

# Top Five Action Steps to Fight Hunger in Hartford

May 2007

The Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy was established in 1991 by the Hartford City Council to implement the recommendations of the Mayor's Task Force on Hunger that year. 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 ordinance that created the Commission set forth four goals for the city's food policy:

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

These goals are as relevant today as when the Commission was first created. Hartford has significant food and nutrition challenges, with 52% of low-income households facing uncertainty about how to get the food they need and 24% of low-income households experiencing hunger within a twelve-month period. As households struggle to stretch the grocery budget through the week, often the cheapest food is also the least nutritious. Unhealthy eating habits in Hartford have resulted in near epidemic rates of diet-related diseases, with the prevalence of diabetes 120% higher and hypertension 29% higher than the rest of Connecticut.

Yet Hartford is also a city that has the resources, vision, and leadership to address these issues. Working together, we can expand access to safe and nutritious food. As part of its advisory role to city officials, the Commission proposes five action steps for city leaders this year that are described in brief detail in the pages that follow.

## Support Local Food Pantries

Last year the Hartford City Council initiated a \$60,000 Food Pantry Grant Program to expand the capacity of emergency pantries. This funding is greatly needed and long overdue.

## Five Action Steps

- #1 Renew the Food Pantry Grant Program**
- #2 Expand enrollment in WIC and Food Stamps**
- #3 Increase school breakfast participation rates**
- #4 Improve coordination among Hartford's farmers markets**
- #5 Expand the Healthy Food Retailer Initiative**



City of Hartford  
Advisory Commission on Food Policy

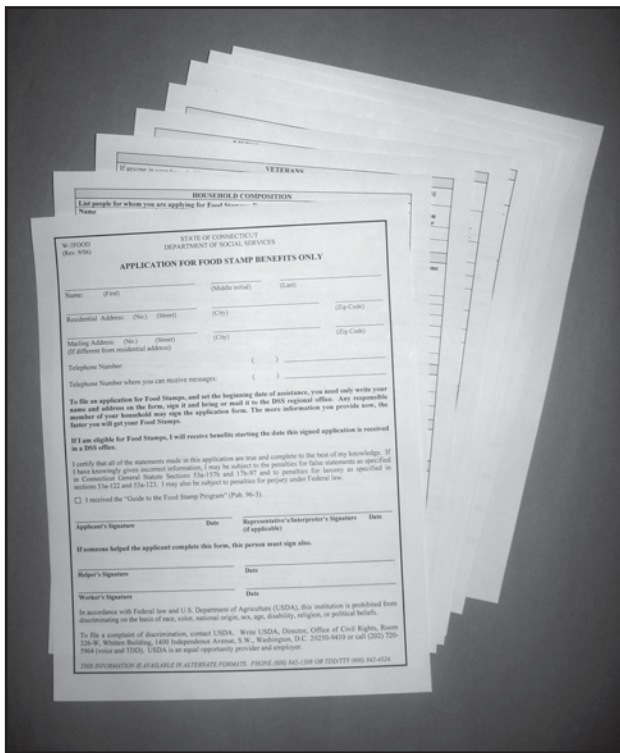
While food is just as essential as other basic necessities like housing and health care, the City of Hartford has historically provided fewer resources for emergency food assistance than to other community needs.

Strengthening the capacity of food pantries is a wise investment in the overall social service delivery system, since pantries can reach families who are not yet receiving other services. The volunteers who operate emergency pantries often function as “street case workers” who refer people to other forms of assistance. For example, the same person that comes in for a bag of groceries might require job training or an English as a Second Language (ESL) course in order to become self-sufficient. By expanding the capacity of food pantries to serve more people, Hartford can build human capital for those most in need.

The Food Pantry Grant Program awarded grants to seven agencies through a competitive process. The largest grant was for \$9,800 and the smallest grant was \$5,400. Hartford should continue this important program with another \$60,000 allocation in 2007.

### Expand Food Stamp and WIC Outreach

The Food Stamp Program is our nation’s first line of defense against hunger. In Hartford, 33,591 people use the Food Stamp Program to buy food for themselves and their families every month. Still there are many people who are missing out on the benefit; statewide only 60% of those who are eligible actually receive food stamps. The federal government provides funding for outreach workers to educate community organizations, local government and individuals in Hartford on the importance of the benefit.



Expanding participation directly benefits food insecure households as well as providing economic stimulus to the community. For every food stamp benefit redeemed it generates \$2.00 in economic activity. In federal fiscal year 2005 the Food Stamp Program generated over \$75 million in economic activity in the City of Hartford alone.

Similarly, the federal WIC (Women, Infants and Children) Program safeguards the health of low-income women infants and children up to age five by providing nutritious foods to supplement their diets, nutrition education and counseling, and making referrals to health care agencies. Last year this program generated more than \$5 million in food sales in Hartford while serving more than 9,000 individuals.

Only 60% of eligible families sign up for Food Stamps, partly because the application ranges from 8-16 pages and asks up to 130 questions. Additional resources for community outreach can help more people enroll.

intensified at City Hall, libraries, health and human services departments, food pantries, emergency food sites and local food retailers, with the goal of increasing enrollment in WIC and the Food Stamp Program by 5% over the next five years.

### Increase School Breakfast Participation

Research confirms that children who eat a healthy school breakfast have higher test scores, lower rates of absenteeism, and less behavioral problems. In Hartford, the School Breakfast Program can provide a free, federally funded

breakfast to all students. The problem is that only about 35% of Hartford students are actually eating the meal as it is offered before the school day begins. This issue is not only a matter of food; it also involves funding - federal funding that the School Food Service Department forgoes hundreds of thousands of dollars in federal reimbursement.

We know that there are a number of simple solutions for school systems or individual schools to choose from in order to increase participation. Some of these solutions include: breakfast in the classroom, grab-and-go style, or breakfast provided in the cafeteria during the school day. Using these strategies, the Hartford Public Schools should establish a goal of increasing school breakfast participation by 20% over the next five years.

### Improve Coordination of Farmers Markets

The first Hartford farmers market opened in 1978. At that time, the Hartford Food System (through ConnPIRG) coordinated the markets and represented the interests of Hartford residents. A new organization, ConnFARM, helped farmers and represented their interests. The early markets grew quickly and were vibrant elements of their neighborhoods.

Today there are more markets, but each has fewer farmers and thus provides less variety than the early markets, and they are generally less lively. Further, today's markets are clustered in a narrow band running east to west through the middle of the city. There is no coordination among the markets, although the state Department of Agriculture keeps track of them, assists with access to Food Stamp and WIC programs, and provides minimal publicity.

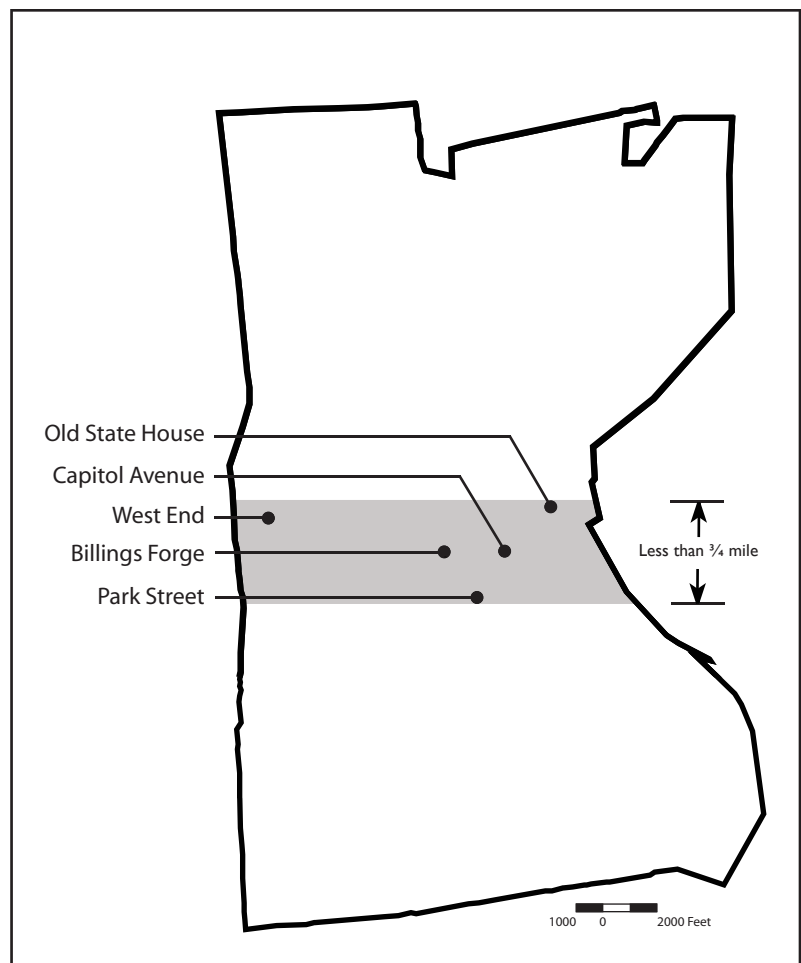
One challenge that did not exist 30 years ago is the proliferation of farmers markets throughout the state. A limited number of farmers are in demand by a large number of markets, many of which operate in more prosperous areas that are more readily accessible to farms than Hartford.

The Commission recommends the following:

- *That all markets be coordinated and promoted together to raise public awareness and help people locate markets that are open at convenient times.*
- *That efforts be made to develop markets in the underserved northern and southern parts of the city.*
- *That promotional efforts focus on making one market a destination market drawing a large number of farmers and customers from throughout the city and surrounding towns.*
- *That a single responsible entity focus on making each market able to handle electronic benefit transfers, enabling low-income shoppers to take advantage of local produce.*

The City of Hartford could accomplish this by identifying city staff who could take on these responsibilities, or by funding a local agency whose mission aligns with that role.

**Location of Hartford's Farmers Markets**



Hartford's farmers markets are concentrated in a narrow band across the center of the city, excluding neighborhoods in the north and south.



Members of the Hartford City Council recognize the owners of Shop Fair, El Kiosko, and El Gitano grocery stores with proclamations from Mayor Eddie Perez, commending their leadership in the Healthy Food Retailer Initiative.

### **Expand the Healthy Food Retailer Initiative**

Shopping for groceries in inner-city communities can be a challenging task. Hartford has only one major supermarket, a Stop & Shop just a few blocks from the city line. In the absence of larger stores, residents rely on local retailers like corner markets and bodegas for their grocery needs, or travel regularly outside their own communities to buy food elsewhere. These local retailers typically offer substandard choices compared to regular supermarkets. Shelves at corner markets and bodegas are overflowing with snack foods, since these items sell quickly and have a higher profit margin than regular food staples like boxed pasta or canned soup. Prices are generally higher as well.

Through the Healthy Food Retailer initiative, 25 stores are partnering together to improve the nutritional quality of the groceries they sell. The primary incentives offered in return for their participation are a door sticker and grassroots promotional assistance through flyers and customer surveys.

Support from city-administered programs can convince even more retailers to participate, including access to the wholesalers that supply Hartford Public School cafeterias, expedited assistance with WIC and EBT licensing, resources for facade improvements, and other forms of assistance. Through these steps, the City of Hartford can take a more active role in supporting stores that are shifting their grocery inventories from junk food to healthy groceries.

The Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy can be reached in care of:

**HARTFORD**   
**FOOD SYSTEM**