

For Immediate Release

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Bipartisan “Healthy Food Financing” Bills Would Create Jobs and Cut Dietary Diseases
*Business leaders, community advocates applaud effort to expand existing HFFI legislation
to increase access to healthy foods in underserved communities*

December 1, 2011, Washington, D.C. – A bipartisan coalition in the House and Senate yesterday introduced bills (S. 1926, H.R. 3525) that will invest \$125 million to reduce the number of low-income Americans living in areas with inadequate access to healthy food – all while helping combat the childhood obesity crisis nationwide and potentially creating or preserving thousands of permanent and construction jobs. The re-introduction of this well-supported legislation from the 111th Congress will establish a Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The [HFFI legislation](#) would direct the USDA to designate (through a competitive process) a Community Development Financing Institution (CDFI) as a National Fund Manager, responsible for administering one-time loans and grants and leveraging additional private dollars to create the Healthy Food Financing fund.

The Senate lead sponsor is Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), with co-sponsors John Tester (D-MT), Al Franken (D-MN), Bob Casey (D-PA), Tom Harkin (D-IA), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Jeff Merkley (D-OR).

“Obesity and diabetes rates are reaching crisis proportions in our country and it is time to take aggressive action,” said **Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand**, who, as the first New Yorker to serve on the Senate Agriculture Committee in nearly 40 years, is helping lead the fight in the Senate to combat child obesity and promote good health. “Millions of New Yorkers do not have access to fresh, healthy food. By building new grocery stores in underserved areas across the state, we can give people the opportunity to live longer, healthier lives, save billions in health care costs and create tens of thousands of good-paying jobs.”

According to a 2011 study of [Limited Supermarket Access](#) areas by The Reinvestment Fund, an estimated 24.6 million Americans live in areas with inadequate access to healthy foods. Access to healthy food is also associated with lower risk for obesity and other diet-related chronic diseases, according to [The Grocery Gap](#), a 2010 report by PolicyLink and The Food Trust.

A National Fund Manager will partner with local groups, state and municipal governments, which can provide perspective and be responsive to their community needs, to administer the funds. The National Fund Manager will also identify underserved communities, based on guidelines spelled out in the bill, and work to provide

loans and grants to help supermarkets and other fresh food retailers open new stores or expand their fresh food offerings in underserved rural, suburban and urban areas.

The HFFI legislation is modeled after the highly successful Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, which turned \$30 million of state seed money into \$190 million of additional investment since it began in 2004 – creating or retaining over 5,000 jobs and opening 88 new or improved fresh food stores throughout the state.

The House lead sponsor is Rep. Allyson Schwartz (D-PA-13), with co-sponsors Rep. Michael Burgess (R-TX-26) and Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR-3).

“The *Healthy Food Financing Initiative* is a public-private solution to help address one of the most severe public health issues facing America, the growing obesity epidemic,” said **Rep. Allyson Schwartz (PA-13)**. “By establishing healthier food options in underserved areas, millions of Americans will have the opportunity to live longer, healthier lives, saving billions in health care costs. This is a vitally-needed effort from a public health standpoint, and just as importantly from an economic perspective. This initiative would stimulate local economic development, strengthen and revitalize neighborhoods, and put tens of thousands of Americans to work.”

“Families from communities across the country which have been hit hardest by the economic downturn not only struggle to find jobs, but also the option of healthy foods for their families,” said **Rep. Michael C. Burgess, M.D. (TX-26), who serves as Vice Chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee’s Subcommittee on Health and is Chairman of the Congressional Health Care Caucus**. “The availability of healthy food options is vital to help curb preventable diseases and increase the quality of life in some of our country’s most vulnerable populations. This legislation intertwines two of these basic needs: secure jobs and healthy food options, and will benefit not only these communities, but our country as a whole.”

“More and more Americans are suffering from dietary diseases – like obesity and diabetes – because they don’t have easy access to fresh, healthy foods in their communities,” said **Rep. Earl Blumenauer (OR-3)**, who recently released a [report](#) entitled *Growing Opportunities: Family Farm Values for Reforming the Farm Bill*. “A nationwide Healthy Food Financing Initiative would make low-interest loans available to bring quality grocery stores and farmers’ markets to underserved neighborhoods. This initiative helps support local businesses and jobs and will give families the opportunity to make healthier choices when it comes to food.”

Current efforts by the Departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and Treasury are demonstrating need and demand for resources. This new legislation responds to the need for additional support to address the problem in a deeper and even more focused way. A federally-funded national initiative operated through a single agency, with support from other agencies, would provide the critical seed capital to establish new and expand existing healthy food financing partnerships in communities across the United States.

“Independent grocers are uniquely positioned to help address food deserts, in part because of their flexibility to adjust projects to meet the needs of the local marketplace, as well as their strong commitment to the communities which they serve,” said **Peter J. Larkin, President and CEO of the National Grocers Association (N.G.A)**. “N.G.A.’s members are proud of the important work and investment that independent grocers have made across country to address food deserts and we look forward to continuing to work with Congress to create a national healthy food financing initiative structure to help spur new investments and resources that ultimately creates new jobs while providing much needed access to the communities that need it most.”

High start-up costs or limited access to credit often prevent local grocery owners from opening new outlets in underserved communities, even though many grocery stores that have recently opened in “food deserts” have proven very successful. The initiative would help grocery owners meet existing demand in these communities while also serving the health needs of those communities.

Since 2009, **PolicyLink, The Food Trust and The Reinvestment Fund** have been working together to raise awareness on the issue of limited food access in communities across America and the need for a national program to finance the development of healthy food retailers. Today, more than 90 organizations representing the grocery industry, labor unions, public health and food security advocates, state and local governments, civil rights groups and community development organizations have voiced their support for a national solution to increase access to healthy food in low-income communities.

“Supermarkets and grocery stores represent more than healthy food choices – they are also about creating jobs, supporting community businesses and revitalizing neighborhoods,” **said Judith Bell, PolicyLink President, speaking on behalf of the three organizations.** “The bills introduced today represent a powerful next phase in the effort to create equitable access to healthy food across America.”

To learn more about the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, please contact Patricia Smith, Senior Policy Advisor, The Reinvestment Fund at patricia.smith@trfund.com, or John Weidman, Deputy Director, The Food Trust at jweidman@thefoodtrust.org.

For more information on the federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative, please visit www.PolicyLink.org/HFFI or contact Janet Dickerson, Press Secretary, PolicyLink at janet@policylink.org.