

Testimony of

**Alexandra Ashbrook
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Joint Public Hearing on Bill 18-967, the “Food, Environmental, and Economic Development in the District of Columbia Act” (“FEED-DC”).

**John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Room 500
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Thank you for this opportunity to testify and to Councilmembers Mary Cheh (Ward 3), Kwame Brown (At-Large), Tommy Wells (Ward 6), and David Catania (At-Large) for introducing this important legislation. I am Alex Ashbrook, director of D.C. Hunger Solutions, an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center.

In March 2010, D.C. Hunger Solutions and Social Compact issued “When Healthy Food is Out of Reach: An Analysis of the Grocery Gap in Washington, D.C.” to document areas in the District underserved by full-service grocery stores, highlight how the grocery gap disproportionately harms low-income households, and suggest solutions to close that gap. For thousands of residents – particularly residents in areas of wards 7 and 8 where there are only three main chain grocery stores for 142,000 residents—finding an apple is no easy task.

Lack of access to healthy foods is helping drive the obesity epidemic in our city. And due to insufficient grocery retail, more than \$100 million in grocery expenditures “leak” out of the city each year into Maryland and Virginia. The grocery gap means missed opportunities for improving health, reducing hunger, and fostering economic development.

While limited access to grocery stores can be problematic for District residents at any income level, the FEED Act wisely focuses on closing the gap for low-income residents who are most adversely impacted in our city by high rates of hunger, diabetes, and obesity. Low-income households with already-tight food budgets often have little or no extra money to spend on travel to distant grocery stores; larger grocery stores tend to have lower prices than small markets for healthier foods, and consequently, those who live far from full-service grocers may ultimately pay a “poverty tax” to purchase higher-priced foods in small neighborhood stores.¹

The FEED ACT represents a critical and thoughtful step toward closing the grocery gap. This legislation, modeled on the successful Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative of 2004, provides the District with an exciting opportunity to address the lack of access to healthy foods, improve food security, and create jobs. The Pennsylvania Program has resulted in a \$30 million state investment over three years being leveraged by a private financial institution to create a \$120 million state-wide program. The program has financed 83-full-service grocers and other healthy food outlets, created or retained

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. “Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food—Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences,” *Report to Congress*, (June 2009).

5,000 jobs, and improved healthy food access for close to 400,000 people.^{2,3} Buoyed by Pennsylvania's success, New York, Louisiana, Illinois, New Jersey, Colorado, and others are adopting similar legislation. Furthermore, supporting the FEED ACT will help the District compete for \$25 million in available federal funding allocated for state Healthy Food Financing Initiatives.

Recognizing the tough fiscal situation the District faces, the FEED ACT minimizes District expenditures by leveraging public dollars through private investment and New Market Tax Credits and packaging available District resources such as energy assistance, existing property tax exemptions, small business assistance, and available land parcels. During these challenging times, attracting new grocery stores makes good economic sense—grocery retailers are anchor businesses that create jobs, generate tax revenue, draw foot traffic to support neighboring businesses, and help spur other development.

Supporting the FEED ACT is a wise, evidence-based approach to improve residents' nutrition and overall health, reduce hunger, potentially lower residents' food costs, and spur economic recovery. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Respectfully submitted,

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² Jeremy Novak, The Reinvestment Fund. *Written Testimony to the House Subcommittee on Health Innovations in Addressing Childhood Obesity*, (December 16, 2009).

³ Policy Link, The Food Trust, and The Reinvestment Fund. *A Healthy Food Financing Initiative: An Innovative Approach to Improve Health and Spark Economic Development*, (December 31, 2009), <http://www.policylink.org/>.