



Re: *State Efforts to Improve Access to Healthy Foods in Food Deserts*

Executive Summary

Areas that are “low-income census tracts with a substantial number or share of residents with low levels of access to retail outlets selling healthy and affordable foods” are known as food deserts.ⁱ Food deserts can have profound public health implications, such as obesity and chronic diseases.ⁱⁱ The Southeastern portion of the United States has both a higher concentration of food deserts and a higher percentage of the population impacted by food deserts.ⁱⁱⁱ As such, multiple CSG South states have explored various avenues for improving access to healthy foods in underserved areas. What follows is an overview of enacted legislation from our region.

Research Methods

Enacted legislation and statutes were reviewed via Quorum and states’ bill tracking systems. Program funding sources were determined through budget appropriation legislation and individual programs’ publicly available data.

Findings

Special Populations

Several states have targeted food access policies toward populations with a known elevated risk of food insecurity. Below are examples from the CSG South region.

- **Arkansas:** [Senate Bill 59 \(2025\)](#) guarantees reimbursement for breakfast for all public school students, supported by federal and state funding and a newly established Food Insecurity Fund. Reimbursing schools for breakfast costs the state \$1.90 per breakfast, resulting in an estimated \$14.7 million for the 2025-2026 fiscal year.^{iv}
- **Tennessee:** [Senate Bill 1239 \(2025\)](#) established a task force to end childhood hunger by advising Tennessee officials on strategic uses of public resources and potential government and non-profit partnerships. Establishing this task force is not expected to have a significant fiscal impact, as its operations are not anticipated to affect government operations or expenditures.^v
- **West Virginia:** [House Bill 4447 \(2020\)](#) created the Shared Table Initiative for Senior Citizens. This legislation builds on the Shared Table Initiative in West Virginia Schools.^{vi} It established a mandate for the Bureau for Senior Services to manage and distribute excess food from senior centers and other locations to senior citizens.^{vii} The initiative aims to be cost neutral.^{viii}

Financial Incentives

States have also explored methods of incentivizing healthy food options in food deserts and generally underserved communities. These incentives range from tax credits to supplementing SNAP benefits. Below is a brief summary of incentives from three of the CSG South states.

- **Mississippi:** [Senate Bill 2077 \(2022\)](#) established the Healthy Food Families Program, which funds nonprofits that provide matching dollar incentives for SNAP benefits spent on fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets and retailers. The program’s first year had an award ceiling of \$360,000.^{ix} The program received \$400,000 this past session.^x Another effort from Mississippi, though not reauthorized this past session, is the Small Business and Grocer Investment Act. This act was originally in place in the 1970s, but the Mississippi General Assembly reenacted it through [House Bill 1132 \(2019\)](#). This program aimed to improve access to healthy foods in underserved communities across the state by incentivizing small groceries to carry healthy foods and produce. The program’s reenacting legislation stated that grants and loans designated through the Mississippi Development



Authority should fund it. As such, following the pandemic, it was funded through awards from the [State Small Business Credit Initiative \(SSBCI\) Program](#) (see [House Bill 1164 \(2022\)](#)), which in turn received its monies as part of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 ([House Resolution 1319](#)).

- **Oklahoma:** [House Bill 1955 \(2024\)](#) eliminated the state sales tax on food for human consumption, reducing cost barriers for all residents. This resulted in an estimated \$370.3 million decrease in sales tax revenue and an increase of \$93.8 thousand in administrative costs for fiscal year 2024.^{xi} Additionally, [Senate Bill 506 \(2017\)](#) established the Healthy Food Financing Program in Oklahoma through a revolving fund within the Department of Agriculture. This program offers loans, grants, and support to retailers who bring fresh, healthy, and affordable food to underserved communities.
- **South Carolina:** The Healthy Bucks Program allows SNAP participants who spend at least \$5 to receive \$15 in tokens for fresh fruits and vegetables at participating locations.^{xii} The state's Department of Social Services administers the program,^{xiii} while funding for this program comes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and not directly from the state (see [House Bill 4000 \(2019\)](#)).

Mobile Markets

Alabama and Florida have both implemented mobile market programs. Although neither is a state-run program, both receive public funds through grants or otherwise. These programs convert box trucks, buses, and trailers that can be attached to a vehicle into functional grocery stores, complete with refrigeration and retail equipment. These mobile markets allow operators to travel to underserved areas and food deserts. Currently, mobile markets primarily operate in urban areas due to population density and efficiency.^{xiv} Below is more information on mobile market operations in Alabama and Florida.

- **Alabama:** [Live HealthSmart Alabama Mobile Market](#) (LHSA) is one component of the Live HealthSmart Alabama initiative, a broader wellness program. In 2023, LHSA initially received \$2.7 million from the University of Alabama at Birmingham's (UAB) Strategic Investment Fund, and it subsequently received an additional \$5 million to be used for the years 2023-2025.^{xv} Although primarily funded through UAB, the program receives additional funding from various partners.^{xvi} The mobile market brings fresh produce and other goods throughout Birmingham, Selma, Camden, Demopolis, and other underserved communities.^{xvii} Customers can pay using cash, debit/credit cards, or EBT cards.^{xviii}
- **Florida:** The Fresh Stop Mobile Market is a partnership between the non-profit organization, Hebni Nutrition, and the Sprouts Healthy Community Foundation, operating in food deserts in Central Florida.^{xix} Although the program's budget is not readily available, the Florida Department of Health is listed as a program partner.^{xx} Additionally, in 2021, [Florida Senate Bill 2500](#) authorized the Department of Agriculture to partner with entities to deliver non-Emergency Food Assistance Programs (non-TEFAP) fresh food products to food insecure residents.

ⁱ Nulph, David, Ryan Williams, and Michele Ver Ploeg. 2017. "USDA ERS - Data Feature: Mapping Food Deserts in the U.S." Usda.gov. 2017. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2011/december/data-feature-mapping-food-deserts-in-the-u-s>.

ⁱⁱ National Research Council (US). The Public Health Effects of Food Deserts: Workshop Summary. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2009. Summary. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK208018/>

ⁱⁱⁱ "USDA ERS - State-Level Estimates of Low Income and Low Access Populations." 2025. Wwww.ers.usda.gov. January 6, 2025. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/state-level-estimates-of-low-income-and-low-access-populations>.

^{iv} Arkansas Department of Education. *Fiscal Impact Statement: SB 59*. Little Rock, AR: Arkansas State Legislature, 2025.

^v Tennessee General Assembly Fiscal Review Committee. *Fiscal Note: SB 1239 – HB 1357*. Nashville, TN. 2025.

^{vi} WV Code §18-5D-5



vii WV Code §16-5S-9a

viii Dianna Graves, *Notice of Agency Approval of a Proposed Rule and Filing with the Legislative Rule-Making Review Committee: 76-06 Shared Table Initiative for Senior Citizens* (Charleston, WV: West Virginia Secretary of State's Office, Administrative Law Division, July 21, 2025), PDF.

ix Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, Mississippi Healthy Food and Families Program: Request for Grant Proposals, FY '23 (Jackson, MS: Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, December 30, 2022).

x Miss. S.B. 2028, 2025 1st Extraordinary Session, § 11 (2025), Mississippi Legislature bill status, <https://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/20251E/html/SB/2001-2099/SB2028SG.htm>.

xi Rick Miller, Huan Gong, and Joseph P. Jappa. REVENUE IMPACT STATEMENT AND/OR ADMINISTRATIVE IMPACT STATEMENT FIRST REGULAR SESSION, FIFTY-NINTH OKLAHOMA LEGISLATURE: HB 1955. Oklahoma City, OK. January 3, 2023

xii "Healthy Bucks - South Carolina Department of Social Services." n.d. Dss.sc.gov. <https://dss.sc.gov/assistance-programs/food-and-nutrition-programs/healthy-bucks/>.

xiii "Healthy Bucks - South Carolina Department of Social Services." n.d. Dss.sc.gov. <https://dss.sc.gov/assistance-programs/food-and-nutrition-programs/healthy-bucks/>.

xiv Ramirez, A. Susana, Lillian K. Diaz Rios, Zulema Valdez, Erendira Estrada, and Ariana Ruiz. 2017. "Bringing Produce to the People: Implementing a Social Marketing Food Access Intervention in Rural Food Deserts." *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 49 (2): 166-174.e1. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2016.10.017>.

xv Windsor, Matt. 2018. "Grand Challenge Promotes Health and Wellness | Strategic Plan." Uab.edu. 2018. <https://www.uab.edu/plan/grand-challenge>.

xvi "Partners | Live HealthSmart Alabama." 2025. Uab.edu. 2025. <https://www.uab.edu/livehealthsmartal/partners>.

xvii "Live HealthSmart Alabama Expands to Central Alabama Thanks to Gift from Novo Nordisk, Inc." 2025. Uab.edu. 2025. <https://www.uab.edu/news/campus-community/live-healthsmart-alabama-expands-to-central-alabama-thanks-to-gift-from-novo-nordisk-inc>.

xviii "Good Nutrition | Live HealthSmart Alabama." 2025. Uab.edu. 2025. <https://www.uab.edu/livehealthsmartal/key-services/good-nutrition/#mobile-market>.

xix The. 2025. "Hebni Nutrition." Hebni Nutrition. 2025. <https://www.hebninutrition.org/the-fresh-stop-mobile-market>.

xx Partners | Build Partnerships Today — Hebni Nutrition. 2025. "Hebni Nutrition." Hebni Nutrition. 2025. <https://www.hebninutrition.org/partners>.