For many people, shopping for healthy food means a quick drive to a neighborhood grocery store. But that’s not the case in underserved communities with limited access to stores that sell fresh fruits and vegetables, whole-grain foods or high-quality meats. This limitation often leads to poor diets, which can contribute to obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. A regional leadership group called “Healthy Food Virginia” is drawing attention to “food deserts,” or areas with limited availability of affordable and nutritious food, to show their economic impact on communities like the Hampton Roads region of Southeast Virginia. Raising awareness has been critical in building support among policy makers for healthy food financing initiatives, which are programs that expand the availability of nutritious food, including developing and equipping grocery stores, small retailers, corner stores, and farmers markets selling healthy food.

The Challenge
Limited access to stores selling healthy, affordable food is a problem affecting the health of many low-income residents in Hampton Roads, a metropolitan area known more for its sparkling beaches, harbors, and large military presence. Residents without cars must often walk more than a mile or catch multiple buses to reach the nearest grocer. Convenience stores provide a closer option but often sell pre-packaged, less nutritious and more expensive food. People living in such food deserts tend to have higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related health problems. Virginia’s adult obesity rate is over 28 percent; obesity has an economic impact on a community by contributing to higher medical costs and reducing workforce productivity through increased absenteeism.
The Solution
The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program is working to support healthy living in communities around the country. In Virginia, the Hampton Roads ANCHOR team partnered with a reporter from local television station, WVEC, to highlight the challenges of finding healthy, affordable food in a food desert by going grocery shopping for a typical Thanksgiving meal. The reporter went to several convenience stores but found only canned goods. One store manager said he had stopped carrying fresh produce because they failed to sell, highlighting the complexity of the issue. An American Heart Association volunteer recounted the struggles of growing up in a food desert and how it took hours to get to the grocery store by bus, while an AHA employee described the connection between food deserts and diet-related illnesses. The news segment noted that more than 1.7 million Virginia residents, including over 480,000 children, live in low-income communities with limited supermarket access. It also included a map of affected areas and a website with additional information.

Sustaining Success
Healthy Food Virginia continues to raise awareness about the limited access many residents face when shopping for healthy food. WVEC-TV followed its original news segment from November with additional stories in February highlighting local efforts to improve the availability of healthy food choices in underserved neighborhoods. A video of the Grocery Bag Challenge, where American Heart Walk participants carried a bag of groceries for a mile, was posted on the American Heart Association’s Facebook page, http://HealthyFoodVA.heart.org, and partners’ social media sites. Hampton Roads residents have responded by supporting efforts to make healthy, affordable food available for all.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
By highlighting the lack of healthy, affordable food in Hampton Roads, the Thanksgiving-themed media story raised awareness about the magnitude of food access problems in the area and helped build an audience eager to support healthy food financing initiatives. With community and partner support, ANCHOR is encouraging environmental change aimed at eliminating food deserts and helping Hampton Roads residents improve their health through better nutrition.

Results
This story aired three times on November 24, 2015, and also was posted on the television station’s website. More than 105,000 people viewed the broadcast story, while more than 25,000 unique visitors logged onto the website were the video was posted. The reach stretched further after the story also was featured on the American Heart Association’s website and the social media sites of partners. The awareness push continued when the news station produced a week-long series on food access during its February 2016 sweeps week. Those pieces included interviews with local business developers about their plans for building downtown grocery stores, including a new market in a food desert located in Newport News.

Get Involved
Making the healthy choice the easy choice for all Virginians helps improve the wellbeing for all of the residents of Virginia’s Commonwealth. Visit http://HealthyFoodVA.heart.org to find out how you can make a difference. For those outside Virginia, connect with your local food banks, farmers markets, and health coalitions to see what is being done in your area and how you can contribute.