

# AmeriCorps VISTA and Increasing Access to Healthy Food

Kalie Wertz 22 April 2015

Despite Philadelphia's close proximity to some of the richest agricultural land in the nation, access to healthy food at affordable prices has been limited. Out of the 1.5 million people in the city, over 300,000 are living in areas considered "food deserts," a term created by Great Britain's Nutrition Task Force in the 1990s to refer to areas with a lack of access to places that sell affordable healthy food (Philadelphia Department of Public Health, 2013). Although there have been recent improvements over the past 10 years, including the addition of Whole Foods and Trader Joe's and an increase in farmers' markets, those who now have increased access to purchasing healthy food options are often still living in low-income situations.

Organizations such as The Food Trust and the Coalition Against Hunger have been working in Philadelphia to help everyone have equal access to affordable, quality, nutritious foods and have been utilizing AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers in three-year increments to implement innovative and sustainable projects. While it particularly works in low-income neighborhoods, The Food Trust has implemented an incentive program for SNAP (formerly

known as food stamps) benefit holders to shop at farmers' markets, in addition to developing a citywide network of corner stores that carry healthy food choices and expanding healthy youth leadership programs. Now in their final year, these projects have used the volunteers as an integral part of helping programs gain traction and form creative means of expansion. The Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger has three volunteers working on different aspects of hunger around the city—child hunger, senior hunger and community nutrition—and they have been working with community leaders to identify USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) program barriers and develop comprehensive plans to improve access in their communities.

## **The Overarching Problem**

Getting access to healthy food can pose a variety of issues for anyone in a city environment, particularly for those living in high-poverty areas. Consequently, populations living near or below the poverty line are typically more at risk of developing nutrition-related chronic diseases such as obesity and high blood pressure (Bell, Mora, Hagan, Rubin, & Karpyn, 2013). SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (what was once called food stamps), has worked to combat financial hardship as a barrier to healthy food purchases by allowing those who qualify to receive a monthly benefit from the state to be used to purchase food. However,

because SNAP has specific requirements based on income and household size, a number of individuals do not even realize they are eligible, a number that has grown to every one in five people since the Great Recession.

As for those who have muddled through to finally get SNAP benefits, the given amount is usually so limited that purchasing food for a month can mean opting for the cheapest choices, making consumers often face a choice between health and affordability. As of April 2014 in Philadelphia County, there were 475,890 people receiving SNAP benefits, almost a full third of residents. However, the maximum amount that each person can receive monthly amounts to \$194, with \$164 added for each additional family member for whom food is being bought (Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, 2014). Buying produce at an average of \$2.50 per pound to sustain a healthy diet often does not leave a lot of extra money for other foodstuffs, such as grains, meats and dairy.

At the same time, the number of farmers' markets nationwide has increased over the past 20 years by almost 15%, and in the city of Philadelphia alone, there are now over 60 different markets every week during the season of May to November. However, a large percentage of SNAP beneficiaries are often unaware that they can use their benefits at most farmers' markets in the city through new wireless EBT (electronic benefits transfer) machines. Additionally, low-income populations may view these

markets as having other barriers, such as cultural or language obstacles, inconvenient hours, product mix, lack of transportation or the perception that market prices are higher than what they can find at supermarkets or convenience stores (Briggs, Fisher, Lott, Miller, & Tessman, 2010).

Additionally, nonprofit organizations in Philadelphia and across the nation are always in a state of insecurity, and often have difficulty beginning new programs due to staff size and budget restraints.

## **The Innovative Solution**

AmeriCorps VISTA is a national service program that was created by President John F. Kennedy to fight poverty in America by giving nonprofits and schools access to full-time, able-bodied volunteers for a year at a fraction of the cost of an on-staff employee. VISTA volunteers offer a unique method for nonprofits to increase their staff sizes while also remaining conservative with their budgets. Volunteers have been instrumental in allowing local organizations to begin new food access initiatives throughout the city, despite only working in these capacities for a few years.

Located in the center of rich agricultural generational roots, Philadelphia is perfectly positioned for everyone to have equal access to nutritious foods at affordable prices. In order to place more ownership of their food and

their benefits in the hands of the people, organizations nationwide have implemented incentive programs at farmers' markets, allowing SNAP beneficiaries to receive additional dollars to spend at the market. This model has been tested in other states, such as New York and Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia's nonprofit The Food Trust adapted it in 2010 in conjunction with the city's Department of Public Health. These additional dollars, called "Philly Food Bucks," give a 40% increase to the food stamp dollars by providing \$2 for every \$5 spent with an ACCESS card at markets.

The results have been astonishing, with Philly Food Buck redemption increasing from \$13,560 in 2010 to over \$78,000 in 2014. AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers who work with The Food Trust's Farmers' Market Program have been tasked with not only getting the word out about this program but discovering innovative ways to draw SNAP beneficiaries to markets. This includes market tours, flyer distribution, aiding with cooking demonstrations and creating trainings for market associates and volunteers. Volunteers have also been utilized at The Food Trust to help catapult the Healthy Corner Store initiative and sustain the 650-store network around the Philadelphia region that supplies locals with increased access to healthy foods, in addition to creating sustainable materials for The Food Trust's youth leadership program by engaging middle and high school students to become involved with making healthy changes among their peers.

VISTA volunteers have been a cornerstone at the Coalition Against Hunger, where three currently work in the three different areas of hunger relief and senior, child, and community hunger. Each volunteer has the opportunity to connect with key leaders throughout Philadelphia who expand even beyond hunger because hunger is often a side effect of other issues, such as homelessness, financial difficulty and health problems/injuries. The senior hunger VISTA volunteer has worked to create an online guide for social workers and other professions to access information about where affordable food resources are available. The child hunger volunteer has worked with child care providers and schools to ensure that all Philadelphia children are receiving meals throughout the day. The community hunger volunteer has worked with the food pantry network around the city to better ensure food resources at each site and to improve their systems for connecting the food with the hungry.

## **The Social Impact**

For a city that is currently "up and coming", including major renovations throughout the city, an increase in the downtown population of over 15% since 2000 and an arts and culture community that rivals those of San Francisco and Lower Manhattan, this model has already become an integral breakthrough for many Philadelphia communities to become more aware of and involved with where and how their food is grown. And even beyond this program at

The Food Trust, VISTA volunteers have been involved in every step of the process of increasing food access, from linking residents to SNAP benefits through the Coalition Against Hunger's SNAP hotline to creating GIS maps of Philadelphia's food deserts at Philabundance.

However, while volunteers are only hosted at an organization for three-year intervals, the work they have achieved in their time has been critical to the foundation of these initiatives. VISTA volunteers primarily create programming and increase the sustainability of these programs by creating tool-kits, instruction manuals, trainings and full details so these projects can be continued when they leave after their full service year. Their service works to better connect their programs' leaders, who can then carry on and sustain stronger relationships that were first established by the VISTA volunteers.

The social impact of allowing locals to be more connected to the food that literally surrounds them is endless. Not only will it improve their mental and physical health, but it will also allow for customers to feel more connected to their communities. Food is what captures and connects us all together; we often meet friends, colleagues and relatives over a meal. Food is the great connector, and other cities nationwide will be able to adapt our food provision program to their needs.

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## **Author Biography**

**Kalie Wertz is a current AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer who is serving at The Food Trust in their Farmers' Market program, focusing on promoting the Philly**

**Food Bucks initiative as well as implementing strategies to better manage and train volunteers, market associates and farmers. Ms. Wertz is originally from California and served as an AmeriCorps state and national volunteer in Washington State from 2013 to 2014, where she achieved her master gardener certification and developed a passion for food justice. She is planning to pursue a master's in public administration and continuing to work in developing strategic plans for battling food injustice nationwide.**