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Nourishing NYCHA: Food Policy as a Tool for Improving the Well-Being of New York City’s Public Housing Residents

Nevin Cohen
CUNY School of Public Health

Nicholas Freudenberg
CUNY School of Public Health

Craig Willingham
CUNY School of Public Health

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Nourishing NYCHA: Food Policy as a Tool for Improving the Well-Being of New York City’s Public Housing Residents
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By Nevin Cohen, Nick Freudenberg, and Craig Willingham, CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute

In the last few years, NYCHA has attracted the attention of policy makers, developers, elected officials and activists seeking new ways to improve living conditions, enhance public safety, repair an aging infrastructure, encourage economic development and promote health in the city-within-a-city that New York’s public housing constitutes. In this policy brief, we consider another aspect of NYCHA: the food its residents buy, prepare and eat and the role food plays in the health, environment and economy of the city’s NYCHA population. Our goal is to contribute new insights into how NYCHA can use food policy and programs to improve the well-being of its residents and make our city healthier, more self-sufficient, safer and more sustainable. More specifically, we hope to identify what NYCHA is doing now and what it could be doing in the coming years to reduce food insecurity, diet-related health conditions and promote food-related economic development, employment and sustainability.

1-Credit: NYU-CUNY Prevention Research Center, Reference 4
Why Food at NYCHA?

The starting point of any investigation of NYCHA properly begins with the people who live there. What is known about the health status of NYCHA’s public housing community?

Health and Diet in NYCHA Residents

**High death rates from diet-related chronic diseases.** A 2009 study found that compared to other New York City populations, all of whom experienced declines in death rates from all causes between 1991 and 2001, adults over the age of 45 living in public housing in New York City did not experience such declines.\(^1\) In fact, the gap between death rates of middle aged and older adults living in NYCHA facilities and other New Yorkers in this age group widened between 1991 and 2001. Among the leading contributors to the higher death rates among older public housing residents were cardiovascular diseases, certain forms of cancer, and diabetes, all conditions caused in part by diet.

**High SNAP participation rates among older residents.** A 2009 survey of a random sample of 1,000 NYCHA residents over the age of 65 by the NYC Departments of Aging and Health and the CUNY School of Public Health found that 41% of older NYCHA residents reported receiving SNAP benefits (food stamps).\(^2\) Participation in SNAP was three times higher among older NYCHA residents with very low income than among older adults with very low income nationwide.\(^3\)

**High rates of food insecurity.** In the 2009 survey, one in five (20%) older NYCHA residents were food insecure. More than half (56%) of older NYCHA residents who experienced food insecurity did not report receiving food stamps, and 55% of older residents who reported money-related food insufficiency reported not receiving food stamps.

**High rates of fair or poor health and diet-related chronic conditions.** A survey of adults over the age of 35 living in 5 NYCHA facilities in East Harlem conducted in 2014–15 by researchers from the CUNY School of Public Health and the New York City Department of Health found that 46% of respondents reported that they were in fair or poor health, a rate much higher than the 29% of all New York City residents over 35 who reported fair or poor health.\(^4\) This same survey found that 54% of the NYCHA residents surveyed reported having hypertension and 29% reported having diabetes, again much higher than the citywide rates for this age population of 40% for hypertension and 14% for diabetes. More than three-quarters (77%) of NYCHA survey respondents over the age of 35 were overweight or obese, compared to 63% of all New Yorkers of this age. Fourteen percent of the NYCHA respondents reported that their diet was somewhat or very unhealthy and nearly one-third (32%) were food insecure, defined as worried about having enough food for themselves and/or their families.

Citywide, the average NYCHA household brings home an annual income of $23,300. One NYCHA resident who completed the East Harlem survey explained the challenge of eating healthy for families
with low incomes. “I can’t afford the gym or organic food. I can’t afford the healthy food. There is a lot of things I can’t afford”.

These findings show that many NYCHA residents face health challenges and that a significant portion of their health conditions are related to diet. This suggests that improving food environments in and around NYCHA developments could contribute to reducing the burden of chronic diseases and food insecurity.

**NYCHA: Large in Scale and Broadening Scope**

One of the best ways to understand the impact that food policies and programs can have on NYCHA residents is to acknowledge its enormous scale. NYCHA is the largest public housing authority in North America, with 607,000 residents, more people than Las Vegas, Atlanta, or Miami. NYCHA operates 2,500 buildings at 328 sites, occupying 2,472 acres, and 8.1% of the rental housing in NYC. In fact, it functions more like an American city than simply a collection of buildings, with its own police force, administration, and public facilities. Around the country, cities with many fewer residents have articulated food policies and goals, yet until recently food was not on NYCHA’s agenda. This seems like a critical oversight when you consider the high burden of diet-related diseases and food insecurity that affects NYCHA residents.

**Current Food Initiatives at NYCHA**

In recent years NYCHA has begun to expand its use of food-related activities, part of the Authority’s broader attempts over the last decade to reduce operating losses, better maintain and upgrade its infrastructure, reduce energy costs, promote citywide sustainability goals, and improve the quality of life of its residents. These goals are reflected in Building Healthy Communities, a citywide initiative aimed at improving the health of New Yorkers, as well as in other plans and strategies that seek to transform the lives of NYCHA residents.

**Building Healthy Communities**

Building Healthy Communities (BHC) aims to increase opportunities for physical activity, provide better access to healthy, affordable food, and improve public safety to reduce stress and encourage physical activity. It focuses on 12 neighborhoods that face significant health disparities and include large NYCHA developments. BHC was conceived of as a way to secure private philanthropic funding for projects and to link local non-profits, businesses and residents together to ensure success and maximize impact.
The food component of BHC involves building and operating food-producing farms on NYCHA developments, establishing farmers markets, and creating new school gardens. The program’s efforts to increase physical activity involve installing new exercise equipment, creating pedestrian plazas, free exercise classes, and walking, running, and cycling paths. To enable people to feel comfortable using public spaces, BHC also includes designing capital improvements in public spaces to improve public safety, such as by installing lighting and cameras. Similarly, BHC calls for extending the hours of community centers so residents have safe places to socialize and engage in physical activity in the evenings.

Farms at NYCHA

Given NYCHA’s scale, it is not surprising that it has the nation’s largest community gardening program, with approximately 700 gardens tended by residents, more than the city’s own GreenThumb gardening program. NYCHA even has a rooftop hydroponic greenhouse, built atop Arbor House, a new mixed-income building on the grounds of NYCHA’s Forest Houses development in the Morrisania neighborhood of the South Bronx. NYCHA’s newest urban agriculture initiative, Farms at NYCHA, is part of the BHC program, and involves large-scale urban farms at several NYCHA developments. Building on the success of a one-acre farm at Red Hook Houses, which was established in 2013 and operated by the non-profit youth development organization Green City Force, NYCHA established three new farms in 2016: at
Howard Houses in Brownsville, Brooklyn; Bay View Houses in Canarsie, Brooklyn; and Wagner Houses in East Harlem.

Following the tenets of the BHC program, the NYCHA Urban Agriculture Initiative is a partnership among NYCHA, Green City Force, the Fund for Public Health in New York City, the Mayor’s Office, and community gardening groups at each location. Green City Force recruits, trains, and supervises AmeriCorps members who live in NYCHA developments. The “corps” members build the farms, plant and cultivate crops, collect and compost organic waste from residents, operate farm stands that give away the produce to residents, and run educational programs for residents and neighborhood school children. The project aims to distribute approximately 2,000 pounds of fresh produce per farm per season to NYCHA residents, enabling participating residents to eat healthy food and encouraging healthier eating. But the expected outcomes are much broader. The Corps members get job training skills, competencies in environmental work, community organizing, and nutrition education, and as a result are expected to graduate from the program into full time employment or college. The farms are also designed to increase community cohesion and resident engagement, increase safety, and turn underused spaces into active community places, helping with stewardship and long-term sustainability.

2- NYCHA Urban Farm at Bay View Houses in Canarsie, Brooklyn. Photo courtesy of NYCHA.
Food Business Pathways

In recent years, NYCHA has launched several initiatives meant to connect residents to quality workforce opportunities. One of these is the Food Business Pathways Program (FBP), which helps residents transition informal food businesses, those run on the side, out of residences, and without proper licensure, into legal, sustainable businesses. Launched in 2015, this initiative provides NYCHA residents with the training, tools and support to start their own food business. The FBP program combines, services and resources from a wide range of partners to help prospective business owners operationalize their concepts. Those bringing their expertise to this project include the NYC Department of Small Business Services (business training), Hot Bread Kitchen (food business incubation), the NYC Economic Development Corporation (economic development and market research), Citi Community Development (financial support) and Start Small Think Big (pro bono legal advice). The FBP harnesses the resources and know-how of its partners to provide NYCHA residents a streamlined and inclusive conduit toward entrepreneurship by helping to remove some of the financial stress, confusion, and operational guesswork faced by first time business owners. To date, 72 program graduates have formed businesses. Programs like the FBP help level the playing field for NYCHA residents who might not otherwise be able to scale their food business, brings them into the formal economy, and helps create new good food jobs for low-income New Yorkers.

Food Security and Meal Programs

NYCHA coordinates several longstanding programs that provide meals and other food resources for residents in need. These programs contribute to NYCHA’s overall food program strategies by addressing immediate, long and short-term meal gaps. Utilizing financial support from the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) NYCHA provides meals to children and teenagers at 191 licensed community facilities throughout New York City. Approximately 5,000 children ages 6 to 12 and 1,400 teenagers receive a healthy nutritious meal through this program per day. Similarly, NYCHA works with the New York City Department of Education to host the Summer Lunch Program. In 2016 this program provided approximately 2,300 breakfasts and 2,500 lunches to youth ages 0-18 at NYCHA sites daily throughout the summer school vacation. These programs run parallel to range of meals programs targeting older residents at various NYCHA senior centers, which also includes Meals on Wheels and similar senior feeding programs. Furthermore, NYCHA partners with City Harvest on its Mobile Market Program to distribute free produce at 8 locations in all five boroughs. With the help of community volunteers produce is distributed twice a month; giving out 280,000 pounds of produce to over 7,250 participants per month. These programs provide a much needed resource for NYCHA residents impacted by issues of food insecurity.6
Food as a Vehicle for Community Engagement

Several groups working in NYCHA facilities, from settlement houses and community development corporations to youth and food justice organizations have brought food-related activities to NYCHA residents. For example, United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) works to engage residents of low-income communities and of public housing projects in improving their communities.

In 2015, UNH created the Building Healthy NYCHA Communities through Food initiative with the goal of engaging public housing residents in defining, driving and leading activities that will improve the diet and well-being of people living in these communities. Three settlement houses and NYCHA communities were selected as partners: Jacob Riis Settlement House and Queensbridge Houses in Long Island City, Queens Community House and Pomonok Houses in Flushing, and SCAN-NY and Lehman Houses in East Harlem. All three sites had demonstrated a desire, intent and capacity to create intergenerational, community-driven, multi-layered healthy food programming at their sites. The programs use food as an
organizing tool, bringing families and communities together around common issues of interest, and also

socially, resulting in other health and community development benefits. Across the three sites, healthy food strategies work to increase access to fresh and affordable healthy foods; educate residents on nutrition and healthy food preparation; develop resident leadership around healthy food education and advocacy; and form partnerships with NYCHA, resident committees, local organizations and institutions, citywide agencies, and corporate partners.

Gentrification, Food Access & Future Challenges

As many New York City neighborhoods become attractive to higher-income families moving in from other neighborhoods and states, families living in NYCHA developments are experiencing the effects of gentrification, often defined as an increase in the proportion of higher-income residents moving into the
area. Prior research shows that gentrification can bring both positive and negative changes to longer-term residents. How do the neighborhood changes associated with gentrification affect food environments in communities within NYCHA facilities?

In 2015, Abt Associates, the NYU Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, and several community partners examined the response of NYCHA residents to gentrification. The study found that two-thirds of NYCHA residents live in public housing developments surrounded by census blocks with an average income that is greater than the NYC median ($51,865), showing that most NYCHA resident live in communities with high income inequality. This economic “integration” brought both benefits (e.g., better schools and lower crime rates) and costs to NYCHA residents. Ethnographic investigations in three neighborhoods found that that NYCHA residents were often dissatisfied with local food choices, finding the quality of food low in the stores they could afford and the prices too high in the food stores that sold higher-quality food.

As New York City develops strategies to counteract the adverse housing and economic consequences of gentrification, it will also need to develop new ways to prevent harmful changes in food environments in gentrifying neighborhoods where many NYCHA residents live. In late 2015 the Pathmark Supermarket on 125th Street and Lexington Avenue, one of the area’s largest, shut down, depriving many local NYCHA and other residents of a source of relatively healthy, relatively affordable food. In mid-2017, a new Whole Foods Store will open on 125th Street just a few blocks away, raising concerns among Harlem residents about whether it will be affordable and welcoming to low-income residents, including those living in NYCHA. In order to ensure access to healthy and affordable food, more needs to be done to address the challenges of income inequality, affordable housing and affordable commercial rents to allow existing residents, food retailers and other business owners to thrive along with new residents.

NYCHA Food Going Forward

NextGen NYCHA

NextGen NYCHA is a 10-year plan to get the Authority on sound financial footing, and to improve the quality of life for NYCHA residents. It was crafted in response to years of declining federal funding, deferred maintenance and hurricane damage from Sandy estimated to cost $17 billion, outdated and unsustainable heating and energy systems, and inefficiencies that have led to higher administrative costs and unnecessarily low rent collections. The programs contained within the NextGen NYCHA plan aim to improve facilities, reduce crime, and provide opportunities for its residents to improve their health through access to healthy food, physical activity, social services, improved workforce opportunities (FBP is part of this strategy), and closer engagement with their neighbors.

One strategy in the NextGen plan (Strategy #3) is to fully lease the more than two million square feet of non-residential ground floor spaces in its developments, which currently house approximately 150...
retailers and professional services. By being more deliberate in the way it handles its commercial spaces NYCHA will improve opportunities for food retailers and others to lease at its sites.\textsuperscript{9} To expand the spaces in NYCHA developments available for commercial use, Manhattan Borough President Brewer has recommended rezoning existing residential zones with commercial overlays to permit more ground floor retail space in NYCHA properties.\textsuperscript{10} And a report from the Manhattan Institute recommends that NYCHA pursue new supermarket development on underused NYCHA land.\textsuperscript{11}

The NextGen plan also called for updating the Authority’s design guidelines for renovations and new construction to modernize apartments, improve sustainability and safety, and improve residents’ quality of life. These new design guidelines, which were released in 2016, call for improved kitchen spaces with more counter space, larger cupboards, energy efficient appliances, and improved ventilation.\textsuperscript{12} Kitchen renovations will make it easier and more pleasant to cook in NYCHA apartments and may encourage families to prepare meals at home more often.

**An Agenda for Nourishing NYCHA**

NYCHA can and should continue to structure its food projects to function as a way to transform the health and economic fortunes of its residents. The key to NYCHA’s success in using food as a vehicle for change lies in ensuring a varied approach that is both realistic and comprehensive. The work happening now under BHC and NextGEN helps move the needle on poverty and food access issues, but needs to be expanded.

To spark discussion and encourage the development of a focused policy agenda, we close by proposing some steps that NYCHA and the New York City government could take to build on its expanding food focus and to become a model of food program and policy integration for other public housing authorities around the country.

1. Strengthen and expand agricultural projects with a focus on extending reach and impact to a larger proportion of the NYCHA population.
2. Create sustainable model programs for training NYCHA residents to become food service workers who can prepare the institutional food served in many child care, senior citizen and youth programs located within or around NYCHA facilities.
3. Strengthen, expand and evaluate training programs to prepare NYCHA residents with an entrepreneurial spirit to start catering businesses and mobile food carts that can bring more healthy and affordable food to New York City’s low-income neighborhoods.
4. Strengthen or create, in partnership with community organizations, food action centers within NYCHA facilities that can promote recycling and composting, offer cooking demonstrations and classes, enroll residents in public food benefit programs and open non-profit cafes that bring residents together to prepare and eat healthy food. These centers should encourage intergenerational programs that build on the knowledge and experience of NYCHA residents and
make special efforts to reach males and females in every age group, including young children, teens, working adults and older people.

5. Provide incentives and subsidies to encourage food retailers, farmers markets and non-profit developers to open food outlets within NYCHA’s retail spaces, offering long-term, affordable leases in exchange for offering healthier, more affordable food.

Link food and health care initiatives within NYCHA. No NYCHA residents will benefit more from improvements in food environments than those who suffer from or are at risk of diet-related chronic diseases. By ensuring that the many chronic disease management initiatives being implemented in New York City and within NYCHA include helping their patients find affordable, healthy food and by supporting improvements in food retail, these programs can magnify their impact.

References