

Good afternoon, my name is Allison Karpyn and I am the Co-Director of the Center for Research in Education and Social Policy (CRESP) at the University of Delaware and Associate Professor in the Department of the Human Development and Family Sciences. I am also a Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Public Health Initiatives and have researched food policy and food security for the past 18 years.

I would like to thank Congressman Dwight Evans, Congresswoman Scanlon, Chairman McGovern and their staff and colleagues as well as leadership at Bartram's Gardens for hosting today's conversation.

On the eve of Juneteenth it is exceptionally appropriate that we are here together in the town known for brotherly love, speaking about food security, a human right. It is also notable that we gather this week, a week when Vice President Kamala Harris has announced an incredible commitment, \$1.25 Billion dollars to Community Development Financial Institutions, which are an important backbone of small business development, and the federal Healthy Food Financing Program, which in many ways was borne out of a vision for food security which started here.

Our most recent data show that one in every six children live in food insecure households¹. We know the reasons for food insecurity in the US are complex, and as a term food security reflects both the quantity and quality of food in our diet; food security addresses physical, social and economic access. To ensure families are food secure, we must make sure our children have full bellies, and ensure that what is in those bellies is nutritious.

It was only a year ago that our nation, irrespective of income, felt the panic of not knowing if we would have enough food. Everyone saw that our supermarket shelves were bare. I urge us as a nation to not forget the profound impact that such a crisis has on our whole selves, beyond a meal alone. **We must also collectively step back, and take a close, intentional, look at the lessons learned in our region, and recognize what has worked during this difficult time.**

In many ways, our nation succeeded in abruptly shifting parameters to adopt to the rapidly changing inventory and "remote" contexts that redefined our lives. Federal and state operated food programs made adjustments to some of the more stringent criteria, from alleviating congregate meal program requirements for school meals, to enabling WIC program participants to purchase substitute products, and attend required meetings virtually. There are many examples of successful adjustments to existing programs which warrant discussion and consideration for permanent change. Furthermore, the pandemic demonstrated the importance supermarket access and local food systems alike, as critical foundations for food security.

Generally, research on the topic of food security is robust – we know that food security is not just a "food" problem – it's a problem that stems from inadequate access to

¹ Coleman- Jensen A, Rabbit M, Christian A, et al. Household food security in the United States in 2018, ERR-270, U.S Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Washington, D.C.: USDA, 2018.

education, jobs, housing stability, and economic possibility, often called the social determinants of health. And at the risk of sounding too academic, I will add that these issues are reciprocal where, for example, poor access to education is both a cause, and a consequence, of food security.

Further, we know food security is influenced by community well-being, including neighborhood safety, connectedness, as well as perceptions of increased availability of healthy food and supportive health and physical activity environments, both formal and informal.

Our region was one of the first to recognize the profound impact that community has on food security – locally we have demonstrated that:

- Farmers markets (FM's) located in low and moderate income areas which accept SNAP and WIC FMNP directly impact food security and nutrition;
- The distribution of financial resources such as “food bucks” programs like the FINI GusNIP program which provide additional funds for those wanting to buy fresh food, are feasible to administer and effectively work to increase healthy food sales and improve dietary intake.

In recent years, the number of FMs across the US has increased steadily from 1,755 markets in 1994 to 8,140 in 2019². Two ways FM managers are seeking to better serve the needs of low-income and minority customers is by locating the markets in underserved neighborhoods and by accepting benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)³. Both such efforts have been a staple of operations by organizations like The Food Trust in the Philadelphia area, including Chester, PA where healthy food access is a considerable challenge for many residents.

Research shows that low income residents including SNAP recipients consume FVs less regularly than non-SNAP shoppers⁴. With increasing efforts, however, SNAP sales at FMs have shown steady improvement in SNAP benefit use; in 2017, more than \$24.4 million SNAP redemptions were honored by FMs, a 35.2% increase from 2012⁵.

Further, a recent national study that myself and colleagues completed found that SNAP shoppers who have access to, and shop at, a farmers markets spent more of their

² National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), Agricultural Statistics Board, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). *National farmers market managers 2019 summary*. 2020. Available at: <https://downloads.usda.library.cornell.edu/usda-esmis/files/pz50hd694/gx41n598k/jd473j98z/nfar0820.pdf>.

³ Gold A. Participation in the supplemental nutrition assistance program...SNAP. Available at: <https://apps.ams.usda.gov/MarketingPublicationSearch/Reports/stelprdc5108758.docx>.

⁴ Wolfson JA, Bleich SN. Fruit and vegetable consumption and food values: National patterns in the United States by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program eligibility and cooking frequency. *Prev Med*. 2015; 76:1–7. doi:10.1016/j.ypmed.2015.03.019.

⁵ Food and Nutrition Service. *Comparison of SNAP authorized farmers and markets FY 2012 and FY 2017*. United States Department of Agriculture. 2017. [Accessed 18 Mar 2021]. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/SNAP-Farmers-Markets-Redemptions.pdf>.

monthly budget on FV, consumed more FV, and reported lower than average BMI. **These findings indicate that FMs represent an important mechanism to impact food security and promote health equity for individuals and families using SNAP and need to remain as a federal priority for investment.**

Here too, we have demonstrated that large scale distribution of high-quality nutritious, locally grown food is possible - Common Market, a regional and national leader has worked tirelessly to devise and sustain mechanisms to support the distribution of locally grown food and is a pioneering leader. During the pandemic over 95,000 pounds of food was delivered in just 16 weeks directly to food insecure households with children⁶ through a novel partnership with the Childrens' Hospital of Philadelphia and the non-profit Food Connect Co.

I must also recognize our regions great leaders, including the late Stevanna Wynn of the SHARE food program, who worked tirelessly to demonstrate the value of state food programs, local nutrition education and emergency food distribution models that enabled healthy food access while prioritizing dignity.

Regionally, the Philadelphia area has also pioneered financing programs, such as the Fresh Food Financing Program, which are effective at developing supermarkets and grocery stores in areas that do not have them, helping to re-instate food justice in communities for decades have been challenged by a lack of economic investment.

Yet, amidst these successes are ongoing challenges, several of which I would like to highlight.

First, we have an unnecessary paperwork burden in many of our social benefit programs which is both costly to taxpayers, and prohibits families from getting the food they need. As we reflect on what worked during the pandemic many emergency food providers have told me that the reduced administrative burden allowed them to serve families in need, while reducing stigma and shame that often coincides with accepting help.

Reducing administrative program burdens must become, a national priority.

I have seen small food cupboards that are required to manage multiple "qualification" systems for residents and must keep several different refrigerators operating in order to keep food separate, only because food from different state and federal sources can't "intermingle". And with the substantial paperwork burdens, is also a lack of adequate infrastructure to make the most of the data we have. For example, many states systems are not integrated, so that a family that qualifies for SNAP and may also qualify for WIC, for example, would not be easily identified and offered both programs simultaneously.

Our nations' public assistance data infrastructure is a leading concern, and I dare say a picture of irony. Let me explain why.

⁶ Garcia, I., Donovan, A., Lehmann, Y., Perfetto, J., Kulshreshtha, S., Shrihari, D., ... Khan, S. (2021). Tech Led Solutions to Address Food Insecurity during a Global Pandemic. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 32(2), 5-12. [doi:10.1353/hpu.2021.0047](https://doi.org/10.1353/hpu.2021.0047).

First, current systems, as noted, mandate considerable administrative burdens and, as a result, have amassed detailed benefit program usage information which could be actively used to refine programs and, ideally, to ultimately create cross-sector data systems. Such data access would enable our country and its cities, states and local programs to actively see where pockets of need are greatest, how usage rates are shifting, and how a program or combination of programs are serving participants both in the short and long term. We know that to solve food security, we must not only look at food, but at the broader structures that drive economic and social conditions, which will ultimately require the integration of data across departments.

The data exist, and the context to interpret the data also exists, yet today, efforts to at minimum, understand the kinds of purchases program participants make, is limited by the interpretation of federal guidance – effectively restricting researchers to appropriately access WIC and SNAP usage data in partnership with states. **Data access is a problem that could be solved at a very low cost, and in short order, by simply reviewing federal guidance to enable food program usage data to become reasonably available for research purposes.**

Last, I would like to speak directly to the Healthy Food Financing and related programs, such as the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Program which was pioneered by Congressman Dwight Evans and partners like The Food Trust and the Reinvestment Fund, among others. I have spent my career studying such efforts, and want to share a little about the profound effects these programs have had on communities.

First, we know that the problem of supermarket access, often called food deserts, was largely driven by redlining - the discriminatory practice documented in the 1930's where neighborhoods were designated as undesirable and loans were restricted as a result. Initially evidenced by maps used by federal loan programs operated by the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) the practice was depicted by designating white neighborhoods as desirable and worthy of investment, and neighborhoods where persons of color, and other immigrants, resided as "hazardous". As a result, white neighborhoods in the suburbs flourished, and supermarkets re-located to meet demand.

And yet, despite banking policies of the day, there are examples of areas of Philadelphia that through incredible strength, vision and community support were able to develop needed retail corridors. Located in the Yorktown neighborhood, on Broad Street in North Philadelphia, is the site of Progress Plaza, an area once designated as hazardous on HOLC maps in 1936. Today, thanks to early pioneering leaders like Reverend Leon Sullivan, and investment programs like the Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI), a supermarket operates today.

In fact, since 2004 the FFFI has resulted in over 90 projects in Pennsylvania, including smaller 12,000 square ft grocery stores to very large 65,000 square foot supermarkets employing 150-200 full time and part time employees with weekly sales of \$200-\$300,000. In rural and urban areas across the state of Pennsylvania the effort has generated over 5,000 jobs and improved healthy food access for more than one half-million of the states' residents, many of whom live in the very communities where the stores are located. Such efforts are critical for developing and sustaining food security, as they address not only issues of food access and affordability, but also economic

vitality of neighborhoods and offer jobs with the potential for advancement to a variety of qualified applicants, including those who are working to re-establish themselves after having been incarcerated or involved in the criminal justice system.

Efforts like the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative and the Federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative need to continue to have our legislative support. Supermarkets are a critical component of food justice, particularly in long discriminated-against communities, and as demonstrated by the pandemic, an invaluable resource to communities.

I will conclude by saying that this is a critical moment in time to reflect, document and modify our nation's approach to ensuring food security. Our nation, across income brackets, has had a common experience in seeing first-hand how fragile food security can be, and how quickly circumstances can change. And yet, over the past year we have learned that our systems can be adaptive, and are capable of adjusting quickly to reflect current needs, and family contexts. Now it is incumbent upon us to do what we can to use the experiences of the past year to advance our nation's future.