Food is a constant presence in the news — from its role in soaring obesity and diabetes rates, to the steady decline in the number of farmers. Food insecurity, food waste, and food sustainability are just some of the topics that many organizations currently tackle. The American Heart Association through its Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program has brought synergy to those efforts in Hampton Roads, Virginia. It recently organized meetings with more than two dozen stakeholders to discuss the creation of a regional food policy council that could help address the community’s needs with a single, unified voice. The body tackles distribution, accessibility, insecurity and other important food-related issues in a way to encourage collaboration and improvement of existing policies, or to help create new ones wherever needed.

The Challenge
Virginia is a major grower of food for the United States, yet for many families in the southeastern part of the state, finding affordable, nutritious food is a challenge. Many residents of the Hampton Roads area live in pockets with low access to healthy food. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines these areas as “food deserts,” or neighborhoods that lack easy access to fresh, affordable groceries. Residents who live in food deserts have much higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related health problems.

More than 29 percent of Virginia’s adult population is obese. The problem also affects children in the state: nearly 14.3 percent of youth ages 10-17 are obese. Increasing access to nutritious and affordable food is a key step to enabling people to maintain a healthy weight.

“I feel much better now about healthy options. This training really put me at ease and it feels more doable than before.”

— new Business Enterprise Program vendor
The Solution
In December 2016, ANCHOR Partnerships Program staff pulled together representatives from farms, food banks, public health departments, nonprofit organizations, medical systems and universities to discuss the formation of a food policy council for Hampton Roads. The group agreed there is a need in the region for a unifying body to address healthy food access issues, and it met again at a follow-up summit convened two months later in February 2017. Participants explored the role of a food policy council and discussed pressing food issues in the area. They identified food gaps and brainstormed ideas for addressing them. They also drafted a mission statement and outlined values and a vision for the new council.

Sustaining Success
Council members will hold another meeting in April to fine-tune the council’s vision and mission statement. They also will select leaders for working groups and agree upon a framework for the council’s infrastructure. The group also plans to hold additional training sessions and briefings for its members during future meetings.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
Starting a regional food policy council creates a strong, unified voice around food issues. The council will advocate for changes to improve food access for all, but especially for those living in underserved neighborhoods. It can facilitate collaboration among different organizations and help support change in policies, systems and environment at the local level.

Results
The mission of the newly-created Hampton Roads food policy council is to make sure healthy food is assessable for all residents, at all income levels with an emphasis on local. The council will strive to keep the area’s food system honest, sustainable and ethical. It also will help educate consumers in making wise food choices, while ensuring that the appropriate systems and policies are in place so that residents can make those healthy choices. The new council plans to take a closer look at existing food challenges, particularly those related to food distribution, access, waste and insecurity. It will examine the impact these issues have on residents, and what solutions and hurdles exist in trying to resolve the problems. It ultimately plans to use its collective voice to encourage collaboration between community organizations, businesses and city leaders so that no one in the Hampton Roads region ever goes hungry or has to struggle to obtain affordable, nutritious food.

Get Involved
Interested in having your voice heard or having your organization participate in the Hampton Road food policy council? Contact Michelle Charter (michelle.charters@heart.org), the regional campaign manager at the American Heart Association’s ANCHOR Partnerships Program. Or learn more about overall efforts in the region to improve food access by going to the American Heart Association’s website: http://healthyfoodva.heart.org.