



Nourishing Communities: Strategies to Address Food Insecurity in Atlantic City

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INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity has been a significant issue for the residents of Atlantic City for decades. The creation of the much-heralded supermarket in Renaissance Plaza in the 1990s did not live up to expectations. Two attempts by the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority (CRDA) to create a publicly-subsidized supermarket in recent years have failed, as the proposals offered by ShopRite and other operators could not justify the hefty \$18.7 million price tag. This report will recommend fiscally responsible ways to combat food insecurity through smaller, neighborhood-centric initiatives that will have a far greater impact and cost less money.





Qualitative Research: Text Survey of Atlantic City Residents

In April 2024, South Jersey Forward conducted its first qualitative research by sending a food availability survey to a large cross-section of Atlantic City residents via text message.¹ While this is not a scientific survey and only approximately 100 residents responded, there are some notable data points that would benefit policymakers and guide the formulation of a more formal community needs assessment that will be addressed in another part of this report.

TOPLINE FINDINGS:

- The overall satisfaction with the quality of food and produce in Atlantic City is poor.
- There is a widespread belief among respondents that the food available in Atlantic City is too expensive.²
- Most respondents never heard of or ever utilize food security alternatives like mobile food trucks or the C.R.O.P.S. storefront, signaling potential for growth in these areas.
- The Save-a-Lot in Renaissance Plaza is viewed poorly or fair by a majority of respondents.
- Most residents have to travel outside of Atlantic City for food.
- Half of the respondents would utilize regular, dedicated Jitney and bus routes to and from supermarkets if they were reasonably priced, indicating that public transportation needs to be improved.

¹ A copy of the full survey results is available online [here](#).

² Whether this is due to global inflation or higher prices in Atlantic City versus nearby towns warrants further research.

Recommendation: Neighborhood Co-ops

Policymakers should support several smaller, nonprofit-owned markets and co-ops throughout Atlantic City. One example of this is the storefront operated at Tanger Outlets by C.R.O.P.S., a regional food security nonprofit. The development of these co-ops should be tailored to the needs of a particular neighborhood rather than a "one size fits all" approach. The Pleasantville-based Ideal Institute of Technology, for example, is exploring the creation of a neighborhood co-op on South Carolina Avenue, which would include indoor aquaponics and hydroponics facilities.

In Central Jersey, the nonprofit Fisherman's Mark operates the "Free MARKET" (formerly called the Food Pantry) in Lambertville to support food insecure residents in Hunterdon County. The pantry even offers free lunches to local children who qualify for free or reduced lunch at school. Fisherman's Mark's total operating budget, which includes other social services besides the pantry, is approximately \$1.2 million,³ or 6.4% of the subsidy that CRDA was going to grant ShopRite. Food insecurity can be mitigated without breaking the bank.



Recommendation: Creation of Public Food Innovation Spaces by Utilizing CRDA-Owned Land

In SJF's housing report last year *[Strengthening Communities: Solutions to Foster Owner-Occupied Middle Class Housing in Atlantic City](#)*, South Jersey Forward showed that the CRDA owns nearly 250 parcels of vacant land in Atlantic City. While SJF continues to advocate for this land to be turned over to the private sector with reverter clauses to spur economic development, one beneficial, short-term use for this land is to create public food production spaces for residents. These "edible landscapes," popping up in cities like Detroit and Atlanta, offer some relief to food insecurity by growing fruits, vegetables, and nuts which would then be available for free to residents.⁴ Using some of these parcels while they're waiting to be developed for a permanent use would benefit residents as well as help beautify Atlantic City.

³ <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/222302255>

⁴ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/are-edible-landscapes-future-public-parks-180976291/>

Recommendation: Creation of a \$5 Million Food Innovation Fund

To effectively address food insecurity and foster economic development in Atlantic City, it is crucial to create a dedicated funding mechanism that supports innovative, community-driven solutions. Policymakers should use approximately 25% of the CRDA funds, originally allocated for the ShopRite project to establish the Atlantic City Food Innovation Fund. This \$5 million fund would serve as a catalyst for a range of initiatives aimed at enhancing food access, promoting local entrepreneurship, and building a sustainable food ecosystem.

In addition to funding the aforementioned food innovation spaces, the Food Innovation Fund could also be used for efforts like:

1. SUPPORT FOR NEIGHBORHOOD CO-OPS AND NONPROFITS:

Provide financial assistance and technical support to neighborhood co-ops and nonprofit grocery stores. These funds could be used for startup costs, expansion, equipment purchases, and inventory growth. By empowering local organizations, the fund would help create a network of community-owned markets that offer fresh, affordable food and promote economic resilience.

2. TAX INCENTIVES FOR SUPERMARKET ALTERNATIVES:

Offer tax incentives to corner stores, bodegas, and other small retailers that commit to expanding their inventory of healthy, fresh food options. This would encourage existing businesses to invest in new refrigeration units, shelving, and other necessary infrastructure to store and display perishable items. In return, these stores would play a vital role in providing convenient access to nutritious food within their neighborhoods.

3. GRANTS FOR INNOVATIVE FOOD ACCESS PROGRAMS:

Support innovative programs such as mobile farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives, and food delivery services that specifically target underserved areas. By funding these creative solutions, the Atlantic City Food Innovation Fund would address the unique challenges of food distribution and accessibility in urban settings.

4. PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL FARMERS AND PRODUCERS:

In February, South Jersey Forward participated in a roundtable meeting with the New Jersey Office of the Food Security Advocate. One of the topics discussed was efforts to facilitate partnerships between urban food initiatives and local farmers and producers in South Jersey. By providing grants or low-interest loans to local agricultural businesses, the fund would support the development of a robust local food supply chain. This would not only improve food security but also strengthen the regional economy and promote sustainable agricultural practices.

The creation of the Atlantic City Food Innovation Fund represents a strategic investment in the city's future.



Recommendation: Conduct a Formal Community Needs Assessment

A comprehensive community needs assessment is essential to accurately identify and address the food insecurities faced by Atlantic City residents. While South Jersey Forward's qualitative research has provided valuable initial insights, a more thorough approach is necessary to develop effective, targeted interventions.

A formal community needs assessment should include:

- 1. In-Person Community Meetings:** Facilitating open forums and focus groups in various neighborhoods will allow residents to voice their concerns, share personal experiences, and suggest potential solutions.
- 2. Scientific Surveys:** Conducting quantitative research through scientifically designed surveys will provide statistically significant data on food access, affordability, dietary preferences, and the impact of current food security initiatives. Surveys should also be available in multiple languages given Atlantic City's diverse population.
- 3. Partnerships with Local Organizations:** Collaborating with local nonprofits, community groups, and government agencies will enhance the assessment process. South Jersey Forward has offered to partner with C.R.O.P.S. and CRDA on a needs assessment to leverage their expertise, networks, and resources.

The results of this formal community needs assessment will provide a robust foundation for developing strategic, evidence-based interventions to combat food insecurity. South Jersey Forward is committed to supporting this critical endeavor, ensuring that all voices are heard and that solutions are rooted in the community's realities and aspirations.



Recommendation: Robust Marketing Campaign to Address the Stigma of Supermarket Alternatives

It is imperative that we eradicate the stigma around supermarket alternatives. Oftentimes, residents in need feel embarrassed to purchase from a publicly-subsidized co-op or farmers market that they view as "welfare," as if their money is somehow less "green" than those on the mainland. A robust marketing campaign will ensure people know the resources available to them. It will compel those of means to frequent these shops or mobile markets to show that there's no stigma in obtaining quality food for one's family, whether it's at a mobile farmers market, a food distribution center, or a publicly-owned co-op. Local dignitaries, celebrities, and community leaders should be encouraged to use social media to showcase these alternatives as viable locations for obtaining quality food and produce. Ensuring residents don't feel "less than" when using these viable alternatives is of paramount importance.

Recommendation: Appointment of a Food Insecurity Coordinator for Atlantic City

Given the complexity of this issue and all of its moving parts, the state and the city must collaborate to appoint a coordinator to oversee all of these efforts. A fragmented approach to addressing food insecurity is inefficient and unsustainable. This individual would help, for example, coordinate the mobile food pantries that both Virtua and AtlantiCare operate so that they are not duplicating efforts. There needs to be one person who will get all of the nonprofit, private, and public sector stakeholders together so that everyone's time, money, and efforts are maximized to benefit residents.



CONCLUSION

Addressing food insecurity in Atlantic City requires a multifaceted, neighborhood-specific approach rather than relying on large, singular projects. By supporting the development of neighborhood co-ops and public food innovation spaces, conducting a comprehensive community needs assessment, and appointing a dedicated food insecurity coordinator, we can create sustainable solutions tailored to the unique needs of each community. Establishing a \$5 million Food Innovation Fund will further bolster these efforts by providing essential financial support and fostering innovative food access programs. A robust marketing campaign will help dismantle the stigma around using supermarket alternatives, ensuring all residents feel empowered to access quality, affordable food. Through these coordinated strategies, Atlantic City can build a resilient, community-centered food system that promotes long-term health, economic growth, and food security for all its residents.

ABOUT SOUTH JERSEY FORWARD

South Jersey Forward is a nonprofit think tank and advocacy organization that is committed to exploring bold public policy to solve our problems. From Atlantic City to the Delaware Bay, the Pinelands to Cape May, we will research and identify solutions that will make South Jersey a better place to live.

We thank you for reading this report. South Jersey Forward will continue to host roundtable discussions, issue reports, conduct research, and work with policymakers to enact good public policy. We will not promote milquetoast ideas or boilerplate positions just to get a headline. South Jersey Forward and its contributors will be focused on bold proposals and ideas regardless of their political popularity. We are committed to preserving the issues-based, apolitical nature of South Jersey Forward.

We welcome your feedback, ideas, and suggestions on this or a future research topic. Please feel free to email us at info@southjerseyforward.org and follow us across all social media platforms.



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