

Prince George's Food Equity Council Prioritizes and Promotes Health and Equity within the County's Food System and Food Policies

Prince George's County, MD has high rates of health disparities compared to its surrounding counties and a food environment that limits access to fresh healthy foods. Organizations promoting greater health equity in the county recognized that access to fresh, healthy, affordable, safe, sustainably produced, culturally appropriate foods was important to improving the overall public health and community wellbeing of residents but found many potential partners worked in silos with disconnect and uncoordinated initiatives. The Prince George's County Food Equity Council provides a platform for stakeholders to collaboratively revitalize the local food system and elevates the voice and connectivity of farmers, grassroots organizations, low income residents, business leaders, health advocates, educators and others who are often not at the table when food and farm policies are developed.

A survey of food deserts inside the DC Metro Region's Capital Beltway found that all USDA defined food deserts outside DC were located in Prince George's County, MD. Health disparities in the county were similarly alarming, the County has the second highest obesity/overweight rates of adults in Maryland and 1 in 2 children are overweight or obese, compared to a national average of 1 in 3.¹ Additionally, a study conducted by the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission found that less than ¼ of the supermarkets inside the Capital Beltway carry healthy and wholesome foods.²

Residents in the most underserved areas of the County had too few options to access healthy foods. Food system planning needed to be incorporated into the County's short and long term planning and access to healthy foods for all residents needed to be raised as a priority.

The Prince George's County Food Equity Council launched on Food Day, October 26, 2014, with the mission of significantly improving public health and community well-being of all who live, work, study, worship and play in Prince George's County. The volunteer Council has 22 diverse members with representation ranging from hunger relief organizations, to urban farms, to government agencies. Members work to develop

¹ Prince George's County Health Improvement Plan 2011 to 2014: Blueprint For A Healthier County and State Health Improvement Process (SHIP), Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, www.dhmfh.maryland.gov/ship

² Healthy Food Availability Index survey conducted by the M-NCPPC Prince George's County Planning Department.

policy-based solutions to create systemic change to the local food system, promoting health, economic opportunity, food security, and well-being, especially among communities that have been negatively impacted by the current food system.

Since launching, the Council has elected internal leadership and established policy priorities through its three workgroups; Health Eating and Nutrition Education, Local Food Production, and Healthy Food Retail. FEC has developed resources to assist residents in finding and preparing healthy and affordable food and policy makers in identifying gaps in services in their communities. To advance its work, FEC established partnerships across the County and state beyond its membership and will continue building relationship through its first Food Equity Forum. The Food Equity Forum will be used to identify the county's strengths and existing initiatives by bringing together food system change makers from across the county to connect and identify need for policy changes.

While still in the first year of implementation and evaluation, the Prince George's County Food Equity Council has achieved the following:

- County Council resolution recognizing FEC and granting annual hearing
- Directory of Nutrition Education Resources and Food Assistance Programs in County
- Listening session on barriers and challenges for local small food businesses
- Partnerships resulting in large community events to increase awareness of importance of healthy eating and sustainable farming including Hear the MD Crunch, Food Day, and TEDxManhattan "Changing the Way We Eat" viewing party
- Launched the first Prince George's County Food Equity Forum engaging over 80 food and health advocates on improving access to healthy food for all socio-economic groups

FEC continues to work collaboratively with stakeholders to identifying food system deficiencies and promote innovative solutions in an effort to transform the food system into one that improves public health, ensures environmental sustainability, and spurs sound economic development.

The Prince George's Food Equity Council is looking for residents and business to join its workgroups and give input on what is important to their community. If you want share your ideas for the food system change happening in Prince George's County or just want to learn more and spread the word, please contact Sydney Daigle, Food Equity Council Coordinator, at pgfoodcouncil@gmail.com.

Want to connect with us through social media? Our Twitter and Facebook handles are:
www.twitter.com/pgcfec & www.facebook.com/pgcfec