



# Making Baltimore's Food Deserts Bloom with Healthy Food

**Baltimore Food Policy Advisory Committee (Baltimore Food PAC)| Johns Hopkins WIC | Baltimore, Maryland |** Presented By: Jasina Wise, Project Coordinator, Marycatherine Augustyn, PhD, Research Associate

## Introduction

A primary objective of the Johns Hopkins WIC Community Partnerships for Healthy Mothers and Children (CPHMC) project was to increase the number of people in Baltimore City with improved access to environments with healthy food and beverage options. This objective was selected, in part, because the 2015 Baltimore Food Environment Map and Report (Mapping Baltimore City's Food Environment: 2015 Executive Summary) revealed that one in four Baltimore City residents live in Food Deserts and certain subpopulations, specifically Africans Americans and children, have disproportionately low access to healthy foods because they are more likely to reside in a food desert. A food desert is an area where the distance to a supermarket or other food outlet is more than ¼ mile, the median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level, over 30% of residents have no vehicle available, and the availability of healthy foods in all food outlets is low. A significant number of Baltimore's WIC participants live in food deserts.

Along with our coalition partners, the Johns Hopkins WIC CPHMC project sought to address the lack of availability of healthy foods in Baltimore City by improving access to corner stores and Virtual Supermarkets within food deserts, including enacting the policy and legislative changes necessary to recruit new food retailers into these areas while supporting existing vendors to stock and promote healthy foods.

## Project Overview

According to the 2015 Baltimore City Food Environment Map the highest concentration of corner stores located in food deserts is in Baltimore's west side. The Baltimore City Baltimarket Healthy Stores Initiative, a CPHMC coalition partner, assists corner stores in marketing, merchandising and selling healthy food options. Baltimarket also sponsors the Virtual Supermarket Initiative which provides Baltimore residents with access to healthy foods at supermarket prices, especially food deserts where healthy food access is limited, through online ordering at locations such as senior apartments and libraries. Johns Hopkins WIC was integral to the implementation, support and maintenance of these activities, as well as ensuring that consideration of the specific needs and circumstances of WIC recipients were at the forefront of the initiative's activities.

## Activities

### Healthy Corner Store/Virtual Grocery Store Activities

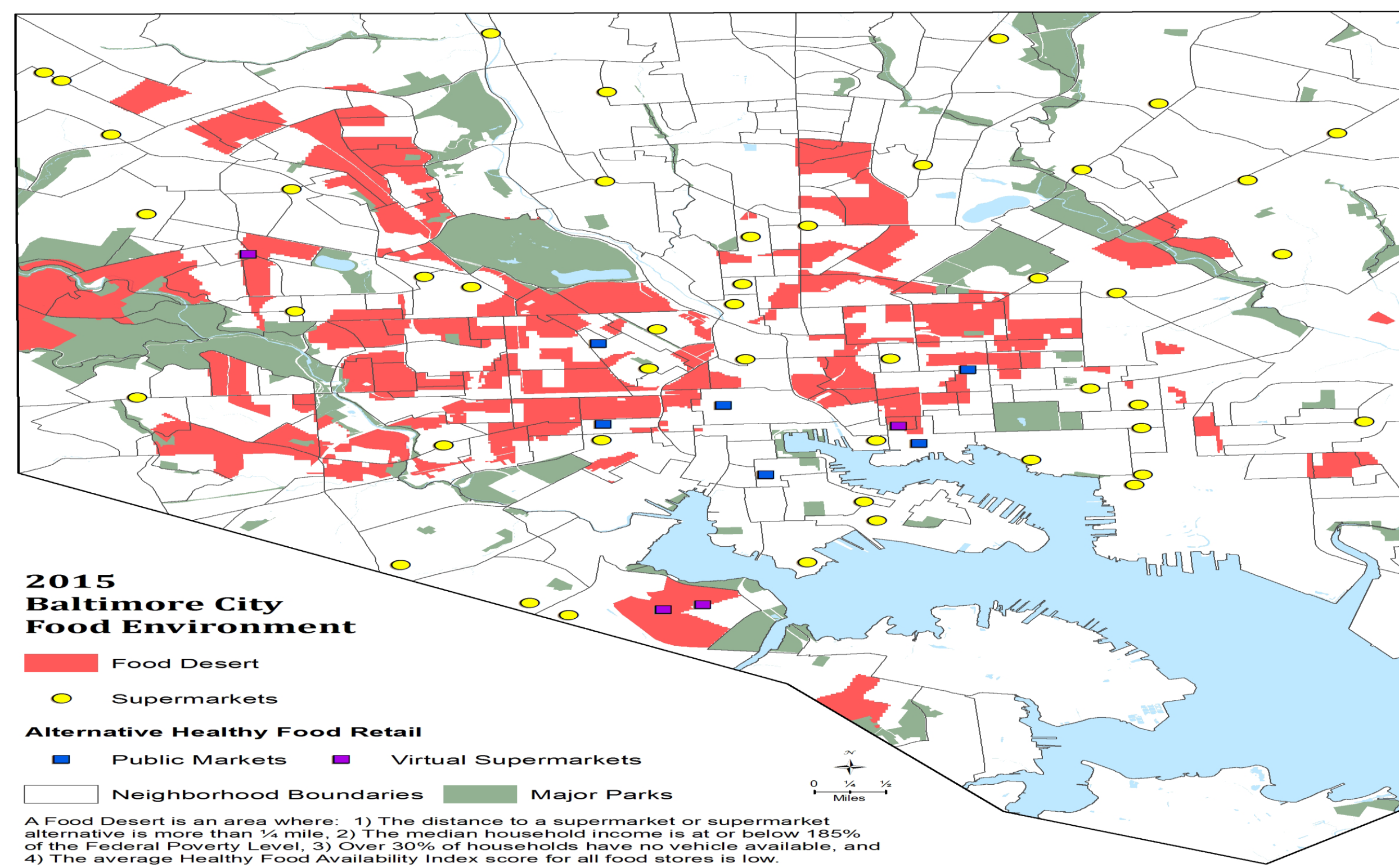
- With Baltimarket we trained and assisted corner store owners to stock and sell fruits, vegetables, whole grain foods, low-fat milk and dairy, and healthy snacks and drinks.
- With Baltimarket, established Virtual Supermarkets, thereby increasing healthy food availability in low healthy food availability neighborhoods.
- Coordinated WIC and community efforts by providing WIC specific guidance to Baltimarket staff to promote WIC foods in corner stores.
- Taught WIC participants and other community residents healthy shopping skills through the Share our Strength Cooking Matters at the Store initiative
- Assisted Coalition Partners to update The Baltimore Food Environment Map to incorporate nutrition assistance programs including WIC clinics, WIC retailers, and SNAP Retailers.

### Legislation Activities

- Created financial incentives to address the high cost of property tax, workforce development and financial security that Baltimore City grocer's encounter.
- Planned the next steps with Coalition Partners to facilitate healthy food access in Baltimore's Food Deserts through legislative changes.
- Provided support and attended the Baltimore City Council Meeting where the Personal Property Tax Credits – Food Desert Incentive Areas legislation received a favorable recommendation to move to a 3rd Reading.
- Personal Property Tax Credit legislation has subsequently been approved and received the Mayor's signature.
- Worked with our Coalition Members to disseminate information regarding the Personal Property Tax Credit and its effects on improving the food environment of Baltimore City.
- Legislation has been introduced in the City Council to require warning labels in stores and restaurants that sell sugar-sweetened beverages.

## Outcomes

- As of February 2016, nine healthy corner stores have been launched and one additional store has been recruited
- As of February 2016, six Virtual Supermarket sites have been established and 600 people have been served.
- The Baltimore Food System Map was updated to incorporate Nutrition Assistance programs including WIC clinics, WIC retailers, and SNAP Retailers.
- Baltimore City Council passed the Personal Property Tax Credit – Food Desert Incentive Areas.
- Completed the implementation of the Share Our Strength Cooking Matters Program at community events. We completed 66 shopping tours with 1196 participants. Additionally through these participants, we reached at least 2792 household members.



## Next Steps

- The Johns Hopkins CPHMC has determined that the following steps will ensure project sustainability:
- Continuing to work with our lead Coalition partner, The Baltimore Food Policy Initiative (BFPI), an inter-governmental collaboration with the Department of Planning, and the Baltimore City Health Department.
- Continuing to serve on Baltimarket's (i.e. healthy corner stores) Taskforce to provide guidance to ensure project implementation and continuation, including: new retail store recruitment; new virtual store recruitment; recruitment of Youth Neighborhood Food Advocates (YNFA); and YNFA projects
- Continuing to work with the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future to utilize the Baltimore Food Environment Map to produce tools to assist residents to access available resources, including healthy food retailers, health providers, and social and community services.
- Work with the Farm Alliance to increase access of Farm Stands to WIC participants and to arrange for mobile Farm Stand to come to areas of the City without regular Farmer's Markets.
- Promote transit lines which include stops near healthy food stores.

## Lessons Learned

- Achieving the change necessary to reduce the chronic disease burden and access to healthy food in Baltimore City requires a multi-step process. This process includes: developing the community's perception of importance; obtaining stakeholder and resident "buy in" and making sure that this group plays a significant role in decision making; ensuring that the players understand and support the mission and strategies, and entrusting "ownership" to them; developing a strong communication network that ensures rapid dissemination of results; fostering continued commitment to the strategies; and developing plans to maintain momentum so that the change will be sustained.
- It is important to solicit feedback from our partners about their and their constituents needs. For example, we were made aware by a partner health care provider that her patients' food access needs would be best served by a tool designed to assist them to "shop healthy" on a budget.
- Recognition of disparities in healthy food access in Baltimore is increasing and politicians are becoming more likely to support legislation to increase healthy food access, particularly in the food desert areas in Baltimore City.



## Best Practices

- 1) **Coalition Building:**
  - We assembled our Coalition by taking advantage of an existing group of organizations focused on a unifying issue: to create comprehensive strategies to improve food access from many perspectives and implementing programs and policies with multi-sector support
  - The Coalition supports the goals, needs and activities of the individual organizations as well as the common goal
  - There is a strong communication network within and among the coalition members, as well as other organizations and constituents.
  - The Coalition meets regularly face to face and each organization has the right (and responsibility) to participate in decision making.
  - A specific organization (Baltimore Food Policy Initiative) has taken the lead to ensure sustainability of the Coalition
- 2) **Community Action Plan**
  - Identify community needs through a multifaceted approach, including review of existing data from multiple sources through a comprehensive lens, collection of "new" data; and key informant and intended audience interviews.
  - Develop goals that address the identified needs, are measurable and attainable, and that have a prescribed completion date
  - Develop the strategies necessary to achieve the goals. Strategies must be designed to accomplish each goal and related objectives
  - Solicit feedback from organizations and groups who will play a role in project implementation and individuals who will be affected by programmatic activities and outcomes
- 3) **Project implementation**
  - Foster communication networks to ensure continued organizational and community buy-in
  - Develop a sustainability plan to ensure that effective strategies will be continued beyond the Project/funded period
  - Perform internal process evaluation to ensure project has been implemented as designed; modify/refine activities as appropriate
  - Incorporate a process evaluation by the impacted community and partner organizations to ensure that strategies are being carried out as expected and barriers to implementation are identified and possible solutions are developed; modify/refine activities as appropriate
  - Incorporate an external objective outcome evaluation to assess project effectiveness

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