

# **HJR 8 Study: Childhood Hunger**

## ***Stakeholder Suggestion: Review Issues Related to Food Deserts***

Prepared by Sue O'Connell  
for the Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee  
January 2012

### *Background*

Testimony during the House Joint Resolution 8 study of childhood hunger included discussion of the problems related to a lack of access to healthy food. Members learned about the concept of "food deserts," which are areas that lack a full-scale grocery store or a store with a wide range of healthy food items. The 2008 Farm Bill defined food deserts as areas "with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower income neighborhoods and communities."

Members of the Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee also were told that many Montanans in remote or rural areas do not have a way to travel to towns with a better selection of food. As a result, they have even more difficulty buying healthy food.

The committee in November 2011 asked for more information on a stakeholder recommendation to review issues related to food deserts. This briefing paper provides additional detail about the request and presents options for committee consideration.

### *Request for Review*

The Food Security Council of the Montana Food Bank Network and the End Childhood Hunger Steering Committee suggested focusing more attention on food deserts. Stakeholders have subsequently clarified that the recommendation sought additional study of this topic by state agencies that work on business, transportation, and food production and distribution issues.

The recommendation also suggests that Montana study programs developed in other states, including Pennsylvania. Private groups there matched state funds to create a loan and grant program for building new grocery stores and upgrading existing stores in underserved areas.

### *State Agencies With Potential Interests in Food Desert Issues*

Several state agencies may have a role to play in a study of improving access to healthy foods.

- The Department of Agriculture works to link Montana agricultural producers with marketing opportunities. As part of that effort, it has undertaken a mapping project that includes information on all the grocery and convenience stores in the state. The map can be overlaid with demographic and other data to analyze market opportunities and to show where gaps in the retail food network exist and are most severe.
- The Department of Public Health and Human Services offers many programs that involve low-income children and their families. It also works with grocery stores that are involved in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). As part of its food-related programs, the department transports food for distribution in some communities. And it funds transportation services for certain groups of people, such as senior citizens and disabled people.

- The Department of Commerce operates a number of programs designed to spur economic development and assist Montana businesses.
- The Public Service Commission regulates certain motor carriers in Montana. Some businesses that carry passengers fall under PSC jurisdiction; the businesses must meet a number of requirements and file rates with the PSC. Transportation issues related to food deserts may involve topics under the jurisdiction of the PSC, if they involve proposals for transporting people to areas with better food choices.

Options for Committee Consideration

If the committee wants to promote further study of food deserts and related issues, members could consider the following options:

1. Approve drafting of a bill that requires one or more state agencies to study the topic and report back to the appropriate interim committees before the end of the 2013-14 interim.  
*Note: A bill would have the force of law and thus require that the study be conducted. A study bill should either contain an appropriation to cover the costs of the study or direct the agency or agencies to conduct the study within appropriated funds.*
2. Approve drafting of a resolution urging one or more state agencies to study the topic and report back to the appropriate interim committees before the end of the 2013-14 interim.

*Note: A resolution would serve merely as a suggestion to the agencies. It would not require that the study be done.*

3. Approve the drafting of an interim study resolution for the 2013-14 interim.

*Note: The study would be carried out if the resolution is approved by the Legislature and the study is ranked highly enough in the post-session poll of interim studies.*

4. Send a letter to potential stakeholders, including state agencies, to encourage them to work on the issue and bring ideas to the 2013 Legislature or to the Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee in the 2013-14 interim.

*Note: A letter would serve merely as a suggestion to the agencies. It would not require that the study be done.*

5. Find that the issue of food deserts warrants further review. Include the finding in the final report on the HJR 8 study.

6. Identify other options for consideration.