

Food Security and Health

POSITION STATEMENT

Oklahoma Health Equity Campaign

"You've got to go out on a limb sometimes because that's where the fruit is."

~Will Rogers

A community is food secure when...

- There are adequate resources (such as grocery stores or farmers markets) from which people can purchase foods.
- Available resources are accessible to all community members.
- Food available in the community is sufficient in quality, quantity and variety.
- There are adequate food assistance programs to help low income people purchase and prepare nutritious foods.
- Locally produced food is available to community members.
- There is support for local food production.
- Every household is food secure within the community.¹

Oklahoma Ranks Very High for Having Very Low Food Security

One out of four Oklahoma children lives in a food insecure household, and there are nearly a quarter million of those households in the state.² About 100,000 of those, have very low food security, meaning the food intake of some household members was reduced and normal eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year, due to limited resources.³

Likewise, the number of Oklahomans receiving assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, reached an all-time high of 902,554 individuals in 2014, nearly one fourth of the state's population.⁴

Oklahomans also face a number of diet-related chronic health problems such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes. In fact, according to the United Health Foundation, Oklahoma ranks 46th among all states for our overall health and we are near the bottom for our fruit and vegetable consumption.⁵

Some of the many related contributing factors include:

- low median income and high poverty experienced by many Oklahomans;
- a high density of fast food establishments and convenience stores in many communities;
- low access to nutritious foods and lack of skills in selecting and preparing them; and
- healthier food options are sometimes more expensive, and it can be challenging for food shoppers to find and prepare items they and their families will enjoy eating.⁶

Another factor affecting the availability of good food can be found in many of Oklahoma's 77 counties – where a significant number of low-income residents have low-access to supermarkets and other venues offering nutritious foods. In fact, thirty-two counties have well over 20% of their residents with low access to a supermarket or larger grocery store, which can be especially challenging for households when transportation is limited.⁷ These food deserts occur in rural areas throughout the state and also in more urbanized areas, such as in west and north Tulsa and parts of northeast OKC, where convenience stores and liquor shops are common.

Vision: All people and communities are healthy with no one at a disadvantage in achieving the best possible health.

Mission: Maximize the health potential of all Oklahomans through resources and opportunities available in our communities.

Fortunately, Oklahoma has a number of dedicated and resourceful individuals, organizations and agencies working to make lemonade from some of the lemon-like predicaments. Efforts to increase the presence of healthy corner stores, and farmers markets beginning to accept SNAP, WIC and senior benefits – to name a few. These are happening at the same time as city and community wellness programs are promoting gardening to youth and adults, while teaching cooking and canning classes.

What's most needed at this time is leadership from policy makers, program administrators, elected officials, business leaders, nonprofit organizations and citizens to recognize and strongly support these and similar efforts as beacons of hope across the state.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

GOAL: Increase food security in Oklahoma by making fresh, affordable locally-grown food more available to all Oklahomans.

- Support Healthy Corner Store, Farm to School and farmers market initiatives at local and state levels
- Encourage more Oklahoma farmers to produce healthy home-grown food for consumption by local residents and institutions
- Increase the affordability of nutritious foods by eliminating the state sales tax on fruits and vegetables

GOAL: Link Oklahoma-grown foods with good taste and health. The health of Oklahomans can be improved if Oklahomans increase their consumption of farm-fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean meats.

- Promote gardening, healthy cooking instruction, nutrition education and eating local, in schools, households and communities.
- Limit the abundance of unhealthy foods in communities and require nutritional information be provided to fast food customers
- Establish local food policy councils in cities and counties to explore ways to increase production, consumption and overall availability of healthy local foods.

To increase food security in your own backyard:

- Find and shop at a farmers market to support your local farmers
- Join the Oklahoma Food Co-op
- Start a small garden and plant a row for the hungry

SOURCES

¹ Closer to Home: Healthier Food Farms and Families in Oklahoma, 2006. Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/closer_tohome/index.htm

² Map the Meal Gap, Feeding America, 2015.

³ Household Food Security in the United States in 2014, ERR-194. USDA, Economic Research Service, September 2015.

⁴ Momentum: 2014 DHS Annual Report, Oklahoma Department of Human Services. 2015.

⁵ America's Health Rankings, Oklahoma, 2015. United Health Foundation, <http://www.americashealthrankings.org/>

⁶ Can Low-Income Americans Afford a Healthy Diet, Nutrition Today. 2010 Nov; 44(6): 246-249.

⁷ Food Environment Atlas, Economic Research Service (ERS), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 2015. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas.aspx>

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