Improving Access to Food in Low-Income Communities: An Investigation of Three Bay Area Neighborhoods

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Executive Summary

Prepared for
the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund
by California Food Policy Advocates

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Improving Access to Food in Low-Income Communities:
An Investigation of Three Bay Area Neighborhoods – January 1996

In September 1994, The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund engaged California Food Policy Advocates to conduct an investigation identifying barriers to nutritious and affordable food experienced by people living in San Francisco Bay Area low-income communities. The investigation resulted in an extensive report and set of recommendations, of which this is the executive summary. This report offers a conceptual framework for future grantmaking activity at the Fund, and for others who share similar interests and concerns.

The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund is a family foundation based in San Francisco that seeks to enrich the lives of people living in San Francisco and Alameda Counties.

California Food Policy Advocates is a nonprofit public policy and advocacy organization whose mission is to improve the health and well being of low-income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious, affordable and safe food.

Kenneth Hecht and Edward Steinman prepared this report.

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Despite an abundance of food in our country and in our state, increasing numbers of Californians are suffering from hunger — defined as the condition in which the level of nutrition necessary for good health is not being met because of a lack of access to food. According to an April 7, 1995, report, commissioned by the California Senate Office of Research (SOR Report), “The vast majority of Californians with income at or below the poverty line experience actual hunger caused by lack of resources to obtain food — approximately five million people, including two million children and over a quarter million seniors.” In view of the legislative proposals currently working their way through Congress, aimed at reducing significantly federal spending on income and nutrition assistance, these numbers are likely to increase substantially in the next few years.

Hunger is capable of producing progressive handicaps — impairments which can persist throughout life. Direct and adverse consequences can affect a child’s health, education and future employability, and there are demonstrable costs to society in each instance. The severe impact of hunger upon a child’s opportunity to learn is well documented in a series of recent studies, many of which were compiled in the “Statement on the Link Between Nutrition and Cognitive Development in Children,” an important report published in 1994 by the Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy at Tufts University School of Nutrition.

As the Tufts Center report points out, “[e]ven nutritional deficiencies of a relatively short-term nature influence children’s behavior, ability to concentrate, and to perform complex tasks.” In addition to profound medical and educational consequences, the psychological impact of hunger and the fear of hunger experienced by children who are deprived of food also produce low self-esteem which can result in anti-social or delinquent behavior. The costs of hunger are far too high — and they are avoidable in this, the agriculturally richest of all nations.

The principal reason why people in the United States lack adequate food is because they have insufficient income. This state recently has experienced a deep and prolonged recession in which jobs were lost and wages eroded; at the same time, housing costs have continued to climb and public benefits have shrunk — over the past four years, Aid to Families with Dependent Children grants have been cut by 14 percent. Over three million Californians currently receive food stamps, while nearly the same number must resort to emergency food services. These conditions underline the dysfunction from which our food system suffers.
This report seeks to describe and analyze that dysfunction as it manifests itself in three low-income neighborhoods in San Francisco and Oakland. It does not examine the causes nor scope of poverty in those communities nor does it intend to estimate or describe the prevalence of hunger. These measures are amply documented in a 1995 report on hunger and the problem of food “insecurity” commissioned by the California Senate Office of Research and, in 1993 and 1994, reports on hunger from the Alameda County Community Food Bank and San Francisco Food Bank, respectively. Rather, this report treats poverty, hunger and a lack of nutritious, affordable food in low-income neighborhoods as givens and seeks to answer the following three questions: what and how people in low-income communities eat; what obstacles they experience in accessing nutritious food at reasonable prices; and what potential solutions there are to overcome these barriers.

It also should be noted that this investigation of community food security was not under-taken in response to the current Congressional proposals to dismantle the federal nutrition programs. Similarly, the recommendations presented here are not intended to, nor do they, provide a substitute for the large-scale, cost-effective and dependable nutrition assistance programs upon which millions of low-income Americans have relied. However, the timing of this Congressional debate and of other events in many communities across the country lends this report special interest.

This report is based on the concept of community food security — defined by the Life Sciences Research Office of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (and widely adopted nationally) as:

[A]ccess by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life and includes at a minimum: (a) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods; and (b) the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (e.g., without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing and other coping strategies).

The concept rests upon a systems approach and a community development model. It is prevention-oriented and ultimately seeks to create partnerships among communities, businesses and government to ensure the access of all people at all times to nutritious, affordable food. While this report focuses on three specific neighborhoods, its ideas and approaches can be extrapolated to other low-income communities in the Bay Area and beyond.
Methodology

The project consisted of three distinct components: selecting the sites, conducting extensive research in the communities selected, and identifying and analyzing models and systems of food delivery in communities across the country.

The four primary criteria employed in site selection were income/poverty, race/ethnicity, the degree of community organization and replicability. Subsidiary consideration was given to such demographic characteristics as age, household composition and transportation, as well as to the circumstances of food acquisition for residents of the neighborhoods. Two communities were chosen in San Francisco: Bayview/Hunters Point, a sparsely populated, predominantly African American neighborhood, and the Tenderloin, which is densely populated and ethnically mixed. One community was selected in Oakland: Fruitvale, a slightly less impoverished area with a large Latino and mixed population.

The second and most important element of the study was the research and on-the-ground work in the three neighborhoods. Initial interviews and meetings were conducted with key neighborhood leaders and organizations and then with government and non-profit agency officials, members of the food industry with facilities in the community and, finally, with a great many residents representing distinct sub-populations within the neighborhoods. Eleven focus groups and 45 resident surveys and interviews were conducted in the three neighborhoods, and market basket surveys were commissioned to compare food prices at a variety of stores within two neighborhoods against supermarkets in nearby areas.

The third portion of the study consisted of a comprehensive review of the literature, plus meetings and interviews with academics, activists and experts around the country who are engaged in any aspect of community food security systems.

Description of the Sites

The Tenderloin: Densely populated and multicultural, the Tenderloin symbolizes the deterioration and social problems that plague most American inner-cities. With an area of only one-half square mile and 25,000 residents, the population density is nearly 300 times greater than the rest of San Francisco. Previously a neighborhood of aging, single white men, the Tenderloin in recent decades has received increasing numbers of single African American men, Southeast-Asian families, and in the last few years, Latino families. It is a poor community: the mean income of $16,831 is less than half the city’s.

There is no supermarket in the Tenderloin, but stores selling prepared foods occupy the most commercial space in the area, and small stores selling groceries are next. The Heart of the City Farmers’ Market is the most heavily relied upon
food resource, and there is a concentration of emergency food sites — including the city’s two largest soup kitchens and a multitude of pantry programs. Substantial reliance also is placed upon food stamps, but their value is diminished for elders because they cannot be used in restaurants.

**Bayview/Hunters Point:** This isolated industrial and residential community has long been home to some of San Francisco’s poorest residents. African-Americans now make up 62 percent of the population (it was 73 percent ten years before), while the area has seen large increases in other ethnic groups. Living conditions have worsened in the last decade: poverty has swollen from 25 to 30 percent of the population, female-headed households have grown from 31 to 40 percent, and 26 percent of the residents (versus 10 percent for the city) rely on public assistance.

Bayview/Hunters Point contains one discount supermarket, but it is inaccessible by public transit from most of the neighborhood. Otherwise, the area mainly has convenience stores, liquor stores with some food and fast food outlets — and none of them carries much in the way of nutritious food. Participation in the Food Stamp Program is high, although there are few places selling food in Hunters Point for which the food stamps can be used. There is a free hot meal offered by a different church group every day of the week, but lunch is the only meal provided.

**Fruitvale:** Fruitvale is an older, stable, family community which used to be heavily Mexican American. These days it is ethnically mixed, with other Latino populations, African-Americans, whites, and Southeast Asians. The median income is well below that of surrounding Oakland; many of the industrial jobs previously held by residents have disappeared.

There are nearly 100 small food and drink establishments in the area. Nonetheless, nearly 80 percent of the neighborhood’s potential $44,500,000 in food sales is lost to bordering trade areas. In other words, most Fruitvale residents do most of their shopping outside of the Fruitvale district. A variety of community studies and surveys over the years have identified a supermarket as the most prominent deficiency and desire in the area. Currently, when residents cannot find transportation to the bordering supermarkets — or, even when they can, between trips to these stores — they are compelled to patronize the local convenience stores, where the food is scanty, in poor condition, often culturally unfamiliar, and exorbitant in price.

**How People Currently Shop, Store, Prepare and Eat**

**General Description:** Where people shop depends on three variables: price, location and selection. In the three neighborhoods, the residents’ incomes — substantially shrunken by inflation, loss of jobs, higher rents and severely cut public benefits — present the biggest barrier to acquisition of nutritious food.
The absence of accessible supermarkets deprives these residents of their best chance to have a good selection of nutritious food at reasonable prices. In fact, the United States Department of Agriculture sometimes uses the presence of a supermarket in a community as a proxy for the availability of affordable, nutritious food in that area. Inspection of the local convenience stores discloses that many of them are dirty, unappealing and mainly function as liquor stores. They carry little healthy food, charge high prices and offer credit (which brings problems as well as benefits).

The increasing prevalence of single-parent families and working mothers has exacerbated the loss of nutrition education and cooking skills, thus increasing dependence upon fast foods and other non-nutritious options. Emergency food programs are important to the lower-income families, but dissatisfaction with the quality of the food — as well as the perceived lack of respect for the programs' clients and the difficulties and long waits involved in obtaining meals — means that these programs are not at all well regarded. Pantry programs often are hobbled by restrictions on frequency of their use, a limitation that helps mask the chronic nature of most food insecurity these days.

The Tenderloin: Six focus groups, each with a separate sub-population, and other investigation reveal that Tenderloin residents do most of their shopping at convenience stores in the area, which they find both expensive and unsatisfactory. The broad selection and affordability of food at the Heart of the City Farmers’ Market lead to its wide use and appreciation. Southeast Asians and Latinos, in particular, seek culturally based foods, for which they often need to take cumbersome trips to other parts of San Francisco. The Tenderloin contains the city’s main soup kitchens, which are used as necessary — but are not popular. Heavy reliance upon cash assistance programs fails to provide Tenderloin residents with sufficient income to purchase an adequate diet.

Bayview/Hunters Point: Relying primarily upon surveys, community meetings and interviews, the study found that, although there is a supermarket located in the area, residents derive little use from it, mainly because it is located away from most of the population and public transit is difficult. Most residents have little choice but to shop in the neighborhood, but — in parts of the district — there are no food stores at all. Where they do exist, they offer poor food at exorbitant cost.

Fruitvale: Focus groups, meetings, interviews and recent market studies confirm that those residents who can, do most of their food shopping out of the area, relying upon transportation from friends and family members to travel to supermarkets located around the periphery of Fruitvale. While everyone does some marketing in the neighborhood, mainly from small convenience stores, those stores are viewed as taking advantage of their location to charge too much for food of poor quality. The federal food programs, operating in child care facilities, schools and congregate senior centers, are well used and appreciated.
Problems and Barriers

The corner stores are pervasive throughout the three neighborhoods studied, and, because of their proximity, they are patronized by virtually all the residents, for greater or lesser amounts of their groceries. Unfortunately, they operate chiefly as liquor stores, carrying only small stocks of mainly pre-packaged, processed snack foods and a little, often over-aged, milk and fruit, all sold at extremely high prices. Market basket surveys, comparing prices of the same foods in a range of stores in and near the neighborhoods, disclosed, as the residents predicted, striking differences of price. Thus, Tenderloin residents pay 42 percent more for the same food items at a neighborhood corner store than they would at a discount supermarket located approximately a mile away. The price differential in Bayview/Hunters Point was 64 percent.

The deficiencies of the convenience stores take on significance because of the unavailability of supermarkets, where the best variety of nutritious food at reasonable prices is to be found. But there are other problems for low-income inner-city residents as well. Among them: farmers' markets, although well appreciated, tend to operate within limited hours and days; the SHARE program, a national food-buying coop which sells groceries at greatly reduced prices, tends to be avoided because there is no choice in selection of food items; and elders who rely upon Meals on Wheels or congregate meal sites often make do on only one meal a day.

The report’s priorities in proposing solutions rest upon the following considerations: universality of the problem; replicability of the solution in other Bay Area neighborhoods and elsewhere; cost and feasibility of implementation; and, perhaps foremost, interest of the community to the nature and scope of the solution offered.

The study confirms that the major barrier — besides insufficient funds at the disposal of area residents — is the lack of access to large supermarkets and, therefore, dependence upon local corner stores. Most of the problems described in this report will persist unless the major grocery chains are persuaded to open supermarkets in convenient inner-city locations or, alternatively, paratransit systems are developed to transport residents to nearby supermarkets. Moreover, regardless of new supermarkets or better transport systems, there needs to be marked improvement in the goods and services offered by the corner stores.

Solutions

The report’s recommendations are intended to satisfy two overarching objectives: (1) to stimulate efforts at both the community and regional levels in a way that invites and enables other sectors of society (i.e., government, business and other civic leaders) to reinforce the efforts of the grassroots community and (2) to harness and maximize existing resources, while also being receptive to creating
new activities where appropriate. Reflecting these criteria, the following recommendations receive primary emphasis:

- Establish good methods of para transit which will permit inner-city residents to patronize existing, relatively nearby supermarkets;
- Induce supermarket chains to locate new stores in the inner city; and
- Improve the corner stores.

Next, the promising benefits of food policy councils, with their capacity to introduce nutrition considerations into a myriad of diverse community policy decisions, are given considerable emphasis.

Following these four recommendations, consideration is then given to a variety of non-conventional, non-commercial methods of food acquisition: SHARE, cooperative groceries and bulk buying arrangements, farmers’ markets, subscription agriculture, and community and backyard gardens.

Finally, this section analyses issues and opportunities concerning public and private food programs, which include the Food Stamp Program, other federal food programs, food banks and emergency food providers.

This order of priorities takes advantage of the commercial food system as it currently exists: a focus upon supermarkets and corner stores encompasses most of the existing primary system of food acquisition. Working to improve the existing system, instead of creating totally new ones, seeks to make relatively modest incremental changes to the vast investment and food infrastructure which the network of existing food stores represents.

While nutrition education is not identified separately among the listed priorities, it is a high priority among neighborhood residents and organizations. Rather than being treated separately, however, nutrition education can be accomplished by incorporating it into virtually all the approaches recommended in this report.

I. Recommendations Concerning the Conventional, Commercial Food System

A. Transportation to Supermarkets

Over the past two decades, major supermarkets across the country have fled the inner cities. Since it is unrealistic to expect the chains to return to all these neighborhoods, the lack of adequate and appropriate transportation to large nearby markets represents the major obstacle in accessing affordable and nutritious food. Most low-income individuals do not own reliable automobiles, nor do they have practicable access to others vehicles. Public transit is slow, unreliable and — for everyone, but particularly for the disabled, elders, and
those accompanied by young children — it drastically limits the amount of groceries that can be carried home.

One promising solution is to harness a rich existing resource by taking advantage of the extensive fleet of paratransit vehicles sitting idle most of the day in all Bay Area communities. “Paratransit” is defined here as transportation that is specialized, on-demand, “non-fixed” route and complementary to public transit. Throughout the Bay Area, as elsewhere, paratransit vehicles — whether operated by social service agencies, religious institutions, government agencies, private corporations or private individuals — are generally used for no more than four to six hours each day. By integrating these vehicles into a program transporting low-income people to large supermarkets (many of which are open 24 hours each day of the week) and by providing expanded nutrition education opportunities for these residents, significant gains in accessing affordable and healthy food would be realized.

A 1993 survey found that nearly 80 social service agencies (mainly serving elders and the disabled) in San Francisco and Alameda communities, using government and non-profit funds, own and operate vans, although for purposes unrelated to food acquisition. In addition, new state “trip reduction” requirements may compel counties, municipalities and large corporations to promote the growth of van pools to assist their employees to commute to work. Plainly, there is a host of challenges associated with use of vehicles owned by others for transportation to supermarkets: financial feasibility and sustainability, scheduling, staffing, insurance and others. Nonetheless, capturing vans — already owned and operating — when they are idle is viewed as a promising transportation strategy.

There are three major approaches to be explored to improve the transportation options of low-income individuals to supermarkets. The first is use of shopper shuttles and supermarket-funded paratransit. Combinations of government agencies and community organizations across the country already are developing public-private partnerships to operate transportation for low-income people to supermarkets. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, shuttle buses run daily from public housing sites to major shopping centers; in Sacramento, a shuttle operates on weekdays to take elders and the disabled to a supermarket 10 miles away; a Pathmark store in Newark, New Jersey, subsidizes the customers’ return trips, provided they have purchased a minimum amount of groceries. A feasibility study is being conducted in Los Angeles for proposed shuttle service to supermarkets and farmers’ markets.

The second option uses vans owned by social service agencies — vehicles in rapid growth because of federal mandates and accompanying financial assistance for agencies serving the disabled and elders. State-required metropolitan and citywide transportation commissions already promote coordination among agencies in the use of their vehicles. While the coordination currently is confined
to non-food related transportation, services also can be expanded to include food access goals.

The third approach uses corporate-owned vans in a coordinated paratransit program. In Sacramento, an association of corporate van owners contracts with a paratransit organization for use of its vehicles during their “down time” to transport low-income people. The businesses receive welcome income to cover their own van costs and enjoy good public relations, as well. In some communities, volunteers are recruited to do the driving, thereby lowering operating costs considerably. Such arrangements also can lead to community economic development and job opportunities.

B. Inner-City Supermarkets

Not only is a supermarket a part of every American’s dream, but it does, in fact, represent the best solution to the problem of access to a large variety of fresh, nutritious food at reasonable prices. In addition, it can aid in broader economic development and revitalization for a community and promote a positive self-image for the people who live there. While it is not economically feasible for supermarkets to open new stores in every inner city neighborhood, there is a resurgence of interest on the part of some grocery chains in returning to the cities they abandoned two or three decades before. In these cases, prospective grocery operators may be influenced by the offer of cooperation with a community development organization.

In 1994, the Local Initiatives Corporation (LISC) created a $24 million corporate equity investment fund, known as The Retail Initiative, to assist community development corporations (CDCs) in 14 targeted regions, including the Bay Area, to establish new supermarket-anchored retail centers. Separately, Public Voice for Food and Health Policy has launched a project to provide a national framework for the various local efforts to attract supermarkets to inner cities.

Already, a scattering of grocery chain-CDC partnerships have emerged around the country. Perhaps the most prominent partnership is in Newark, New Jersey, where the Pathmark supermarket is demonstrating the enhanced community sensitivity and support which such a joint enterprise can stimulate. For some years now, the Spanish Speaking Unity Council in Oakland has been planning for economic development in Fruitvale that is centered on dramatic expansion and reconstruction of the BART station. The Spanish speaking Unity Council has begun plans for an extensive retail development which may be anchored by a supermarket. Local philanthropies might consider making additions to the LISC asset pool or providing funds to CDCs to assist them with developing the plans and information they need to approach LISC or other potential funders.

An alternative approach is to foster the development of mini-supermarkets, perhaps a third the size of a new suburban supermarket, to supply fresh meat,
produce and the most popular items carried in the larger stores. Similar to Rebuild Los Angeles' plans, these mini-markets might anchor "shopping clusters," to be built on city-owned vacant land, and operate together as cooperatives to achieve the greater buying power, lower prices and other leverage that such an arrangement offers. A New York City nutrition advocacy group has established a working group of representatives from relevant public and private agencies to stimulate the development of smaller supermarkets in that city. A smaller supermarket is a particularly useful model in the Tenderloin, where a community group, recognizing the need for better grocery stores but mindful of land scarcity and high real estate prices there, has been exploring a project similar to Seattle's Pike Place Market. Once again, any development of larger or smaller supermarkets can be supplemented by increasing nutrition education programs for community residents.

C. Corner Stores

A major focus of this report is the vast network of convenience stores, which often represent the sole accessible food resource for a large number of isolated, immobile inner-city residents. Upon examination, these stores turn out to be generally unsatisfactory sources of good nutrition, in large part simply because they are extremely difficult, precarious enterprises, barely able to survive. While much more study is required, some of the most visible problems are clear: under-capitalization; inexperience with business, retailing and groceries; insufficient volume to achieve reasonable wholesale prices or, in some cases, any wholesale distribution whatsoever; slow turn-over and spoilage of perishables; customers with little cash; and long hours and small margins.

In short, the owners need assistance — of many kinds — and a strong recommendation of this report is to muster that support. Government should be asked for tax benefits, small business loans, appropriate zoning rules, adequate law enforcement and other services. Technical assistance needs to be furnished to import the skills that the store owners lack. Arrangements to facilitate collaboration, perhaps in the form of a grocers' co-op, should be explored to determine whether bulk buying, group health insurance and other benefits may be viable.

A major recommendation of this report, then, is to establish a project to improve the operation of corner stores. Their business will have to be thoroughly studied and understood so that a package of assistance can be assembled that makes sense to the store owners. Their cooperation must be gained, and their self-interest in adopting changes will have to be evident. At the same time, the stores' customers need information — about the health benefits of good nutrition — that will induce them to purchase the improved selection of foods which store owners may be encouraged to offer.
II. Recommendation Concerning Community Nutrition Oversight

D. Food Policy Councils

Food policy councils, which now exist in a number of cities across this country and throughout the world, represent official governmental — or quasi-governmental — recognition of, and commitment to ameliorate, hunger. Typically, food policy councils are created by ordinance, contain a statement of purpose to eliminate hunger, and include, among the appointed stakeholders, city officials, civic leaders, and nonprofit representatives. The councils generally are authorized to examine the impact on hunger and nutrition of a variety of basic and pervasive municipal powers and functions — education, housing, health, zoning, public transit, taxes and economic development, among others. Because hunger is all too often an invisible problem, any development that increases its visibility and signifies official cognizance is extremely valuable.

Food policy council meetings — bringing representatives from private, government and non-profit sectors together to focus on critical hunger problems — offer promise of coverage in the media, thus winning recognition in the community. Important resources can be tapped, media exposure becomes simpler and consideration of food accessibility becomes imbedded in the regular functioning of government. What may be most important is the establishment of an official, regular and permanent locus to which hunger crises may be referred and which will pro-actively promote access to good nutrition.

When food policy councils are established, they have the capacity to monitor and correct the sorts of problems and issues raised in this report and to develop, propose and implement appropriate policy and program initiatives. For example, councils can ensure that an adequate assessment of food access issues for low-income residents have been conducted in a city or county; if, as in Los Angeles, for example, such information is not available, the council can commission such a study. Likewise, councils can ensure that nutrition education and food preparation skills are provided to low-income residents.

Regional and multi-jurisdictional food policy councils should be explored for later development. Such steps would recognize that systemic food problems are not confined within a single city or county, and solutions in one location often require (or offer useful models for) solutions elsewhere. The East Bay Public Safety Corridor, combining two counties, 18 cities and 11 school districts, is an example of cooperative action which seeks, in part, to solve some of the nutrition problems affecting youngsters within the corridor. One of its early achievements has been to increase the participation of schools in state food programs.
III. Recommendations for Non-Commercial Nutrition Strategies

Among the following potential solutions, there are a number of attractive strategies that can facilitate better nutrition for low-income people. But nutrition is not the sole, nor — in some cases — even the major, reason communities may advocate for their promotion. Rather, they also serve some different objectives to which a community might give high priority: community organizing, economic development, job training and employment, education, health care and public safety, among others.

E. SHARE (Self-Help and Resource Exchange)

This national organization operates, among other things, as a large food-buying cooperative. Participants belong to host sites, typically at churches and other community organizations, where they pay $14 per package at the beginning of the month, perform two hours of community service during the month and receive a package of groceries worth $25 to $30 at the end of the month (when fixed incomes are most likely to be exhausted). Northern California SHARE, based in Richmond and extending along the coast from Lake County to San Luis Obispo and in the Sacramento, San Joaquin and Central Valleys, contains about 260 host sites serving 15,000 – 18,000 households. (The national organization provides on average 350,000 – 400,000 packages per month.)

SHARE has always had trouble penetrating inner-city neighborhoods, and the three areas studied in this report are no exception. There are potential problems built into the program's structure: it is an unfamiliar way to acquire food, without the chance to shop, to view the items and to make one's own selections, and many low-income people find it difficult to pay $14. But SHARE is potentially an appealing solution for residents in low-income areas. It doubles the shopper's money, provides healthy food and nutrition education and encourages community service.

SHARE may benefit from improved transportation — from the central warehouse in Richmond to host sites and from the host sites to participants' homes. Assistance is needed to start up new host sites, a demanding process. Moreover, SHARE could use more effective marketing and promotion of its services.

F. Consumer Food Co-ops and Bulk Buying

While consumer food co-ops take a variety of shapes and sizes, they all seek to concentrate purchasing power so that consumers who join can achieve better prices, selection, quality and service. Higher volume not only affects price, but it also enables members, in some cases, to choose foods with specific characteristics (a Fruitvale group, for example, wants pesticide-free produce), to select particular growers from whom to buy (for example, Latinos in the valley to sell...
to Fruitvale Latino customers), to engage in economic development and to bring community-enhancing benefits to its locality.

Co-ops present substantial problems, too. These include the need for sufficient capital, staffing, business skills, transportation, insurance and space. Co-op proponents in Fruitvale are extremely eager to revive their co-op while a hotel in the Tenderloin, catering to those on public assistance, has recently started a small store selling reasonably priced food and other items. Co-ops, in which the participants already have evidenced heightened interest in food, are particularly promising sites for nutrition education. There are successful models, including a co-op grocery store in Baltimore, whose track records encourage fresh efforts to establish consumer food co-ops.

G. Farmers’ Markets

In many cities, farmers’ markets have become a major means to provide access for low-income people to high quality food at affordable prices. Apart from their important role in bringing fresh, nutritious food to communities which otherwise have no access to it, the markets also provide a number of economic, educational and community development opportunities. Such markets, along with community gardens and localized farming projects, promote a regional food system and contribute to the economic sustainability of local and regionally-based agriculture. By any measure, San Francisco’s Heart of the City Farmers’ Market is a great success.

While farmers’ markets will not survive in every community, this report recommends exploring their development in low-income neighborhoods in addition to those where they currently exist. A variety of problems must be solved: space has to be found, perhaps in public parking lots vacant on the weekends; transportation needs to be arranged to make the markets accessible to low-income people; and food stamps and WIC coupons should be accommodated.

H. Subscription Farming

The concept of sustainable agriculture — defined as using human and natural resources to produce food in a manner not wasteful of such finite resources as top soil, water and fossil energy — is generating a variety of program ideas. One is “subscription farming,” in which farmers deliver fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables to subscribing members. As it is developing in the Bay Area, this offers farmers guaranteed sales and income and provides customers with a convenient way to receive fresh food. Concerns include cost-effective transportation and accounting systems that enable low-income customers to use food stamps and WIC coupons.
I. Community Gardens

Community gardens can be wonderful experiences in neighborhood building, organizing and celebrating. Although they do not contain the capacity to increase dramatically the supply of food for a large number of community residents, they do make a contribution to nutrition while serving a number of other goals. Gardens give people the chance to see and touch growing produce. Sites provide an effective location for the transmission of nutrition information and such gardens often are sought as places of refuge, safety and interaction with one’s neighbors and friends.

Gardens can be operated by churches, schools, tenant groups and a wide assortment of other sponsors and are visible expressions of community organizing and spirit. They require relatively little investment and can lead to other community economic development activities.

IV. Recommendations Concerning Public and Private Food Programs

J. Greater Utilization of the Food Stamp Program

The size and stability inherent in the “entitled” federal food programs — unless they actually are dismantled in Congress this term — offer compelling advantages to a campaign to improve the reach of these massive nutrition programs. The privately funded nonprofit programs simply cannot match the scope of the federal programs. Therefore, examining and seeking to solve problems in the Food Stamp Program, at $27 billion the largest of the federal nutrition programs, is well warranted.

There are a multitude of problems with the Food Stamp Program: the application process is difficult and off-putting; coupons are often obtainable only in objectionable check-cashing establishments; and there are limited opportunities in inner-city neighborhoods to buy good food at reasonable prices with the stamps. The potential scope and benefit from the program justify continued efforts to improve it.

K. Other Federal Food Programs

Other potentially important federal food programs are underutilized in the three examined neighborhoods. Most of the programs are recognized by rigorous scientific studies to be extremely effective. School meal programs, for example, have been shown to contribute to better academic performance. The Special Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), with its emphasis on nutrition education and case-management methods, has been demonstrated to produce remarkable savings in neo-natal medical costs. The underutilization of programs, therefore, is particularly unfortunate, because they are known to furnish significant portions of recommended daily allowances (RDAs) to low-
income people who urgently need them for proper growth, development and well-being. Efforts to expand the programs should include focused outreach and promotion, streamlining administration, and consolidating the application process, operation and reporting requirements of as many of the programs as possible.

L. An Expanded Role for Food Banks

The food banks in San Francisco and Alameda counties now have matured into stable, significant resources for their communities. They may be in a position to assume an important role in the development of community food policy councils. The food banks also can be encouraged to work together with their emergency food sites — as "Gateways" — to assist their clients in gaining access to federal and state food and income assistance benefits as well as other public services. Additionally, food banks can play a role in promoting nutrition education through their member agencies, and can expand current bulk-buying projects. Food banks can also explore regional collaborations with other Bay Area food banks in such areas as transportation, warehousing and food acquisition.

Finally, food banks may be able to help address an emerging and perplexing problem concerning the clients of emergency food programs: a growing dependence upon the emergency programs as an ongoing food source. Such chronic dependence upon emergency food programs not only burdens the limited resources of nonprofit organizations, but also hinders people's ability to regain self-reliance in meeting their food needs. Strategic activities that reduce this dependency and equip people to address their longer-term food needs pose one of the most difficult, yet valuable challenges for this field. With the assistance of food banks, neighborhood residents and nonprofits may be able to organize around these issues and to reduce and prevent dependency on emergency food services by strengthening the cooking, shopping, budgeting and other life skills of residents.