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Baltimore names its first food czar

Panel recommends expanding farmers' markets, gardens to increase healthful food consumption

By Meredith Cohn, The Baltimore Sun

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City leaders named a "food czar" Tuesday to lead the battle against poor eating habits that are linked to the intractable obesity epidemic and alarming levels of heart disease and diabetes in Baltimore's poorer neighborhoods.

As the city's new food policy director, Holly Freishtat will be responsible for improving demand and access to healthful foods. She joins just a few others with similar missions around the nation, including in New York and Boston.

"We want all of Baltimore to have healthier foods," said Freishtat, a sustainable food specialist and Baltimore native, whose position will be funded through nonprofit and business sources. "Culture is one piece, access is another."

Those in the poorest neighborhoods have had to depend on carryouts and corner stores for food because groceries have left in the last few decades. Those residents now suffer the highest rates of heart disease, strokes and diabetes, according to a report also released Tuesday from the Baltimore City Food Policy Task Force.

Studies showed that 14 percent of Baltimore's low-income families didn't have access to enough good food and that was having a devastating impact on health, according to the report. More than two thirds of the city's adults and almost 40 percent of high school students were overweight or obese.

"Heart disease is Baltimore's No. 1 killer, and has been for a long time," said interim Health Commissioner Olivia D. Farrow. "Making health food accessible in every low-income community is the first step toward lowering the number of deaths in Baltimore from diet-related health problems."

Freishtat, who will act as a consultant to the city, said she would engage city agencies, nonprofits and businesses to change policies, form partnerships and start programs all aimed at better eating. The donors paying for her services include the Abell Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Kaiser Permanente.

To start, she plans to engage school kids in helping create a new ad campaign to promote healthful foods. And

she wants to expand the number of farmers' markets that access food stamps; the city now has three with EBT machines.

Previously, Freishtat worked for the Washington State University King County Extension, where she developed a curriculum to teach low-income students in elementary school about nutrition through gardening and cooking. In Washington she also helped develop a pilot program to link local farmers in supplying seasonal foods to hospitals and retirement communities, according to the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, where she was a fellow in 2007-08.

In addition to the ad campaign and expanding farmers' markets and home delivery of food, task force recommendations include expanding community-supported agriculture. In such programs, residents pay in advance for fresh produce delivered all season from a local farm, though low-income people could possibly pay in installments.

Recommendations also include continuing research into ending so-called food "deserts" — neighborhoods that lack large food markets — and building support for more community gardens, including changes to zoning to encourage them, especially in vacant lots.

Other ideas include encouraging street vendors to add healthful foods. In the schools, the group supports a central kitchen model and improvement of the food environment in general. Officials and school kids already work their own organic farm and participate in Meatless Mondays in the cafeterias.

In March, the city began its Virtual Supermarket Project, which allows residents in East and West Baltimore to order groceries online from Santoni's Super Market in Highlandtown. They pick up the food the next day at the Orleans or Washington Village branches of the Enoch Pratt Free Library.

City officials said they are going into senior high-rises and to neighborhood associations to actively promote the service, which was launched with \$60,000 in federal stimulus money.

The steps will have a real impact in lower-income neighborhoods, said Mayor Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake, who introduced Freishtat at City Hall at the same time she unveiled the task force recommendations. Those neighborhoods now have an average life span 20 years shorter than in high-income neighborhoods.

"Implementing these recommendations will go a long way toward improving the health and quality of life of city residents," she said.

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