



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

CT food deserts: In 24 towns, no stores accept food stamps

A bill would create the Office of the Food Access Advocate and provide tax incentives to certain grocery stores opening in food deserts.



by José Luis Martínez

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Patty Allegra-Babcock, left, heads out of the Pomfret Community Center with her cousin, Dan Johnson. In order to purchase food with her food stamps, she has to rely on her family and friends to drive her to a grocery store that is about 20 minutes away from her home in Pomfret. YEHYUN KIM / CT MIRROR

When Patty Allegra-Babcock wants to use her food stamps, she has to cross town borders. She lives in quiet and tree-covered Pomfret, in a part of northeastern Connecticut where there are no stores that accept food stamps.

The nearest grocery store that accepts her benefits is a Walmart, miles east in Putnam. But Allegra-Babcock doesn't have a car, so she relies on friends and family to drive her around.

"From where I live, closest [grocery store] is probably a good 15 to 20 minutes, traffic willing," she said. "Usually, I would have to wait until somebody is available. You gotta work around people's schedules."

Allegra-Babcock isn't alone. Out of more than half a million food stamp recipients in the state, nearly 3,800 live in towns where there are no retailers that accept this form of payment.

Food stamps, handled by the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, have long provided financial assistance to low-income families and individuals. **Depending** on income and family size, residents get a fixed monthly amount to buy nutritious food in approved stores.

Most of the towns that don't have food stamp retailers are in **rural** parts of the state, adding to the long list of challenges for people who live in these communities.

To remedy the issue, the legislature will consider **House Bill 6854**, which would create the Office of the Food Access Advocate. This office would support food insecurity programs and community-led efforts, provide an informational hotline and manage food insecurity data, among other things. It would also provide tax breaks for certain grocery stores opening in underserved areas.

This bill isn't just targeted at fixing the issues faced by food stamp recipients. It aims to help the communities in "food deserts."



Including Pomfret, where the photo was taken, 25 towns in Connecticut don't have grocery stores that accept food stamps, which creates challenges for people trying to get food in their neighborhood. YEHYUN KIM / CT MIRROR

Food deserts are census tract areas in which at least 100 households are located more than one-half mile from the nearest supermarket and have no vehicle access; or at least 500 people, or 33% of the population, live more than 20 miles from the nearest supermarket, regardless of vehicle availability, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

An analysis of federal data by CTInsider found that 8% of the state's census tracts could be considered a food desert.

The role of community markets

For years, the absence of incentives or a state office dedicated to food insecurity left community markets to fill the gap.

Connecticut Foodshare, a statewide nonprofit that supports various local partners with financial assistance and resources, has been at the forefront of reducing food insecurity in the state. They have partnerships with more than 500 organizations, including one near where Allegra-Babcock lives.

That organization is called the Thompson Ecumenical Empowerment Group, a nonprofit that provides community support and resources such as diaper banks, clothing vouchers and scholarships.

One of its services includes various community **markets** powered by local donations. Open every day of the week in at least one of their locations in Pomfret, Woodstock and Thompson, TEEG provides food and beverage options to residents in need at no cost, regardless of whether they have food stamps. TEEG says that on average, they serve about 250 to 300 families a month between all three locations.

“The cost of food went up significantly. That's why we try really hard to get people to come in and to have a lot of those commodities that are quite more expensive — frozen meat, eggs, dairy, frozen vegetables — so that we can supplement that SNAP aspect,” said Chelsea French, community programs manager at TEEG.

Since Allegra-Babcock only receives \$24 worth of food stamps a month, down from over \$100 monthly before the reductions, and social security income that barely covers her other expenses, she goes to the community market for fresh produce and meats.



Hannah Johndrow packs food that are provided for free at the Pomfret Community Center. YEHYUN KIM / CT MIRROR

“You gotta pay your bills. The lights, the phone, mortgage, stuff like that. I live from paycheck to paycheck, basically,” Allegra-Babcock said.

To get to the community market, though, she still has to rely on somebody to give her a lift, since she doesn’t have a car.

This is a challenge faced by more than 53,000 households in the state that receive food stamps and don’t have access to a vehicle, according to U.S. Census estimates. For rural parts of the state, where homes and retailers are more widely disbursed than in urban areas, not having a car can hinder access to food and other essential services.

The current bus service in the area, Northeastern Connecticut Transit District, is not as reliable and consistent as other bus services around the state, residents say. It has fixed stops, and residents can request deviated pick-ups ahead of time, but shuttle arrivals are usually spaced by over an hour.

“They'll come pick you up, and it may be hours before they come pick you back up at the grocery store, which means you can't get anything perishable or frozen, because you don't know when you're going to get back,” said French.

Some retailers allow food stamps to be used for online purchases, which can then be delivered through partnerships with Instacart. Last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture provided \$5 million in support to the National Grocers Association Foundation to help expand the number of retailers that accept food stamps online.

In extenuating circumstances, TEEG staff have resorted to personal food deliveries to people's homes, primarily seniors and persons with disabilities.

In some cases, the issue isn't transportation. It's the quality of the food stamp stores.

Carl Asikainen, food systems coordinator at TEEG, said that even though some towns

may have food stamp retailers, they are not always the best option due to lack of fresh and nutritious products.

This is the case in the nearby town of Thompson. There are four food stamp vendors: a gas station, a Dollar General and two small convenience stores.

“We've got Dollar General, but we know the food quality there is nothing fresh, right? ... We want people to have better options,” said Asikainen.



A community member rummages food products at the Pomfret Community Center. The center provides for free food products that are donated or purchased from cash donations to its community members. YEHYUN KIM / CT MIRROR

But even if a food stamp grocery store were willing to open up in some of these areas, they have to follow local zoning regulations.

In Pomfret, where Allegra-Babcock is from, different districts allow certain types of retailers to open shop.

Space for a supermarket or grocery store is limited.

Ryan Brais, the assistant planner and zoning officer for the town of Pomfret, said that a supermarket opening in the town is unlikely due to population, geographic location and lack of public sewer and water. Regardless, Brais said, the town will always consider applications for zone change and development.

"By nature, commissions do not typically take the initiative to add commercial areas to the map after the initial creation of the zoning map. They wait for someone to apply to rezone their land. The desire to rezone residential property to commercial is driven by commercial interest. Due to the town's rural nature, there have been very few requests to rezone property since zoning was adopted in 2003," Brais said.

However, agricultural retail such as farmers markets, where more than 50% of the products are grown on site, are possible in most of the town.

Cathy Smith, senior center coordinator for TEEG in Pomfret, said a farmers market that accepted food stamps would be beneficial.

"It's all about getting the fresher food, the organic food, the gluten-free food. It's harder for us to get all of that even in our markets," said Smith.

Allegra-Babcock does have a market store across the street from where she lives, but they don't accept food stamps.

"I would love to have something set up where Patty could go down to the local farm over here and utilize her SNAP," said Smith.

Local farmers markets still face financial and administrative barriers in beginning to accept food stamps.

A survey of 134 farmers in Alabama found that farmers markets frequently cited the following as barriers when attempting to set up their food stamp program: "lack of internet access, increased burden for processing payments, increased need for bookkeeping, limited availability of information about the application process and payment system, limited support from the market for completing the application, a small customer base and limited number of SNAP clientele," according to the survey.

And those barriers would only be faced after a retailer meets initial qualifications to become a food stamp retailer.

To qualify, a store must have a certain amount of staple foods, which do not include hot or prepared foods, or more than half of its sales must be from staple foods. Once that criteria is met, vendors must then purchase equipment that has the ability to

accept food stamps and be subject to random inspections.

Barriers to becoming a food stamp vendor are not currently being addressed in the legislature.

Legislation under consideration

As it stands under **House Bill 6854**, the only grocery stores that would be able to receive the tax incentives when opening in food deserts are those that have "labor peace agreements" with a labor union. This type of agreement is not a collective bargaining agreement where workers are legally unionized. Instead, it is an agreement where an employer and a labor union agree to be peaceful in case the labor union attempts to organize the workers. A labor union agrees to not cause economic disruptions against the business, such as boycotts or work stoppages, while an employer agrees to remain neutral, allow the union access to employees and guarantee the union the right to be the collective bargaining representative of the employees.

On March 23, the Human Services Committee voted the bill to the House to be further discussed before it is sent to the finance and appropriations committees.

A group of legislators from the Human Services Committee unsuccessfully attempted to amend the bill so grocery stores wouldn't be required to have a labor peace agreement with a labor union.

Sen. Lisa Seminara, a ranking member of the committee, argued in the meeting that requiring retailers to have a labor peace agreement creates a roadblock.

"We want to solve the problem of food insecurity and food deserts, but now we're going to have a roadblock because the only people that can apply for ... this incentive is if you're in a labor [peace] agreement," said Seminara.

Sen. Matt Lesser, one of the legislators opposed to the amendment, argued that the amendment would expand the scope of the bill, making it costlier and thus harder to push through the Finance Committee. He also said that the labor peace provision is in the state's interest.

"We don't want to have potential construction projects derailed by labor strikes ... I'm

"hopeful we'll have a compromise on that labor language, because I think it's important, but also, we want to make sure that people can still access the tax credit," said Lesser.

Heading to the House first to be further discussed, it still faces the finance and appropriations committees before votes in the full chambers.

Two other bills regarding food security have also made their way out of the Health Services Committee.

The committee approved a **bill** that would change the way food stamp benefits are given out to ensure that recipients can access food. Instead of giving everyone their benefits at the same time, the bill would give benefits to different recipients at different times during the month. This bill doesn't split the payments; everyone still gets one disbursement. A different **bill** also passed in the committee and headed to the Appropriations Committee would create a task force to study the elderly nutrition program and designate \$2 million towards it.