

Update on Michigan's Food Policy Councils

Michigan established a Food Policy Council in 2005 to improve the state's food environment. The Council brings together a broad range of nongovernmental organizations and government agencies. Since its founding, the Food Policy Council launched a number of initiatives:

Increasing EBT use at farmers' markets

The Council partnered with the Michigan Farmers' Market Association to increase the number of farmers' markets that accept SNAP benefits electronically.

There are now 275 farmers' markets in Michigan. Of those 83 now accept EBT. The Council is working to get more markets to accept SNAP benefits and to get the word out to consumers.

In addition, Michigan has expanded its distribution days for SNAP benefits. The state used to distribute SNAP benefits over the first 10 days of the month. This schedule caused highs and lows in both stock at stores that primarily served the SNAP population as well as highs and lows in work hours for part-time employees at these stores. The Food Policy Council succeeded in changing the distribution cycle to span the first 23 days of the month. Retailers are now reporting less fluctuation in both inventory as well as hourly employees' ability to work consistently.

Next steps for improving Michigan's food environment

The Council adopted the Good Food Charter as the Food Policy Council's strategic plan. The Charter identifies 25 priorities that the Council will work to achieve over the next ten years. The Charter includes measurable indicators to determine the impact of the Council's efforts.

The Charter's priorities include:

- Expand and increase innovative methods to bring healthy foods to under-served areas as well as strategies to encourage their consumption.
- Improve school food environments and reduce school sales of low-nutrient, high-sugar, high-fat and calorie-dense foods through snack and vending machines or competitive food sales.
- Provide outreach, training and technical assistance to launch new grocery stores and improve existing stores to better serve underserved people in urban and rural areas.

- Encourage institutions – including schools, hospitals, colleges and universities – to use their collective purchasing power to influence the food supply chain to provide healthier food and more foods grown, raised and processed in Michigan.
- Develop a farm-to-institution grant program to provide planning, implementation and kitchen or cafeteria equipment grants to maximize the use of locally grown, raised and processed foods in institutional cafeterias.

Tax incentives to grocery stores

In 2008, the Michigan legislature passed a bill that provides property tax incentives to grocery stores that locate or expand their products in underserved areas to include fresh produce, meat and dairy.

Unfortunately, these tax incentives were not effective for Michigan’s underserved areas. Despite the prevalence of food deserts in Michigan, the Council found that people in underserved areas perceived this approach as government over-involvement in their communities. The Council and the state grocers’ association are discussing what approaches might be more successful.

Farm to school legislation

Also in 2008, the Food Policy Council successfully spearheaded a package of bills in the state legislature to support farm-to-school initiatives. The new law lowers the small purchase threshold or the dollar amount at which a school or school district must initiate a formal bid process for school food purchases.

As a result of this new law, schools are now able to purchase more food locally. Schools can also purchase specific products from individual farmers. In addition, Michigan is one of two states participating in a USDA pilot project. Through this project, schools can use half of their school food entitlement money to purchase local foods.

In addition, the Michigan Farm-to-School team meets quarterly to discuss opportunities for improving farm-to-school opportunities. The Council and the Michigan Farm-to-School team are working to educate school and school districts about how they can purchase local foods within their budgets. The team includes the state Departments of Agriculture and Health, the Sustainable Food Systems group, representatives from Michigan State University and the state Food Policy Council.



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