

Closer to my grocer

Food deserts and the campaign for the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund

IN RURAL AND URBAN areas of all sizes, from large swaths of southern and southwestern Virginia, to Richmond, to Martinsville, and Norfolk, residents must travel excessive distances to purchase the foods necessary to maintain a healthy diet. While localities are uniquely aware of the challenges within their own communities, food access has gained significant attention at the state level in the recent years. In 2012 and 2013, Delegate Delores McQuinn of Richmond introduced House Joint Resolutions to direct the General Assembly to examine the issue of food deserts in Virginia. Virginia's Food Desert Task Force released a report in January 2014 which documents food access issues across Virginia.

In November 2014, Governor McAuliffe signed Executive Order 34 to create the Commonwealth Council on Bridging



children obese, more must be done to help all children grow up at a healthy weight.

While grocery stores contribute positively to public health, they also serve as important community anchors and economic development institutions for localities. Councilman Phil Mis-

kovic of Crewe, VA says that “with no anchor business like a full-service grocery store, the whole community suffers. The newspaper loses weekly ad revenue, other stores lose customer traffic, and people are less likely to make Crewe

their permanent home. If we can help our entrepreneurial neighbors succeed and expand their mom-and-pop grocery shops to full-service stores, we’d be helping everyone.”

Over the years, grocery stores have left communities due to factors unrelated to customer demand. The average grocery store hires 90 people from the neighborhood where it operates and provides private sector, entry level jobs with room for growth.³ Furthermore, increased healthy food retail will expand opportunities for Virginia’s farmers and Virginia Grown products.

The Closer to My Grocer campaign is working to increase healthy food retail in underserved areas. The campaign is supported by a diverse coalition of business, health, child advocate and locality groups, like the Virginia Municipal League, that have an interest in improving food access. Ultimately, the campaign seeks to establish a Healthy Food Financing Initiative, the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund.

More than 1.7 MILLION Virginians, including 480,000 children, live in lower income communities with limited supermarket access.

the Nutritional Divide. Chaired by the First Lady Dorothy McAuliffe, one of the council’s main objectives is to “encourage the development of innovative and sustainable retail models to provide access to healthy foods in areas classified as food deserts.” A July 2015 report from the American Heart Association finds that 1.7 million Virginians, including 480,000 children, are living in low income areas with limited supermarket access.¹

A growing body of research shows that access to nutritious food is unequally distributed in Virginia and that increasing access to healthy food retail, like grocery stores, can help. People who live in communities with limited supermarket access suffer disproportionately high rates of diet-related health problems like obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

Conversely, when a community has access to a grocery store, they are more likely to consume fruits and vegetables and maintain a healthy weight.² With nearly 30% of Virginia’s

Healthy Food Financing Initiatives and the Pennsylvania Model

The Virginia Grocery Investment Fund is an example of a Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI). HFFI is a unique private-public model that encourages healthy food retail to locate in underserved communities that need it most.

The first HFFI program was created in Pennsylvania in the early 2000s. Representative Dwight Evans, a Pennsylvania lawmaker representing Philadelphia, sought a solution to the food access issues faced by his constituents. In 2004, Representative Evans helped launch the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) with \$30 million from the state's Department of Community and Economic Development.

Case Study: Bloss Holiday Market Blossburg, Pennsylvania

WHEN THE OWNER of Bloss Holiday Market in Blossburg, Pennsylvania, decided to retire, the 1,400-resident rural community faced the loss of its only store in town and the only supplier of groceries and fresh produce for nearly eight miles. The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative provided Ryan and Melanie Shaut, a young entrepreneurial couple from the community, with the financing they needed to purchase and renovate the store, thus preserving the only retailer within 11 miles to accept both food stamps and Salvation Army grocery vouchers for families in need. This project also aids food pantry patrons who receive vouchers that enable them to supplement the pre-packaged foods they get from the pantry with fresh produce at Bloss Holiday Market. In addition to providing nearby access to fresh, healthy foods in a region without a strong public transit system, this project has saved 30 quality jobs for local residents.

Source: *Waldoks R., Lang B., Treering D. (2015). Food for Every Child: The Need for Healthy Food Financing in Virginia. Philadelphia, PA: The Food Trust. Copyright The Food Trust 2015.*

The FFFI is a partnership between the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Reinvestment Fund, the Food Trust and the Urban Affairs Coalition. The Reinvestment Fund, a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI), serves as the administrator of the program and leveraged the \$30 million dollar state investment for an additional \$90 million to create a \$120 million dollar fund. The fund is used to provide low interest loans and grants to encourage development of new healthy food retail and to support existing operators in underserved low income communities.

Since 2004, the program has seen incredible success in Pennsylvania. After five years of implementation, FFFI supported 88 fresh food retail projects in rural and urban areas, created or retained more than 5,000 jobs and secured healthy food access for over 400,000 state residents.

The Pennsylvania FFFI program is considered a best practice in efforts to increase healthy food retail in underserved

communities and received Harvard's Innovations in American Government Award.

With the success of the Pennsylvania HFFI model, other states including California, Colorado, Illinois and New Jersey have established HFFI programs. Additionally, in 2011 the federal government started a HFFI program through the Departments of Treasury, Agriculture and Health and Human Services.

The Virginia Grocery Investment Fund

The Virginia Grocery Investment Fund is a public-private partnership modeled after Pennsylvania's Fresh Food Financing Initiative. The Fund is designed to be seeded with state dollars and operated by a Community Development Financial Institution that has a strong track record of work in low income communities. The CDFI will receive project applications from communities and score them based on:

- The level of need in the area to be served;
- The degree to which the project requires an investment of public financing to move forward, create impact, or be competitive;
- The degree to which the project will have a positive economic impact on the underserved community, including creating or retaining jobs for local residents;
- The degree to which the project will participate in state and local health department initiatives to educate consumers on nutrition and promote healthier eating; and
- Priority will be placed in projects committed to sourcing Virginia Grown products when available.

To learn more about the program, visit healthyfoodva.heart.org/vagroceryinvestmentfund.

Funding from General Assembly

The Closer to My Grocer coalition was formed just prior to the 2016 General Assembly Session. In December 2015, Governor McAuliffe included \$10 million in his budget for the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund. During session, the Senate appropriated \$2.5 million for a pilot of the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund while the House of Delegates did not include any funding for it in their budget. Therefore, the final 2016-2018 biennium budget did not include any funding for the

More than 80% of Virginia's voters believe that supermarkets create jobs and revitalize communities, serving as retail anchors and sparking complementary development nearby.

Virginia Grocery Investment Fund. Advocates are aware of the current budget challenges, but will continue to advocate for increased access to healthy food retail in underserved communities.

What Virginia voters say

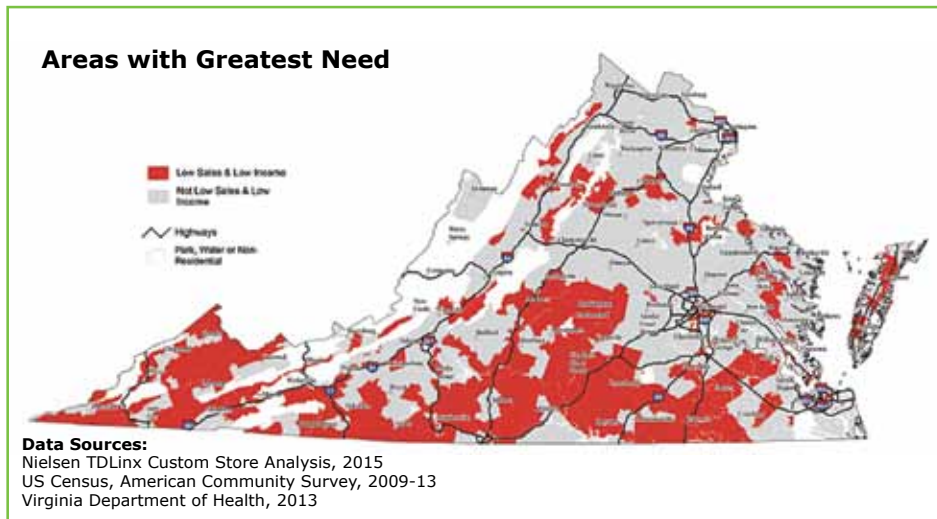
In May 2016, the American Heart Association's Mid-Atlantic Affiliate conducted a poll of 500 registered Virginia voters. Our findings indicate:

- 9 out of every 10 voters in Virginia believe that unhealthy

Food deserts

eating and childhood obesity are serious issues for children growing up in the United States today.

- 88% of voters are concerned that 480,000 of Virginia's children do not have access to healthy foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables.
- 55% of Virginia voters believe state and local governments should do more to improve access to neighborhood stores where people can buy healthy foods.
- Virginia's voters identified affordability, poor economic conditions and a lack of nutritional education as barriers to healthy food access in both rural and urban areas.
- 82% of voters support a state program to help make healthy foods available to more of Virginia's children by giving low interest loans and grants to businesses to open grocery stores, farmer's markets, and other places that provide healthy food in communities without them.
- 83% of Virginia's voters are convinced that supermarkets



This map displays lower-income communities where there are low supermarket sales and a high number of deaths due to diet-related disease in Virginia. These areas have the greatest need for more supermarkets and other fresh food retail. To provide affordable and nutritious food in these neighborhoods, Virginia needs to encourage new supermarket and other fresh food retail development in lower-income areas.

create jobs and revitalize communities, serving as retail anchors and sparking complementary development nearby.

These results indicate that Virginia voters overwhelmingly support the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund and that the majority of voters believe that state and local governments should do more to improve access to healthy food.

Restock our future: Providing healthier options in public spaces

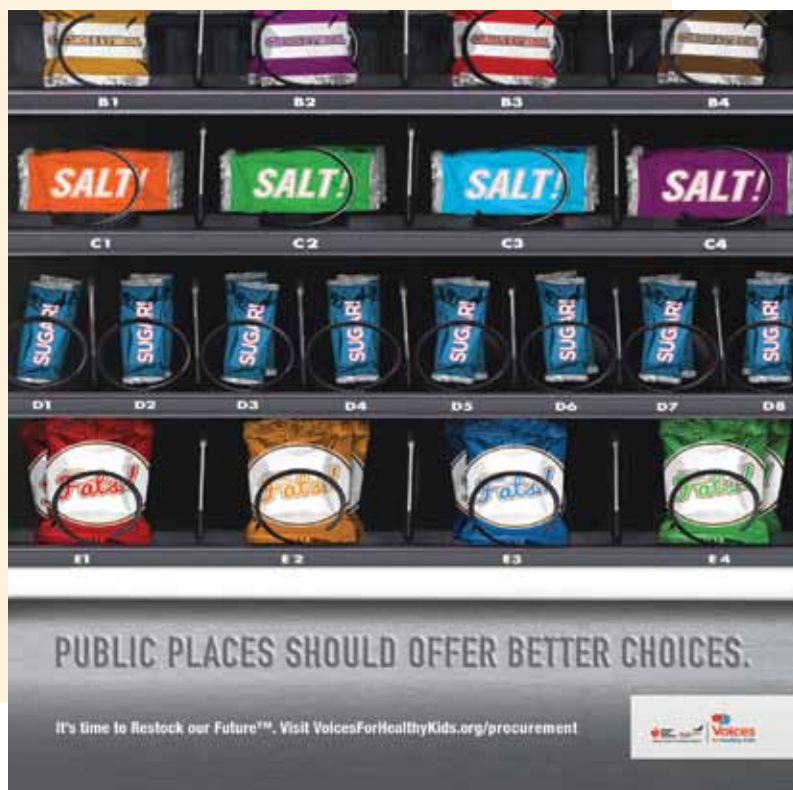
THE DEMAND FOR HEALTHIER FOOD and beverage options is increasing. In America, more and more people want healthier food where they work, play, and live. Right now, there are few, if any, healthy food and beverage options available in many public places, like parks, recreation centers, libraries, and other city buildings. Municipalities have the opportunity to be a leader in their community by changing the food environment and offering healthier food choices.

Access to healthier food and beverages benefits public health. What we eat and drink directly impacts our health, but we tend to eat out of convenience. Ensuring that nutritious foods are readily available and accessible in public places allows children and families to choose healthy options. This decreases their risk for heart disease and diabetes in the long run. A small change can make a world of difference.

Cities and towns can implement healthy vending or healthy food service policies to provide options to employees and the public. Vending machines, cafeterias, concession stands, and snack or coffee shops are just a few places to start offering additional healthier options. Changing to a healthier vending policy in your community helps make the healthy choice the easy choice for employees, children, and their families.

The American Heart Association is working in Virginia to encourage private businesses and local governments to


adopt healthy vending and service guidelines. To learn more about healthy vending and food service or to get involved, contact Melissa Assalone with the American Heart Association at Melissa.assalone@heart.org.



Add your voice

Localities have a lot to gain from the creation of the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund! You can help support the creation of the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund in the following ways:

- Share your story. Does your locality suffer from limited access to fresh foods? Join us in writing an op-ed in your local newspaper.
- Learn more. Do you know an individual or organization that should learn more about the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund? If so have them contact Allie Atkeson at allie.atkeson@heart.org or visit healthyfoodva.heart.org.
- Help educate our General Assembly members about the

need for healthy food access and ask for their support of the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund. 

About the author: *Allie Atkeson is the Campaign Manager for the American Heart Association in Virginia.*

¹ Waldoks R., Lang B., Treering D. (2015). *Food for Every Child: The Need for Healthy Food Financing in Virginia*. Philadelphia, PA: The Food Trust. Copyright The Food Trust 2015.

² Bell J., Mora G., Hagan E., Rubin V., Karpyn A. (2013). *Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters: A Review of the Research*. Oakland, CA: PolicyLink and The Food Trust. Retrieved from: http://thefoodtrust.org/uploads/media_items/access-to-healthy-food.original.pdf

³ Food Marketing Institute (2011). http://www.fmi.org/docs/health-wellness-research-downloads/access_to_healthier_foods.pdf

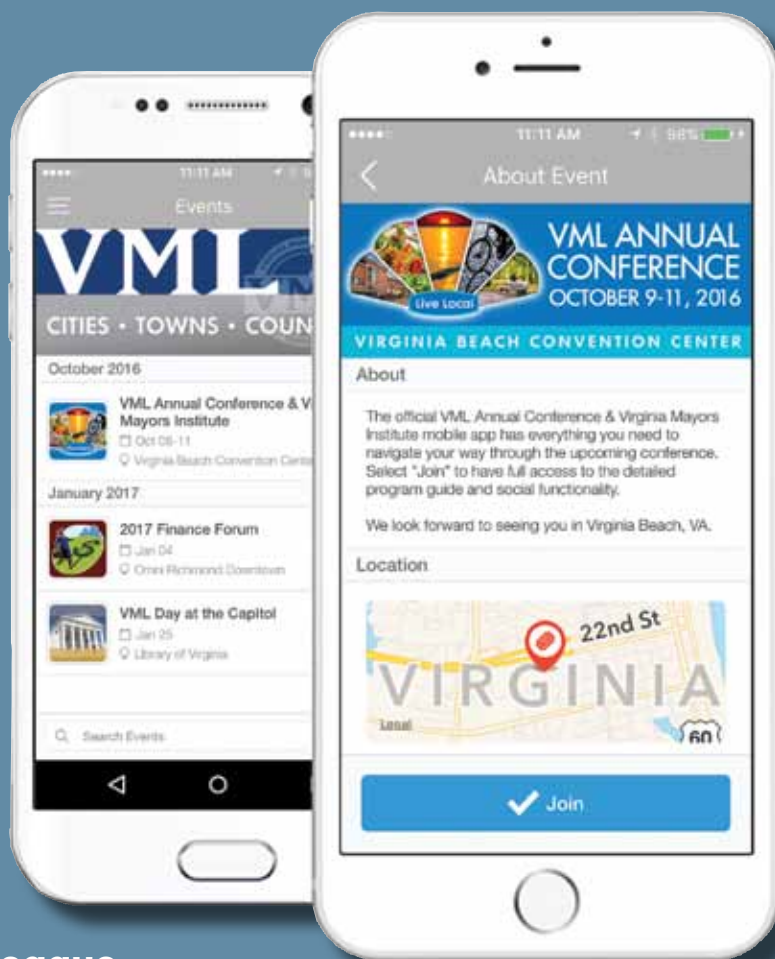
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