Bigger is not always better in Texas. It certainly isn’t healthier. In the state capital of Austin, about 37 percent of the city’s residents are overweight, and 21 percent are obese. For some, the weight problem stems from food insecurity. Limited access to nutritious food often leads to unhealthy diets, a factor that can contribute to obesity and other chronic illnesses. To help raise awareness about food insecurity in Austin, the American Heart Association hosted a community discussion and training session for local educators, health care workers, social service agencies and non-profit leaders to help make healthy food access a reality for everyone.

The Challenge

Limited access to nutritious food is a widespread problem in Texas. A report on supermarket access shows that Texas could support an additional 589 stores in neighborhoods across the state designated by the federal government as food deserts. Residents in these areas often must travel more than a mile to reach the closest grocery store that offers a variety of high-quality fruits, vegetables and other healthy food.

About 18 percent of Austin residents are considered food insecure. They lack reliable access to affordable, nutritious food and frequently don’t know where their next meal will come from. As a result, they develop poor diets and become more at risk for obesity, diabetes, heart disease and stroke. In Texas, over 32% of adults are obese; it’s a problem that hits consumers in their wallet as well as their waistband. Texas businesses spend about $9.5 billion annually on obesity-related costs linked to health care and absenteeism.

“I learned a lot during the August 18th community training, but more than anything I was empowered to create change and given specific tools I can use today for improving healthy food access in Austin.”

– Maria Wright, AHA volunteer
The Solution
The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program is supporting healthier living in communities around the country. In Austin, Texas, the American Heart Association is raising awareness about people who need better access to healthy, affordable food. It hosted a forum on Aug. 18, 2016 to educate the community about food insecurity and the steps that can be taken to improve widespread access. Leaders from the Central Texas Food Bank, the Austin Independent School District, Seton Health Plan, a children’s shelter and various charities and nonprofit organizations joined individual community advocates in answering the American Heart Associations’ call to learn more about Austin’s history with healthy food financing efforts. Participants also learned about strategies and tools that can help them recruit supporters who will speak out about food access issues and the need for policy change.

Sustaining Success
Raising awareness and educating the community about food insecurity is only the first step. The ANCHOR team in Austin is collecting pledge cards from individuals eager to support the campaign. They also continue to recruit volunteers interested in serving as spokespeople who can share stories about how food insecurity has personally touched their lives.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The community discussion and training session on healthy food access has helped raise awareness about food insecurity and its prevalence throughout Austin. The campaign also has laid the groundwork to encourage local leaders and other decision makers to implement future policy, systems and environmental changes that will build upon past healthy food incentive programs, such as the corner store initiative. That city program provided small neighborhood shops with funding to buy equipment necessary to allow them to sell more fresh produce. The American Heart Association continues to work at creating an environment of informed advocates, stakeholders, and residents who will support food access issues and the need for policy change.

Results
On Aug. 18, 2016, ANCHOR’s community and training forum on healthy food access brought together leaders from schools, health care programs, social service organizations and local advocates with reach across the city of Austin. After being shown a map of all the city’s food insecure neighborhoods, attendees realized just how widespread the problem is: Every participant either lived in, next to, or knew someone from a highlighted region on the map. Participants also learned about recent retail initiatives that have helped improve healthy food access. They also were trained on strategies and efforts they can take to help ensure everyone has access to nutritious and affordable food. While improving access to nutritious and affordable food doesn’t guarantee a reduction in diet-related health illnesses, removing barriers to them can help empower people trying to maintain healthy weight.

Get Involved
The American Heart Association encourages Austin residents to learn about ongoing efforts to improve healthy food access for all community members. For more information, contact Brian.Bowser@heart.org, the regional campaign manager for the ANCHOR team in Austin.