

OLR Brownbag Lecture Series
“Access to Healthy Food In Low Income Communities”
Thursday, September 29, 2011
12:00 – 1:30 Room 2600, LOB

Transcription

Nicole Dube (OLR): I'd like to welcome everyone to our first OLR Brownbag Lecture Series. I'm Nicole Dube with the Office of Legislative Research (OLR). This fall, a group of OLR researchers, including myself, decided to take a closer look at nutrition and food safety issues. We think these issues are interesting, important, and issues that we are likely to become more involved in over the next few legislative sessions. We decided to hold what we hope to be a monthly lecture series as a way for us to interact with experts in the community and to provide a forum for legislators and other legislative staff who want to learn more about these issues.

Today's lecture is on access to healthy food in low-income communities. We are very excited to have some wonderful speakers joining us today. First, to my left we have Dr. Tatiana Andreyeva, Director of Economic Initiatives at the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. Next we have Lucy Nolan, Executive Director of the nonprofit, End Hunger Connecticut. Next to Lucy we have John Frassinelli, Director of Connecticut's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, also known as the WIC program. Finally, we have Jiff Martin, Sustainable Food System Associate for UConn's Cooperative Extension.

Before we get started, I thought we could take a minute to go around the room and introduce ourselves so that our speakers have an idea of who we are. So, if you could please say your name and where you work that would be great. (Introductions).

We've asked each of our speakers to make a brief presentation of about 10-15 minutes. We will have an opportunity for questions and discussion afterwards. But, we want this to be informal and interactive, so please feel free to ask questions as we go. Also feel free to eat your lunch if you brought it or have some water and snacks. With that, I'll turn it over to Dr. Andreyeva.

Dr. Andreyeva: Thank you for joining this session and like Nicole said we want it to be informal so please interrupt if you have any questions. We're going to start with a brief discussion about what we mean by food access and why we care. Then we'll talk about potential promising strategies to improve food access.

So, what is access to healthy food and what do we mean by healthy food? Healthy food in general is whole foods, like fresh produce, low fat dairy, and whole grains. Generally speaking, access to healthy food is measured by access to a full-service supermarket or large grocery store. Basically, when we talk about access to healthy food, we really have in mind access to a supermarket. In terms of specific definitions of how we measure it, a household doesn't have access to healthy food, if the household is more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store and doesn't have a vehicle. There are about 2 million households in the nation that qualify. In Connecticut, this map gives you data on the proportion of households that have no vehicle and live more than one mile from a supermarket. As you can see, we do pretty well compared to the national data. Most counties have 2% or less than 2% of

these households compared to the national average of 2.2%. So basically, the biggest problem is in the northeast where they have 3.6%. These are not huge percentages. So, we're talking about a very small proportion of the population that have no vehicle and live more than one mile from a supermarket.

Many of you have heard of "food deserts." What do we mean by food deserts? Food deserts are different from the definition we discussed earlier. It's a low-income area that is more than one mile from a supermarket. According to this definition, we have 8% of American households that live in food deserts. In rural areas, we're talking about low-income communities and neighborhoods usually measured by those that are more than 10 miles from a supermarket. So based on this definition, now we're looking at food deserts which are low-income communities that are more than one mile from a supermarket. Based on that definition we are looking at a map that gives us data on the proportion of households in low-income communities that live relatively far from supermarkets. Again the problem is in the northeast. Most other counties are doing fairly well compared to the national average of 8%. I was kind of surprised to see this data for Hartford and New Haven because I'll talk about the study we did in a number of towns in Connecticut and a lot of communities have problems with access to healthy food.

John Frassinelli: How are you defining a supermarket? Are you talking about a multiple cash register supermarket?

Dr. Andreyeva: It's based on the federal USDA food environment data. It's basically a store that has annual sales of at least \$2 million. So, it's a fairly large supermarket. I give the link, so you can go online and see data. There's a lot of data you can get at the county level. The most recent is 2006 data. They looked at data on SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program formerly known as Food Stamps) authorized food retailers to create these maps.

So, why do we care? I'm sure many of you have heard about significant socioeconomic inequalities. Usually, low-income minority communities have poor access to healthy food. There are a lot of studies on food access and how it's related to obesity, health, and diet quality. We're also concerned about food prices. If there's no supermarket, residents have to rely on small stores and pay higher food prices.

I think also another reason we need to think about food access is that it is responsive to policy changes as I'll show in a minute. It wasn't like that several decades ago. If you look at the chart it gives you the number of full-service supermarkets in Los Angeles. In 1963 we had 34 but in 2002 we only had 5. There's been a significant reduction in the number of grocery stores, at the same time a lot of fast food chains, you may have heard about a moratorium East Los Angeles had on opening fast food places for one year, trying to control the spread of establishments without healthy foods.

When we worry about healthy eating and talk about the barriers to healthy eating, it's not just limited access to healthy food, it's also abundance, convenience, low-cost, and massive advertising of energy-dense low-nutrient foods. I don't think we can solve the problem by just providing access to healthy food without really controlling what's going on on the negative side. Basically, our society makes it easy to eat less healthy food. It's an effort to find healthy foods in a lot of communities.

So we know it's a problem, but what can we do about it? I'm going to talk about several economic approaches. One of them is changes in food assistance programs. We can talk about the WIC program, developing new grocery stores, and improving existing grocery stores.

So, for changes in food assistance programs, what we want to create is increasing demand for healthy food. The changes I'll talk about in a minute regarding revisions in the WIC food packages, has created that increased demand for healthy food. The change also requires higher standards for vendors to carry healthy food. By increasing purchasing power of customers in underserved areas, we can also get it through high participation in WIC and SNAP. In terms of the provisions in the WIC program packages, a couple of years ago the Institute of Medicine recommended to change WIC packages to provide more whole grains, provide cash vouchers for fruits and vegetables. WIC vendors were required to carry fruits, vegetables, and whole wheat bread. This change was implemented nationwide in October 2009.

We did a study where we went to 300 stores in Connecticut – all kinds: small, large, WIC-approved, non WIC-approved. Basically, all stores in five towns: Danbury, Bristol, Manchester, New Haven, and West Hartford. We went three times: in 2009 before the change, 2010, and 2011. We looked at what foods the stores carried. How many stores carried whole wheat bread before the change and after the change in the WIC program? We looked at prices, quality, and very detailed inventory of what foods were available in stores. What we showed was that there was a significant increase in the supply of health foods. If went to stores in low income neighborhoods before the program change, you didn't see a lot of produce or low-fat meals, or whole-wheat bread at all. It was a very different picture after the change. We are talking improved availability of healthy food, especially whole grains because WIC-approved stores were required to carry whole wheat bread. We also saw some improvement in non-WIC stores. It was the same picture in 2011, so two years after the change, there was sustained improvement. Based on very sophisticated econometric models, we showed that it was due to the changes in the WIC packages. The most significant change was found in low-income communities because higher-income communities didn't have a problem with not having produce before the package changes.

We also interviewed retailers because there was a concern that small stores may find it difficult to carry produce and so forth. We interviewed a lot of retailers, 67 small stores, in these five towns. We found that most of them had really no problem adapting to these new changes. They could find produce, they could find whole wheat bread and provide it to their customers. All they wanted to know was what their customers wanted to buy. If there was demand then there would be supply. So, if you have customers asking for whole wheat bread or produce with their vouchers provided through WIC, retailers will find ways to supply this product. Demand determines supply.

The second approach is to develop new grocery stores. In our current funding situation, it's hard to argue for it. But, there a lot programs, including the federal Health Financing Initiative, that provides about \$35 million to private and public funding, to encourage opening new stores in underserved, low-income communities. In Philadelphia, there's a big program, the Fresh Food Financing Initiative. I think they provided about \$88 million to encourage opening new stores in underserved communities. So, it's possible if there's funding. Somebody has to get organized and look for this funding and help communities get it.

There was a case in New Haven where many years ago Shaw's did a market study and found it was low-income, but still pretty high population density. It was interesting for them to open a store in New Haven. A lot of market studies on low-income communities don't have a lot of good data on how much income there is in that neighborhood. All businesses care about is their profit and if there's money in these communities. We need better data on business potential for low-income communities.

Sandra Norman Eady (OLR): Can you tell me how you're defining a low-income community?

Dr. Andreyeva: We define it by average household income under 200% FPL. There are different definitions. We also use a lot household income under \$40,000 for a family of four. In our WIC study, we also looked at eligibility criteria for the WIC program.

Question: Did you by any chance look at where the communities spent their money? Whether it was spent in the local community or whether people travel outside the community to grocery shop at all?

Dr. Andreyeva: In our study we didn't look at it, but data on SNAP purchases suggest that SNAP recipients spend about 92% of their money at supermarkets. I think with WIC it's less important because WIC participants are not really price sensitive besides fruits and vegetables. Because for fruits and vegetables they get vouchers, say \$10 per month per child, then they care about prices. For other products they really don't care about prices because they get a coupon for say a gallon of milk. For food stamps, we have about \$140 per month per food stamp recipient for average benefits. When you have \$140, you care about prices. A lot of them shop at supermarkets.

John Frassinelli: With regard to the WIC program, we authorize stores statewide. Some of the things we've found as Tatiana mentioned are that food stamps primarily get redeemed at supermarkets because it's a cash based issuance. In the WIC program, ours is a paper check, and it literally says on it "2 gallons of WIC-approved milk." The cost of the product isn't really a concern because we pay the cost of the product. It's not a cash based issuance. With the exception of, we issue specific checks for fruits or vegetables that say \$5, \$6, or \$10 worth of fruits or vegetables. So that's the only cash based issuance that we have. But, in terms of shopping behavior, we actually just looked at the city of Hartford and looked at our participants that live in the city of Hartford and where they're shopping. The city of Hartford has about 8500 WIC clients. When we looked at where they were redeeming their checks over the course of three months, they were shopping at 160 towns across the state. So, not only may they not be shopping in their neighborhood, and may not even be shopping in the city of Hartford, they're shopping all over the place. So, if they're working in a part of the state or if they have jobs that take them all over the state in different times of the month or seasonally, they can use those vouchers there within the state of Connecticut.

We've also seen some data where we've looked at client zip codes within the city of Hartford and see, for instance right in the middle of Park St., and say well where are they using their vouchers? And we noticed that many clients are actually walking past several small stores to get to the grocery store on the outside of town. Or taking the bus to Manchester to shop at the bigger supermarkets in Manchester. I think in some cases they're certainly redeeming their vouchers right in the city, because we have WIC-approved stores on most corners, but when it coincides with their SNAP benefits they may be taking that whole shopping trip and using it in a larger grocery store.

Dr. Andreyeva: I think that not just for lower-income households but for all households, supermarkets and even Walmart supercenters, Costco, that's where people shop. In particular with food stamps, because participants receive their benefits once a month at the beginning of the month, this is when they go to supermarkets and get their shopping done.

Another policy to help develop supermarkets is using zoning, tax incentives, employee training, etc. But again all of this would be related to pretty significant costs which is not what we want to hear now given the budget. This has been done in the past and there are lots of successful stores out there.

In terms of improving small stores, again we can talk about connecting stores with resources. I have mentioned the healthy food financing initiative. A lot of government programs, at the federal level in particular, provide financial and technical assistance. But, somebody has to get organized. I'll give you the example of the Philadelphia Food Trust, a well-funded nonprofit that helped a lot of small retailers to get organized, get funding, change their equipment, and provide fresh produce. So we can talk about lower permit fees and loans.

Jiff Martin: One thing about the Philadelphia Food Trust, there was a pretty big piece of legislation that passed that created the funding to finance those changes in the stores. So yes, the Food Trust did a lot of the on the ground work, but there was a large legislative commitment of funds to create new grocery stores as well as pay for retrofitting for fresh food.

Dr. Andreyeva: There was a lot of effort on every level to help Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in general. I think they opened 88 stores – they're success is just amazing. And again we can talk about promoting SNAP and WIC participation to increase spending power. Right now we have about 45 million people on food stamps. It's a lot of money out there. When we did our survey of retailers, I know a lot of them were very concerned about losing WIC. A lot of non-WIC stores wanted to be on WIC because they wanted to have this money from SNAP and WIC. Even so, a lot of SNAP participants don't spend their money at small stores. In terms of the food trust example in Philadelphia, they did a pre-intervention study of small stores and found that a lot of children on their way to school were buying a lot of snacks and spending significant money. They partnered with stores providing funding to purchase refrigeration units (unintelligible) and also doing a marketing campaign at schools encouraging children to buy fruits and vegetables. It was a huge success.

Another example is in Detroit they have trucks, like ice cream trucks, to drive around neighborhoods and sell peaches and greens. These are just a couple of examples of initiatives that can help underserved communities to get access to healthy foods.

In terms of recommendations, I'm not a lawyer so I don't know what's possible at the legislative level, but first of all I think I would recommend conducting an up to date needs assessment for Connecticut because the data that I showed is based on the 2000 census. I'd also recommend applying for funding through the Healthy Food Financing Initiative. There's money out there, it's just that somebody has to get organized and apply.

What I didn't talk about was mini food deserts. What we mean by mini food deserts is airports, parks, schools, and government facilities that basically have little or no healthy food. For example, Boston

recently decided not to allow that meet nutrition standards, dietary guidelines, to be sold in government buildings. So, there are local policies that can be implemented for this. Thank you.

John Frassinelli: I just want to give a little bit of background on the WIC program. First of all WIC clients don't come down to the WIC office and get a ten pound block of cheese. Some of those ideas are still out there, but that doesn't happen. We serve women who are either pregnant, postpartum, or breast feeding. We serve infants up until their first birthday and then we call them children up until their fifth birthday. When they reach their fifth birthday they are rotated off the program. We provide nutrition information and counseling as part of the package, we provide breast feeding support and breast feeding counseling, and we ensure that all of our WIC clients are connected with a health care provider. We don't provide health care, but we make sure they have a health care provider, either a medical home connected with a clinic, community health center, or provider. And then we provide referrals to everything under the sun from SNAP, smoking cessation programs, fuel assistance, OB-GYN services, all over the place. And of course we provide vouchers for healthy food.

With regard to the issuance of vouchers, the other side of the WIC program is that we authorize, monitor, and inspect the grocery stores that accept WIC. So, we have about 570 grocery stores on WIC, and that includes mom and pops, small corner stores, medium size stores (IGA, FoodMarts), and large stores such as Walmart and Super Stop & Shop. And then we have an additional 120 pharmacies that are authorized to accept WIC vouchers for infant formula.

So on the authorization side, just to piggyback on to what Tatiana was talking about, is in 2009 the new food packages went into effect as a result of the IOM recommendations. A lot changed in that time. We hadn't had any real change in the food packages in WIC in almost 30 years. It included things like whole grain bread and whole grain rice and low-fat milk and cash-value vouchers for fruits and vegetables. So what we do from our vendor unit or grocery store unit is we set up a minimum inventory requirement. We say you have to carry a certain number of loaves of bread in your store at all times. You need to carry a certain number of gallons of low-fat milk in addition to whole milk. The reason for that is because for our children ages one to two, they would get whole milk, because it has to do with brain development and nutritional need for the higher fat milk. And then they need to carry a certain minimum number of gallons of that.

The minimum stocking requirements of the stores are specifically related to what we call the food prescription – what the vouchers are for. The reason we insist on minimum inventory requirements is that we want to make sure that when mom goes to the store with her vouchers, because as you see in some parts of the state she has to borrow a car, ask for a ride. In the northeast and northwest corners where not only are there not a lot of WIC authorized stores, there are very few stores at all. So we want to make sure that when she has to take the bus, or a couple of buses, or get a ride to the supermarket, that the products are there that are on her vouchers. And so in some cases, mom will get there and have to decide, ok my check is for 3 gallons of milk and there's only 2 gallons of milk on the shelf. Mom has to decided whether to take the 2 gallons and live with it, or wait and come back and be able to redeem the full value of the check. So, those are the reasons for the minimum stocking requirements.

In terms of issuance of the food prescription, the interesting thing is that the food prescription and the amount of food that each client gets is specifically based on nutritional need. So, the whole grain bread is a good example in that the IOM said that women in this category need a particular amount of bread

to get these specific nutrients for whether she's pregnant or breast feeding. Now the interesting thing is that the IOM says this is how much she requires. So the USDA said ok, so that's what we're going to prescribe. The problem is that the USDA said that equates to 2 pounds of bread. I don't know if you've looked at a loaf of bread lately but it doesn't come in pounds. It doesn't come in 16 oz loaves, it comes in 24 oz loaves. So, in some cases there's a disconnect between what the nutritional specificity is in terms of the need and what's available in the market. So in the last two years there's been a lot of scrambling on behalf of the manufacturers to make bread in one pound loaves and things like that. When Tatiana said that stores were quick to get all the products on board, part of that reason is because we said on October 1st you have to have all these products because folks will be showing up with these checks. So the manufacturers responded as I said, and that contributes to having whole grain bread, whole grain rice, and whole grain breakfast cereals in the stores as well as whole grain infant cereal and formula.

With regard to the fruit and vegetable vouchers, we set a minimum inventory with that also. And that is \$25 worth of fruits and vegetables at all times and one of them has to be a fresh fruit and one of them has to be a fresh vegetable. You can also use that voucher for frozen fruits and vegetables or canned fruits and vegetables at this time just to make sure that when you get there if the fruit isn't ripe enough or overripe, they have some options. If the family's capacity to keep things in the freezer isn't good, or maybe they don't have a freezer, we want to afford them the opportunity to get canned so that they don't walk away from the store empty handed.

Sandra Norman Eady (OLR): Is that \$25 per week, per month?

John Frassinelli: The \$25 is the value of the produce that the store has to keep on hand at all time. So, that's not the issuance. The amount of the voucher is \$10 per month.

Sandra Norman Eady (OLR): So a family, no matter the size, you get \$10 for fruits and vegetables per month?

John Frassinelli: It's issued by client. So if mom's postpartum and has a child that's free she would get a \$10 worth of produce for herself and the child would also get \$10 worth of produce issued to them.

Sandra Norman Eady (OLR): And if she had another child under age 3 there would be \$10 for that child?

John Frassinelli: If she was under age 3 but over age 1. If she was under age 1, we don't issue fruit and vegetable vouchers for infants because they're on either breast milk or infant formula at that time. Does that make sense?

Rep. Gary Holder-Winfield: I sent you a letter, I don't know if you received it. I don't want to really go into it, but could you talk to me about how you handle stores seeking to become approved vendors.

John Frassinelli: Currently what we do is, well the long story is in 2004 we had over 800 stores on the program and the USDA from Boston came down and said we didn't have the capacity to manage this many stores effectively. Since then, we've been trying to be more strategic about where stores are. We

have specific distance parameters depending on population density. So, in the inner city clients would have to have a store within three quarters of a mile in order to shop which is closer than the mile but that includes small stores as well. My analysis includes small stores, whereas Tatiana's analysis does not. I can tell you that in New Haven, Hartford, Waterbury, and Stamford the average is about a half a mile to a store.

What we do is we plot the location of all grocery stores we have authorized on the program. And then we actually plot the addresses of all the clients on the program. And we see where clients live in relation to what stores are available. We also look at the capacity of the store to serve that number of clients. If there are a large number of clients in an area, and there's a supermarket within $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile, we determine that that's an appropriate store and that they can shop at that store. If there's a large number of participants living in an area and there's only one corner store and they have one cash register, than we may determine that that small, one cash register store does not have the capacity to serve that number. So we would open up that area to invite more vendors to apply to be authorized.

Question: When we talk about the process for selecting, and this is pretty specific, infant formula, and how this comes about? What's the process for selecting one particular formula and whether it's the healthiest choice or it's just cost efficient.

John Frassinelli: We provide standard infant formula to most of our clients. It's your standard milk based or soy based formula that you find on the grocery store shelves. What happens is every few years we go out to bid for one of the large companies to be a sole provider of that infant formula to Connecticut. So, on Saturday it changes over from Gerber to Mead Johnson. And so the lowest bidder in that process becomes the provider of that infant formula. Now, they're all FDA-approved formulas, they're all standard formulas that differ very little. I can tell you the reason why we do that is because it results in revenue to the program of about \$1 million per month. So, Mead Johnson was the lowest bidder and we will actually be paying ten cents on the dollar for infant formula for their right to be the sole provider in Connecticut – actually New England. It was a New England bid. We go into a bidding process with the other New England states to get the lowest price. If we didn't have that rebate program, we would probably have to reduce – right now we have 58,000 WIC clients – we would probably have to reduce that by about 10,000 clients. That's why one provider is picked.

We also allow physicians to authorize or write prescriptions for specific products if the child has an immune problem or an amino acid issue like PKU (phenylketonuria). We allow special medical formula in those cases.

Sen. Terry Gerratana: I heard that there's a WIC for seniors. Does the Department of Public Health do anything with seniors?

John Frassinelli: The Department of Agriculture (DOA) has a farmer's market coupon program for seniors. They also have a farmer's market coupon program for WIC. The state DOA runs that program.

Lucy Nolan: There's a sheet I put up front that has all the spending that we do on all the federal and state food programs that has that amount from 2010 in there as well. It should be two pages. It has in there how much the senior farmer's market coupons and the WIC farmer's market coupons. The state

puts in about \$189,000 per year and there's some federal funding as well. The federal funding has flat-lined or even gone down.

Kristin Sullivan (OLR): You talked about small, medium, and large stores that could be approved and that in an area if there's not one that meets the standards you open it up to others. So what happens if in an area there aren't really any that are good enough. You were talking about food deserts. Maybe in an inner-city where there just aren't stores with the capacity. Does that happen and what do you do?

John Frassinelli: In the cities, if they're a grocery store and they're authorized to sell groceries in the state by local health, then they would be hard pressed not to meet our requirements.

Kristin Sullivan (OLR): But if there aren't larger stores around and only the smaller corner stores?

John Frassinelli: Then we take the smaller stores. So if we're looking at an access area and we see that there are too few stores, we'll take any and all stores to the extent that they meet the requirements. The requirements are that they need to submit prices to us and they have to be reasonable. They have to agree to maintain the minimum inventory of products. They have to not have been under disqualification from the SNAP program. We don't do an extensive background check, but to the extent that there's no history of problems we would approve them.

I can tell you in the northeast and northwest corners we're just begging for stores. I had folks driving around looking for stores. The phenomenon is interesting in that in the cities where there seems to be a congregation of stores there's better access to public transportation. In the northeast and northwest corners, the culture is of cars. You realize that you probably won't be able to walk to a grocery store. Everybody understands that public transportation is not an option out there. So cars rule in terms of getting to the grocery store. We do allow a greater distance because we understand that in most cases you will have to take a car to the grocery store. There are some areas where we have been searching for years and years and there are just too few stores. Also in the northeast and northwest corners, that whole Windham county, there are about 900 WIC clients compared to 9,000 in the city. So, there is a difference.

Lucy Nolan: I'm going to look at it somewhat differently. At End Hunger CT! we work on the federal food programs primarily. So we've been looking at this in terms of those programs. Some of you may have been around when the school nutrition bill passed. That was one of the things we worked on. We did get sodas out of schools and doing the healthy food certification so that schools would have the ability to serve healthier foods. They got ten cents per meal served from the state to do this. That has been the only money the state has put into school lunches since they first put money in 28 years ago. That's pretty significant. That would be one of my legislative priorities – looking at how we are funding our school lunches and to make sure that schools are getting enough money from the state.

I do want to say that one in four Americans within the last year have participated in one of the 15 federal food programs, including the National School Lunch Program. When I teach at college I ask how many of you bought lunch at school at one point and almost everyone raises their hands. Everybody at one point has participated in the federal food program. I think that's significant because those programs like WIC have so much to do with getting people food. When I was looking at the questions, like how do you define access to healthy food, I would have to say the one thing that's most

important to me, is respectful and equitably. There is some talk of being able to say that only people who are only on SNAP should not be able to buy junk food. Who defines what junk food is? There's 1200 new foods everyday that come onto the market. Everytime that happens someone will have to decide what's junk food and what's not. So that's a barrier in many ways to doing something like that because who decides. Is pizza junk food? What I refer to as healthy food is quality food. It's not necessarily fresh fruits and vegetables, but it's food that doesn't have a lot of processing, it's food that lets kids think, play. It's food that lets us go to work feeling healthy so when we eat breakfast in the morning we're not full of stuff that slows us down. So, I have a broader view of what healthy food is.

One of the interesting things brought up when talking about SNAP benefits is that when people get their SNAP benefit, they get it once per month. They will go to BJ's and Walmart and the big stores and spend all their money. What they can get to last for a month is not generally going to be fresh foods. It's going to be something that's going to last a whole month. The food banks in Connecticut and Foodshare have really taken this on and set up mobile food sites so that people can go out and they have old soda trucks that they retrofitted to put fresh fruits and vegetables and some frozen meats. They have a "Meat the Need" program where they get meat that's on its last day to be sold on the shelf. The stores flash freeze it and the foodbanks take it. So they get those foods out to low-income people as well. So there has been some movement in that way for low-income people. I know the Hispanic Health Council is working on some things as well in Hartford particularly.

When I look at aspects of accessibility that are more important than others I think that school meals, especially these days, we have to make sure there's equitable access to those. When they passed the Healthy Hunger Free Child Act of 2010 one of the parts of the law is that meals that are full priced have to reflect the cost of the meal. This will now increase meals for full-price students anywhere from 25 cents to a dollar. This is pretty significant if you have a number of kids in school and you don't meet that 185% FPL, which is pretty low. One thing that we've all become accustomed to since they started the school meal program in the 1940s was that anyone could get a meal at school. Schools have taken that on themselves. If someone comes in and they don't have any money for whatever reason, the school will often buy them a meal. What we're seeing in some places now because of the economy though is that some of those schools are giving kids white bread with cheese sandwiches. And then again we get this whole stigma of the kids who can't afford to pay but aren't on the federal food program. We have to be really aware of that. So, I think that for me that's one of the big things is that while kids are at school they need to be able to get a good solid breakfast and a good solid lunch. Because sometimes that's all they're eating – that's it. Particularly in areas like Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, Stamford, or even out in the rural communities that's all they're eating because their families can't get to a supermarket. This again brings in the transportation piece. With the SNAP program, the reason people go once a month is because they can get a ride there and can buy all their stuff. And often people have to pay people to drive them. So, transportation is a huge, huge piece to be able to get healthy foods.

One of the other things when we talk about the farmer's markets is there are farmer's markets and there are some great things happening in CT. There's a group called Wholesome Wave which is based in Westport that does double coupons for people who are buying fresh fruits and vegetables at the farmer's markets. Or they'll give \$5 for every \$5 someone spends. This has been very slow to take off. I have not been a fan of it because I'm not sure that it was always sustainable but as its taking off I'm becoming more of a fan of it because so many more people are using it. It really is working. At

Billings Forge, I just heard last week that they're selling \$200 a week. That shows that if we can help people buy those fresh fruits and vegetables at our farmer's markets that are from our farmers in Connecticut that people will use the program. But, if it's going to cost more people are not going to use the program because they don't have the cash to do that. They're going to spend the money on what's the cheapest and most accessible. I think those farmer's market coupons seem to be a good way to get more fresh fruits and vegetables.

So, one of my barriers to eating healthy is the perceived price for the food, transportation, and marketing. Marketing is a huge, huge, huge piece. When you go drive down Park St. you see Coca Cola signs. There's just huge marketing particularly to low-income communities that we could take a good solid look at. The marketing to children – I have 17 year old twins but once when they were around 7 or 8 year old we were walking down the store. One of them said, "Look Chris, Oreo cereal – let's get it mom!" And I said, "How do you even know about that?" And they said they saw it on Nickelodeon. So, is there something we can do where we can start working on the marketing and that includes fast food restaurants around schools. I mean how many fast food restaurants are around Hartford compared to East Hartford or West Hartford. It's significant. The bodegas and small stores near schools where kids can go in and buy for \$1 300 or 400 calorie foods. I have something here from a different study where elementary school students spent \$1 to \$2 in the store totaling 1400 calories. That's almost a whole days worth of calories, not for them, but for me. I think we need to look at some of those other bigger societal things which I know we hate to do sometimes.

One example of a successful strategy or program is the healthy food certification in Connecticut. It has really worked well and we're up to between 2/3 to 3/4 of the schools in the state are on it. Also getting sodas out of schools. I'm my own market study. I had a senior and junior in high school when we worked on that bill. I have seniors now and nobody in school could care less that there isn't soda or Gatorade in schools anymore. What it does do is tell kids that if its not in school than its not 100% ok. It doesn't give it that type of cache.

Also, double couponing at the farmer's markets has been working. The WIC and senior farmer's market coupons are hugely successful. They can't keep enough senior farmers' market coupons in stock. People are fighting over it. We hear from the Department of Agriculture that they are constantly getting senior centers asking for more and different centers asking to participate. Because of the way it's done, it tends to go to the same people every year. So to be able to expand that program would have a huge impact on our senior population in the state. As I mentioned, we put \$189,000 in it which is pretty insignificant.

If I were given legislative priority in the upcoming year? That's a tough question for me because there are a lot of things and they all cost money. One is that I would make sure that we have enough money in the school lunch program to make sure that all kids are eating well. I would love to see a universal school lunch program in the state where every meal is free to every kid. Because adolescent girls who eat at least one meal a day at school have less weight issues. So we know that even though not everyone likes the meals they get at school, they think the food is bad, it's often a lot better than a bag of chips or whatever else these kids bring from home because they just pick what's available.

I think one of the things we could do is look and figure out a comprehensive statewide plan. We could take a look at all of these things and see what's going on with our food, how are we using our federal

food programs, etc. The SNAP program alone brings in over \$500 million a year. It's a significant amount of money that comes in. Then we have school breakfast and summer food, and all these programs that bring in federal money. So, how could we look at those programs and see how they're being utilized. Who's getting them? How are we supporting our own Connecticut, whether its markets or farmers? We need really take a comprehensive look at what's going in. With WIC too – how do they all play together? We do have different pieces, but before we do something, take a broader look.

Question: In terms of food access or information, John you mentioned that your office mapped the location of grocery stores, is there a master map out there with different layers so can map location of all farmer's markets, grocery stores, etc. by county. Who should do that if it's not out there?

Lucy Nolan: The Department of Agriculture

John Frassinelli: I just want to give you a perspective on the farmer's market program and how the WIC farmer's market coupons dovetail with the WIC fruit and vegetable vouchers and with Wholesome Wave. I can tell you that our cash value vouchers for fruits and vegetables can be used at grocery stores or farmer's markets. We have 49 farmer's markets authorized to accept the vouchers. I can tell you that about 1% of these vouchers get redeemed at farmer's markets. Even in the summer, they choose to use them at grocery stores or corner stores. But just to give you an idea, for that family we were talking about before, you've got mom on the program and two kids between the ages of 3 and 5. In the month of July, the family would get \$75 to use at a farmer's market for produce. If Wholesome Waves is at that farmer's market, then you're talking about \$150 in one month just for those two programs alone for the month of July. If you expand that to looking at July and August, it's about \$220 worth of fresh fruits and vegetables. That's the importance of programs like Wholesome Wave. Even though it might not be replicable, it gets people connected to the farmer's market, connected to fresh produce, and connected to the seasonal availability of fruits and vegetables.

Lucy Nolan: If I can just add one thing. I didn't realize this and just found this out. Often the farmers will price by the community. So the Coventry farmer's market will be a lot more expensive than Billings Forge or the north end of Hartford. That's an important thing.

Question: So by and large are people spending their allotment for fresh produce vouchers?

John Frassinelli: They're actually spending about 82%. 82% of those specific fruit and vegetable vouchers are redeemed every month. Of the ones that are redeemed, they redeem 98% of the value. For the folks that are using them, they use them right up to the penny. One of the policies we've put into place is that we wanted them to be able to get produce above, for instance, the \$5 voucher. So if they go to the grocery store, we didn't want them to have to worry about having only \$4.98 worth of product. We wanted them to get more and perhaps pay the difference. But they're not doing that. They're calculating it right up to the amount of their benefit and they don't have extra money to cover it. So 82% are being redeemed and I just don't understand why the other 18% is not. But, of the ones that are being redeemed, almost 100% of the value is being captured.

Question: Do you track at corner stores what people buy? Is it loaf of bread, tuna, milk?

John Frassinelli: We don't because it's still a paper check system. It's very archaic. We're about two years away from an electronic debit card system like SNAP where we will know exactly what they bought.

Question: It seems like from a regulatory perspective we're doing a lot of the right things even down to what supermarkets and stores are stocking. Is it more of a consumer preference issue we have to deal with? What else besides throw more money at it, which we all wish we could, what else can we do? It seems like we're covering a lot of the bases here.

John Frassinelli: You mean consumer preference for?

Question: Well, like the example that was mentioned where the child spends \$1 or \$2 on chips.

John Frassinelli: Tatiana may be able to speak to this, but the whole healthy corner store discussion is relatively new. It's only about 2 or 3 years old. Tatiana's study and UConn did another study. Prior to October 2009 where we required stores to carry fresh fruits and vegetables, those inner city stores were not carrying them. They might be carrying onions and plantains, but other than that they weren't carrying them. So, you're right. Looking at it from a regulatory perspective, we essentially artificially created a healthy food environment by forcing them to carry it. But, what that does is build upon the entire community to say this WIC authorized store is carrying these products. If I'm going to compete I need to provide better produce, more produce, better variety, more healthy foods.

Question: Could you restrict certain canned vegetables and require the store to provide those vegetables fresh?

John Frassinelli: It's a very delicate balance and we're talking about that right now. We're talking about not allowing canned vegetables to be bought with the vouchers. It's a delicate situation. My issue is there are 10 million different kinds of food out there that I'm going to have to look, say the sodium content for every single one. We want to push them toward healthier options like frozen and fresh foods, but we don't want to restrict their access to quantity of food to feed their families.

Dr. Andreyeva: I just want to jump in and just mention how important it is to have fresh produce on the minimum inventory list. In Illinois, its HHS asked for canned or frozen and it didn't have to be fresh. As a result, there was no change in availability of fresh produce in stores. It's great that Connecticut required to have at least one. States have the capacity to have different minimum inventory standards. In terms of what WIC participants are buying, we have data from a large supermarket chain in the northeast. I'm not ready to talk about the results yet, but we're looking at what WIC participants are buying. We'll know what kinds of fresh produce they're buying and also what we want to know is whether they're substituting their purchases of fruits and vegetables with WIC money. For example, before the WIC change, if a person spent \$50 per month on produce. If after the WIC change they now get \$25 from WIC, are they spending \$75 or are they just substituting government government money? If they are just substituting then we're not going to see any change in their fruit and vegetable consumption. Hopefully, they're increasing their fruit and vegetable purchase with extra help from WIC.

In terms of SNAP participants, the USDA just funded a huge study to look at what SNAP participants are buying. The USDA doesn't really know what they're buying. There's a lot of discussion of SNAP money being spent on soda. Nobody really has sound data on what SNAP participants are spending on soda. So they're funding a study using scanner data which is like when you go to the store and use your loyalty card and the purchase is recorded.

Question: You can buy soda with SNAP?

Dr. Andreyeva: Yes

Question: Why is that? That seems like a no-brainer.

Lucy Nolan: You can buy almost anything with SNAP except hot, prepared meals.

Kristin Sullivan (OLR): Isn't that part of the discussion of people's rights to buy what they want and also quantity? You can get a lot more white bread than whole grain bread. In my grocery store I see this often. It's like bulk of soda and white bread and things that are not expensive.

Question: I sat through a presentation about a program that aligns SNAP benefits to points. So it's more expensive to buy soda than juice. It extends the amount of money you have when you buy healthier choices. I think there are seven states participating.

Dr. Andreyeva: There's a study the USDA is doing where they provide a subsidy, it's in Western Massachusetts, 30% on purchases of fruits and vegetables when using their SNAP benefits. It's a randomized control study. If they buy \$100 of fruits and vegetables they get \$30 back on their EBT card.

Lucy Nolan: It's significantly different to give people money to buy the better things than to say we're going to take away your money or say it's going to cost you more to buy soda. Part of the big problem with this, and this is why when you compare buying a liter of soda for 99 cents and a gallon of milk for \$3.50, and you have a limited amount of money because the SNAP benefit is not a lot of money. People are going to choose the soda because it's going to fill up their kids, even though it doesn't really.

John Frassinelli: From the WIC perspective - because ours is regulatory - we decide what is purchase and not, there's a huge bureaucratic and financial investment in identifying which foods are appropriate and not and monitoring those stores and going in and inspecting those stores and doing undercover purchases. I look at the SNAP program as an anti-hunger program making sure people have enough money and enough food. The WIC program is more prescriptive for specific growth periods and people's lives. I think they work nicely together. Is it a problem buying soda? I don't think it's as big of an issue as it's sometimes made out to be.

Question: But if its soda, chips, cookies than it does become a problem.

Lucy Nolan: But who decides? Are Kashi cookies better than oreos? Those are the issues you get into. How do you make those decisions?

John Frassinelli: You do get into is 100% juice ok, but 50% juice is not. Is soda with fruit juice added ok? I understand where you're coming from and I think its part of the discussion, but it has a huge regulatory component to it.

Jiff Martin: Just listening to you guys, one of the things I think is the hardest talking about these issues and talking to a room full of people who might not be thinking about it as much as you are, is distinguishing between the federal stuff and the state stuff. Because there are so many of these things driven by federal policy that no one in this room can do anything about. So, if you're interested in making changes or reforms, you first have to have an understanding of what is being driven by federal policy and federal funds, and what is actually something the state is affecting. The WIC program is a good example of tailoring it a certain way in Connecticut.

I also thought for the sake of the people in the room to highlight a couple of tools that do exist in the state government. There is a Connecticut Food Policy Council that was established in 1997. It has an uneven performance over the many years but does exist. It consists of appointees of many agencies. There might be some merit of looking again at that to see if all the appropriate agencies are represented on that council. I just want you to know that entity exists under the Department of Agriculture. Both John and Lucy serve on that council. It's certainly possible to charge that council with things to do. It does have a small budget through the Department of Agriculture. That's something to think about.

There's also a newly revitalized Agriculture Development Council, which through legislation passed this summer, changes the membership and gives it a couple of new assignments, one of which is to look at increasing consumer purchases of local food.

This brings me to what I should be talking about a little bit. The Connecticut Food Policy Council is doing an update to its food security report. It's not the needs assessment that Tatiana was talking about but it would be a map produced at the end of it. There is an effort of the Connecticut Food Policy Council to do a new version of this. There are also other resources. There's a farm map on the Department of Agriculture website where you can see where all the markets and farm stands are. But it's not putting both pieces of information together. It's not putting the markets with the WIC stores. But we're thinking about creating a website that goes along with this new report that does have all those food assets of a community. So, that's in the pipeline.

My angle on this is more agriculture. Certainly, there's a lot of excitement about local food in Connecticut. There's been a lot of policy and legislative support for that over the last 10 years. There's a lot of demand that can be met by agriculture in Connecticut. There are a lot of ideas out there about how to do it. Agriculture as an industry is something we want to continue to grow in this state. It's not a portable industry. It's not going away. So, there's a lot of rationale for investing in that industry. But where this crosses over with the access question goes to some of the things these guys were talking about like grocery stores. How do we get more produce from local farms into the grocery stores so we're capturing those millions and millions of federal dollars people are spending in the grocery stores on produce. Wouldn't it be nicer if that dollar spent on an apple was going to a Connecticut farmer instead of a Washington farmer? How do we foster these business relationships in a way that works? A lot of the connections between farms and grocery stores have broken down. We have a lot of missing pieces we'll have to rebuild because the way our food industry has evolved over the past couple of decades, we've sort of lost the middle man. We've lost a lot of the infrastructure in between. We don't

have the processing facilities, we don't have the slaughter facilities. I know we're not talking about meat, but we don't have a lot of the trucking companies. We don't have places where you can cut and chop onions anymore that would be useful for a cafeteria, for example.

That's another place where you can really get into the access issue. Because there's a lot of school food opportunities. The kids are required in the school lunch program to be getting produce. Can we get that to be Connecticut produce? Is there a way to do that but you can't just drive up with your farm truck and drop off a box of apples. That works in some cases but in most cases that doesn't work. You need to funnel it through the distributors that have contracts with those cafeterias. So there are a lot of opportunities in that realm that have not been talked about in the last few years at the capitol. Legislatively, policy wise, that's where the conversation would need to go to find that nexus.

Sen. Terry Gerratana: Are you telling me that there's the fresh fruit and vegetable program \$1.7 million of federal funding. Do you have to go through the middle man so to speak? Do you work for the Department of Agriculture?

Jiff Martin: No, I work for UConn.

Lucy Nolan: I'm talking about Connecticut money on that document.

Sen. Terry Gerratana: This says federal funding \$1.7 million through the Department of Agriculture.

Jiff Martin: I think that's Rosa DeLauro's pet project that she started and Connecticut was one of the first states. I think there are 25 schools in Connecticut that basically are incentivized to get a 10:00 AM snack of a local fruit, usually. The Department of Agriculture somehow helps manage that.

Sen. Terry Gerratana: So there's no other way to get fresh produce?

Jiff Martin: It's about business relationships. There's a farm to school program but what this program is for the state of Connecticut is there's someone at the Department of Agriculture who spends a small percentage of her time facilitating contacts. For example, there's a farmer who's looking to sell to a school and there's a school that's looking for apples. She tries to help foster those connections. But, there's no purchasing preference at the state of Connecticut for locally grown which some other states have done. Massachusetts has a really neat one where they say if it's a \$25,000 or less contract in a cafeteria that receives state funds, it's a no-bid contract so a local bidder can come in and compete very successfully to get that. So, a local farmer could get that. That's where the interesting opportunities lie legislatively. Look more closely at the grocery stores and the cafeterias and ask how we can get product from our Connecticut farmers onto those plates. And the only other legislative idea I might throw out there is the state is not a model for this. The state itself has how many state buildings with state cafeterias? And why aren't you finding Connecticut milk in those cafeterias? And why aren't you finding Connecticut produce in those cafeterias at least in-season? Where is the Connecticut product that all state employees are consuming because it really needs to start at the top. Even at UConn, we all need to demonstrate this behavior of supporting our local farms.

Nicole Dube (OLR): Does anyone have any other questions before we wrap up?

Kristin Sullivan (OLR): One of the questions I was going to ask all of you is are there states that you would recommend legislators and policy people around here look at? You mentioned Massachusetts and the no-bid contracts under \$25,000. But for the school lunch program or any of the different areas we've talked about. Are there states you think are doing a good job that we might look at?

Lucy Nolan: Connecticut actually for the school lunch program is doing quite well because of the healthy food certification. The federal legislation that was passed was based on the Connecticut incentive.

John Frassinelli: Jiff may be able to speak this more, but I think there are a lot of states that have fewer restrictions and fewer regulations when it comes to getting local produce into schools. I think Connecticut is regulatory heavy on that. But I think other states do a better job of being able to facilitate those relationships and the sales directly. Because there are a couple of schools I thought of in terms of farmer produce. There's a gentleman on our Food Policy Council who works for wholesaling. He believes the future of farmers in Connecticut is selling their products wholesale to the grocery stores so that they could sell it for them. Well, farmers have their own opinion about that. Many say they can't sell it at 50 cents per pound when they can sell it a farmer's market for \$1.49 per pound. So, the obvious connections may not resonate with all the parties, which I think is part of the discussion. What do farmers really want and what do the wholesalers really want and are we talking about making sure there's a bucolic setting in the country, or are we making sure that farmers can keep their family farms in their families at the same time as producing enough local produce to sustain a school. Because it's a significant amount of food that has to go to a school.

Lucy Nolan: I also think some of the problems with some of the regulations are local public health departments. The state will say something is fine, but the local health department will come in and be very picky and specific and things don't happen.

Jiff Martin: There are some states. Pennsylvania is a great model of investment in grocery stores. Oregon has done a lot on getting local into the schools. They have a good purchasing preference. Washington does as well. Maine has done amazing stuff on the dairy end of things to promote the local dairy industry. It depends on what specific incentive or policy change you're looking for. There are definitely models out there.

Question: I know you said you'd like the state to build toward a universal school lunch program where any child that needs a lunch could have one. Have there been any studies on how much that would cost the state? If we did spend more, are there federal reimbursements available?

Lucy Nolan: Right now, not to get too specific, but some communities like Hartford, Bridgeport, New London, and New Haven all have universal meals because they have enough children in their communities who are free or reduced price. To be free it's 130% of the FPL and reduced price is up to 185% FPL (their family's income). It's called Provision 2 and it's a USDA model. You can do it. With the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act they really did try to make a national, universal meal. It's just so very, very expensive. It's billions and billions of dollars. Schools do get help with each meal, even the full-priced meals. It's insignificant, maybe 26 cents. But it's not insignificant if you have a lot of kids. But compared to paying for the full price of the meal, it's not a lot.

Question: This is a more specific question, but I got a call about a year ago from a cafeteria worker. I know you said the kids are required to take fresh produce as part of their free lunch. One thing she was noticing was that some of the kids said they didn't want the apple or whatever it was. Some of the workers would say no, by law they were required to take it. You can give it to them but you can't force them to eat it. She was noticing a lot of waste and a lot of things being thrown away. She wanted to take it upon herself to bring some of the items to a local food shelter. But because of public health concerns, you can't take food someone took to their table and then reuse it, especially with produce. She's wondering how to reconcile that.

Lucy Nolan: There aren't really any laws about what can be accepted at a food pantry. It's up to the food pantry or the soup kitchen to decide.

Question: It's more the school telling her no, she can't take the food and reuse it for the next day or donate it. She noticed a lot of waste.

Lucy Nolan: Surprisingly, one thing that will stop waste is if kids have recess before lunch. They will be hungry and they've done studies that say the plate waste goes down significantly. They drink their milk, eat their fruit, etc.

John Frassinelli: One of the things we did right over here at Fox Middle School off of Capitol Ave. is we literally went to the lunch line and took the bowl of fruit and put it at the front of the line. The number of kids taking fruit doubled just by moving it to the first item. Did they eat it? I'm not sure. But at least they thought about eating it.

Lucy Nolan: Just those little things make such a big difference though.

Kristen Miller (OLR): Well, we've run out of time for today. We just want to thank everyone for coming, our four panelists, and everyone who joined us. Although today's issues have dealt with access to healthy food in low income communities, there are so many different issues related to nutrition and food safety in the news around the world. For example, if you listen to the radio or watch television, there's the big listeria outbreak with the melons, the Food Safety Modernization Act which was signed this past January, Dr. Oz had a big to do with the FDA over arsenic in apple juice – there's just a plethora of different things.

We intend to have discussions similar to that of today in the coming months on different topics dealing with nutrition and food safety. Our next discussion will focus on the benefits, difficulties, and different models of localized food production and the "going local" movement. We also hope to have a future discussion dealing with issues of chemicals in food and food safety. Because we're trying to make this an interactive project, if you're aware different issues you're interested in, or that you think would lend itself well to this type of forum, just contact Nicole, Kristin Sullivan, Carrie Rose, Ryan O'Neil, or myself up in OLR. We also want to let you know we have a page on the OLR website that's specifically geared toward this issue team. It's under "2011 Focus Areas" on the homepage. It's a direct link to our page which has information about past presentations, upcoming presentations, etc. We'll also have an email in the upcoming weeks about our next discussion. Thank you very much.

Carrie Rose (OLR): One more thing I wanted to point out before we go. The Legislative Library actually does food policy news alerts. It's a little broader than what we talked about today, but if any of you want to sign up for it just email the legislative library. They come about once or twice a week and you can unsubscribe at any time.