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RESEARCH CONFIRMS ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD STILL MATTERS

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For Immediate Release

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Research Confirms Access to Healthy Food Still Matters

For Immediate Release

November 19, 2013 -- A new report underscores healthy food access as the foundation necessary for reaping the positive benefits associated with healthy food. The report reveals that improving healthy food access in low-income communities and communities of color continues to be an urgent need with nearly 30 million people living in low-income areas with limited access to supermarkets (defined as the closest store being more than a mile away). The problem is particularly acute in low-income communities of color.

The new joint report by PolicyLink and The Food Trust, [Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters: A Review of the Research](#), reviews research reaffirming that access to healthy food is a critical component of healthy, thriving communities. The report reviews more than 170 studies, published between 2010 and 2013, in an attempt to synthesize and present the latest research on healthy food access and identify where gaps may still exist since the publication of the first groundbreaking 2010 report, [The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters](#).

"Without access to healthy foods, a nutritious diet and good health are out of reach," said Judith Bell, president of PolicyLink. "And without grocery stores and other fresh food retailers, communities are also missing the commercial vitality that makes neighborhoods livable and helps local economies thrive."

The report systematically reviews the new studies and reevaluates the evidence base. The majority of the evidence continues to support—or strengthen—three primary findings.

1. Accessing healthy food is still a challenge for many families, particularly those living in low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, and rural areas.

Recent national-scale studies conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) and The Reinvestment Fund have found that 25 to 30 million Americans—about 9 percent of the total population—are living in communities that do not provide adequate access to healthy food retailers, such as supermarkets or grocery stores, within a reasonable distance from their home. A large number of recent studies have analyzed the specific access challenges faced in different urban and rural communities by a wide range of population groups.

2. Living closer to healthy food retail is among the factors associated with better eating habits and decreased risk for obesity and diet-related diseases.

More than 75 studies in the past three years have examined the direct health impacts of access to healthy food on diet and on the risk of obesity or overweight, as measured by fruit and vegetable consumption and body mass index (BMI), respectively. The majority of these studies find healthy eating and positive health outcomes associated with access to healthy food.

3. Healthy food retail stimulates economic activity.

Healthy food retail outlets can serve as drivers of economic activity. Even during times of economic downturn and amid threats to established business models, the supermarket and grocery store industry is a powerful economic entity that can create jobs and stimulate growth. For instance, it is estimated that 24

new jobs are created for every 10,000 square feet of retail grocery space, so a very large market can generate between 150 and 200 full- and part-time jobs.

Innovative Approaches Working to Improving Healthy Food Retail

The report finds that in recent years, there have been a growing number of innovative approaches to bring healthy food retail into communities that have limited access. The best known large-scale innovation is the highly successful Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative—a statewide public-private effort that helped develop or improve 88 supermarkets, smaller independently owned grocery stores, farmers' markets, and other fresh food outlets in urban communities, small towns, and rural areas throughout Pennsylvania. The national Healthy Food Financing Initiative is modeled after Pennsylvania's efforts.

Implications for Policy and Research

The evidence published in the last two decades, and the past three years in particular, shows that access to healthy food continues to be a critical factor for improving both the physical and economic well-being of communities. This review led to the following policy and research recommendations:

- Comprehensive equity-oriented approaches to improving food retailing and access, that take economic, social, and environmental contexts into account, are needed to improve health.
- Strategies should focus on those most in need—low-income people and communities of color.
- Research that examines local lived experiences and uncovers lessons about the implementation of recent initiatives to improve food retailing in communities with limited access will be critical to understanding how healthy food can be accessed by all.

"Even as progress is being made to improve access in urban neighborhoods and rural communities, millions of Americans are still struggling to put healthy food on the table," said Allison Karpyn, director of research and evaluation at The Food Trust. "We hope this new research contributes to action at the local, state, regional, and national levels to leverage resources and target efforts to the places with the greatest need."

To download an executive summary as well as the full report, [click here](#).

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PolicyLink is a national research and advocacy institute advancing economic and social equity. Founded in 1999, PolicyLink helps create sustainable communities of opportunity that offer access to quality jobs, affordable housing, good schools, transportation, and the benefits of healthy food and physical activity. The organization is based in Oakland (Calif.), with offices in New York City, Los Angeles, and Washington DC. www.policylink.org