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### Food deserts encourage poor diets

by Charles Hallman  
Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder  
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It's hard for many people to buy healthy food

Over 23 million Americans, including 6.5 million children, live in low-income urban and rural neighborhoods that are more than a mile from a supermarket.

Such areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food are defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as "food deserts." In Minneapolis, efforts are underway to shrink such deserts in the interest of healthier eating.

Annie Mae Jones, who has lived in North Minneapolis since 1963, remembers when her neighborhood had plenty of supermarkets. "They have been going away one by one [over the years]," she points out. "We used to have little corner stores" that provided the neighborhood with the type of intimacy and familiarity not often provided by today's big-box superstores, adds Doloris Irwin, another longtime Northside resident.

The smaller "convenience" stores today "charge an arm or a leg" and can be costly to seniors such as herself, notes Jones. "We really need more supermarkets on the North Side."

Both Jones and Irwin have seen their neighborhoods over the years become transformed into food deserts. Those who are able often leave the neighborhood to purchase their food: "A lot of people go to Costco and Sam's [Club] because they think they are getting better bargains," says Irwin.

We heard similar stories from residents around the city who say today's area supermarkets, which are the only places they get affordable fresh foods, are not as accessible as before.

"The smaller stores are too high," says a young Southside woman who regularly shops at Supervalu at Lake Street and Nicollet. Two Black Northside women say they shop at a suburban Wal-Mart that is a 20-minute drive from their homes.

The Cub Foods store on West Broadway and the Rainbow located in nearby Robbinsdale "are too high," one woman says, while the other complained about a local convenience store in their neighborhood: "You pay about \$4 for a gallon of milk, and it's [only] \$1.97 at Wal-Mart."

The neighborhood store is "more like a teenager store — they only have munchies," she added. "There [is a] need to have more stores that [are] not so highly priced."

A woman resident at the Ebenezer Towers on Portland Avenue mainly eats "low-priced noodles" because of her fixed income. "I don't buy healthy foods because they are too expensive," she says, adding that she usually shops at a nearby drug store or dollar store for her food.

According to health experts, lack of access to healthier food often leads to a poor diet and can lead to higher levels of obesity and other health concerns, such as diabetes and heart disease. "We have high obesity rates, not only in Minneapolis but in Minnesota," notes Aliyah Ali, a Minneapolis Health Department specialist.

First Lady Michelle Obama said during her speech at last week's NAACP convention in Kansas City that among her "Let's Move" health campaign's goals is to eliminate food deserts in the U.S. within seven years.

"A lot of times people think that food deserts mean inner city or poor, or sometimes people think that it means a minority neighborhood," explains Mari Gallagher, who runs her own research firm in Chicago. "But there also are food deserts in rural areas around the country and in suburban areas."

However, she warns, "I would say that those living in these food-desert areas are most likely to die and suffer prematurely... A great deal of [such persons] are African Americans."

A Northwestern University associate urban health professor, Gallagher told the Association of Health Care Journalists annual convention in Chicago in April that there are two different types of food venues. "Mainstream" venues are small or large grocery stores or supermarkets where healthy foods can be purchased, "fringe" venues include gas stations and convenience stores, which often do not have healthy food options regularly available for purchase.

"Neighborhood residents and youth" primarily shop at these fringe stores, especially in communities of color, says Ali.

The Minneapolis Health Department last summer found that only 28 percent of convenience stores in North Minneapolis were in compliance with the city's Staple Foods Ordinance, which requires that licensed grocery stores provide five varieties of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Later, Council Member Elizabeth Glidden introduced an amendment to the ordinance last October to better define the fresh-food requirements for local grocery stores that the city council approved last December.

City health officials this past spring also started a year-long Healthy Corner Store Program to work with convenience stores from four neighborhoods: Near North, Phillips, University and Seward. Each participating store must add three new items of fruits and vegetables, two new items of whole grain



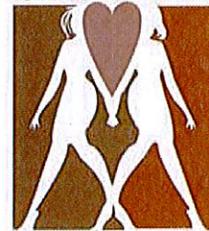
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products, and two new items of low-fat and/or skim dairy products. They must also display in-store marketing materials and participate in training for produce purchasing, stocking, handling and marketing.

"The plan right now is to work with 10 stores," says Ali, who is in charge of the program. "This specific program is really focused on the fresh produce because we do know that in certain pockets of Minneapolis there are minimal numbers of full-scale grocery stores."

The USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) has authorized 571 locations in Hennepin County as places where low-income families can buy healthy food such as milk, fruit and bread products. These locations include large supermarkets, drug stores, discount outlets, dollar stores and convenience stores.

The MSR randomly visited 14 SNAP-authorized stores around the city. Among the six stores visited in the Phillips area, one was poorly stocked, including rotten heads of lettuce and rotten bags of carrots. When asked about produce freshness, one Southside store clerk said that the fruit on sale was "about three days old."

Seven of eight Northside stores also were poorly stocked. One store owner claimed that the fruit is stocked fresh daily; another pointed out that "the bananas are good" but didn't know how old the apples were. That same store had no milk products except ice cream.

Prices on such items as eggs, milk and bread either were not easily recognizable or not indicated at all.

The fruits and vegetables were individually priced and not sold by weight or quantity.

Her program's main objective, according to Ali, "is making healthy choice an easy choice. Our long-term goal is that we are trying to make healthy foods more visible, attractive and affordable to residents in our low-income neighborhoods."

Charles Hallman welcomes reader responses to [challman@spokesman-recorder.com](mailto:challman@spokesman-recorder.com).

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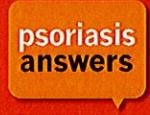
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