Agriculture is Virginia’s top industry by far, with its production levels ranking among the top food growers in the entire nation. Yet for many families throughout the state, finding healthy and affordable food can be a challenge. In the cities of Chesapeake, Newport News, and Suffolk, the region of Southeast Virginia, pockets of residents live in “food deserts,” or neighborhoods with limited access to stores that sell fresh food. A regional coalition working to improve healthy food access in low-income communities has collaborated with a local business and its mobile market to bring fresh produce to a food desert located in the city of Chesapeake. The well-received mobile market set up shop once a week over the summer at the Chesapeake Cuffee Community Center, offering products at discounted rates.

The Challenge
More than 1.7 million Virginia residents, including more than 480,000 children, live in low-income communities with limited supermarket access. That often leads residents, particularly those without cars or other transportation, to meet their grocery needs at closer convenience stores that usually sell pre-packaged, unhealthy and more expensive food. For this and other reasons, residents who live in food deserts tend to have higher rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and other diet-related health problems. In Virginia, the adult obesity rate is more than 27 percent and nearly 30 percent of children ages 10-17 are overweight or obese. The Commonwealth is projected to have more than one million diabetes cases and more than two million cases of heart disease by 2030 if this current pace continues.

“In my opinion, it’s wonderful! My husband Bernard is a diabetic so it is important to eat healthy. This market reminds me of growing up on the farm with lots of veggies – like a kid again!”

– Audrey Vick, mobile market customer
The American Heart Association collaborated with Healthy Chesapeake, a coalition of organizations, agencies and activists, to bring a mobile market run by Five Points Community Farm Market to a food desert located in the city of Chesapeake. For eleven weeks over the summer, the market opened shop on Wednesday afternoons at the city’s Cuffee Community Center, offering residents the chance to shop for fresh peaches, tomatoes and other seasonal produce. The cost of the products for sale were subsidized by an American Heart Association grant and with $5 vouchers that Healthy Chesapeake provided for low-income seniors. The mobile market also accepted payments from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (formerly known as food stamps).

Sustaining Success
As part of the Healthy Eating Work Team of the Healthy Chesapeake Coalition, the American Heart Association recruited the Five Points Community Farm Market to bring its mobile market to the Cuffee Community Center every week from 4-6 pm, July 20 to September 28, 2016. The community center, city libraries, civic leagues, the area’s largest food pantry, and the American Heart Association all worked to promote the market through social media, brochures, billboards and other advertisements placed within a five-mile radius of the market’s location. Taste tests and free recipe cards helped entice people to visit and make return trips. Moving forward, the team will meet with the civic leagues and public housing residents to assess community interest in continuing to increase healthy food access in the South Norfolk area.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The addition of a mobile farmers market in a neighborhood considered a food desert reflects changes on both an environmental and systemic level. The addition of Five Points Community Farm Market to an area that previously lacked easy access to affordable fruits and vegetables represents an environmental change, while offering consumers who live in such regions regular opportunities to buy nutritious produce is a systems change.

Results
The American Heart Association worked collaboratively with the Five Points Community Farm Market to offer residents the chance to buy fruits and vegetables, which are the cornerstone of healthy eating. The weekly visits by the mobile market gave area consumers the chance to supplement their other grocery purchases with local, affordable produce. Through a combination of social media posts, traditional advertising and word-of-mouth promotion, mobile market sales increased with each passing week, and even doubled within two weeks of its introduction.

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
Support farmers markets in your neighborhood, and raise awareness about efforts to help underserved neighborhoods that have limited access to grocery stores. For more information about how you can make a difference in your community, visit http://healthyfoodva.heart.org.