To keep Hartford healthy and strong, we need to continue working hard to make sure that healthy food and beverage options are available wherever our residents live, work, play and learn.”

- Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin

The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program is supporting healthier living in communities around the country, including in Hartford, CT. The Healthy Hartford ANCHOR project’s collaboration with the city government and other community partners is making healthy food and beverage options more visible, available, and desirable. Poor diets can lead to obesity, diabetes and other health problems, yet many people in Hartford believe healthy foods cost too much. Healthy Hartford ANCHOR is working with its partners to spread the news about numerous initiatives at grocers, senior centers, worksites, and schools that provide fresh and nutritious food options at affordable prices.

The Challenge
Too many people in Hartford believe that wholesome, healthy food is too expensive. About two-thirds of those who participated in a September 2015 ANCHOR-commissioned survey found that to be the case. Yet, most also felt it “very important” that local childcare programs provide healthy meals and snacks to their children. The survey also found broad support for grocer incentive programs that encouraged the purchase of fresh produce among people who received benefits through SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program formerly known as food stamps. Nearly all who were surveyed said they would like to see more farmers markets accept SNAP payments.

Multiple efforts to promote the availability of healthy, affordable food and beverages are taking place across Hartford through farmers markets, a mobile market, and neighborhood grocers. Unfortunately, many city residents and community leaders are unaware of these initiatives.

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The Solution
Hartford’s ANCHOR program partnered with the Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy to organize a major communications plan to better publicize healthy food and beverage options throughout the community. A public service announcement was created to highlight various nutrition initiatives in the community, including programs at early learning centers, elementary schools and worksites throughout the city. The video also showcases neighborhood grocers that give store vouchers as incentives for SNAP recipients to use more of their benefits for fresh fruit and vegetable purchases.

In addition to YouTube, the public service announcement was distributed throughout Hartford, including the city’s health department, the city chamber, merchant groups, offices supporting the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, and area senior centers. A resource guide listing locations of farmers markets, stops scheduled for the mobile market, and public transportation routes to all included sites was distributed along with the video.

Sustainability Efforts
Healthy Hartford ANCHOR conducted Nutrition Environment Measurement Surveys (NEMS) with local farmers markets, grocery stores, and worksites with vending machines. Survey rankings and summary assessments will help identify gaps and areas for expansion and improvement in community health. The results are being shared with the Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy for inclusion in its annual report to the mayor, city council, city department leaders, and community stakeholders. The city health department and area hospitals plan to use updated NEMS information in their community health assessment reports.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The public service announcement created by ANCHOR is being used to encourage grocery store managers and owners to increase the variety of produce they keep stocked. It also helps promote the incentive programs some grocers use to encourage SNAP recipients to buy more fresh fruits and vegetables.

ANCHOR staff have been conducting interviews with SNAP and WIC clients and senior center visitors to determine their food shopping and preparation preferences. ANCHOR will then work with local merchant groups to use interview findings to help shape the future design of store marketing and branding materials.

Results
Local ANCHOR partners have helped promote the public service announcement and the resource guide on their websites and social media channels. The video helped raise awareness about ongoing food-based initiatives, as well as encouraged other organizations to join the efforts of merchants and community groups being highlighted. Partners were also encouraged to become familiar with the American Heart Association’s Healthy Community Food and Beverage Toolkit, and act upon the ideas in the toolkit to create a healthier culture and food environment.

The efforts have inspired another initiative: the local food bank, Foodshare, has helped oversee exploration of a cooperative produce-purchasing group among grocery store owners and food distributors. Organizers are hoping to turn the proposal into a state-wide Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which helps bring grocery stores and healthy food retailers to underserved communities.

Get Involved
Work with us to increase community awareness of existing food programs, initiatives, and resources. Contact your local American Heart Association office for information and resources to learn how you can support healthier food and beverage options!