

THE CASE FOR A SPRINGFIELD FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

Thousands of Springfield residents are facing a food crisis because they cannot afford and/or do not have access to affordable and nutritious food.

Who and what?

Since 2007, several non-profit organizations led by Springfield Partners for Community Action, Partners for a Healthier Community and The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, have conducted a planning process to establish a Springfield Food Policy Council. In 2009, Mayor Domenic Sarno enhanced the partnership by providing leadership to develop a Springfield food policy implementation plan which included several city departments to be facilitated by the Springfield Department of Health and Human Services and the Public Health Council. All parties have agreed to establish a Springfield Food Policy Council.

The purpose of this Council is to oversee the coordination of public and private efforts to improve access to nutritious, affordable, fresh, and safe foods for all residents of Springfield. To the greatest extent possible, this Council will advocate for policies and resources that promote and strengthen the local and regional food systems for the City of Springfield by investing in local resources and solutions.

The Springfield Food Policy Council will be governed by a Steering Committee composed of representatives from diverse sectors of the community, including but not limited to the relevant municipal departments, non-profit organizations that are devoted to food security and public health, faith-based organizations, neighborhood councils, farmers, grocers, food producers and youth organizations. While some members will be appointed by the Mayor, remaining members of the Steering Committee will be elected by the active members of the Food Policy Council's Committees, which will be open to all residents of Springfield. The creation of subcommittees will ensure active civic participation from a broad cross section of constituents.

The staff at Square One will tell you that if some of the kids [preschoolers] are asking for their third bowl of cereal—it must be Monday.

Why do we need it?

- A recent study of hunger and food insecurity in Mason Square found that rates of hunger and food security were far above the national average. Nine percent of households experienced moderate to severe hunger and 19% were food-insecure (with or without hunger).
- Close to 60% of our K-12 population is overweight and obese, and rapidly heading towards a lifetime of chronic disease (e.g. diabetes, hypertension, stroke, heart disease).
- State health data shows that the rate of diabetes mortality is higher in Springfield (52.3/100,000 people) compared to all of Massachusetts (35.3/100,000 people).

What is a Food Policy Council?

A Food Policy Council is a collaborative group of individuals representing sectors from agriculture, food production and distribution, nutrition, health, social services, and government, and work directly with the city, local or state government. As such, they are often administered through government agencies or food policy related non-profit organizations. Such councils have been established, with great success, in many cities with similar challenges and opportunities as our own. Members often include farmers, produce wholesalers, government representatives, food banks, school food service representatives, public health agencies, social service agencies and programs, and ordinary residents. A council's members are charged with examining the local food system and making recommendations for how it can be improved. Food Policy Councils seek creative solutions that will improve a community's food access and food security on a larger, systemic level.

Why create a Food Policy Council?

Food Policy Councils broaden the discussion of food and agricultural issues to facilitate a more comprehensive examination of local and regional food systems. They serve as a forum in which people involved from many different parts of the food system and government can learn more about each others roles and work together to improve the availability of adequate levels of culturally competent, nutritious and affordable food to all residents in the community.

What are possible outcomes?

Many initiatives have resulted from Food Policy Council examination, recommendations and oversight of local food systems, including:

- Mapping and publicizing local food resources
- Creating new transit routes to connect underserved areas with full-service grocery stores
- Persuading government agencies to purchase from local farmers
- Organizing community gardens and farmers' markets
- Creating a State Food Security Task Force
- Developing guidelines for school nutrition programs
- Promoting direct marketing opportunities such as institutional purchasing
- Developing state-wide marketing initiatives to promote locally grown foods
- Organizing regional conferences and national workshops to promote state and local Food Policy Councils
- Developing regulatory health and safety requirements for food based business
- Supporting legislation on food ingredient labeling
- Providing professional development/nutrition education

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