Healthy: Gwen Flynn

COMMENTARY: Building Demand for Good Food

Gwendolyn Flynn
LAFPC Leadership Board Member & Former Policy Director
of Community Health Councils

Food deserts is an over-used term that typically describes communities lacking access to healthy, quality, and affordable food. Still, resource deficient neighborhoods and communities of color, like South Los Angeles are considered food deserts, as they continue to have fewer supermarkets, farmers markets or other fresh food outlets serving local residents than more affluent areas. This limited access is connected to poor health behaviors and health outcomes for residents living in food desert communities.

In the 1960s, growing economic development in the suburbs of Los Angeles contributed to “supermarket flight”. This phenomenon was caused by the outflow of grocers from urban areas as they followed white middle class shoppers into suburban communities. The absence of these food businesses paralleled other public and private divestment in neighborhoods like South Los Angeles, contributing to lost tax revenues, jobs and access to amenities. The impact of these conditions persist until today despite recent modest public policy gains to transform communities, and correlate with disparities in health behaviors and health outcomes in the area.

The historically complex food access problems affecting communities like South Los Angeles necessitate equally complex, long-term solutions. We must recognize that neighborhood change, behavioral shifts, leading to improved health take time. Questions about the demand for healthy food options in resource poor communities are often predicated on false assumptions about food choice. One may assume that these rates of high unhealthy food consumption derive solely from the choices of community residents-- not recognizing that in most circumstances, their choices are already predetermined by lack of access to healthy alternatives, racially targeted marketing of unhealthy food and a disconnection from their ancestral foodways.

ACCESS: Food markets in under resourced communities are not only limited in service ability, but also often sell lower quality foods at higher prices. Efforts to improve the quality of healthy food options in impacted communities throughout Los Angeles are growing in prevalence, but few data exists to comprehensively track progress in this area. Strategies like the Healthy Neighborhood Market conversions expand and enhance fresh food inventories in small corner stores and liquor stores. These strategies help to improve the quality of food sold in communities, but to truly sustain and scale up these efforts, they must be paired with targeted marketing strategies to rebrand stores as transformed community assets.

TARGETED MARKETING & DEMAND FOR GOOD FOOD: Large multinational food corporations selling unhealthy, heavily processed foods are notorious for targeting resource poor communities of color in their marketing and locations. Although more education and resources are emerging to explain how healthy food can be affordable, changes in food consumption patterns have yet to be captured at a granular level in the data.

Behavior change takes time and individual-level interventions. The allure of old habits, compounded by perpetuation of systemic barriers can still impede an individual from eating healthier even if they intend to change their diet. Strategies such as building self-efficacy, promoting strategic urban planning, and culturally
tailored education have all shown success in helping to bridge the intention-behavior gap. We must continue to uplift comprehensive solutions that not only transform systems that impede healthy nutrition behaviors, but also provide solutions tailored to the individual needs of impacted populations.

ANCESTRAL FOODWAYS: No matter what our background, we can all point to a time in our ancestral history when we had a close connection to land—growing and consuming fresh food. When we weren't growing our own food, and before corner stores and supermarkets, we patronized open markets or bazaars selling fresh edibles. Over time, we have lost our connection to fresh food through the increased industrialization of our food system. We must reclaim our ancestral memory and reconnect ourselves to freshly grown, wholesome, healing foods.

Ultimately, increasing access to grocery stores and other healthy food outlets in communities like South Los Angeles is about more than healthy food. Improving the distribution of healthy food resources is about righting past wrongs of discrimination, divestment and neglect. Better nutrition resources must be based on the belief that everyone deserves to have healthy, affordable and quality food regardless of where they live. It is effective in improving health outcomes, it contributes towards economic parity and a morally just society.