

# FOOD DESERTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

A food desert is an area **low in income** and **low in access to healthy food**.<sup>1</sup> Food deserts have **poverty rates of at least 20 percent** or a median family income at or below 80 percent of the state median. To qualify as a food desert, an area also must have at least 500 people or **33 percent of residents who live** further than 1 mile from a grocery store in urban areas, or **further than 10 miles from a grocery store in rural areas**.<sup>1</sup>

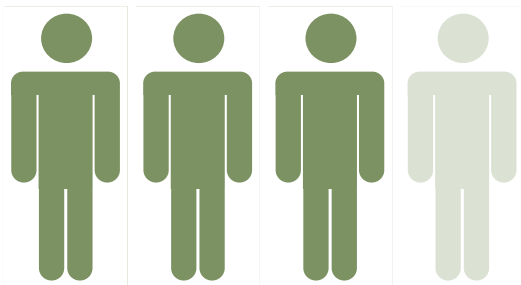
**349** Food deserts in NC<sup>4</sup>

With steep barriers to healthy food, it can be difficult for residents of food deserts to make health-conscious food decisions.<sup>1</sup> The lack of fresh food availability has debilitating public health consequences.<sup>2</sup>

Food deserts contribute to growing epidemics of **obesity** and other food-related disease.<sup>2</sup> Without access to markets with fresh options, many residents turn to food dense in calories—often called “empty calorie” foods—which are readily available at fast food restaurants and convenience stores.<sup>3</sup>

*“People tend to make food choices based on the food outlets that are available in their immediate neighborhood”*  
—Walker (2010)<sup>3</sup>

High correlation exists between residency in food deserts and obesity.<sup>10</sup>



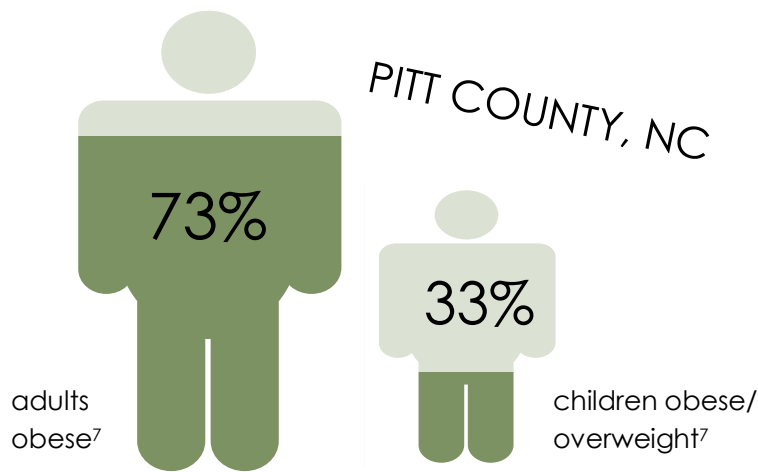
One in four NC children is food insecure<sup>5</sup>



Nearly 16 percent of NC residents are food insecure<sup>14</sup>



Alcohol and cigarettes: most common products in Pitt County, NC corner stores<sup>6</sup>



Residents of food deserts are<sup>1</sup>....



Less likely to own a car

More likely to live in poverty



# What can be done?

Food environments across the nation vary greatly;

yet, one solution seems successful in many contexts:



## HEALTHY CORNER STORE INTERVENTIONS:

- Investment of public money into various promotions of healthy foods in preexisting corner stores in food desert areas<sup>8</sup>
- Interventions include marketing techniques, stocking healthy foods, refrigeration for produce, and extra cash inflow to participating stores<sup>9</sup>
- Bipartisan solution to food insecurity<sup>12</sup>
- Adaptable to both urban and rural contexts<sup>8</sup>
- Prior research in Baltimore, MD found significant and positive impacts of the intervention on sales of promoted healthy foods<sup>11</sup>
- In the same study, market owners demonstrated “significantly higher self-efficacy for stocking some healthy foods” (Song, et al., 2009)<sup>11</sup>
- Cooperation with federal and state means-tested public benefits programs, including SNAP and WIC<sup>8</sup>



## HEALTHY FOOD SMALL RETAILER PROGRAM

Proposals for funding for healthy corner store initiatives have been alive in the North Carolina General Assembly (NCGA) since the beginning of the 2015 session.<sup>13</sup> **In June 2016, the NCGA signed House Bill 1030 into law, which included \$250,000 in funding for a pilot version of the Healthy Food Small Retailer Program (HFSRP),** an innovative method for tackling rural food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> The HFSRP reimburses owners of corner stores in food deserts for purchases they make related to refrigeration or food stocking equipment, to encourage produce supply.<sup>2</sup> The store owners must be willing to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) vouchers, because the program specifically **targets low-income communities.**<sup>2</sup> Researchers, primarily Pitts et al., have been evaluating pilot programs in Pitt County, NC from the initial \$250,000 funding.<sup>10</sup> Results have been mixed so far<sup>11:15</sup>, but legislators of both parties are still convinced that the HFSRP is worth the investment, shown by renewed funding of \$250,000 for 2018.<sup>16</sup>

**In March of 2017, North Carolina state Representatives Yvonne Lewis Holley (D), Donny Lambeth (R), Pat McElraft (R), and Amos Quick (D) sponsored House Bill 387, entitled “Corner Store Initiative,” which would provide \$1 million in recurring funding to the HFSRP.**<sup>13</sup> The bill highlights the national obesity epidemic as the primary motivator behind public funding for healthy corner store initiatives.<sup>12</sup> Small food retailers can receive up to **\$5,000 for purchasing and installing refrigeration, display, or other necessary equipment for stocking nutrient-dense foods.**<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, they can receive up to \$100 “to offset initial expenses related to participating in food desert relief efforts.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, small food retailers can receive up to **\$1,500 in funds to support nutrition education, employee hiring, or technical or business assistance in promoting healthy eating.**<sup>12</sup>



# NCGA: More Action!



Despite years of bipartisan support, HB 387 stalled in the House Agriculture Committee in April, 2017.<sup>13</sup> In May, 2017, the Senate went back and forth on whether to include funding for the HFSRP, and whether the amount should be \$250,000 or the full \$1 million.<sup>13</sup>

## The North Carolina General Assembly should:

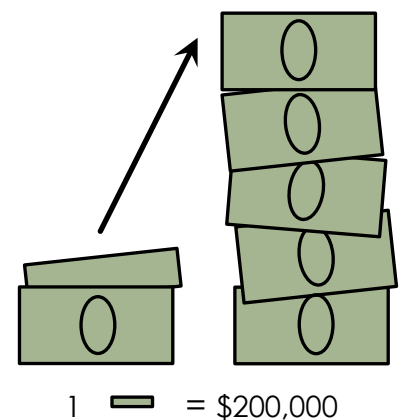
### 1. Prioritize issues relating to food deserts and to obesity, especially in rural areas, for the 2019 policy agenda.

Members of the NCGA must realize the gravity of both food insecurity and obesity in North Carolina, especially in rural counties like Pitt County. Constituents should hold their representatives accountable for the prominence of these issues. HB 387 should stall in committee no longer.

### 2. Commit to **\$1 million** in annual funding for the HFSRP, at least through 2022.

The HFSRP pilot program is in its infancy and needs a small injection of resources to continue implementation and evaluation at a scalable level. Pitts et al. and other funded researchers should receive a renewed grant from the state to continue evaluating the program. Increased funding should expand the program and program evaluation beyond its focus on Pitt County.

HFSRP Budget Recommendation



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