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CITY OF HARTFORD ADVISORY COMMISSION ON FOOD POLICY

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2012 Recommendations Point the Way to Increased Food Security in Hartford

The Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy was established by City ordinance in 1991 to implement recommendations from the Mayor's Task Force on Hunger. Continuously operational since then, its purpose is to integrate all agencies in the city in a common effort to improve the availability of safe and nutritious food at reasonable prices for all residents, particularly those in need. The Commission's work is guided by four goals outlined in the establishing ordinance:

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

These goals remain very relevant today. Hartford experiences chronic and significant socio-economic and health challenges, including a lack of ready and affordable access to healthy food. Among cities with populations above 100K, Hartford has one of the lowest median household income levels in the nation, and, at under \$30,000 in 2009, the median income is less than half that of Hartford County. Over 30% of Hartford individuals and almost 30% of Hartford families live below the federal poverty level. Almost 40% of families with children less than 18 years old are below the federal poverty level, making Hartford one of the poorest cities for children in the country. 30% of Hartford households are enrolled for SNAP benefits (representing almost \$7M in benefits each month.) Hartford's unemployment rate in September 2011 was 15.6%, almost double the 8.8% rate in the state as a whole.

In August 2011, the Food Research and Action Center reported that in 21 states and the District of Columbia 25% of households with children experienced food hardship in the prior year. In a study completed five years ago, food insecurity among the Hartford's low-income households was estimated at more than 50%, with almost 25% of low-income households experiencing hunger within a 12-month period. This study is being updated now; given the current state of the local economy, we do not expect improvement in these numbers.

The recently established CT Health Equity Index, which is used to identify social, economic and environmental conditions that correlate to health outcomes, reveals that Hartford's poorer neighborhoods consistently have higher mortality rates than the City's more affluent neighborhoods. Insufficient access to healthy food is one probable factor in Hartford's high rates of diet-related diseases. Although the average age of Hartford residents is lower than that in the surrounding Hartford County, the death rate from diabetes is almost 11% higher in the City than in the County overall. Young people are also vulnerable to the consequences of Hartford's food environment. Hartford's youth are exposed early to this environment, creating a significant challenge to their health and well-being. An assessment conducted by the Hartford Childhood Wellness Alliance found the obesity rate among Hartford preschoolers was 23%, nearly double the national average. For children 6-11 years old, the obesity rate was 24%.



Advisory Commission on Food Policy

Recommendations for Action in 2012 and Beyond

The negative impact of inadequate healthy food access for Hartford's residents remains a challenge. However, the Commission believes that progress can be achieved with practical strategies that can alleviate hunger and provide Hartford residents with greater food security. As part of its advisory role to City officials, each year, the Commission prepares several recommendations on food and nutrition issues. For 2012, the Commission recommends action on the following items. We are ready to discuss these recommendations and partner with City agencies and community organizations on implementing them.

Increase Utilization of the Summer Food Program

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federal child nutrition program that allows kids 18-years-old or younger to receive free meals while school is out for the summer. Without this program, youth who rely on subsidized school lunches would risk a gap in healthy eating during the time that school is not in session. There are two sponsors/meal providers in Hartford—Hartford Public Schools and the City of Hartford through the Families, Children, Youth and Recreation Department. Both provide free breakfast and lunch to more than 70 locations throughout the city. Unfortunately, both programs served fewer meals in summer 2011 than in the summer of 2010, which also had a decrease from the year before. For the number of meals served compared to summer 2010, Hartford Public Schools had an 8% decrease in its program and the City of Hartford had an 11% decrease. In total, 205,994 meals were served over the eight week period, about 20,000 less meals than in 2010.

The Commission strongly encourages the City to make increasing the number of children participating in Summer Food a priority to ensure children receive good nutrition year round. The following activities are suggested activities that increase awareness and access to summer meals:

- 1) *We urge City and school administrators to promote and publicize the SFSP more aggressively. Families should be notified of SFSP site locations, times, and that all children 18 and under are eligible. High-priority mailings like the final report card and recording telephone messages can help in marketing the program.*
- 2) *Summer youth programs should be encouraged to partner with Hartford Public Schools or the Recreation Division to receive meals or attend services sites.*
- 3) *School administrators should be made aware and communicate to their staff that all schools with summer school serve meals and those meals are available to any child in Hartford, not just those attending that school or summer programming.*
- 4) *Efforts should be made to align summer recreation programming with meal times since activities act as a magnet in drawing kids to meal sites.*
- 5) *Since meals are only available to children, it is very possible that many families do not participate because the whole family cannot eat the meal. A pilot effort to subsidize or seek funding to cover the cost of meals for adults could be useful in determining if this is a major barrier to participation for children in Hartford. The Commission would commit to help find sources of funding to make this possible.*

Tax Incentives and Economic Benefits for Healthy Food Businesses

Food production and food retailing account for a very significant portion of Hartford's economic activity. To encourage the development of healthy food production and increased access to healthy food in the City, the Commission recommends that incentives for healthy food production and sale be explored and implemented. For example, the City tax code could be amended to provide tax incentives to private property owners that develop or allow a Hartford nonprofit organization to develop a community garden or urban farming/agricultural operation on their property. To be eligible for a tax incentive, a property owner might deed the property to a 501c3 organization that will develop a garden on the property. Language in the deed would state that if the property ceases to be used as a garden, ownership would revert back to the donor of the property. Another example of incentives could be City-sponsored purchasing arrangements that would allow retailers to get favorable pricing on equipment to display and sell healthier food selections. The Commission would be pleased to work with City leadership on exploring what options might work for Hartford.

Increase School Breakfast Participation

Like the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program is a federal nutrition program overseen by the United States Department of Agriculture, which provides reimbursements to school districts for serving nutritious meals. Studies show that children who eat breakfast show improved cognitive function, attention, memory, and perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast at home.

The majority of Hartford schools participate in a universal feeding program where breakfast and lunch are provided at no cost to the student. Hartford Public Schools currently has school breakfast available at all schools, offering many nutritious options including a variety of fresh fruits, whole grains, hot breakfast choices, and low fat dairy products for students. The district average for breakfast participation is 39% of those eating lunch; however, 40% of schools have breakfast participation rates that exceed this average reaching up to 85% participation. Barriers to breakfast participation can include school start times, bus schedules, school building facilities, and parental preferences.

The Commission encourages the City to make school breakfast a priority in all schools by promoting its connection to learning and encouraging alternative methods of school breakfast like grab-n-go, in-classroom, and second chance breakfast where breakfast may be served and consumed in areas other than the cafeteria. These methods have proven successful in other areas of the country and state by heightening program awareness and making breakfast more accessible to students.

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Recommendations for Action in 2012 and Beyond

Expand the Reach of Farmers' Markets in Hartford

Farmers' markets continue to provide a vital link between farmers, Hartford residents and healthy food. Hartford's farmers markets are a true community asset. They generate economic development, combat food insecurity and build sustainable community; farmers' market provide unbeatable freshness, taste, quality and healthy choices for our residents. They are good for the environment and preserve the agricultural heritage of our state.

The Hartford Farmers' Markets is a consortium of certified markets and related organizations in the city who are working together to promote the overall benefit and availability of fresh produce from farmers' markets.

The work of the consortium has been supported by the generosity of the City Council. Hartford farmers' markets all accept WIC and Senior Farmers' Market Coupons and many also accept SNAP/EBT. Two markets have implemented incentive programs to expand the value of federal nutrition benefits at the markets. This means greater access to healthy local fruits and vegetable for Hartford residents.

By encouraging the vibrancy of these markets and sharing in the responsibility for their success, Hartford has become a competitive destination for farmers and consumers alike to enjoy these community assets. We recommend that City leadership continue their strong support to ensure the ongoing health and growth of all our markets.

"Farmers' markets generate economic development and combat food insecurity for Hartford residents."

Evaluate and Improve Disaster Preparedness Impacting Hartford's Food Supply

The early winter storm that left much of Greater Hartford without power for more than a week had somewhat less effect on Hartford than on the suburbs; however, this would be a good time to evaluate what worked and did not work both in Hartford and in the suburbs in order to improve the response to a future disaster that has the capacity to affect the food supply. The Commission recommends that the City undertake an evaluation of food system readiness for a disaster and report their findings to the community. Areas of focus should include:

Grocery stores – How many are equipped to operate if the power is out? Can we help more stores be equipped for such an emergency? Can we establish transportation systems to help people get to the stores that are open?

Food pantries – Many food pantries were without power and closed for an entire week. People who rely on food pantries do not have a supply of food at home. How can we ensure that people who rely on food pantries are served in time of disaster, either by keeping the pantries open or by providing an alternate means of service?

Storm related shelters – Did the shelters that were open have access to enough food and other supplies to meet the needs? What lessons did we learn? What can we do better next time?

Communications – With landline phones, mobile phones, and internet connections down or limited, how do we communicate with people during an emergency to share information about food or other resources? What did we learn from this disaster and what could we do better next time?

Food safety – With power out, food safety becomes a major issue for both households and institutions. What safeguards are in place and what can be improved to ensure a safe food supply in a time of emergency?

Increase SNAP and WIC Enrollment

While close to 380,000 individuals and families in Connecticut are currently participating in the SNAP program, participation among older adults is low. A mere 34% of eligible older adults are receiving SNAP benefits, meaning over 70,000 eligible older adults are not receiving SNAP benefits in Connecticut. Food insecurity among this population continues to be especially challenging because older adults have unique nutritional needs and may require special diets for medical conditions.

The applications process is confusing to most, leaving them hesitant to apply. With many older adults the target for scams, they feel uncomfortable disclosing personal information for fear of being scammed. Advocates have found that working one on one with seniors has proven to be more effective in gaining their trust and assisting them with the application process. Older adults seem more receptive to working with someone who will guide them through the applications process. Advocates seek out those potentially eligible at senior housing sites, senior health fairs and expos and through our continued work with the Department of Social Service's Medicare RX Bus.

End Hunger Connecticut! has partnered with AARP CT to bring awareness to those potentially eligible older adults. This partnership has resulted in improving SNAP access to potentially eligible older adults. It is our recommendation that the City of Hartford support efforts to reach out to the older adults, encouraging them to apply for SNAP benefits.



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Prior Recommendations and Other Commission Activities

The Commission is pleased to recognize the action taken by City leadership in passing a *Trans Fatty Acid* ban which went into effect in 2012 and for creating a *Restaurant Scorecard* process which lets patrons know how the food establishment is doing in its inspections. 2011 also saw the establishment of a food growing site at the corner of Park and Main Streets, reflecting an earlier Commission recommendation on visible *Promotion of Urban Agriculture*.

In 2011, the Commission also conducted a grocery store food price survey, which is an activity undertaken on a periodic basis to assess the prices paid in City stores relative to suburban markets. The focus in 2011 was to see if there was evidence of price changes that coincided with availability of SNAP benefits, i.e., end of month prices vs. beginning of month prices. For each store, price data on a list of staple items were collected in two time periods. For most of the items, results were mixed with few clear trends. However, both whole and 1% milk prices changed dramatically between the two collection periods, with average price differences ranging from \$1.37-\$1.42. Some focused data collection would be helpful to examine this phenomenon more closely.

“Hartford could become a hunger-free community.”



Future Trends and Areas of Focus

Food-related Uses on Landfill

Potential uses for the completely covered landfill are being proposed. Among the suggestions that have been proposed is the construction of commercial greenhouses. We believe that food growing in these greenhouses is a logical use of a portion of the landfill.

Understanding Economic Impact of SNAP, WIC, Urban Agriculture, Corner Stores, and other Food Security Strategies

Ensuring access to healthy food for all Hartford residents is not just a social and public health good. It is also good for the economy. It is a useful economic development activity to understand the business impact of various food security activities, such as WIC and SNAP usage, small markets that are more successful offering healthier selections, and commercially successful farmers' markets and city farms. Doing so could lead to more effective strategies to ensure that these activities operate at their maximum potential in the City.

Food Hubs

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

Healthy Food Zones and Other Healthy Food Ordinances

In 2011 The Los Angeles City Council enacted a ban on new fast-food establishments in certain parts of the City. The City Council first enacted a one-year moratorium in 2008. Since then, no new stand-alone fast-food establishments have opened in the impacted area. In Minneapolis, the Staple Food Ordinance refined the terms for city licensure of food

markets, requiring that retailers carry a baseline inventory of perishable and non-perishable food. While conceived as a crime-prevention strategy, it has proven to be the basis for encouraging healthier grocery inventories in ‘corner stores.’ Healthy Food Zones, or better definitions of what qualifies as a grocery store, may be concepts worth exploration and may be areas where Hartford could be a leader in demonstrating care for the food choices that are provided to our children and families.

Freshplace Replication

Freshplace is an innovative food pantry in Hartford founded by Foodshare, the Chrysalis Center and the Junior League of Hartford, who have partnered with the University of Connecticut to evaluate the program. Freshplace opened in 2010, offering fresh foods and individualized case management to monitor goals for becoming food secure. Early results indicate significant decreases in food insecurity and significant increases in self-sufficiency. Replicating the Freshplace model in other food pantries by incorporating case management services to members may be a key component in the fight to end hunger in Hartford.

Hunger-Free Community

It is feasible to consider that Hartford could become a hunger-free community. In order to take appropriate action toward this goal, it is necessary to fully understand the extent of the problem. The degree of food insecurity in all Connecticut towns was documented in a 2005 report supported by the Commission. That report is being updated in 2012; we look forward to receiving this data as one important basis for City leadership to work with the Commission to develop solutions suggested by the information.