is indexed to inflation, the resulting buying power would be tremendous.

Many of the policies needed to strengthen the local food economy require government investment and regulation. To maximize government subsidies, private companies must consult with and be held accountable to the local community. Consultation with residents about the type of food needed in a community is good business practice. In addition, community benefits agreements should be required for new food retail developments of a certain size, to address the need for living wage jobs, benefits, and local hiring practices.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Develop ‘food enterprise zones’ in neighborhoods with food deserts.
  - Attract new food outlets by identifying potential site locations, creating zoning incentives to encourage new stores, or establishing a funding apparatus.<sup>40</sup>
  - Dedicate public financing or micro loans to community food partnerships, commit ICAP funding to food retailers, and exempt these retailers from business taxes.
- (2) Explore revisions to City and State Environmental Quality Review (CEQR and SEQR, respectively) standards that would require studying the potential impact that development proposals and other discretionary actions may have on the food system.
- (3) Explore new land use and zoning incentives for developers who include food markets in new developments, such as a floor area bonus or exemption for projects which contribute to healthy food outlets.
- (4) Make smart policy decisions about publicly-owned property, including the addition of healthy food retailers. For example, if NYCHA is considering infill development on their properties, the Authority should review opportunities to include retail outlets for healthy food. The City should consider adopting a policy to investigate these options in every disposition of City-owned property and to review its current portfolio of vacant or underutilized City-owned properties to find additional opportunities.
- (5) Pursue an industrial retention policy to promote the food processing industry by creating financial incentives for small-scale processing in the foodshed, which may include streamlining fees and permitting processes, incorporating food processing in wholesale market development, and training local workers.
- (6) Develop a job incubator program in conjunction with an urban agriculture education program to connect job training with the food industry, such as urban food production, processing, and entrepreneurial job training.
- (7) Support fair workplace standards in the changing food industry.
  - Establish policies to safeguard basic labor rights on farms with fewer than eight workers, including the right to time-and-a-half overtime, federal minimum wage, the right to organize, and workers compensation coverage.<sup>41</sup>
  - Mandate that restaurants disclose employment law violations when renewing operating permits (Responsible Restaurant Act) and tailor the New York State Attorney General’s Green Grocer Code of Conduct to gourmet grocers.<sup>42,43</sup>
- (8) Create incentives for the local treatment of food waste to recover optimal energy and material value, utilizing solid waste management conversion technologies such as anaerobic digestion, and thermal processing.

## V. FOOD AND NUTRITION EDUCATION

More than half of New York City adults are overweight or obese.<sup>44</sup> For schoolchildren, it is only 43 percent. This problem is twice as prevalent as it was 20 years ago in the United States.<sup>45</sup>

The result is a rise in such chronic illnesses as type II diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension among both children and adults – a situation so severe that the Surgeon General identified the prevention of obesity as a national priority.<sup>46</sup>

This is a complex problem with many causes. We live in a society where newspaper stands sell more junk food than they do newspapers. Restaurants serve excessively large portions. Many New Yorkers do not have adequate healthcare and exercise infrequently. All of these factors are exacerbated by commercial marketing, public attitudes, government policies, and a lack of easy access to information.

Food and beverage marketers have deep pockets, and their advertising campaigns present a substantial challenge to nutrition education. More than ten billion dollars are spent annually to market food and beverages to children and youth in the U.S.<sup>47</sup> Television advertising encourages children to want high calorie and low nutrient food and beverages.<sup>48</sup> And the problem does not end there. Even people who think they know about healthy eating do not realize how processed food can be. A well-educated parent who believes that she is providing healthy food to her kids may not realize that a “juice” drink contains far more sugar than nutrients. Restaurants serve children’s menus that include fried chicken, cheeseburgers, and macaroni and cheese rather than more nutritious - and still affordable - options. Even “healthy” fast food options, such as salads with fried chicken and creamy dressings, are laden with calories, sodium and saturated fat.

Food and nutrition education can substantially help solve many of these problems.

New York City has demonstrated unparalleled leadership in this area. With the support of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Mayor Bloomberg banned trans fats from restaurants, promoted healthy food in bodegas, launched a green carts initiative to provide fresh produce, and – in a move that generated the most headlines (and probably the most conversation) since the ban on indoor smoking – required chain restaurants to post calories.

Nutrition education will still have to overcome many obstacles in order to achieve results. While the federal government is a major source – and often the only source – of public funding for nutrition education, it also heavily subsidizes crops, such as corn and soy which are turned into sugary, fatty, and processed foods. By contrast, fruits and vegetables receive very little subsidy.<sup>49</sup>

Counteracting this onslaught will require a well-funded education campaign that enlists nutritional experts and regular eaters alike and targets the young and the old in schools, homes, communities, and in the press.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Encourage the consumption of healthy food in place of junk food.
  - Encourage New York City government agencies to continue reducing the amount of unhealthy and processed food served. For instance, this can be achieved by mandating that city institutions replace junk food in vending machines or encouraging relationships with food carters to provide fresh fruit options for purchase as a supplement to the vending machine.
  - Encourage private and nonprofit entities to replace junk food with healthy options through grants, tenant improvement funds, tax breaks, access to low interest loans, or applicable licenses and permit processes.
- (2) Expand nutrition education campaigns through public service announcements, subway advertisements, and popular culture. For instance, ‘Food Stars’ could assist in creating new food messages, especially as New York City is a global taste creator.
- (3) Develop an ongoing collaboration between nutrition experts and the city’s education and youth agencies to improve nutrition education in public schools and after-school programs by expanding the city’s in-classroom breakfast initiative to as many public schools as possible, encouraging scientifically-based standards for school food, development of the Wellness Policy, expanding the School Food Garden to Cafeteria Initiative, and support funds in the Child and Adult Care Food Program that would pay for the meals of classroom staff so they can model healthy eating behavior for children.<sup>50,51</sup>
- (4) Advocate for an increase in the per pupil federal reimbursement rate for school meals, which would allow for upgrades to school kitchens, improved training for staff, and the purchase of healthier unprocessed ingredients. Culinary training on whole unprocessed foods preparation should be offered to children, youth, families, and seniors.
- (5) Expand nutritional education components of government programs, such as WIC and State Nutrition Action Plan (SNAP), New York State’s health literacy programs, and the expansion of WIC Peer Counseling Programs to promote breastfeeding.
- (6) Reauthorize and improve the Federal Child Nutrition Program to ensure that funds are set aside for local nutrition coordinators and nutrition education activities.
- (7) Encourage employers to promote nutrition education and healthy eating practices in the workplace by creating an online clearinghouse of information to assist employers with implementing worksite health and wellness policies.
- (8) Offer incentives through private insurance, the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), Medicaid, and Medicare, for healthy weight and lifestyles, such as coverage for gym memberships and counseling for obesity.<sup>52</sup>

## VI. STEPS TOWARD IMPLEMENTATION

For many New Yorkers, the problems described in this report are not new. The rise in food prices has already been featured in many newspaper articles and felt by our wallets. The rising obesity and diabetes rates are both visible and documented by New York City Department of Health statistics. Anyone who has tried to buy a fresh apple in the city knows that it can be a challenge, though candy bars are usually within easy reach. It is clear that the food system – from farming and trucking to education – is in dire need of repair.

Many city leaders, including Mayor Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Quinn, have demonstrated their leadership on the issue. The bold moves to ban trans fats and require chain restaurants to post calories caught the attention of policymakers across the nation. The establishment of the Green Carts program and Healthy Bodegas initiative are also important steps to improve the availability of fruits and vegetables.

There is clearly no silver bullet to address this multi-faceted issue.

Precisely because there is no one solution, we must continue to develop a critical mass, a movement to effect change. Hand-in-hand with Borough President Stringer's Steering Committee, our office will tackle the recommendations in this report. We will begin drafting a Food Charter to identify goals for our food system, which will be informed and embraced by community members. Yet more must be done. To effectively bring about the breadth of change highlighted in this report, New York City government must be structured to support the cause.

### Some recommendations on how to achieve a sustainable food plan include:

- (1) Expand the existing Food Policy Coordinator position into an Office of Food Policy to advocate for the city's food system sustainability goals.
- (2) Develop a New York City Food Policy Council, comprised of government representatives, communities, organizations, gardeners, and farmers, to develop a citywide food system plan, engage under-served communities in policy decision-making and strategic planning, and develop partnerships with the State Food Policy Council.
- (3) Draft and adopt a citywide food charter to promote awareness about food values within local communities and publicizes the city's plans to an international audience.
- (4) Develop a detailed food system assessment and sustainability plan, including indicators of success, and monitor progress through an annual food and health report card.
- (5) Incorporate food indicators in existing municipal and state accountability monitoring efforts by linking them to other health outcomes and social research, such as crime, drug and alcohol use, and family conflict.
- (6) Make the food system a priority in environmental sustainability.
  - Add food to the portfolio covered by the Mayor's Office of Long Term Sustainability.
  - Draft and adopt a New York City Climate 'food print' resolution.
- (7) Sponsor community events and public health campaigns to promote healthy food and urban agriculture, such as community health fairs, open garden day, a harvest festival, or a citywide 'eat well' week. Highlight restaurants and farmers markets as key elements of the city's appeal as tourist attractions, and bolster 'buy fresh, buy local' campaigns by creating local food festivals, creating a seal for retailers that serve local food, offering recognition through books like *Zagats* or *NYC & Company*, and advertising local food and wine to tourists.<sup>53</sup>
- (8) Create a vertical farming model, which provides food, workforce development, and a state-of-the-art education center on agriculture for New Yorkers and tourists.

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