A healthy food system can be vital to a city’s economic system, as well as its overall welfare. The New Haven Food Policy Council, a volunteer advisory board, is updating the Food Action Plan it originally developed in 2012 to improve affordable and healthy food access for all city residents. The American Heart Association worked with the Food Policy Council to conduct a survey that will help assess the degree of food insecurity in New Haven and ultimately shape food assistance programs and policies. The American Heart Association also helped bring together neighborhood residents, advocacy groups and local businesses for a day-long community workshop to discuss food access problems and brainstorm ideas to address them. The resulting dialogue will be incorporated into an updated New Haven Food Action Plan that will build and improve upon citywide efforts to develop a robust food system in which everyone has access to affordable, healthy food.

The Challenge
A recent survey of underserved neighborhoods in New Haven, CT found that about one-third of residents did not have enough food to eat, or lacked enough money to buy groceries. Most of the respondents were people of color and women. About one-third came from households with incomes of $15,000 or less. Hunger and food access problems have the ability to threaten community health. But food insecurity – or living in a condition without reliable access to a sufficient amount of affordable, nutritious food to sustain a healthy lifestyle – is often a hidden problem. For example, few people realize that many overweight or obese residents who come from economically disadvantaged communities also are malnourished. Their weight problems stem from access to unhealthy food – their meals may be rich in calories, but poor in essential vitamins, minerals and other nutritional necessities.

“New Haven has an active food community. This is an exciting time for the city as we update the Food Action Plan to include more sectors of the food process that need addressed.”

– Joy Johannes, New Haven Food System Policy Director
The Solution
The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program is supporting healthier living initiatives throughout the country. In Connecticut, the American Heart Association is working with the New Haven Food Policy Council and other community partners to assess the extent of the region’s food security issues and identify possible solutions. The American Heart Association’s ANCHOR team is working with the Council to help update the New Haven Food Action Plan, a blueprint that lays out food policy goals and priorities, and strategies to increase accessibility to healthy food sources. It also is helping analyze findings from the 2016 “New Haven Food Insecurity and Access Survey.” It helped the city conduct the survey to identify the region’s top food access problems and the greatest gaps in service.

Sustaining Success
The Council will evaluate ways to reach out to health advocates and city agencies, including transportation and economic development departments, about how to pool resources in efforts to address food access problems. It will continue to build public awareness about food insecurity, to help bring the issue out of hiding, and work with local city officials who represent neighborhoods where food insecurity is widespread. The Council also will work closely with the city’s first-ever food system and policy director who was appointed in 2016 to ensure that everyone has access to healthy and nutritious food.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The campaign to increase food access and improve food security will generate a number of system-level and environmental changes within the city. The ANCHOR team, in its work with the New Haven Food Policy Council, is educating key leaders and the public about the extensive coordination and collaboration necessary between government agencies, private businesses and non-profit organizations to make food access programs effective. These efforts could ultimately lead to city-wide policy, systems and environmental improvements to improve access to healthy food.

Results
ANCHOR helped the New Haven Food Policy Council post “food idea boards” throughout City Hall and public library branches to encourage community members to share their concerns and suggestions ahead of a Sept. 24 workshop, “Food for All: Envisioning Our Future.” The event allowed the public to help identify areas in the New Haven food system in need of strengthening and provide public input in creating a set of future action items. The feedback also will “help build the capacity and create a system in which everyone has access to adequate food and everyone enjoys a healthy diet,” said Joy Johannes, the city of New Haven’s first Food System Policy Director.

Get Involved
Learn more about New Haven’s food-related programs and services by visiting the city’s referral center, www.getconnectednewhaven.com/services/food.