

## Community Food Security in New Orleans

by Sarah Custer

When asked whether they had to travel miles to get to a grocery store, everyone at the Greater Little Zion Baptist Church in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward raised their hands.

Access to nutritious food was a problem before Hurricane Katrina, and since then the number of supermarkets has decreased by half.

"It's ridiculous that I should have to go all the way uptown to buy groceries for myself and my daughter. This is an injustice," says Jenga Mwendo, a longtime resident of the Lower Ninth Ward and organizer at the Lower Ninth Ward Urban Farming Coalition.

The lack of access to affordable, healthy foods is a problem in many New Orleans neighborhoods, where it's much easier to buy fast food than it is to find fresh fruit.

Louisiana was ranked the least healthy state in the 2008 *America's Health Rankings* report, in large part due to residents' unhealthy diets. More than 60 percent of people in New Orleans are overweight, and one in three adults has been diagnosed with high blood pressure.

People's choices about the food they eat are influenced by their environment. For example, studies show that for every additional supermarket in a census tract, African American residents consume 32 percent more fruits and vegetables.

New Orleans, like other urban areas across the country, has an extensive network of small food stores. A survey of low-income New Orleans residents found that most live within walking distance of a corner store, and they shop there an average of 14 times a month; these stores play a vital role in the food security of many families.

Corner stores, however, tend to carry mostly snacks and drinks with low nutritional value. But because they are already present in most communities, partnering with corner stores can be a successful way to make healthy foods available to people. Store owners have indicated that if they know that customers will buy fresh produce, they would be willing to stock it. "Tell us what you want," says Ray Khalailah, the owner of Jimmy's Grocery in the Bywater neighborhood, who recently expanded the selection of fruits and vegetables in his store. "Give us a chance to do something positive. If customers don't tell us what they want, we don't know."

Corner store owners, neighborhood and merchant associations, urban farmers' groups, and public health institutions are beginning to work together in the city to make fresh produce available to more people. The city of New Orleans is introducing new grant and loan programs for fresh food retailers, and small food stores committed to selling fresh produce will be eligible for them. Hopefully, the community support and financial incentives will help overcome the barriers that keep some corner stores from selling produce.

Access to nutritious and affordable food should be a basic right for all people. The reality is that many families in New Orleans find themselves in a barren food landscape. Where market forces do not ensure that healthy food is available, communities can take charge and change their neighborhood environment.

*Sarah Custer was a Congressional Hunger Fellow in 2008-2009. From September 2008 through February 2009, she was in New Orleans working on community food security in the Lower Ninth Ward. For the rest of the fellowship, she worked for the Alliance to End Hunger in Washington, DC.*

