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Making Baltimore's Food Deserts Bloom with Healthy Food

March 30, 2016

Anna Bondy, MPH, RD, LDN and Susan Gross, PhD, MPH, RD, LDN write this piece about what's going on in Baltimore.

The theme of this year's National Nutrition Month is "Savor the Flavor of Eating Right." This brings up an important point that we need to remember to enjoy our food and help people with limited food access and budgets to do the same. The most enjoyable foods are foods fresh from the farm, seasoned well, and cooked with skill. So, if we want our communities to eat right, (and enjoy it) we need to help them access fresh foods and herbs, and teach them how to prepare these foods.

One project that is working towards this goal in Baltimore is Fresh Beets. Although Baltimore City has a limited number of traditional grocery stores, it has a tradition of Public Markets throughout the city that serve as gathering places as well as venues for grocery stores and carry outs. Fresh Beets focuses its efforts at the Avenue Market in West Baltimore. The group started out with monthly events offering affordable bags of seasonal produce for sale, giveaways, education, live music and food tastings - in collaboration with Johns Hopkins WIC, FSNE (Food Supplement Nutrition and Education) and Baltimarket (a suite of community-based food access and food justice programs through the Baltimore City Health Department). When I attended some of the events back in September and October, the produce bags easily sold out before the end of the event. The success of the produce sales at Fresh Beets has led to the creation of a produce stand that will have a permanent place at the Avenue market.

The Johns Hopkins WIC Community Partnerships for Healthy Mothers and Children (CPHMC) project is also proud to have been part of the initiative to allow local farm stands to accept WIC fruit and vegetable checks. Particularly at our Cherry Hill location, located in an especially underserved food desert neighborhood in Baltimore City, participants frequently asked if they could use their WIC checks at the farm stand down the road. When a community has a garden and sells the fresh produce that they grow, it's hard to ask a participant to drive or take the bus to a different neighborhood to go to a grocery store. Also, we talk with

parents all the time about how kids will be more interested in the meals that are served when they get to help buy and prepare the foods. What better way to teach our participants about where foods come from than their own community garden around the corner from the WIC clinic.

One of our coalition members is the American Heart Association (AHA), and in Baltimore we are lucky enough to have an AHA Cooking from the Heart Kitchen in downtown Baltimore, as well as a mobile kitchen that visits senior centers and teaches basic cooking techniques. In the future we hope to partner with the AHA mobile kitchen and bring heart healthy cooking demonstrations to our WIC participants.

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