

Toni Harp 2013 Food Security Position Paper

One of the great things about New Haven is that we already lead our state in food policy. From having our own Food Policy Council, to supporting dozens of urban community gardens and farmers' markets, to sponsoring the John C. Daniels School Garden at Common Ground's School Garden Resource Center, we've done a lot to show other Connecticut cities what they can do to address food security.

For twenty-five years, I've helped lead the fight to improve quality food access in New Haven:

- As an older woman, I led the effort to require universal free breakfast in city schools.
- As State Senator, I established a farm-to-school program to promote Connecticut-grown food in schools, required more nutritious and low-fat food options in school vending machines, expanded access for WIC recipients to fresh produce, facilitated the ability of farmers' markets to take payment from people on food stamps for fruits and veggies, and created a reimbursement program for schools that provide healthy foods to students.

I also haven't shied away from standing up for people when they needed an advocate:

- In 2010, when Shaw's announced that it would close, I met with the Dwight Supermarket Concerned Citizens Committee and residents to help keep a supermarket on the site.
- This year, Sen. Looney and I secured two competitive matching grants through the Department of Agriculture's Farm Viability Grant program, for CitySeed's "Consumer 10 percent pledge program" and New Haven Farms' fresh produce prescription program.

Unfortunately, despite our progress, we must do more to promote healthy, sustainable food outcomes for everyone in New Haven. At the federal level, existing food-stamp benefits are in jeopardy – according to a new report, 22 million American households may see a cut of \$20 to \$25 in their monthly assistance as soon as November of this year.

As our next Mayor, I won't wait to step up our food security – I will lead the effort to enact some simple, commonsense initiatives to improve access to healthy food, educate the public on food issues, and strengthen our local food economy.

My food security strategy has six parts:

1. Expand New Haven Farms' community-supported agriculture (CSA) model, and link it to school-based programs like that at the Common Ground school.

Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) provides people with fresh, local produce. Each week, in return for a membership fee, they receive a share of fruits and vegetables grown by farmers and community gardeners who participate in the program. CSAs teach our young people the value of hard work and community service by showing them how to grow food and cook it.

I will work with New Haven Farms to broaden its ability to reach residents in every neighborhood in New Haven or, if that proves infeasible, to identify community groups and nonprofit organizations to help me to establish similar CSAs throughout the city. I also will tie its activities to relevant points in our school curricula.

2. Create a permanent, indoor/outdoor local produce and food business marketplace.

To develop new neighborhood food businesses, train food sector entrepreneurs, and address at least one of our three remaining food deserts (two of which are in West Rock, one of which is in Fair Haven), I will establish in New Haven our own version of Cleveland's West Side Market. This publicly-owned, 45,000 square-foot produce market, located in a beautiful stone building with vaulted ceilings, offers year-round indoor and seasonal outdoor access to fresh and prepared foods four days a week.

If our local farmers, ethnic cuisine vendors, restaurateurs, and mom-and-pop small businesses can use a hospitable, permanent location that gives entrepreneurs from our many immigrant communities a safe, central place to start food-related retail businesses, I will work with them and form public-private partnerships to create one. It's just the kind of tourist-type attraction that we can use to help diversify our economy and build New Haven's reputation as a visitors' cultural destination.

3. Establish a specialty-food small business incubator.

Food incubators help small businesses and entrepreneurs that have difficulty accessing the commercial kitchen space and technical know-how to succeed and grow, and cities from Denver to New York City have used them to and create hundreds of jobs over the past decade. The most successful model, at Rutgers University in New Jersey, combines business training and mentoring services with access to stoves, refrigeration, and packaging operations.

Food incubators not only help to support food security and the production of local food, they add value to food, and the potential for job growth, by focusing on specialty-food production such as breads, cheeses, and chocolates. While many people visit farmers' markets for fresh, local food that they prepare themselves, specialty foods provide a complementary, differentiated, value-added product that can draw customers, tourists, and other businesses.

Given the rapid growth in specialty-food businesses and their enduring status as a key economic driver for immigrant communities to prosper and create jobs, I will partner with Yale and Gateway to develop a specialty-food small business incubator in New Haven.

4. Help community food stores to provide healthy, locally-grown produce to residents.

Since re-outfitting a corner store to sell fresh produce can cost tens of thousands of dollars in technical assistance, equipment, and initial inventory, cities from Philadelphia to Providence have come up with different ways to help small neighborhood markets to sell fresh, healthy food. I will expand our efforts to improve access to nutritious local produce in a couple of ways.

First, to maximize our efficient use of resources, I will create a Food Security Director somewhere within city government to oversee our efforts and coordinate our many disparate ongoing food security initiatives.

Second, to help storeowners to afford fresh produce, I will work with community organizations and the storeowners themselves to develop a small-store food distribution network that can spread its operating costs across dozens of members. As a model, in, one enterprising Philadelphia storeowner coordinates food purchasing, preparation, and delivery for all store owners, in return for a management and processing fee. Stores throughout the city then profit by offering fresh food at reasonable prices and, as a side benefit, creating local jobs.

5. Incorporate mobile food vending into our healthy-food strategy.

Mobile vending carts selling fresh produce can increase access to healthy foods in underserved neighborhoods and provide economic opportunities for local entrepreneurs. From New York City to Kansas City, cities like ours are encouraging healthy food vending. I will direct our city staff to provide reduced or no-cost city permits and/or preferred locations to vendors who sell “healthy” food from their carts, and otherwise coordinate city efforts to help bring farmers’ market produce to senior centers that have difficulty providing their residents with access to them.

6. Increase our efforts to educate our students and residents about healthy food.

Despite our best efforts, many people still don’t know how to improve the healthfulness of their diet, or what opportunities they have right now to make a difference in their family’s food security. I will lead the effort to promote public awareness of healthy food in two ways.

First, I will work with our schools to incorporate food education into the curriculum. Between the dozens of community gardens in New Haven, the number of larger farms in the greater New Haven area, and the state’s Agricultural Experiment Station, we have innumerable local opportunities to educate our residents about food. I believe that every school must include some form of ongoing interaction with either a community garden or regional farm to familiarize our students with where our food comes from and what they can do to participate in growing it.

Second, I will work with Yale and community organizations to augment state efforts to help eligible people to enroll in the food-stamp program. Many people don’t know that they may qualify for this assistance, and the relevant state agencies are overwhelmed with their current responsibilities. I will ensure that city and volunteer staff attend our farmers’ markets and other neighborhood events to publicize the food-stamp program and help people to enroll in it.