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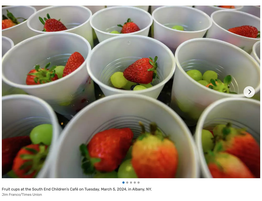
Food deserts persist as Congress seeks to help

A federal bill aims to eliminate food deserts with funds for a program that incentivizes grocery stores to establish more locations in underserved areas.

By Jaileen Ventura
March 7, 2024



Fruit cups at the South End Children's Café on Tuesday, March 5, 2024, in Albany, NY.
Jim Franco/Times Union

WASHINGTON — By the time Tracie Killar was 17, she said much of the food she ate contained too much sugar and there were health consequences from it. Killar, who has lived in upstate New York for more than 50 years, grew up in Albany's South End area, a food desert where most of her meals were highly processed and unhealthy.

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"I definitely did not grow up eating healthy food," said Killar, the founder and director of the South End Children's Cafe, a program that provides healthy food to the community. "We were pretty limited to what we ate and we had a lot of food that was highly processed, high in sugar, high in salt content."

U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand visited the cafe last month, a few weeks after introducing legislation in Congress that aims to eliminate food deserts by allocating federal funds for a program that incentivizes grocery stores to establish more locations in underserved areas. The funding also would support projects that improve food accessibility. Some food industry experts and advocates stress that while it's a good starting point, other issues that can impact access to nutritious food supplies, including low wages and expensive housing, should be ignored.

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"It is a holistic set of issues that need to be addressed," said Ryan Healy, an advocacy manager at Feeding New York State, an affiliate of the Feeding America charity that's seeking to end hunger in the U.S. "We need to make sure that grocers and healthy produce are available to the community. At the same time, we need to make sure that there are adequate wages for folks in the community who then have the resources to buy groceries at some of these outlets."

He added the organization strongly supports Gillibrand's legislation and views it as an important first step.

The legislation, dubbed the Healthy Food Financing Initiative Reauthorization Act, would provide $50 million in annual funding to the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, a U.S. Department of Agriculture program that provides loans and grants for grocery stores to establish more locations. Gillibrand and more than a dozen senators also requested that the House and Senate appointment spending committees allocate $25 million to the legislation in the upcoming government funding bill.

"What makes the Healthy Food Financing Initiative unique is that we know it works. It's already supported the establishment or operation of over 150 grocers in underserved communities across the country, including one right here in the Capital Region," Gillibrand said in a statement.

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In 2021, the program awarded a grant to Capital Roots, a nonprofit in Troy working to increase access to affordable and fresh food in the region. Grant awards ranged from $20,000 to $200,000 that year.

Gillibrand said the Healthy Food Financing Initiative is chronically underfunded, which makes it difficult to meet every community's needs, and that she hopes to get it included in this year's farm bill.

The 2018 farm bill, formally known as the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, is legislation that addresses agricultural and food issues. It expired last year but President Joe Biden signed a law extending it through September.

Lawmakers requested another $25 million for the program, which has $1 million allocated in the Senate. But there is no funding in the House version of the bill.

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Some legislators, citing a report from Cidbank, a financial services provider for the U.S. rural economy, said "rural communities are particularly impacted by high rates of food insecurity with 87 percent of the counties with the highest rates of food insecurity in the United States being designated as rural."

Although New York City isn't considered rural, Healy, from Feeding New York State, said that food deserts are there, too — and in other urban and suburban areas. People don't have access to affordable and healthy food in various parts of New York, including some upstate areas, he said.

"They're prominent in New York City. We see them in some of the upstate towns and regions ... Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester ... [and] here in Albany, the South End is a prime example," Healy said.

In the South End, after one of the neighborhood's two grocery stores, South End Grocery, closed last year, a Market 32 is the only option within a mile of some parts of the community. It's even farther for others in that area.

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At the South End Children's Cafe, Killar said some children have been eating there five days a week for up to eight years. The cafe, which is funded through individual, local, state and federal donations, as well as grants and fundraisers, serves 120 dinners daily, with 40 children arriving in-person after school, Killar said. Remaining meals are sent home to the children's families or placed in outdoor cupboards for neighbors.

"Everybody deserves healthy food," Killar said after Gillibrand's visit last month. "And you know, the fact that there are people that are all over — the South End, Albany, New York and the United States — that are working on food insecurity issues is just really great."

Gillibrand said in a recent post on X that she was proud to see how The South End Children's Cafe is "addressing youth hunger while keeping kids engaged in afterschool activities," and that she will "keep pushing for more resources for programs like these."

In New York, the rate of food insecurity among adults across the state's 62 counties was almost 25 percent in 2023, according to the state Department of Health. In the Capital Region, Albany fell below the statewide rate at 21 percent, but was slightly higher than the food insecurity average of some Capital Region counties.

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Food insecurity rate in New York's Capital Region, 2023

The rate of food insecurity among adults in Albany was below the statewide rate, 24.9%, at about 21%, but was slightly higher than the food insecurity average, 19.4%, of the counties in the Capital Region.

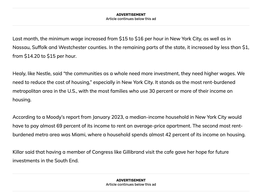

Chart: Jaileen Ventura • Source: New York Department of Health • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

In 2022, more than 44 million people in the U.S. lived in households that were unable to get affordable, nutritious food at some point because of a lack of resources and accessibility. The prevalence of food insecurity was significantly higher for certain groups, including women living alone, households with children, Hispanic households and Black, non-Hispanic households, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Nationwide, households experiencing any level of food insecurity increased by 3.5 million from 2021 to 2022, according to the department. For households facing very low food security where members ate less and skipped meals, it increased by 1.7 million.

U.S. household food insecurity from 2021 to 2022

Households experiencing any level of food insecurity, including low and very low security, increased from 2021 to 2022. Households with very low food security levels also increased.

Chart: Jaileen Ventura • Source: USDA • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

While the majority of U.S. households — 87 percent — had access to food at all times in 2022, almost 13 percent grappled with food insecurity. Households experienced either low food security, where families were able to avoid disrupting their eating patterns only by relying on food assistance programs, or very low food security, where members ate less, with disrupted eating patterns.

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But Eileen Kennedy, a professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, said percentages can be deceiving.

"They're significant numbers, but they're low percentages," she said, referring to the roughly 13 percent dealing with food insecurity, which is about 17 million households nationwide.

Marion Nestle, a former nutrition and public health professor at New York University, said that food insecurity "affects absolutely everything."

"If you don't have enough money for food, you're going to buy the cheapest food you possibly can and you're going to cut corners on other things," Nestle said. "So, I mean, the big issues are food and rent, health care, transportation. Something's got to give if you don't have enough money to cover all of those things."

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Last month, the minimum wage increased from $15 to $16 per hour in New York City, as well as in Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester counties. In the remaining parts of the state, it increased by less than $1, from $14.20 to $15 per hour.

Healy, like Nestle, said "the communities as a whole need more investment, they need higher wages. We need to reduce the cost of housing," especially in New York City. It stands as the most rent-burdened metropolitan area in the U.S., with the most families who use 30 percent or more of their income on housing.

According to a Moody's report from January 2023, a median-income household in New York City would have to pay almost 69 percent of its income to rent an average-price apartment. The second most rent-burdened metro area was Miami, where a household spends almost 42 percent of its income on housing.

Killar said that having a member of Congress like Gillibrand visit the cafe gave her hope for future investments in the South End.

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"It is a community full of people who would respond to anybody's needs in a heartbeat," Killar said. "It is a community that also has been, I think, built on love and care and the support of beautiful people."

Juliann Ventura is a reporter for Medill News Service.

March 7, 2024

By Juliann Ventura

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