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The Washington Center
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Strategy Brief: Food Deserts

Summary: After analyzing the information gathered by the research team, we identified the presence of food desert in underprivileged neighborhood. The research team looked at food deserts in the United States; in order to have an international perspective, we looked at the United Kingdom's food desert as it is a peer country. We came up with two strategies; the first one is educating communities on healthy eating and gardening. The second strategy is creating a partnership between supermarkets and the government to provide healthy and non-processed food at low prices in food desert areas.

A "food desert" is an urban area in which it is difficult to buy affordable or good-quality fresh food. "Food insecurity" is a term defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that indicates that the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire such food, is limited or uncertain for a household (DC). USDA also reports on "very low food security", which occurs when one or more people in the household were hungry over the course of the year because they couldn't afford enough food. USDA monitors the extent and severity of food insecurity in U.S. households through an annual, nationally representative survey. "Food Hardship" is a term defined by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). A respondent is defined to have experienced food hardship if he or she answers yes to the following question: "Have there been times in the past twelve months when you did not have enough money to buy food that you or your family needed" (DC)?

U.S. Food Deserts

One in seven District households are struggling against hunger and in the District of Columbia, 13.2 percent of households were food insecure in the two year period from 2011-2013 (DC). Over one in five American children do not have access to sufficient food

consistently and there are more than fifty million Americans that are food insecure (Pyke, Para. 1). Many think that to solve the problem of a food desert in the United States is to just get rid of them by adding grocery stores. Whole Foods has been moving into the underserved neighborhoods that are food deserts. The Agricultural Act of 2014 is evidence of this. But research has shown that using a new model of nutritional disparity, differences in consumption are a result of variations in demand, more than supply, and that there are a variety of reasons why people do not eat the same: costs, marketing strategies for different products, and cultural products (Guminsk, Para. 7). This would make over half a billion in federal money would be misdirected because of false ideas. A different strategy is needed to combat the issue of food deserts.

U.K. Food Deserts

The shift of more supermarkets into the suburbs has resulted in the shortage of supermarkets in the city; creating food deserts. In the UK as well as in the US food deserts are prevalent in poorer neighborhoods (Peterkin). The supermarkets are too far apart and they don't have access to reliable transportation to go to supermarkets. Their only option is in their local neighborhood, purchasing unhealthy produces at an expensive rate. "Those living in food deserts and who shopped locally paid almost twice as much as those who frequented supermarkets." (Peterkin). Even when people manage to go to the supermarket, fresh and healthy produces are very expensive. These individuals tend to choose processed and cheap foods. This creates a very unhealthy community and leads to obesity.

Strategy One: Education and Expansion

Mixing education with children, teens, and adults is essential to bridging this gap, along with providing affordable, healthy food, to those that cannot obtain it. One way to do this is to

expand programs like D.C.'s Cultivate the City. Cultivate the City has, at JO Wilson Elementary School, integrated gardening and growing fruit and vegetables into the classroom curricula (Schools). The schools have their own gardens and the organization sells the produce grown at an affordable price. Organizations like Cultivate the City should be expanded on and receive federal funding. They are out in the community. They get volunteers that are in a wide range of ages. The Washington Center, Hayes Senior Wellness Center, along with other elementary schools and restaurants all are working with Cultivate the City. By expanding programs like Cultivate the City, communities are involved in the growing and distribution of produce, with the surplus of it being donated to the homeless, as well as learning the importance of eating healthy foods. This is confronting and handling a lot of the true underlying problems of food deserts, particularly the misconceptions that a lot of people are under.

Strategy Two: Local Markets

There is a contrast between food deserts in the inner cities and the food waste from supermarket. Every year in the UK, retailers and consumers waste 12 billion tons of food (Food Aware Community Interest Company). In the US, 130 billion pounds of food is wasted at a retail and consumer level (USDA). We suggest that instead of the supermarkets throwing away food, they form a partnership with local governments and they open shops to sell food. More often than not, the food that is thrown away by supermarkets is edible. The supermarkets provide healthy food to local communities or governments that buy it from them. Supermarket get an additional revenue and it is a good public relations strategy; they're helping disadvantaged communities. The local communities get fresh produce close to them and at a discounted price. It is not a hand out; people will pay for the food. Instead of using their money to buy unhealthy food, or commute long distances they will have access to fresh produce at a reasonable price. The food will only be bought by people living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Residents of food deserts would have to get to show their ID when they purchase the food, or would have a

membership card saying that they are eligible to buy food at the store. In order to buy food in the store, an individual would have to reside in a food desert or have a low income. It is important to note that these new stores would be located in food deserts and try to minimize the distance between poor communities and supermarkets.

Through education, communities learn the benefit of eating fresh produce and by cultivating their own food they are able to stay healthy. People need ways to sustain themselves throughout the year. By having access to inexpensive fresh produce, food deserts can be slowly eliminated.

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