

# Designed for Disease

## The Link Between Local Food Environments and Obesity and Diabetes

### Policy Recommendations

To date, many efforts to reduce obesity and diabetes have focused on encouraging individuals to change their eating habits. However, given the association shown in this study between the retail food environment and health outcomes, additional measures should be aimed at improving the retail food environment to support individuals in making such changes.

Although healthy eating habits are ultimately a matter of individual choice, local food environments influence those choices. It is difficult to follow recommended dietary guidelines in a food environment characterized by an abundance of fast-food restaurants and few grocery stores—a situation faced by many Californians, particularly those in lower-income communities. Reversing obesity and diabetes trends in California requires a range of interventions, including a systematic approach to improving local food environments.

Environmental and policy interventions can improve conditions for large numbers of people. Directing resources toward communities most in need, such as lower-income communities, can maximize the impact of such interventions.

Food environments can be made healthier by increasing the availability of grocery stores and produce vendors relative to fast-food restaurants and convenience stores, by improving the availability of healthy foods relative to unhealthy foods in existing retail outlets, and by increasing consumer awareness of the nutritional content of restaurant food. Based on the findings presented in this brief, insights gained from the national Scientific Advisory Panel convened for this study, and existing policy initiatives in other parts of the country,<sup>41</sup> policymakers are urged to consider the following strategies for improving local food environments:

**Increase access to healthy foods by providing incentives for retail store development and improvement.** Because grocery chains have historically been less likely to locate in lower-income communities and communities of color,<sup>42</sup> new policies and market-based incentives are needed to reverse these trends. New funding could be used to stimulate development of retail projects by offering technical assistance and financing options, such as low-interest loans or seed grants for the purchase of refrigeration equipment and other supplies necessary to store and preserve fresh fruits and vegetables.

**Promote retail innovations, including smaller-scale markets selling healthy foods.** Attention should be given to smaller-scale community innovations, such as mobile vendors, vending machines, farmers' markets, cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, and improved transportation to existing retailers. For example, farmers' markets and mobile vendors typically need less time to transition from vision to operation and can produce added benefits by supporting local farmers.

**Maximize the opportunities presented by the changes in the WIC food package.** The inclusion of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products in the updated WIC food package is expected to increase demand for these healthy foods. Policymakers should adopt measures to ensure that the expanded food package is accessible in lower-income communities by building capacities of existing WIC-authorized stores, expanding the number of authorized WIC vendors, and facilitating grocery store expansion.

**Implement zoning designed to limit fast-food restaurants in overburdened communities.** The health implications of fast-food restaurants should be considered in the community planning and development permitting process. Local governments should strive to achieve a balance of retailers that supports community health.

**Require menu labeling.** Restaurants should be required to provide consumers with nutritional information on in-store menus and menu boards for all standard menu items. Given the proliferation of fast-food restaurants and the high fat and calorie content of many items on their menus, prominent posting of the nutrient content of items for sale can help consumers make healthier choices.

41. Examples include menu labeling legislation passed in New York City and under consideration in a number of additional cities and states nationwide, and The Food Trust's Supermarket Campaign, which seeks to improve access to supermarkets in underserved communities through leveraging economic development resources, active public/private partnerships, research, and policy advocacy to address the negative impacts related to the lack of food retail choices in communities across the country. More information about the Supermarket Campaign can be found at [www.thefoodtrust.org/php/programs/super.market.campaign.php](http://www.thefoodtrust.org/php/programs/super.market.campaign.php). Retrieved March 27, 2008.

42. Healthy food, healthy communities: Improving access and opportunities through food retailing. PolicyLink; 2005.

