The price of admission: Access to food denied for some

By Cielo Lutino

Some rankings aren't worth their boasting rights. The hungriest state in the nation? According to the Food Security Institute, that's Oregon. How about second in unemployment? Oregon again, the Oregonian reports. And while it seems incredible that the hungriest state could also be the fattest this side of the Mississippi, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention awards Oregon the tag. Combined, these statistics touch on the increasingly vital and complex issue of food access or how we acquire food equitably. From the number and variety of grocery stores in an area to the transit options for reaching those stores and the income levels needed to shop at them, policymakers and community members are growing more and more attuned to the disparities in the ways we feed ourselves.

Take the experience of Bill Beamer with the African American Health Coalition. Where he lives in northwest Portland, Beamer can walk to at least three different grocery stores and pop in at any number of restaurants. During the workday, it's a different story. At his office in north Portland, the nearest grocery is over twenty blocks away, and dining out means choosing from a slender menu of nearby eateries. If Beamer lived where he works, his food choices would be more limited, especially since he doesn't own a car. Thirty minutes and two buses are required just to get to the grocery, never mind the trip back. "It'd be quicker for me to order a Domino's pizza," he says. "I'd have to make a more concerted effort to eat healthy if I lived here."

"Here" happens to be north Portland, where groceries are few and literally far between, as Beamer testifies. And when "here" is east of SE 92nd Avenue, it means no community gardens, illustrated by the Portland-Multnomah Food Policy Council's (FPC) efforts to map possible sources of food in the county in 2003.

But location doesn't affect the quantity of food sources alone; it also affects their quality. The FPC discovered as much when the same mapping project showed higher concentrations of convenience stores in low-income neighborhoods, suggesting that area residents there are exposed to non-nutritious food more regularly than their higher-income counterparts. Such conclusions worry Wendy Rankin of the Chronic Disease and Prevention sector of the Multnomah County Health Department who believes that "environmental factors impact people's ability to eat and to eat well."

"We make a mistake if we just tell people, 'Eat healthy food,'" she continues. "We're forgetting the environment in which people operate, whether it's an infant who isn't being breast fed to an older person who doesn't have access to healthy food because they're isolated."

Beamer agrees, "It's much easier to take on healthy behavioral habits when you have more choices and options to shop for healthier food."

It's also much easier to shop for healthy food with a full wallet, which is harder to come by in Oregon's economic climate today. Although it's showing signs of improvement, gains in employment are modest, and Oregon retains one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, the Oregonian reported in January. Mix the state's shabby employment figures together with the region's high cost of housing and the population's general debt burden, and the rising need for emergency food services recently documented by the Oregon Food Bank comes as no surprise. Unfortunately, supplies haven't kept pace with demand, and at least one member of the FPC cites the war as a cause. "Before the Iraq war, private organizations like churches could go to the USDA and buy food for social services at a lower cost," says Lou Boston. "Now the food is a lot more expensive because the supply is going to the war."

Lamentable indeed but Debra Lippoldt, executive director of Growing Gardens, a nonprofit building gardens in partnership with other organizations and community volunteers, cautions against a reliance on emergency food services. "The emergency food system mitigates a problem rather than solves it," she says. "It's not a permanent solution to a food access problem."

Unattended, the problem kills. "The factors that influence chronic disease come down to mitigating the use of tobacco, promoting physical activity, and food access," says Rankin. "How to access affordable food is a critical piece of attending to chronic disease."

Policymakers and community members are slowly waking to the alarm sounded by the issue of food access. In 2002, prompted by faith-based organizations and local activists, the City of Portland and Multnomah County jointly established the FPC, which has already advanced food-related issues on at least two fronts. Due to its efforts, Multnomah County Corrections, food vendor Aramark, and local wholesaler Rinella Produce increased purchases of fresh foods from local farmers who netted over $30,000 that would have otherwise gone to food providers outside the region. The FPC also conducted its first community food assessment last year when it looked at access issues for the Lents neighborhood. The growing popularity of farmers markets, the City's active community gardening program, and the region's arable lands bode well for food access struggles, but there's still more to address. To facilitate a public conversation on this issue, Portland State University has organized "Planning To Eat," a panel discussion with representatives from the city planning, business, and public health communities, among others, at noon, March 2, at the campus Urban Center. Ecumenical Ministries is also planning an April follow-up to its well-attended workshop, "From Farms to Families: A Community Gathering to Address Food Access For All," that was held on February 19. The follow-up workshop will focus on solutions, and interested parties should call Ecumenical Ministries at (503) 221-1054.

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