

# Ensure Access to Healthy Foods

## Priority 4 – Increase healthy eating by ensuring access to healthy foods.

### THE PROBLEM

Healthy eating reduces the risk of obesity. Obesity can lead to a variety of poor health outcomes, including type 2 diabetes, cancer, coronary heart disease, and stroke. Moreover, insufficient nutrition puts adults and children at risk for illness and weakens the immune system. Children from birth to five years of age are especially vulnerable to nutritional deprivation, which negatively affects their ability to learn, grow, and fight infections.

Limited access to healthy foods and the relative availability of nutrient poor foods prevent many Kent County community members from maintaining a healthy diet. The existence of food deserts<sup>14</sup> within a community is one indicator of access to healthy foods. In Kent County there are 19,172 community members who live in a food desert.

A second indicator of access to healthy foods is 'food insecurity.' Food insecurity is calculated based on responses to a population survey conducted by the US Census. The rate is made up of three questions, including 1) are you worried your food will run out before you have money to buy more, 2) if the food you bought doesn't last, do you have money to buy more, and 3) can you afford to eat balanced meals. The food insecurity rate for Kent County is 15% overall, but households with children in Kent County experience a much higher food insecurity rate of 23%.

*HP2020: Reduce household food insecurity from 14.6% to 6% and in doing so reduce hunger.*

*HP2020: Eliminate very low food security among children.*

A third indicator of access to healthy foods is participation in income-based programs that provide food assistance. Compared to Michigan, a higher percentage of Kent County community members qualify for food assistance (SNAP) and over the past few years, the need for food assistance in Kent County has grown. The numbers of SNAP and WIC redemptions are increasing in Kent County, as is the number of students participating in the free and reduced lunch program.

*HP2020: Increase the contribution of fruits to the diets of the population aged 2 and older.*

*HP2020: Increase the proportion of schools that do not sell or offer calorically sweetened beverages to students from 9.3% to 21.3%.*

*HP2020: Increase the proportion of school districts that require schools to make fruits or vegetables available whenever other food is offered or sold from 6.6% to 18.6%.*

Two important indicators of healthy eating are the degree to which adults and children eat 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day and the degree to which adults and children consume sugar sweetened beverages. The MiPHY (2010) includes questions about these indicators of healthy eating. In Kent County, 34.9% of students reported that they ate five or more servings per day of fruits and vegetables in the past seven days, and 32.1% of students indicated that they drank a can, bottle, or glass of soda or pop one or more times per day over the past seven days. Students who receive Ds/Fs are least likely to report adequate fruit and vegetable consumption and most likely to report drinking soda or pop on a daily basis.

<sup>14</sup> A food desert is defined as low-income census tract where a substantial share of residents have low access to a supermarket or large grocery store (Economic Research Service, USDA).

One poor health outcome associated with a lack of access to healthy food is obesity. According to BRFSS results, in Kent County, approximately 30% of adults are obese and another 35% are overweight. Adult males in Kent County are more likely than adult females to be overweight, and African American adults in Kent County are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to be obese.

In addition, based on results from the MiPHY, one out of ten youth in Kent County are obese. Male youth in Kent County are more likely than female youth to be obese and American Indian, African American, and Hispanic students are more likely than other racial or ethnic group to be obese. Also, students who receive Ds/Fs in Kent County are more likely to be obese than students who receive As/Bs.

Obesity was clearly identified as a major health issue across the state in Michigan's state health assessment and state health improvement planning process. Nearly \$3 billion in annual medical costs in Michigan are attributed to obesity. Currently, approximately 32% of Michigan's adult population is obese and another 35% is overweight. Additionally, approximately 52% of Michigan's adults achieve the recommended amounts of physical activity and 23% eat the recommend amount of fruits and vegetables. In fact, Michigan's state health improvement plan focuses on addressing obesity due to its high prevalence and serious consequences for every Michigan community. The plan aims to reduce the percentage of Michigan residents who are overweight or obese, and to increase the percentage of children and adults who achieve recommended levels of physical activity and eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables. The plan includes strategies for increasing sales of healthy foods in schools, increasing worksite wellness programs, and encouraging health care providers to offer counseling to reduce obesity. The strategies in the plan align with Healthy People 2020 objectives, as well as the strategies Kent County plans to carry out through this priority area.

*MI SHIP: Increase the percentage of Michigan's youth and adults who eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables from 22.6% to 23.7% of adults and 19.6% to 20.6% of high school youth.*

*MI SHIP: Increase the percentage of Michigan's schools selling healthy foods from 26.7% to 28%.*

*MI SHIP: Decrease the percentage of high school students who drank soda or pop at least once a day from 27.6% to 26.2%.*

*MI SHIP: Increase the amount of food stamp sales at MI farmers markets from \$705,969 to \$824,624.*

## THE PLAN

Based on these data and their service system assessment, the Priority 4 workgroup drafted goals, objectives, strategies, and action plans to address increasing healthy eating by ensuring access to healthy foods in Kent County.

Priority 4 Goals, Objectives, and Strategies appear in Table 5. Priority 4 Action Plans appear in Appendix E. The data sources for tracking objectives appear in the footnotes. The evidence-base underlying the selected strategies appears in footnotes, where appropriate.