

Title: Eradicating Food Desert Key to Chicago's Competitiveness

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Chicagoans have reason to applaud an impressive 39% drop over the past five years in the number of city residents living in its "food desert," those low-income neighborhoods where affordable and nutritious food is hard to come by. Yet 1 in 7 residents, 124,000 of them children, still live in communities without readily available fresh food.

The evidence is mounting that limited access to full-service grocery stores offering whole grains and fresh produce, dairy and meat products—along with easier access to fast and convenience foods—may be linked to obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and certain kinds of cancer.

The food desert is more about poverty than grocery stores. Higher costs and security challenges in blighted neighborhoods historically have stood in the way of grocers that might otherwise seek to fill a market vacuum while addressing a public health crisis. But fear and ignorance are finally giving way to innovation, entrepreneurship and collaboration.

Thanks in part to Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's effective use of the bully pulpit, some of the nation's largest retailers have committed to bring fresh foods to impoverished communities. Deerfield-based Walgreen Co. has joined Roundy's Supermarkets Inc., Supervalu Inc. and Wal-Mart Stores Inc. in pledging to open or expand scores of outlets selling fresh fruits and vegetables.

The retailers' efforts are matched by many smaller but no less critical health food ventures. Farm stands, community gardens and farmers markets are surfacing in all quarters of the city. Already, a non-profit called Fresh Moves has retrofitted a retired Chicago Transit Authority bus into a mobile fresh-produce store on the West Side. Pre-stocked produce bins soon will be installed on a daily basis in convenience stores previously distinguished primarily by their inviting counters of carb-laden goodies. And comprehensive educational programming, in person and online, is under way to break unhealthy eating and cooking habits.

The private and public sectors deserve to share the credit for this turnaround. Complementing first lady Michelle Obama's highly publicized anti-obesity campaign, the President's Healthy Food Financing Initiative awarded \$35 million in grants last year to make healthy foods available to more Americans. An additional \$330 million has been earmarked for this year.

Mr. Emanuel has pledged to shrink the number of people living in Chicago's food desert by 200,000—more than half—within the next three years and to eliminate it altogether by 2020. He sees the eradication of the city's food desert as both a humanitarian imperative and an effective driver of job creation and economic development. The mayor is right: A healthier city is a more productive and more competitive city.

Marc J. Lane is a Chicago attorney and chairman of the Illinois Task Force on Social Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Enterprise.

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