## News

# HOW HARTFORD IS GRAPPLING WITH FOOD ACCESS ISSUES

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**Kamora Herrington smiles in the Sterling Street Sanctuary. The Sterling Street Sanctuary is a community greenspace and black history cultural site.**
PHOTO COURTESY OF SAMIRA CHAMBERS

As a resident of downtown Hartford, Alycia Jenkins knows what's missing: a grocery store.

"Food access in downtown Hartford is difficult to come by because we don't have a grocery store," Jenkins said. "I actually either have to get food delivered or I have to go take a bus to get groceries."

Jenkins, an advocate for environmental justice and a local campaign manager for the Sierra Club, added that though she is in a "privileged" position to take a bus to get her groceries or get them delivered, it isn't fair that she has to. Jenkins thinks that Hartford's access to food needs to be more walkable and affordable.

Only 34% of adults in North Hartford — which includes the Northeast, Upper Albany and Clay Arsenal neighborhoods — believe there is access to affordable, fresh produce in the area, according to a DataHaven Community Wellbeing Survey. The survey found that 45% of Hartford residents citywide and 71% of Connecticut residents believe they have access to fresh produce.

The problem weighs heavily on the state's Black and Latino populations, who are the main demographics in the North and South End, according to the North Hartford Health Report. The survey also showed a higher level of income inequality in that area. showed a higher level of income inequality in that area.

There is only one full-service grocery store in Hartford, a Stop & Shop located on New Park Avenue. Smaller grocery stores are available, but they do not offer the same services, scale or pricing as traditional full-service supermarkets.

Today, Hartford is classified as a food desert — an area that has limited access to affordable nutritious food — by the U.S. Census.

The administration of President Ronald Reagan stopped enforcing the Robinson-Patman Act, which gave competitive advantages to large grocery store chains, The Atlantic reported. Many independent stores were driven out of business while large chains moved out of most low-income areas, turning them into food deserts, it reported.

Hartford has struggled to get a grocery store for decades. There have been financial incentives and an attempt at a community-owned store, according to the Hartford Courant. Former councilwoman, Tiana Hercules said these stores failed because they were not profitable in the North End.

Tax incentives have been used to incentivize grocery store development in food-desert relief plans. The 2023 state budget, included a provision that allowed municipalities to lower property taxes for grocery stores that operated in food deserts during 2023 and 2024. No stores opened in the North End at that time.

Kamora Herrington, founder of Kamora's Cultural Corner and the Sterling Street Sanctuary in Hartford, said the solution to food deserts doesn't have to be a large-chain grocery store. Instead, she said that there is a more accurate term for the problem at hand.

"This is not a food desert," Herrington said. "This is a food apartheid."

Food apartheid, first coined by food justice advocate Karen Washington, is defined as systemic, racialized and economic segregation of food access, where marginalized communities are intentionally denied access to nutritious, affordable food while being flooded with unhealthy options.

Herrington said calling Hartford a food desert gives the impression that there is no food in the city, but that is not the case.

"There is plenty of food here," she said, pointing out how every few steps there is a bodega or corner store with junk food.

"All of those places are small businesses that, with more support, could offer us better food," Herrington said. "But, for some reason, in Hartford, the powers that [have] convinced all of us that the way to take care of our food problem is to make Stop & Shop understand that they need to be here."

Hartford and its residents have launched multiple initiatives to address food access, such as food pantries, farmers' markets and urban farming.

Saraya Wise, a resident in the North End, said she uses a source list from 211, a service that connects people to local health and human services, to find nearby fresh fruits and vegetables. The 211 list includes dates, times, location and contact information for places providing food.

"They send me everything," she said. "Believe it or not, it's like maybe eight different places right here on the avenue that'd be giving out food."

Some have also turned to urban farming, which helps expand food access by cultivating, processing and distributing food within the city. Examples include Levo International's hydroponic farm on Homestead Avenue, Trinfo Community Garden at Trinity College and Urban Roots Grow Center at the Chrysler Center.

Knox, located on Laurel Street, is one of the larger Hartford-based non-profits that promotes agriculture growth in the city. The organization hosts farmers' markets, managing 21 gardens, planting trees and offering workforce development training, according to its website.

The organization works with farmers to grow food for sale at several places, including its own farmers' market called FoodShare. Most farmers' markets in the state accept the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, which Doyle said makes fresh food more accessible.

About 250 to 300 people access the community gardens Knox manages to grow fresh food either for themselves or to share with others, Doyle said.

Hartford's low tree canopy creates a heat island effect that affects the growing season, but other than that, it's about the same climate in surrounding cities, he said.

"But the weather has become much more variable and that can be hard for people," he said. "So, one of the things we talk about with our farmers and gardeners is kind of like grow variety, grow extra."

During the off-season, operations have to scale down quite a bit, Doyle said.




**Data by DataHaven Community Wellbeing Survey**
PHOTO COURTESY OF SAMIRA CHAMBERS



**Patrick Doyle, executive director of Knox. He is standing in front of the labyrinth during "Love Your Block Day" at the Sterling Street Sanctuary.**
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