

# Healthy Food in Your Community

*A Toolkit for Policy Change*



# Why is unhealthy food so much easier to buy than fruits and vegetables? Why do some neighborhoods lack stores selling affordable fresh food? And why is adult and childhood obesity so prevalent in the United States?

The answer to all these questions is that our current food system is inadequate for making healthy food available for everyone. Policies at the federal, state, and local levels exert a strong influence on the food available in communities, but many of these policies enable unhealthy processed food, rather than healthy food, to be the most abundant and accessible. The nation is facing a crisis of diet-related chronic diseases, and poor nutrition is associated with some of the leading causes of death, including heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes. Food policies need to be backed by the best available science, which aims to promote and protect health, and it is essential that they address the availability and affordability of healthy food.

## Why Food Policy Matters

Food policies, defined broadly, are any decisions and practices designed to influence food production, distribution, and consumption. Food policies range from federal agricultural subsidies and regulations governing food nutrition labels to local food sourcing policies and zoning decisions affecting where food is grown or sold.

Food policies thus shape access to and the affordability of the type of food generally available in communities. These policies can feel complex or distant, but they powerfully shape your access to healthy food and ultimately your health. Decisions related to the cost, quality, and availability of food determine access to healthy food and the well-being of your community, making it imperative that a critical mass of people care enough about food policy to act.

Are you worried about access to healthy food in your community and want to take steps to get involved locally, but you are not sure of the best ways to have an impact? If so, this toolkit can help you advocate sensible food policies that prioritize public health and are informed by the best available science. Communities must be a part of the decisions that shape access to healthy, affordable food. With this toolkit, you can join local efforts to make healthy, affordable food a regular part of your—and potentially every—community's landscape.

This toolkit will help you to:

- **Navigate key issues related to healthy food**
- **Identify what policies affect food in your community**
- **Recognize where decisions are made and who makes them**
- **Build strong relationships to influence food policy decisions**
- **Take action for food policy change**

Notes on the source material underlying this toolkit can be found online at [www.ucsusa.org/foodtoolkit](http://www.ucsusa.org/foodtoolkit).

*The authors recognize that not everyone engaging in the policy process shares a level playing field, and food injustice and inequity are major barriers to ensuring healthy food for all. The opportunities to participate in policy reform traditionally favor those who already have access to political power. In effect, different communities will experience different challenges when applying the approaches described in this toolkit. Despite this limitation, the authors hope that the toolkit will provide an introduction to how food policies are made and help bolster existing efforts to improve access and affordability of healthy foods for all communities, regardless of their race, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup.*

# Navigating Healthy Food Access, Information, and Affordability

The types of food we eat and feed to our families are not just the result of personal choices and preferences. Our options are strongly influenced by the policy decisions of officials at all levels of government.

The most easily selected and inexpensive options are often unhealthy, skewing families' diets toward less healthy ones that, over time, can cause serious harm to their health. As you learn how policies shape your community's experiences with food, you will start to see what needs to change in order to create easier and more equitable access to healthy, affordable food.

## At the Grocery Store

Access to grocery stores—how you get to them and the quality of the food that you find there—influences what food you buy. Federal policies shape price and food availability, while local zoning policies determine the location of retail food outlets. If you don't have a car, transportation policy helps shape how you get to a grocery store by public transit, by bike, or on foot. The development and operation of new grocery stores in marginalized communities can also be cost-prohibitive, and the resulting disparities in what food items are sold and where stores are located limit the ability of low-income, rural, and many minority communities to obtain healthy foods. Policy makers need to take advantage of opportunities to ensure that all communities have access to grocery stores that regularly stock fresh, healthy food.

### PENNSYLVANIA FRESH FOOD FINANCING INITIATIVE—PHILADELPHIA, PA

In 2001, in response to a report by The Food Trust (an organization dedicated to increasing access to healthy food), the Philadelphia city council called for hearings to learn more about issues of healthy food access across the city. A subsequent task force convened by The Food Trust called for government and industry partnerships to enable supermarkets to enter neighborhoods with limited access to food. The resulting Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative decreased the financial barriers to supermarket development through tax credits, grants, and loans. This initiative was used as a model at the federal level for the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which funds similar initiatives across the country. The states of California, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, and Virginia have implemented similar models, as have the cities of Cincinnati, Detroit, Houston, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, DC.





#### **MENU LABELING LEGISLATION— NEW YORK CITY, NY**

Using a key policy strategy to address the rise of obesity, New York City was the first locality to pass an amendment to the city health code requiring calorie information to be posted on restaurant menus. This was sparked by research commissioned by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that found providing nutrition information in restaurants presented an opportunity to prevent weight gain and obesity. Despite efforts by the New York State Restaurant Association to block the labeling law by suing the health department, federal courts upheld the legislation. The success in New York paved the way for towns and cities across the country to pass similar laws and for the inclusion of national menu labeling requirements for many restaurants and vending machines in the federal Affordable Care Act.

### **At Restaurants**

Menu options in restaurants are a potential pitfall for people attempting to access healthy food in their community. In 2012, Americans spent more than \$680 billion on food in restaurants. Research has shown a connection between eating out and eating more calories, which can lead to weight gain, obesity, and diet-related diseases. There are often more fast food restaurants in low-income and ethnic minority areas and around school campuses, putting these communities at greater risk. Potential approaches to decreasing the pervasiveness of unhealthy food include controlling the location of fast food development, limiting the use of harmful ingredients such as trans fats, and providing customers with nutrition information for restaurant meals.

## On the Label

While browsing the aisles of grocery stores, many consumers look at food and nutrition labels to help them determine what is in the foods they eat. Nutrition labels are regulated by the FDA, but they are facing a hotly debated overhaul for the first time since they were introduced in the early 1990s. The food industry pushes for—in contrast to the FDA-mandated nutrition labels—voluntary, unregulated labeling schemes such as “Facts Up Front,” because they enable corporations to pick and choose which nutritional elements are featured most prominently, an approach that often results in under-emphasizing the unhealthy ingredients in products even when these ingredients predominate. Current policy efforts need to focus on ensuring that communities have access to unbiased, science-backed information about what is in their food.

## In Schools

Food served at school has an immense impact on children’s health and has the potential to shape their understanding of healthy food. In 2012, 31.7 million K-12 students participated in the National School Lunch Program, and 68.2 percent of meals served were free or at reduced prices. The federal Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, passed in 2010, aimed to increase both the healthiness and the reimbursement value of school meals. This food policy sets strong nutritional standards and gives communities like yours the opportunity to influence what is served in schools. During the implementation of the act, a strong debate ensued over how school districts can manage the cost of implementing these stronger standards. Despite the challenges, many schools are working to ensure their lunch offerings are healthy, with more than 90 percent in compliance with the new standards by the end of the 2014 school year. Moreover, surveys of elementary school students and of middle and high school students showed that, after an initial adjustment period, a large majority of students like the new healthier meals. In addition to adopting the new school nutrition standards, school boards and administrators can work to implement policies related to vending machines in schools or farm-to-school efforts to increase healthy food and limit unhealthy options in schools.

## From the Farm

The federal legislation commonly referred to as the farm bill shapes agriculture and food production in America and has an enormous impact on the availability, selection, and cost of food in your community. This complex piece of legislation is renegotiated every five years and covers everything from agricultural research and farm subsidies to food assistance programs for low-income families, most notably the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). However, major concerns exist regarding the role that some subsidies, deregulation of specific crop markets, and inadequate funding in the farm bill play in the steady production of unhealthy processed foods. For example, financial incentives that encourage farmers to grow and market fruits and vegetables, although they are higher now than in previous years, still constitute a negligible percentage of the farm bill’s spending. More broadly, despite the increased opportunities for farmers to bring fresh produce into communities through the proliferation of farmers markets, issues around seasonality, scale, and cost continue to limit healthy food access year-round. In the face of these complexities, policies need to be pursued that support the production of healthy, affordable food and strong linkages between farms and the communities that rely on them.

## Healthy Food Affordability

Eating healthily is crucial to living a healthy life and is a key factor in reducing diet-related disease, but many people lack the resources to purchase and prepare healthy food. Federal nutrition programs, which account for 80 percent of farm bill spending, are intended to help address this, and in 2013 more than 47.6 million people received support through SNAP. Additionally, in 2012, 8.9 million mothers and children received support through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Despite these targeted efforts to supplement food budgets, these resources do not always result in more healthy food for families. Although research findings are mixed as to whether healthy food is actually more expensive on a calorie-by-calorie basis (see the online source notes), the cost of healthy food, the time it takes to prepare healthy meals, and access to fresh food together present a barrier for using these resources to buy healthy food. Local policy efforts need to focus on increasing the affordability of healthy food as well as extending the healthy food purchasing power of those using food assistance.

### THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE'S (USDA) HEALTHY INCENTIVES PILOT—HAMPDEN COUNTY, MA

As part of the 2008 farm bill, the federal government authorized \$20 million for the USDA to test the effectiveness of SNAP incentives to increase the purchase of healthy food. The Healthy Incentives Pilot was launched at the end of 2011 in Hampden County, MA, and over the course of 14 months, randomly selected SNAP participants were provided with an additional 30 cents for every dollar spent on eligible fruits and vegetables. These people purchased 20 percent more fruits and vegetables than did those without the incentive. Programs like this show promise, especially when coupled with other initiatives, in using SNAP to help increase the consumption of healthy food by people with low incomes.



# Identifying Policies that Affect Access to Healthy Food

Many policy tools are available to be used at different levels of government in order to make healthier food more accessible and affordable in your community.

## Types of Policy Tools

### PLANNING

- Strategies for improving access to healthy food can be incorporated into **official planning documents** that cities use for structuring their development. The “Healthy Communities” chapter of the comprehensive plan of Harrison County, MS, for example, focuses on ensuring that all residents can access healthy foods and live active lives.
- Cities and states can use **resolutions** to inform future decisions and guide food-related policy with public health in mind.

#### INDUSTRIAL TRANS FAT ORDINANCE OF THE HEALTHY CLEVELAND INITIATIVE—CLEVELAND, OH

In March 2011, in collaboration with the city’s four major health care systems and the mayor, the Cleveland city council adopted an emergency resolution establishing the Healthy Cleveland Initiative. A key goal was to reduce chronic disease-related health disparities within the city. As a result, the city council passed an ordinance to restrict the use of artificial trans fats in restaurant foods. Although the restaurant industry lobbied the state legislature to include language in a budget bill that prevented cities from regulating trans fat usage in restaurants, the city of Cleveland sued the state for its infringement on city government authority and prevailed.

### LICENSING AND PERMITTING

- Adjusted **permitting and licensing processes** make it easier for retailers to stock healthy food and for community organizations and local governments to encourage the establishment of healthy food outlets such as farmers markets. All of these efforts help to bring more local, fresh, and unprocessed food into underserved communities.

#### EASIER PERMITTING FOR FARMERS MARKETS—MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Despite the presence of large and successful farmers markets in the city of Minneapolis, individuals without cars found the markets hard to access. The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy worked with the city in 2007 to change the permitting and application process in order to make it easier for community organizations to establish markets in underserved neighborhoods. These mini-markets are hosted by organizations already working in and with communities, offering easier access to healthy fruits and vegetables.



### URBAN AGRICULTURE INITIATIVE— BOSTON, MA

This initiative increases community members' access to local food by expanding the permissibility of urban agriculture under the zoning code and the viability of commercial agriculture projects across the city. It was developed through a partnership between the city planning agency, the mayor's office, and an advisory working group made up of farmers, experts, residents, and advocates. The article was drafted after 18 public meetings and finalized based on the feedback from 11 neighborhood meetings across the city. It was adopted into the city zoning code in December 2013.

### LAND USE

- **Local laws that prohibit land use** for specific purposes can be used to stop continued development of fast food or unhealthy food retail. Since 2008, the city of Los Angeles, for example, has had a moratorium on the development of new fast food outlets in south Los Angeles.
- **Land-use or zoning ordinances** can make urban agriculture possible, allow healthy food to be grown and sold in communities, allocate public space for community food-growing initiatives such as community gardens, and permit farmers markets in more locations.

## Food Policy Councils

One effective way to change policies related to food is through a food policy council. These bodies, sometimes located in city, county, or state government, at universities, or run independently through a nonprofit organization, are designed to bring together interested people from diverse quarters to shape regional and local food systems. Food policy councils establish relationships with key decision makers and determine how to navigate the government structures through which food policies are made.

If your community is not represented by a local or state food policy council, consider organizing one. A regularly updated list of established or developing food policy councils and resources for effective food policy council development can be found on the website of the Johns Hopkins University Center for a Livable Future ([www.foodpolicynetworks.org](http://www.foodpolicynetworks.org)).

## FINANCIAL TOOLS

- Federal **appropriations**, which can be used to invest money in programs, studies, and other food-related initiatives, are frequently administered through states, each of which has substantial discretion in how the money is used. State and local governments can also decide to budget additional resources to these efforts. The Healthy Food Financing Initiative (see page 3) is an example of a policy that has received federal and state appropriations. Note that appropriations can also be used to make last-minute changes to laws that do not always benefit communities and hence must be carefully monitored.
- Governments can create **incentives** to help businesses establish grocery stores in communities where stores are lacking, to help existing stores provide more healthy options at affordable prices, or to encourage consumers to buy healthy food. The Healthy Incentives Pilot (see page 6) is an example of a healthy food incentive program that not only aimed to increase consumption of fresh produce but also enabled study participants to purchase more food in general, which re-invested government dollars—through SNAP—back into the local economy.
- **Taxation** is gaining popularity as a means to motivate consumers to purchase healthier foods. Most notable are efforts to tax soda, which can be used to add to the cost of a soda at the point of either production or purchase. Such taxes aim to reduce the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and, if designated for this purpose, can generate revenue for health-related initiatives.
- **Procurement policies** can facilitate the purchase and availability of healthy foods in institutional settings. Farm-to-school efforts have helped create infrastructure for incorporating fresh produce into school meals, and federal standards help guide food purchasing done by federal agencies. Any institutions with large purchasing power, such as hospitals, jails, universities, military bases, and state government offices, can employ procurement policies to increase the nutritional quality of the meals they serve and create a market for healthier foods.



### GOOD FOOD PURCHASING PLEDGE— LOS ANGELES, CA

The LA Food Policy Council developed the Good Food Purchasing Pledge in an effort to leverage the purchasing power of the city's largest institutions and thus increase demand for more socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable food. This procurement policy was developed in collaboration with a coalition of organizations and individuals interested in improving the relationship between institutional food purchasing and sustainable and equitable food production. It was formalized by a mayoral directive, and within a month of its launch in the fall of 2012, four city departments and two private organizations committed to the pledge, influencing the agricultural practices of the region and enabling “good food” to be a part of more than 750,000 meals served daily across the city.





### PARKS AND RECREATION HEALTHY CONCESSIONS POLICY—LAWRENCE, KS

Recognizing its crucial role in encouraging healthy habits and addressing diet-related disease, the Department of Parks and Recreation for the city of Lawrence became the first in the city or county government to implement a policy that sets nutrition standards for all food and beverage contracts. These standards were developed in partnership with the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department and LiveWell Lawrence. The department can now ensure that healthy food availability is a clear priority for all potential vendors and has made the food service vendor a partner in providing healthy food options to all who utilize the city's parks and recreation centers.

### FOOD-SPECIFIC REGULATIONS

- The establishment of strong **nutrition standards** for food served or sold in public institutions can help ensure that healthy options are available in these locations.
- While legislative bodies decide what laws are passed, government agencies at the local, state, and federal levels are responsible for outlining the **rules and regulations**—the detailed procedures—by which the legislation will be implemented. Since federal legislation is often put into effect at the state or local level, individuals can participate in the public comment process to bring local conditions and considerations to bear on the specific way in which the legislation is put into practice.

## Moments to Influence Policy

Everyone can play a role in influencing policy change. When communities successfully incorporate both the public health evidence and the voice of a diverse array of interested people and groups, they can drive home the food policies that aim to protect public health and safety. Common opportunities for engaging in policy change include:

- Attending public hearings where you can deliver comments or provide testimony on food-related issues under consideration
- Submitting your comments on food-related regulations under consideration
- Requesting meetings with policy makers to present your ideas on how to increase access to healthy food
- Writing op-eds and letters to the editor for your local news outlet to inform and respond to key food issues
- Urging your public officials to call for public hearings to bring a specific food issue to the forefront
- Attending or organizing candidate forums before local elections to give your community the opportunity to ask questions and hear where candidates for public office stand on issues related to access to healthy food, especially in underserved areas
- Joining in and supporting existing networks, events, and actions and connecting with organizations already advocating food policy changes in your area

# Recognizing Who Makes the Decisions

Knowing where and when decisions on food policy are made will help you determine the best way to get involved. One key challenge is that food policies are developed and implemented by several branches and levels of government.

Additionally, the authority to enact local policies varies from state to state, and federal and state-level policies can sometimes preempt local legislation. But as you learn how to track decision making, and as you gather evidence for the policies you support (see page 20), your ability to advance healthier, safer food decisions for your community will continue to grow.

## Exploring Food Policy at Each Level of Government

### LOCAL

- Read local newspapers and blogs to check the pulse of the community and to learn about opportunities for the public to engage in discussions around key food issues.
- Connect with local organizations working on food policy change in your community.
- If a food policy council exists in your community, connect with it (see page 8) and see how you can get involved.
- Identify where different types of policies are made, and track opportunities to participate. Great places to start include departments that focus on health, human services, planning, education, and parks and recreation.
- City council members may sit on different committees related to food and health. Meeting with those committees and aligning your efforts to fit within their goals will help with food policy change. Your city government website may house valuable information about food policy efforts. Call your city council member's office to ask his or her staff questions related to the policy issues that you care about.
- Look to see whether the mayor's office organizes around food issues in your city or whether there is a public official responsible for coordinating food policy efforts. Call the mayor's office to see which council members care most about these issues.



## STATE

- Do research online to see whether a state-level food policy council exists in your state or whether your state has established a food charter or food system plan.
- Connect with organizations advocating food policy changes on the state level, and see how you can get involved.
- Identify where different types of policies are discussed at the state level, focusing on departments that work on health, agriculture, education, environmental protection, and human services.
- Call your state representative or senator's office. Ask what his or her position is on relevant food policy issues, and ask what the best way is to follow his or her involvement with the issue.
- Subscribe to online newsletters, join relevant listservs, or follow the social media accounts of especially active agencies and policy makers.
- Learn about state legislation under consideration using your **state legislature's website**, which maintains a database of current legislation that can be searched for specific topic areas.
- Find and track state legislation related to nutrition, physical activity, and health using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's **Chronic Disease State Policy Tracking System** (<http://nccd.cdc.gov/CDPHPPolicySearch//Default.aspx>).
- Search state legislation related to the design of healthy communities and access to healthy food using the National Conference of State Legislators' **Healthy Community Design and Access to Healthy Food Legislation Database** ([www.ncsl.org/research/health/healthy-community-design-and-access-to-healthy-foo.aspx](http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/healthy-community-design-and-access-to-healthy-foo.aspx)).

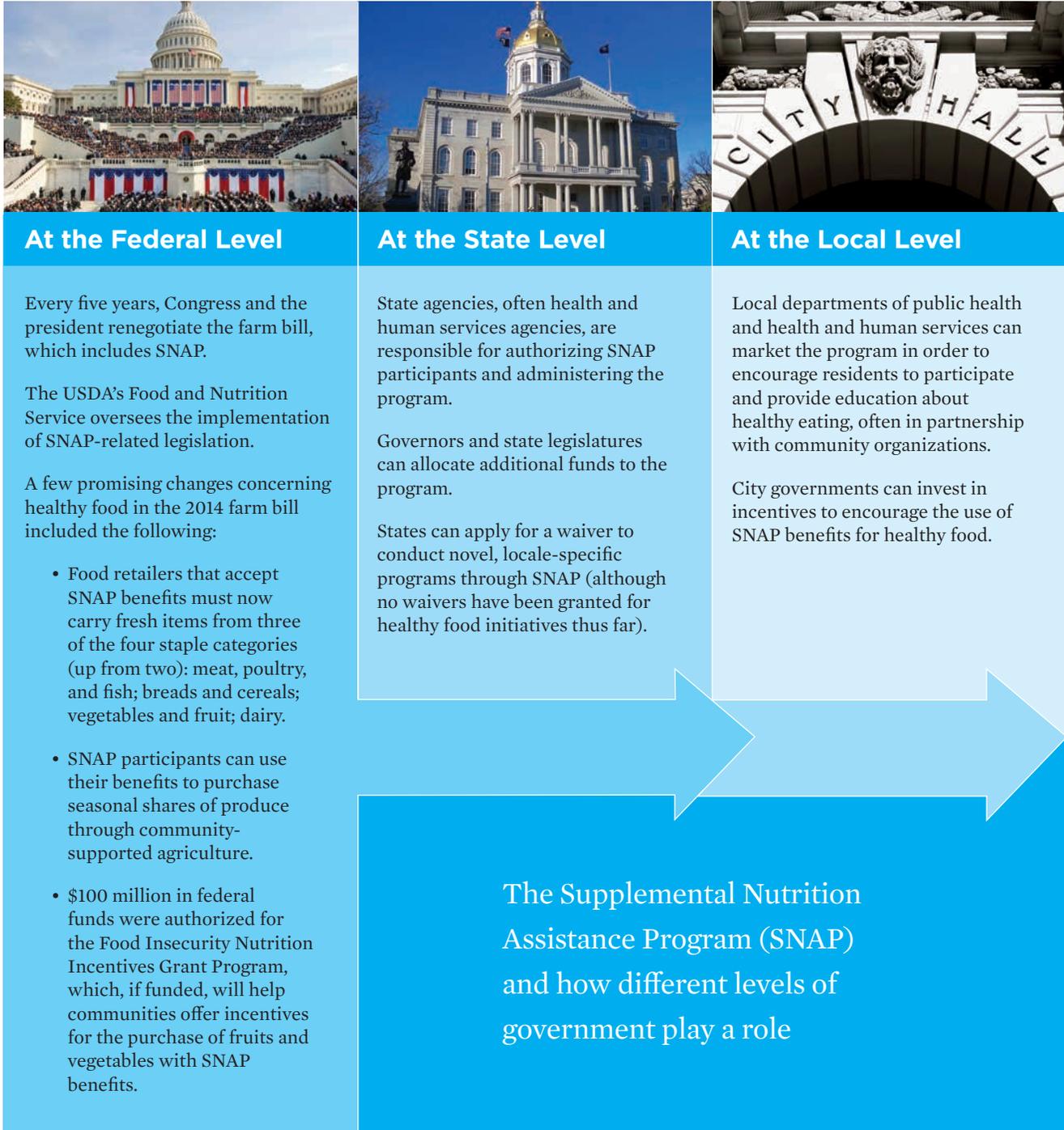


## FEDERAL

- Follow the status of current legislation in the **federal legislation database** (<https://beta.congress.gov>). Do a search on terms such as “food,” “nutrition,” and “agriculture” to locate relevant food policy legislation under consideration.
- Track the voting patterns of different members of Congress on current and past legislation related to food and agriculture using the **Food Policy Action's** policy scorecard ([www.foodpolicyaction.org/whyitmatters.php](http://www.foodpolicyaction.org/whyitmatters.php)).
- If there is a specific policy that has recently been enacted whose progress you want to follow, check out **regulations.gov** ([www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov)). You can also stay informed by signing up for updates about specific laws on the websites of the relevant federal agencies.
- Call your U.S. representative's or senator's office to ask about his or her position on food policies as well as the best way to follow his or her involvement in those issues. To find your members of Congress, do a search at <http://whoismyrepresentative.com>.

## All Food Policy Is Local

While the federal government makes many of the decisions that shape what foods you can access in your neighborhood, many federal policies have state and local implications that can provide your local policy makers with opportunities to influence the availability of healthy food in your community. A classic example that illustrates this interplay is SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, in the federal farm bill.



## Understand Who Makes the Decisions

There are many people that can make decisions to shape access to and the availability of food. When engaging with decision makers, think about how the issues you care about fit into the issues that these individuals work on. If your positions on issues do not align, try to convey how healthy food policies benefit their constituency and are worth the investment.

Decision Maker	Role	Ways to Engage with Them
<b>Federal and State Agencies</b>	Make rules; establish guidelines for states, food industry; gather data and enable access to information	Testify or post public comments on rules that agencies propose related to healthy food issues. Participate with coalitions advocating change.
<b>Elected Policy Makers</b> (such as state representatives, governors, county commissioners, city council members, and mayors)	Design and pass laws; institute commissions and committees of inquiry; appropriate resources	Call your representative's office or arrange for a meeting to discuss your issue of interest. Attend open council meetings to voice concerns or support, or urge your representative to call for a public hearing on a specific issue.
<b>Tribal Leaders</b> (note that tribes and urban Indian organizations have different governance structures)	Enact laws and tribal resolutions; enforce laws through tribal courts and police departments	Call the tribal administrator to identify the best ways to put issues before the tribe. Arrange for a meeting with tribal leaders to discuss healthy food policies; if possible and appropriate, attend a tribal council meeting and discuss issues and opportunities for improving the availability and cost of healthy food.
<b>Zoning Commissions</b>	Make rules on land use	Attend the commission's public meetings to share your opinion on food-related land use issues, and provide comments on proposed changes to zoning rules.
<b>City Planners</b>	Draft city planning documents	Ask for deliberative public engagement in planning discussions and decisions related to community food access and the food system.
<b>School Boards and Administrators</b>	Implement federal and state rules and regulations relevant to school settings	Meet with school board members to discuss food available in schools, and identify specific members who will champion food-related issues.
<b>Administrators of Public Institutions</b> (such as hospitals, prisons, and military bases)	Make decisions on food procurement and service providers; provide incentives for healthy living through workplace policies and health insurance	Raise your concerns about processed and unhealthy food provisioning in these establishments, and highlight examples of leaders and institutions already taking positive steps to promote good health through healthy eating.

# Seven Questions to Ask Your Community's Decision Makers

1. What are your constituents' biggest concerns regarding access to and availability of healthy food?
2. Do you have access to trusted and unbiased information that helps you understand and respond to these concerns?
3. What influences your (and your colleagues') positions on food policies most strongly?
4. What are the biggest barriers to making informed decisions related to food in the communities you represent?
5. On what sources of information are you basing your policy proposals?
6. What resources and kinds of information would you and your staff need in order to make food-related policies that will best help your constituents live healthy lives?
7. How can your constituents help drive decisions that will make healthy food available in your community?

## Strategies for Ensuring Informed Decision Making

One of the most important components of effective food policy change is strong relationships between people who have a stake in the food system and those who make decisions related to it. But roadblocks to informed policy making often exist. Keep your eye out for occasions when policies are advanced without a basis in scientific evidence or community knowledge, or when well-informed policies might be derailed by competing interests and industry pressure. Policies that disenfranchise marginalized communities or fail to advance the public good overall should be challenged. Find local organizations that are working in your community for the kinds of changes you care about (see page 16). Here are three additional ways to ensure informed decision making:

1. **Find your champion.** Identify decision makers and institutions that will champion decisions that increase access to healthy food in your community. Identify local policy makers who have proposed or supported health- and food-related bills in the past. Call you council member's office or request a meeting to discuss food issues and propose options that he or she will likely support, given his or her stated goals and values.
2. **Demand transparency.** In order to hold local decision makers accountable, ask them for details about the decision-making process, about what interests were represented, which stakeholders were consulted, who provided information, and whether or not those entities disclosed all conflicts of interest.
3. **Call it out.** Engage with scientists and public health professionals to clarify the issue, and pressure your local officials to use independent science to inform policies. Push the local media to cover food issues and investigate the influences behind biased policy making.

### MINNESOTA FOOD CHARTER

In order to ensure that all Minnesotans can choose healthy, affordable, and safe food, in 2013 the state began the process of outlining a clear, statewide strategy for achieving this vision. Following the lead of states with food charters including Iowa, Michigan, Oregon, and West Virginia, Minnesota recognized that a statewide healthy food plan was an option that it could replicate. The charter's development engaged more than 2,000 people, enabling perspectives from communities across the state to be incorporated into the final document.



# Building Relationships to Strengthen Food Policy Efforts

The work of influencing public decisions made about food cannot be done alone. There is a wide range of people and organizations with a stake in ensuring healthy food for everyone. When you engage a broad set of stakeholders, it builds community support, and strengthening these partnerships will increase your ability to help change policy related to healthy food access in your community.

## Partner with the People Already Doing the Work

As you seek to influence food policy decisions, reflect on who has a stake in the issue. Think about what individuals and communities are already represented as well as the voices or perspectives that are not present, especially those that are systematically excluded. To ensure successful policies, partnerships that include and respect all voices are crucial. It is important to recognize that bringing in different perspectives will often result in healthy conflict, which is inherently part of a democratic process. Use the following strategies to help you make the process as inclusive as possible:

- Find meaningful ways to connect with those who have a stake in changing food in your community, and work together to define shared goals toward which everyone can work.
- Think through where you have influence, and identify your key connections. Identify the key resources you have in your community.
- Connect with and learn from the local groups that are actively working on food issues in your community and see whether they work on policy change.
- If your community has a food policy council, learn more about its structure, ask what policy issues it addresses, and find out what its tactics are for influencing policy makers.
- Identify community development and advocacy organizations in your community, investigate whether any of their efforts focus on or connect to the food system, and think about how you can align the food issues you hope to address with their missions.
- Assess the strengths of any coalition you work with, and identify additional individuals or groups that can help fill any gaps.
- Connect with scientists and public health experts—either locally or through online resources—to be partners in ensuring that food policies are grounded in independent scientific and evidence-based knowledge.

## Individuals with a Stake in Food Policy Change

Stakeholder	Their Role
<b>Community Members</b>	As those who have the greatest stake in improving access to healthy food, community members are key allies in creating strength for healthy food advocacy. The inclusion of a wide range of community members helps ensure that more voices, backgrounds, and identities are represented in your efforts.
<b>Farmers</b>	Farmers, especially those located in your region, can participate in bringing healthy food into your community at the same time that they are ensuring the viability of their businesses. They can also lend support to advocacy aimed at creating agricultural policies that encourage growing healthy food.
<b>Food Manufacturers</b>	Companies turning raw ingredients into finished food products on any scale can play a role in ensuring that the products they produce are healthy for the people who consume them.
<b>Hospital, Jail, School, and Other Large-Institution Administrators</b>	Through large-scale purchasing power, these entities can use their market strength to bring healthier foods into the places where people are. They also have the ability to implement wellness policies that support healthier eating and living.
<b>Food Retailers</b>	Businesses that sell food directly to consumers have the ability to respond to a community's demand for certain foods and can sell and promote healthier options. They can also take advantage of incentives for increasing access to healthy food (see page 9).
<b>Anti-Hunger Advocates and Organizations Providing Emergency Food Assistance</b>	These organizations track food insecurity and lobby officials regarding hunger in the communities they serve. They can help articulate how poverty affects individuals' ability to access healthy food and can work with the people they serve to ensure all voices working toward change are included.
<b>Leaders of Health Care Organizations</b>	Insurers and other organizations that focus on community health can incorporate access to healthy food into their mandates, as it helps reduce insured populations' need for health care. These organizations can also galvanize employers to promote workplace wellness as a way to manage health care costs.
<b>Members of Community Groups and Social Justice Organizations</b>	Engaging those already working on transforming communities and addressing residents' needs can contribute a more broadly representative approach. These organizations can help with outreach and ensure that your efforts capture the needs of all segments of the community.
<b>Representatives of National Advocacy Groups</b>	Organizations such as the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society have strong advocacy power at both the state and national levels, and they support efforts to influence policies at these levels of government.
<b>Scientists and Researchers</b>	Researchers studying key food and health issues can be asked to help translate the best available science for you to use as you inform a community's policy considerations (see the Union of Concerned Scientists' Science Network on page 20). They can also advocate a strong role for independent science in the decision-making process.
<b>Public Health Officials and Educators</b>	These individuals are committed to promoting and protecting health and preventing disease. They can help communities understand how issues related to healthy food access influence public health.

## COLLABORATION FOR FARMERS MARKET SUCCESS—NEW YORK CITY, NY

Community-run farmers markets face many problems when trying to ensure that they effectively bring both fresh produce to residents and economic opportunity for farmers. As outlets for farmers' produce proliferate around New York City, and as attendance at markets in low-income neighborhoods can be initially low, it can be difficult to secure farmers' participation in these markets. One community organization, Harvest Home Farmer's Market, has faced up to this challenge and has been working with farmers to bring fresh fruits and vegetables into low-income communities for more than 20 years. This organization is working to collaborate with the New York Department of Agriculture and other agencies to develop policy solutions and incentives for farmers, in order to ensure that healthy food is available in every New York neighborhood.



# Taking Action for Food Policy Change

With an understanding of food policy, access, and affordability in your community and a clearer sense of how and where decisions about those policies are made, you will be in a good position to connect with those working on these issues to create change. The following suggestions are designed to strengthen both your knowledge and your approach in order to work effectively for food policy change.

## Get Informed

### LEARN MORE

To learn more about national and local food policies and various influences on the availability of healthy food, the resources below can help.

- **Public Health Law Center:** This national nonprofit organization provides public health professionals, officials, and community advocates with tools to use the law to advance public health. Its healthy-eating topic area provides a wide range of policy tools and legal resources that support efforts to promote nutrition and prevent obesity.  
[www.publichealthlawcenter.org](http://www.publichealthlawcenter.org)
- **Center for Science in the Public Interest:** This organization and its National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity advocate policies and programs to promote healthy eating and physical activity, and bring together a wide variety of national and local organizations to collaborate on this cause.  
[www.cspinet.org](http://www.cspinet.org) and  
[www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy/nana.html](http://www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy/nana.html)
- **Food Politics:** New York University Professor Marion Nestle provides regular coverage on the public health implications of emerging national food policy issues.  
[www.foodpolitics.com](http://www.foodpolitics.com)
- **Eat Drink Politics:** Public health lawyer Michele Simon offers insights into industry influence on the food system and public health, and uses this site to provide an introduction to some of the key obstacles to ensuring healthy, affordable food for all.  
[www.eatdrinkpolitics.com/blog](http://www.eatdrinkpolitics.com/blog)



## USE EVIDENCE-BASED INFORMATION

When you are connecting with others advocating food policy changes, talking with decision makers, or working to get your story into the media, you will strengthen your efforts when you use the best available information. Use the following resources to find independent research and examples of success.

- The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) has prepared **publications on healthy food and farms**, putting rigorous, independent science to work to advance the goal of healthy food and farms.  
[www.ucsusa.org/food\\_and\\_agriculture](http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture)  
  
The problems and potential solutions presented in this toolkit were also discussed at a 2014 forum on healthy food policy organized by the Center for Science and Democracy at UCS.  
[www.ucsusa.org/foodforum](http://www.ucsusa.org/foodforum)
- The **Healthy Food Access Portal** is a collaborative resource that mobilizes data and information on issues surrounding access to healthy food, and it provides resources for policy makers and community advocates alike that support efforts to improve access, build local economies, and enhance public health. The portal provides information valuable for people who are developing policy efforts aimed at financing and sustaining businesses that bring healthy food into communities.  
[www.healthyfoodaccess.org](http://www.healthyfoodaccess.org)
- **Healthy Eating Research** supports research on environmental and policy strategies that have strong potential to promote healthy eating, especially among children in lower-income and diverse populations at the highest risk for diet-related disease. The program aims to provide advocates, decision makers, and policy makers with the scientific evidence needed to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic.  
<http://healthyeatingresearch.org>
- **ChangeLab Solutions** is a nonprofit organization that provides community-based approaches to solving public health challenges. It has a suite of resources for increasing the availability of healthy food in communities.  
<http://changelabsolutions.org/landing-page/creating-healthier-food-environments>
- The **Science Network** at UCS is a community of experts ready to offer their expertise to work being done on local issues. Engaging public health professionals and relevant researchers in your food policy organizing efforts can help ensure that you have science on your side. Connect with UCS to learn more about how our Science Network can help you.  
[www.ucsusa.org/action/science\\_network/](http://www.ucsusa.org/action/science_network/)

## VISUALIZE THE DATA

To help decision makers better understand the issues important to your community's health, help them visualize the data about issues of access to healthy foods, and share how your community compares with others. The resources below can enable you to help others visualize key food issues faced by your community.

- **Health departments** often map health indicators on the district or neighborhood level. These types of data can support your efforts to convince potential collaborators and decision makers of the value of the policy changes you support. Many communities are also mapping their food systems. Great examples include the Maryland Food Systems Map (<http://mdfoodsystemmap.org>) and the Vermont Food System Atlas ([www.vtfoodatlas.com/atlas](http://www.vtfoodatlas.com/atlas)).
- The **USDA Food Environment Atlas** maps statistics related to food choice, health and well-being, and community characteristics to enable the visualization of key issues related to food in a particular area.  
[www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas](http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas)
- **County Health Rankings and Roadmaps** is a data visualization tool maintained by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that maps health indicators in every state at the county level. This resource also provides examples of scientifically supported policies that can improve health.  
[www.countyhealthrankings.org](http://www.countyhealthrankings.org)



## Strengthen Your Approach

### ASSESS COMMUNITY NEEDS

Community food assessments are a great tool for considering the assets and issues that are most relevant to food in your community. Especially when they have broad community representation, these assessments can help build the support you need to get decision makers to consider alternative options more fully. To learn about community food assessments, check out the resources at [www.ucsusa.org/foodtoolkit](http://www.ucsusa.org/foodtoolkit).

### GET THE WORD OUT

Share stories, event opportunities, and information about actions in a variety of settings to reach as many people as possible. This can take place in public places where community members gather (libraries, community centers, and houses of worship), in the local media (newspaper, radio, community listservs), and through social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter.

### GET PEOPLE ACTIVE

Identify clear opportunities for networks you are a part of to get involved and take action. Think about how coalitions of which you are a member can be engaged when moments to influence food-related policy decisions arise.

### GET ORGANIZED

Learn more about effective techniques for supporting campaigns that will influence decisions made about food in your community by exploring the UCS Activist Resource Center ([www.ucsusa.org/action/activist-resource-center.html](http://www.ucsusa.org/action/activist-resource-center.html)), and check out these additional activist/organizing resources:

- The **Community Tool Box**, a project of the University of Kansas, is a free online resource aimed at connecting people, resources, and ideas in order to build healthier communities and bring about social change.  
<http://ctb.ku.edu>
- **The Democracy Center** has a wide variety of free resources for effective advocacy and strategic thinking as well as many examples of successful community action.  
<http://democracyctr.org/citizenadvocacy>
- **The Midwest Academy's** Organizing for Social Change is a resource for communities to learn more about strategies and tactics in organizing for social justice.  
[www.midwestacademy.com](http://www.midwestacademy.com)

### CELEBRATE SUCCESS

Getting decision makers to recognize how their policies affect communities' access to healthy food is a great accomplishment even when it does not result in immediate, large-scale change. Recognize those working hard toward your goals, and broadcast your progress across the community. Finding a moment to regularly reflect on your work will help you maintain a commitment to your cause.

*It is no small task to improve the health and well-being of a community by expanding everyone's access to healthy, affordable food. The authors hope this toolkit illustrates the food policy landscape and your place in it. We hope the toolkit inspires you to explore how key food issues affect the health of your community, identify relevant decision makers, and use the resources detailed here as a springboard to connect with others who are demanding change. The stakes are just too high. Diet-related diseases continue to increase, taxing our health care system and the social fabric of the nation. Take inspiration from successful food policy reform efforts across the country, recognize the efforts of those fighting for accessible and affordable healthy food for all, and get started.*



## Online Resources

This toolkit, along with additional resources for engaging in food policy change, and all source materials, are available online at [www.ucsusa.org/foodtoolkit](http://www.ucsusa.org/foodtoolkit).

More information on many topics covered in this toolkit can also be found at [www.ucsusa.org/food\\_and\\_agriculture](http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture) and [www.ucsusa.org/foodforum](http://www.ucsusa.org/foodforum).

The Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists works to strengthen American democracy by advancing the essential role of science, evidence-based decision making, and constructive debate as a means to improve the health, security, and prosperity of all people. Learn more at [www.uscusa.org/scienceanddemocracy](http://www.uscusa.org/scienceanddemocracy).

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# Healthy Food in Your Community

## *A Toolkit for Policy Change*

*Communities must be part of the decisions that shape access to healthy, affordable food. With this toolkit, you can join local efforts to make healthy, affordable food a regular part of your—and potentially every—community's landscape.*



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Concerned Scientists**

FIND THIS DOCUMENT ONLINE: [www.ucsusa.org/foodtoolkit](http://www.ucsusa.org/foodtoolkit)

*The Union of Concerned Scientists puts rigorous, independent science to work to solve our planet's most pressing problems. Joining with citizens across the country, we combine technical analysis and effective advocacy to create innovative, practical solutions for a healthy, safe, and sustainable future.*

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