

The Roadmap to Food Equity: The Gap in the U.S. Food System

Quinney D. Harris, Ann Hoskins-Brown, and Jan Shaeffer
23 September 2011

The United States is facing an unprecedented crisis that requires unprecedented action. While the stagnant economy, national debt, healthcare, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq might register on your radar as our country's most pressing problems, there is an underlying crisis at the very core of our society that is undermining the nation's health, prosperity and sustainability. It is a crisis of the U.S. food system, encompassing all of the components involved in the production, harvesting, processing, packaging, distribution, marketing and preparation of the food we consume.

The U.S. food system is comprised of a vast network of farmers, farm workers, cultivated land, natural resources, consumers, communities and food organizations. This complex system flourishes and provides the greatest benefit when it is healthy for farmers, our families and communities, and the environment. Unfortunately, it has been an ongoing challenge to focus on the importance of our collective health when the national conversation is muddled by advocates for choice, personal responsibility,

profit and convenience.

The lack of consensus on a philosophical paradigm has left our nation's food system in utter disarray, creating new problems for society at large:

1. The availability and affordability of high-calorie, energy-dense junk foods with little nutritional value have resulted in a crippling obesity epidemic that has greatly contributed to the rates of morbidity and mortality, driving up the cost of healthcare
2. Urban decay, residential segregation, poverty and unsustainable development have resulted in food deserts in inner-city and rural communities
3. Unsustainable growing practices have resulted in chemical runoff in our waterways
4. Globalization has undermined local food production and contributed to hazardous waste and pollution in the environment; and
5. Mass production and corporate monopolies have devastated local economies and exploited farmers, farm workers and indigenous cultures both domestically and abroad.

The current model of the U.S. food system lacks equity and viability, threatening the health and well-being of our great nation. While emerging advocates are making strides with fresh and innovative approaches to reducing food insecurity and improving community health, there is still much to be done. There is currently a responsibility

and duty for lawmakers, corporations, media and advocates to transform our broken food system. The reformed model must promote social and economic justice and assure that the burdens and benefits of the system are more fairly distributed.

What does the equitable model look like?

Over the past 13 years, St. Christopher's Foundation for Children (SCFC) has created, managed and supported programming addressing the greatest health needs of kids served by St. Christopher's Hospital for Children (SCHC). When a community needs assessment revealed significant food access barriers in the communities surrounding SCHC, the Farm to Families concept was born: a modified Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program offering individuals the opportunity to purchase weekly produce boxes for \$10 and \$15.

Through our work with the Farm to Families program, SCFC is targeting communities identified as food deserts with limited access to affordable, fresh foods. Day-to-day implementation of the program brings so much learning. We've learned that we must first create a market for Farm to Families. While the areas we serve have a self-identified need for food access, and most say they will purchase fresh food if it is sold affordably, convincing individuals and families to purchase an unseen good with their very limited resources requires sales skills and incredible

powers of persuasion.

Much like inner-city enclaves across the country, the neighborhoods we serve are fast food friendly with an abundance of corner stores and local takeout restaurants that appeal to low-wealth families due to the cost, convenience and pleasant taste of the food. The odds are stacked against these families. Generations of economic desuetude, social isolation and prolonged reliance on an unhealthy, low-cost food supply (e.g., ramen noodles, Little Hugs, sodas, cold cuts, Kool-Aid, greasy takeout, fried and junk foods) has created a subculture mostly sustaining itself on unhealthy food with little nutritional value.

Indie rap artists Loer Velocity and Donnan Links rap about this phenomenon in the song "[Hood Diet](#)." In the song's hook, the rappers intone, "It's the 'hood diet.' I know it looks good, but don't try it! 'Cause you can get lots of headaches, upset stomach, and high cholesterol. You might vomit on the 'hood diet.'" While many individuals have a personal preference for the sweet, salty, greasy and fried foods that the rappers bemoan, the bad choices and poor food consumption behaviors partially arise out of a lack of retail food options.

A robust and equitable food system doesn't trammel entire communities into making bad choices based on limited retail food options. Instead, it provides all people with easy and convenient access to fresh, wholesome

foods and gives all neighborhoods equal ability to make healthy choices. It adds worth and economic viability to small family farms, differentiating their market share. It champions the environment and safeguards natural resources. It values communities, prioritizes sustainability and incorporates innovation. It is bolstered by the principles of social justice and human rights.

What does it take to get there?

Social change isn't easy. In fact, it's downright daunting. However, there are lives at stake and to not take action would be a dereliction of duty. In order to transform our broken food system, we must remain proactive, seeking opportunities to collaborate, thinking creatively, and engaging in difficult conversations. Here in the City of Philadelphia, local organizations are working to catalyze this process by identifying and eliminating many of the barriers that hinder disenfranchised communities from accessing fresh food. While this is an important first step, there is still much work to be done.

Public and private sector philanthropists, who recognize the need for food system reform, should pool their resources to facilitate the creation of a community food network. A community food network would allow thought-leaders, key stakeholders, policy experts, legislators and local communities to collaborate and shape the food system in our region. This in turn enables communities to

support and grow food business development, sustainable agriculture, food entrepreneurship, local fisheries, nutrition education and experiential learning. This can all be sensibly achieved through information sharing, food distribution, marketing, colloquiums and social events.

National food system reform should be buttressed by marketing strategies and policy change to promote healthy living and long-term sustainability. The movement to promote healthy eating has been a long-fought battle. The fast food industry, soda and liquor companies, and other food corporations have powerful marketing strategies, wealth and influential lobbyists. Companies selling healthy foods are unable to compete. Financial support is greatly needed to augment the marketing of healthy food to make it more desirable and visible to consumers. This will require fresh, innovative approaches with enough edge and appeal to achieve recognition in electronic media and permeate households across the country.

These reinvigorated marketing strategies go hand-in-hand with policy work to influence and promote food system reform at the local, state and federal levels. It is imperative for lawmakers to put policies in place to provide the nation's children with healthier school lunches, support small family farms, protect the environment, and restructure the entire system so that a

handful of large companies no longer own a huge portion of the U.S. food system from seed to plant. Our nation's food policy has been hijacked by big business and their allies in Washington for far too long. It's time to demand change to protect our communities and the future of our children.

What are the benefits once you've achieved it?

Reforming the U.S. food system will benefit everyone connected to the system, resulting in synergy for farmers, farm workers, buyers, consumers, communities and food organizations, while also benefiting the environment. With the proper support in place for food business development, our region will thrive and benefit from economic development and healthier neighborhoods with a new supply of jobs, increased home values, and a plentiful supply of fresh, wholesome foods that are locally grown. The community food network will also pull communities closer together by building relationships, sharing resources and promoting understanding across cultures.

With an ample supply of healthy food available and easily accessible, policies and marketing strategies in place to promote healthy eating, and the risks and benefits of the food system equally distributed, all neighborhoods will finally have equal ability to make healthy choices. As it becomes appealing, convenient and affordable to eat

healthily, more people will be able to make the smart choices that are now burdensome and tough.

The biggest gains are for the children in our communities. National food equity will give all children the ability to grow and thrive, increasing their chances of living healthy and productive lives as adults.

Jan Shaeffer is the Executive Director of St. Christopher's Foundation for Children where she leads the organization's strategic direction, communications, management and grantmaking.

Ann Hoskins-Brown is Program Director of St. Christopher's Foundation for Children where she oversees Foundation programs including Farm to Families and the Community Oral Health Initiative as well as the Foundation's donor-designated fund grant portfolio.

Quinney Harris is the inaugural Fresh Food Fellow at St. Christopher's Foundation for Children. Quinney holds a Masters of Public Health degree from Drexel University School of Public Health and has a background in health promotion, public policy and qualitative research.