

Food Stamps for Fast Food? We Can Do Better

Editor's note: On Sunday, April 3rd, The Courier-Journal reported that Yum! Brands has been lobbying the Beshear Administration for almost a year to allow seniors, the homeless, and the disabled to use their SNAP benefits to purchase prepared foods at restaurants. See the link below to view the article.

For over a decade, Community Farm Alliance (CFA) members in Louisville have worked hard championing the development of what we call L.I.F.E. - a locally integrated food economy that provides healthy food to consumers and opens new markets to struggling Kentucky family farmers. In 2007, we published our community food assessment, "Bridging the Divide," which detailed West Louisville's lack of access to healthy, affordable food and revealed the high concentration of fast food restaurants in the affected neighborhoods. While our assessment focused on Louisville's West End, access to healthy, affordable food is a problem all across the state, from Lexington to Pike County to Fulton County.

The health risks associated with the most commonly purchased fast foods (which sometimes turn out to be the only available "food" for blocks, if not miles) are well known and well documented as are the costs to society in terms of medical care and absenteeism at school and at the workplace as a result of poor health. Increasing access to healthy, affordable food is therefore necessary to abate our current health crisis. Kentucky farmers can be part of that solution. Kentucky farmers need new markets in order to justify the transition from growing tobacco to raising crops for food. Those markets can be found in our underserved rural and urban communities; however they will not simply materialize. New markets for farmers will need policies and other incentives to make them both attractive and sustainable.

Regrettably, the proposal to allow seniors, the disabled and the homeless to use their food stamps to purchase prepared meals at fast food restaurants falls far short of being the kind of creative solution we need to address our Commonwealth's food and farm crises. Indeed, for years now policymakers in Louisville and those from across the state have been generating creative policies in collaboration with a wide range of governmental, business, and non-profit stakeholders to support the development of a local food economy.

Just this past month, Mayor Fischer took a big step forward by naming the members of the Food Policy Advisory Council who will begin to examine Louisville's entire food system and recommend policy changes to improve it. Louisville Metro Government and the YMCA are working hard to provide all of its citizens with healthy food through "Healthy in a Hurry," a project that puts fresh fruits and vegetables in corner stores. And most recently, Mayor Fischer announced that his office would oversee the development of a LIFE Zone (Local Food Enterprise Zone), an area in which individuals and other entities would be provided with incentives to create new food businesses.

To be sure, local food is not limited to Louisvillians alone. Under the Beshear Administration, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of Kentuckians shopping at Farmers Markets, many of who seek out the Kentucky Proud label - a marketing program administered by the Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA). KDA has also made Farmers Market produce and

meat more accessible to all Kentuckians by allowing seniors and women (with infants and children) to use their food stamps and WIC benefits at the markets. In one of its more exciting programs, KDA (along with non-profit and other agency partners) has been working with school districts in dozens of counties across Kentucky to bring local food into school cafeterias. Even Lady Jane Beshear has made local food a priority; she maintains a garden providing the men's homeless shelter in Frankfort fresh produce during harvest season.

CFA believes that in order to provide new opportunities for our family-scale farmers and access to affordable, healthy food for all Kentuckians, our elected leaders, businesses, and community organizations must continue to work together to develop creative solutions for the seemingly intractable issues we face. For instance, a coalition of groups could work to enhance Louisville's most neglected neighborhoods by using food as a catalyst for redevelopment. The empty Winn-Dixie that sits on Fourth Street near Oak would be an excellent location for a local food processor or a community kitchen where entrepreneurs could prepare meals with food from local farms and community gardens to feed the thousands of seniors concentrated in Old Louisville. This would support business development, eliminate a blighted property and provide food access all at the same time. Or fast food companies could work to create a "local taco" or "local pizza" by sourcing products from Kentucky farmers.

We have come to expect creative solutions from our leaders that address the intertwining web of challenges we face today: chronic health conditions, poverty, dwindling markets for family farmers, and decaying urban communities just to name a few. CFA members will continue to expect and indeed advocate for such solutions but using food stamps for fast food is not one of them. We urge all Kentuckians to tell Governor Beshear that we need the kind of creative solutions that provide the most vulnerable in our society access to healthy, affordable food and promote the viability of family-scale farming.

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