

Testimony of
Kristin Roberts
Community Nutrition Associate, D.C. Hunger Solutions
Agency Performance Oversight Hearing on Fiscal Year 2009-2010 Budget
Department of Health
Committee on Health
Council of the District of Columbia
March 2010
Council Chambers
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Room 412
Washington, DC 20004

Chairman Catania and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today about the Department of Health's role in reducing obesity and improving nutrition in the District. My name is Kristin Roberts and I am a nutrition associate at D.C. Hunger Solutions, an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center. D.C. Hunger Solutions works to create a hunger-free community and improve the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income District residents.

The Department of Health recently released a report – the first of its kind in the District – on preventable causes of death among residents. As I'm sure this Committee is aware, poor nutrition and lack of physical activity make up the second leading cause of preventable death. While these two problems and their solutions are quite complex, we do know that access to affordable healthy food is an important component of ensuring good nutrition, and that low-income communities nationally and in the District frequently have limited or no access to healthy foods, especially fresh produce.¹

¹ PolicyLink and The Food Trust, 2010. *The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access and Why It Matters*. Available at: www.thefoodtrust.org.

To that end, in FY 2009 (and in FY 2008), DOH funded D.C. Hunger Solutions to carry out a Healthy Corner Store Program, which aimed to help corner stores in Wards 7 and 8 increase their supply of and marketing of healthy foods – including fruits and vegetables, nutritious beverages, and healthier snacks. The FY 09 program included three main components: partnering with 12 stores to make changes toward selling healthy foods; community education and outreach to increase demand; and piloting two fresh produce distribution systems.

We thank the Council and DOH for this support – and believe it was a good investment. The Healthy Corner Store Program produced encouraging results. Quantitative results are detailed in the evaluation report attached to my testimony (the evaluation was conducted by The Food Trust). Perhaps most encouraging, the program demonstrated convincing evidence of the demand for fresh fruits and vegetables. As just one example, when we began the program two years ago, Martin Luther King Grocery in Anacostia had just a few wrinkled potatoes in the back corner of the store and had no interest in selling more produce. Now, the store has a refrigerator case near the front dedicated to fresh produce, along with a shelf that holds good-looking potatoes and a variety fruits. The store’s owners are pleased with the changes and intend to sustain them.

But the program also showed the need for major expansion of capacity among small stores. As another example, K & H Grocery in Congress Heights sold a wide variety of fresh produce last summer in partnership with the Ward 8 Farmers’ Market, and the owner was so excited about the results that he took the initiative to repair an old, broken refrigerated produce case. But after one month, the energy costs were so high that he unplugged the refrigerator – it was very discouraging.

I would like to share with you the next steps that D.C. Hunger Solutions is pursuing – and that we encourage DOH and the Council to consider pursuing as well. These next steps are informed and influenced by what we learned through two years of healthy corner store work (which included a great deal of communication, trading ideas

and best practices, with similar programs in other cities). We believe that full-service grocery stores are the most effective, most sustainable, and most widely beneficial solution to improving access to affordable, healthy foods.

Therefore, D.C. Hunger Solutions is proposing a city-wide Healthy Food Access Initiative which would help the District draw in new supermarkets to low-income, underserved areas -- improving access, capturing grocery dollars currently leaking out and spurring other economic development. This cutting-edge initiative, like similar ones in Pennsylvania, New York, and several other cities and states. We do recognize that not every single neighborhood can hold a full-scale supermarket, and improving corner stores is the right approach for certain communities. So the Healthy Food Access Initiative also would help eligible corner stores make those necessary capacity improvements to sell fresh and healthy foods successfully. We are seeking to partner with groups in several neighborhoods to target smaller clusters of stores for improvement and technical assistance.

We are very pleased to have DOH's support of this concept – Director Dr. Pierre Vigilance this week pledged DOH involvement in a work group that will research policy opportunities and strategy for this initiative. (The Office of Planning and the Washington, D.C. Economic Partnership also have pledged their support.) The initiative is detailed further in our newly-released report on the “grocery gap” in the District, which is attached to my testimony. We hope to meet with all Councilmembers' offices to discuss the report and its recommendations.

The Healthy Food Access Initiative also could support fresh fruit and vegetable vendors. We are excited about DOH's ARRA grant through the CDC (Communities Putting Prevention to Work) to explore opening up new public spaces for fresh produce vending. The Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) is interested in establishing a healthy vending program – essentially, allowing a new type of vending, just as New York City has done with its Green Carts Program – and we are looking forward to partnering with DCRA to developing the idea further. The Director of the

Office of Planning also has expressed interest, and we hope that DOH, under the CDC grant, will be a key partner in this effort as well.

In closing, D.C. Hunger Solutions commends DOH for its efforts to improve access to healthy foods in underserved and low-income neighborhoods of the District. And we encourage the Department to continue this work. We look forward to the release and implementation of the State Obesity Prevention and Reduction Plan, which was developed with the input of numerous District agencies, businesses, advocates, community groups, and faith-based organizations, and which includes goals on improving access to healthy foods.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Respectfully submitted,

Kristin Roberts
Community Nutrition Associate
D.C. Hunger Solutions / Food Research and Action Center
1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 540
Washington DC 20009
(202) 986-2200 x3041