Farming & Food

Industries’ growing needs
The Clark Park Farmers Market in Philadelphia takes part in a program that encourages SNAP users to shop for healthy foods.

**CONVENIENT STORES**

Bringing healthy food to underserved areas

By Mary Helen Berg

“**W**ow.**”** Nothing more — just, “Wow.” That’s what the Rev. Reginald Flynn of Flint, Mich., imagines shoppers will say when they walk into a brand-new 27,000-square-foot neighborhood grocery store and see shelves brimming with fresh fruits and vegetables.

The North Flint Food Market, scheduled to break ground in 2018, is a key project of the North Flint Reinvestment Corporation, Flynn’s ambitious effort to create local jobs and rebuild a corner of his hometown.

The store would be an oasis in a “food desert,” an area defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a low-income region where residents live a mile or more from a supermarket.

After two Kroger stores and a Meijer supermarket shut their doors within eight months, many Flint residents found themselves in such a desert, at least five to 10 miles from a store that sells fresh fruit, vegetables and meat with little to no access to healthy food, said Flynn, founder and president of the North Flint Reinvestment Corporation.

More than 41 percent of Flint residents live in poverty and recently, access to nutritious food became even more critical. In 2015, residents learned that toxic levels of lead were found in the city’s drinking water; the city had already been issuing boil-water notices for months.

The amount of lead finally fell below federal limits in January, but residents are still being asked to drink filtered water. Healthy food can help combat lead; fruits, vegetables and other foods rich in iron, calcium and vitamin C help clear it from the body.

“The research is showing that access to healthy foods and proper nutrition is

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one of the things that helps mitigate the effects of lead which our families have been exposed to," said Flynn, pastor to 300 congregants at Foss Avenue Baptist Church in Flint. "It's important for them that we are successful."

At least 19 million Americans live in food deserts at least a mile from a supermarket in urban areas and 10 miles from a store in rural regions, according to USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS), Congress mandated the study of food deserts, also known as low-income, low-supermarket-access census tracts, as part of the 2008 Farm Bill, said Shelly Ver Ploeg, an ERS economist.

But it takes more than adding shiny new markets in these neighborhoods to address this thorny problem, Ver Ploeg said. In fact, the number of supermarkets in the U.S. actually increased between 2010 and 2015. But the number of low-income households and those without cars also increased — meaning healthy food was still out of reach for many.

"People’s choice of where to shop and what to purchase is complicated, and the proximity of stores is one factor, but there are lots of other factors," such as food and fuel prices, education, income level and access to transportation, Ver Ploeg said.

Across the U.S., government programs and nonprofit efforts such as Flynn’s are trying to eradicate food deserts, where people are more likely to buy meals at fast food restaurants and convenience stores than from fully stocked grocery stores. The federal government has spent nearly $500 million since 2011 to expand food access, according to the USDA. Recent efforts span from local corner stores to cyberspace.

The USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service has launched a two-year pilot program that allows participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly referred to as the food stamp program) to order groceries online. Seven retailers, including Amazon, FreshDirect, Safeway and ShopRite, have signed on to supply groceries in seven states beginning this August.

To improve access to healthy foods at brick-and-mortar stores, the USDA released the Healthy Corner Stores Guide in 2016. The guide provides strategies and resources for communities that want healthier options for small retailers.

In addition, stores that accept SNAP will be required to offer a broader variety of nutritious foods beginning in May 2017, according to new USDA rules. Previously, SNAP-authorized stores were required to stock a minimum of 12 staples such as vegetables, fruits, dairy products, meats and bread. The rule change now requires a minimum of 84 different staple foods. That rule could backfire, discouraging retailers from taking part in SNAP in cities like Baltimore, where most people live within a few blocks of a corner store, said Joel Gittelsohn, professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Retailers who find the rule change too onerous could drop SNAP, making healthy food even less accessible in food deserts. And, Gittelsohn added, if retailers who accept SNAP are found not to be in compliance with the new requirements they could lose their ability to accept SNAP, and that could likely put many of them out of business.

But, he added, making improvements to convenient and ubiquitous corner stores could increase food access more effectively than adding new supermarkets. "We have to think about using a variety of different approaches. No single approach is going to be sufficient," he said.

Farmers markets are another way to bring fresh produce to underserved communities; USDA provides incentives for both farmers and shoppers. More than 7,000 farmers and markets now participate in SNAP — nine times the number that participated in 2008.

In Philadelphia, for example, The Food Trust, a local nonprofit focused on healthy food access, received $500,000 from the USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition program Incentive to expand its farmers market coupon program.

The Philly Food Bucks initiative encourages SNAP users to shop at one of 25 farmers markets by awarding consumers $2 in fresh produce coupons for every $5 they spend. Sales at the farmers markets have soared as a result, increasing by more than 375 percent, according to The Food Trust.

Back in Flint, Flynn needs to raise $7 million from private and public sources for his community co-op grocery store, which will feature an onsite health clinic and pharmacy. He plans to apply for a grant through the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), a $400 million plan launched in 2010 through the departments of Agriculture, Treasury and Health and Human Services.

USDA programs like SNAP and the HFFI have been "an incredible success," helping to shrink food deserts, said John Weidman, deputy executive director of The Food Trust. "We think they’re really critical to getting at this difficult problem of having areas where it’s just hard to get healthy food on the table for your family."

So far, it’s unclear whether funding for these programs will continue at current levels or how they’ll be viewed by the Trump administration, Weidman said.

But Jessica Shahin, acting administrator at the Food and Nutrition Service, reiterated her agency’s commitment to reduce hunger and address the problem of food deserts. "The Food and Nutrition Service will continue working tirelessly to fight hunger and bring healthier options to food deserts around the country," Shahin said in an email. "Whether for infants and mothers, schoolchildren or the elderly, FNS’ programs will continue to serve as America’s nutritional safety net, promoting nutrition among all those in need."