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CORNER STORES KEY TO REDUCING NORTH CAROLINA'S FOOD DESERTS

RALEIGH – This summer, the N.C. Division of Public Health is launching a “corner store” pilot initiative, working with convenience store owners in low-income communities to find ways to offer healthier, more affordable foods and beverages. Many low-income areas are known as “food deserts” because their residents lack access to healthy food retailers, leading to lower-quality diets and higher obesity rates.

A report recently issued by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) shows that only 11 of every 100 food stores and restaurants in North Carolina offer foods that are considered healthy, such as fruits and vegetables. Studies show that individual food choices are strongly influenced by what foods are available for people to buy.

“Our state, like many others, will struggle to improve its overall health status as long as people lack access and the ability to buy healthy foods to eat,” said State Health Director Dr. Jeff Engel. “We have to make the healthy choice the easy choice.”

The CDC's Children's Food Environment State Indicator Report uses a measure called the Modified Retail Food Environment Index (MRFEI) to show the proportion of supermarkets and produce stands in relation to fast food restaurants and convenience stores across census tracts in the state. A second indicator examines the same data, but focuses on impoverished census tracts.

In North Carolina, the MRFEI rating for the state is 11, slightly better than the national average of 10. Within low income census tracts, North Carolina's measure is 9, compared to 7 nationally. Two counties in North Carolina are already leading the way in identifying and taking action to improve access in their communities.

In 2010, the Mecklenburg County Health Department examined the county for the presence of food deserts, which are neighborhoods, usually low-income, without easy access to full-service grocery stores. An estimated 73,000 residents county-wide were found to be living in food deserts. Thanks to community leaders, work is already underway to bring fresh produce into food deserts through community and school gardens and produce delivery programs.

In Pitt County, researchers led by Dr. Stephanie Jilcott and the Pitt County Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) initiative, have identified “rural food deserts,” many small towns without supermarkets at all. However, these rural food deserts often have local corner stores which may provide a critical link to increasing access to healthy foods.

Jilcott's team is working on examining availability, price and quality of healthy options in corner stores, surveying customers, and interviewing store managers and owners to learn of feasible options to increase healthy food access.

“Our goal in working with corner store merchants is to increase choices for families,” said Dr. Ruth Petersen, head of the Division of Public Health's Chronic Disease and Injury section. “The CDC report highlights what we have suspected for some time but struggle to measure – even when many families want to eat more vegetables, they can't because their choices are so limited.”

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For more information on food deserts, see “From Food Desert to Food Oasis” on the DHHS YouTube Channel.
<http://youtu.be/HqbkQ2d4pQo>

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control provides a guide on Healthy Food Retail assessment for individual communities at <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/HFRassessment.pdf>

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