

FRESH APPROACHES TO SUPPLYING FRESH FOOD

Foundations Help Turn Food Deserts into Oases of Wellness

By Betsey Russell

Imagine living in city where the nearest grocery store is miles away. You don't have a car, and it's too far to walk (especially with full bags of groceries), so you must plan an onerous and time-consuming trip that involves multiple bus rides. Or imagine that you live in a small rural town where the closest grocery store is more than 10 miles away and once again, transportation or health hurdles make securing healthy food a major challenge.

This is the situation for millions of people living in the Southeast. The USDA describes a food desert as “urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Instead of supermarkets and grocery stores, these communities may have no food access or are served only by fast food restaurants and convenience stores that offer few healthy, affordable food options. The lack of access contributes to a poor diet and can lead to higher levels of obesity and other diet-related diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease.”



New Orleans, Atlanta and Memphis are among the nation's top urban food deserts. In rural communities, USDA food desert maps track roughly with poverty maps. The federal government has provided \$400 million in tax incentives to grocery stores that open in food deserts, spurring a push to eradicate food deserts by 2017. But as several grantmakers have found, it takes more than just a grocery store to turn a food desert into an oases for health and wellness.

“In 2005, we began investing in innovations that increase the time Georgia kids spend in physical activity,” explains

John Bare, vice president of the Atlanta Falcons Youth Foundation (AFYF), an affiliated fund of The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation in Atlanta. “Then in 2010 we expanded our work to increase access to healthy, affordable food. We partnered with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and others in a Supermarket Access Task Force to research food deserts in Georgia. We found general correlations between public health outcomes and grocery stores, but we wanted to go beyond the research

to find out what kind of solutions residents wanted for their neighborhoods.”

What transpired was a change in philosophy. Instead of concentrating on measuring food deserts, Bare and his colleagues discovered the desire for community residents to create for food oases. “We spent nearly a year talking to residents about the role food plays in their communities and what they wanted to see. There was really no question about demand, it's about wanting choice and quality,” he says. “Folks of every generation want to eat fresh food, they want to cook, and they also

want to grow food themselves to improve affordability.” “Food isn’t transactional,” Bare adds. “It’s key to building strong communities. It honors heritage and brings people together.”

AFYF looks for innovations where people in communities are taking control to make change. “One small grocery store owner purposefully improved the lighting and attractiveness of his produce cases, and as a result customers bought more produce,” Bare said. “AFYF funded ‘nudges’ like cooking demos and recipe cards to help make the healthy choice the easy choices, and

“We’re also experimenting with mobile markets and pop-up markets,” says Bare. “While the public health approach may be to provide a grocery store and tell people what they should eat, we find that less finger wagging and more options for making good choices available is more effective.”

Food as a Community Connector

A food desert existed in the Broad Street community of New Orleans long before Katrina. “This is a community with a rich cultural history, but it hadn’t seen any investment in 50 years. There was a grocery store before Katrina, but it wasn’t high quality and was planning to close,” explains Jeffrey Schwartz, executive director of Broad Community Connections (BCC), a local nonprofit that has helped lead a revival of livability in the area. As post-Katrina investment dollars flowed into the Broad Street community, Schwartz and others noticed that “the finer-grained initiatives that help to change behaviors and improve health hadn’t really happened yet.”



shoppers purchased more of the featured produce items.” AFYF also funds statewide programs as part of a growing Georgia Food Oasis movement, including a farm-to-school program led by Georgia Organics that has schools serving more than 14 million meals featuring locally grown produce. The Foundation also supports Georgia Organics’ “My Market” campaign designed to increase the number of SNAP (food assistance) transactions at farmers markets. The campaign brought more than 10,000 first-time visitors to farmers markets around the state in 2014.

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BCC partnered with Liberty’s Kitchen, which focuses on youth development in the culinary field, to work on the ReFresh Project, a community development effort with food as a centerpiece. Along with other partners, BCC helped transform an abandoned market building into a new community hub, including a Whole Foods Market specifically designed to serve a population with less buying power than its traditional suburban stores. Besides BCC, Liberty’s Kitchen and Whole Foods, other building tenants include a variety of nonprofits with community building services that range from health to education.

Every partner in the Refresh building is using food or wellness related programming in very different ways to address a range of challenges in the community. “We knew food access wouldn’t be the silver bullet that would just magically make the community healthier and attain more in their lives. We knew we needed a range of partners at the table,” explains Schwartz. “Doing anything in a silo isn’t going to deliver the impact that funders – and the community – ultimately want to see.”

This broad approach also made the various ReFresh Project partners attractive to a wide range of funders, including Baptist Community Ministries (BCM). “We have made youth development a large part of our

community investment,” says Liz Scheer, vice president of health grants. “Supporting Liberty’s Kitchen as a part of the Refresh Project was a great way to deepen our support and give opportunity youth a skill set to help build their lives.”

BCM’s grant helped Liberty Kitchen grow into its new space at ReFresh, which includes an onsite restaurant. Liberty’s Kitchen youth provide soup, hot bar and salad bar fare for Whole Foods every day. Some end up with jobs at the grocery store. Liberty’s Kitchen also partners with other nonprofits to help students attain GEDs, receive healthcare, and more. That’s the beauty of the ReRefresh model, and why it intentionally looked beyond just food, says Schwartz.

A Fresh Focus for Rural

One might not think of rural communities in areas traditionally known for agriculture as food deserts, but in tiny towns surrounded by what have become commercial farms, the lack of food sources can be very real. The Foundation for the Mid South serves several such communities in Mississippi through a community garden program.

But like their urban counterparts, rural residents are also driven by factors of convenience and choice. The tiny town of Okolona is home to some 3,000 residents. It has one grocery store, Todd’s Okolona Food Center, with fresh fruits and vegetables, but residents gravitate toward the easier access (and less healthy choices) of corner convenience stores.

With help from Foundation for the Mid South, Okolona’s town leaders and organizations are working together to help residents purchase and grow fresh, whole foods as part of a community wide effort to live healthier lifestyles. Part of this effort includes the Fruit Basket, through



which the convenience stores supply fresh produce to customers. The city’s commitment is real: when the farmer who supplied Fruit Basket produce moved away, the city created a partnership with Todd’s to supply fresh foods to the convenience stores instead.

“Okolona isn’t a food desert in the sense of not having access, but it had issues of convenience and awareness,” explains Dwanda Moore, program officer at Foundation for the Mid South. The town’s push for fresh foods is tied to a larger healthy living initiative guided by Mayor Louise Floyd Cole.

“The mayor’s goal is to have every resident be able to walk to some kind of recreation space, including parks and a pool, and community green areas with space for gardens,” explains Moore. “She even pays city employees a day early if they participate in wellness programs.”

Community Driven

One overriding theme in exploring foundation food oasis efforts seems clear: Those that are community driven seem to deliver more promising results, at least in the short term. In addition, food access and healthy choices can be a cornerstone for multiple other community building efforts, if funders are willing to see the possibilities.

“My simplest advice is to talk to your grantees about their food needs,” says Bare. “We find many foundations that say they’re not in the food business, but they fund things like hospitals or after school programs, both of which can have huge food and nutrition needs. From there, it’s just a matter of finding the connections between fresh food and the outcome you want to support.”

