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POLITICS

Fresh produce program in Staten Island food desert at risk due to federal funding cuts

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The Children's Aid Society's Food Box program, which provides fresh, affordable produce to residents living in a North Shore food desert, is at risk of



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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- A weekly program dedicated to helping Staten Islanders eat healthier could soon be a thing of the past, as the funding that supports it was recently axed in the federal spending bill.

Each week, the Children’s Aid Society’s Food Box program provides low-cost, farm-fresh produce and nutritional education to North Shore residents living in what’s considered one of the borough’s driest food deserts — a term used to describe areas where residents have limited access to fresh produce due to a lack of easily-accessible grocery stores.

The program provides bags full of enough fresh, seasonal, locally-sourced produce to feed a family of four for a week, all for just \$14, with SNAP recipients able to purchase their bags for half-off using their food assistance benefits.

“The North Shore of Staten Island is a food desert. There are not a lot of places that have fresh, local vegetables and produce and people were looking for something healthier,” said Ilene Pappert, director of the Goodhue Community Center in New Brighton where the distributions take place. “It has become such a community. People are sharing recipes, people are excited about trying new things. And they feel like they were getting their money’s worth.”



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The Children's Aid Society's Food Box program, which provides fresh, affordable produce to residents living in a North Shore food desert, is at risk of ceasing operations due to recent cuts to the federal program that funds it. (Advance/SILive.com | Erik Bascome) Advance/SILive.com | Erik Bascome

Along with each bag, customers receive a weekly recipe that can be made using the produce they've just picked up.

During Tuesday's distribution event, bags were packed with blueberries, tomatoes, cucumbers, Swiss chard, yellow spring onions and parsley, accompanied by a recipe for tabbouleh salad.

Samantha Lee, who has been working as a Food Box program assistant for the past year, helps create the weekly recipes and prepare samples for those picking up food, something she takes great pride in as a dietetic student working to help people live healthier lives.

"The community is so good. Everyone's always really excited to try the new recipes. I know a lot of them have not tried some of these ingredients before, some of these recipes before, and then they try it and they're like, 'Oh, it's really good.' So it's always really exciting when that happens," said Lee.



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In addition to the \$14, or \$7, mixed bags, customers can purchase all sorts of affordable produce from the program's farm stand, which on Tuesday offered items like corn, zucchini, peaches and much more.

The program, which has been operating for nearly a decade, has become a hit within the community, serving more than 100 families each week and providing more than 3,000 bags of fresh produce throughout the year.

However, the Children's Aid Society fears it may need to cease operations of the Food Box program due to the recent elimination of funding for the federal program that supports it.

The program is funded through SNAP-Ed, the educational arm of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program that provides federally funded grants to organizations throughout the country to teach people how to cook healthy meals on a tight budget and encourage them to have physically active lifestyles.

Funding for SNAP-Ed was eliminated in the recent federal spending bill, leaving programs like the Children's Aid Society's Food Box, which receives all of its funding through SNAP-Ed, in a state of uncertainty moving forward.

Taisy Conk, director of food & nutrition programs at Children's Aid, explained that due to the cuts, the program is currently only funded through the end of September.

"Our grant cycle has been every five years. We just started our third cycle. So last year we applied for and received a five-year award letter that started this past October that obviously is now not going to be honored. We were at least calling at the end for sort of like bridge funding or something to close it out, but all they put in the bill is just zero as of Oct. 1," Conk said.

With the federal funds drying up in just a few months' time, the organization is exploring other ways to keep the program afloat, but may not be able to do so unless the state steps in to provide the funding itself.

"We're hoping that we don't have to make any crushing decisions for our team and for our community," Conk said.

A representative for Gov. Kathy Hochul would not commit to the state funding programs that are currently supported by SNAP-Ed, but said the administration is continuing to assess the local impacts of the federal spending bill.

State officials have said that SNAP-related cost shifts in the bill will cost New York state and local county governments up to \$2.1 billion a year and could result in more than 300,000 households across the state seeing their benefits reduced or eliminated completely.

"While we continue to assess the impact of the bill, it contains unprecedented cost-shifts to states for what has always been a federally-funded program. This bill is dangerous and will slash food assistance away for millions of New Yorkers," a spokesperson for the governor's office told the Advance/SILive.com.



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Food deserts

Food deserts, or areas that lack affordable, fresh produce, play a major role in food insecurity here on Staten Island and across the United States.

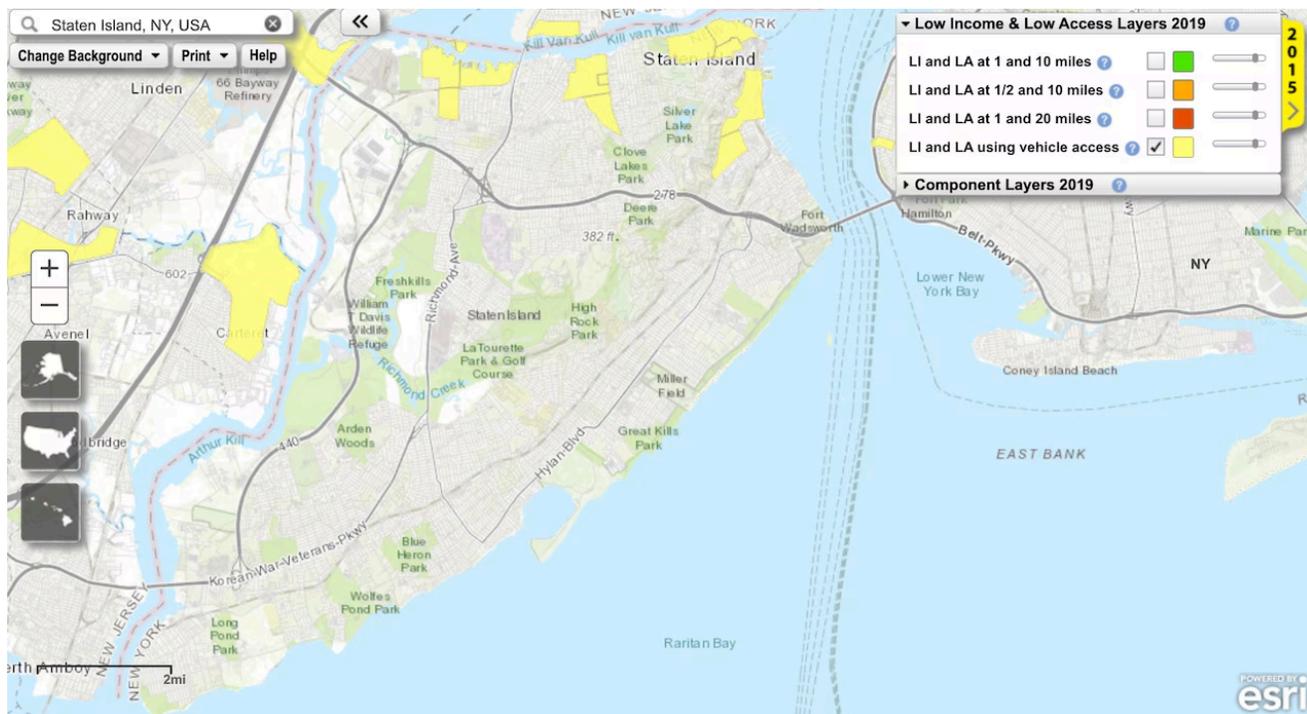
The term applies to various parts of the borough, particularly along the North Shore, where the limited number of grocery stores, coupled with lower rates of car ownership, lead many residents to do their shopping at nearby corner stores and bodegas that offer far less nutritious options than major supermarkets.

Some of these smaller stores offer fresh fruits and vegetables, though they're typically priced much higher than major supermarkets.

“Food insecurity goes very much hand-in-hand with food deserts. So what a food desert is, is not so much that there is a lack of food, but it’s more a lack of nutritious or fresh foods. ... The ultra-processed foods are actually pretty readily available, especially in areas with lower incomes and communities of color,” [Shiara Ortiz-Pujols, director of medical weight loss for Staten Island University Hospital - Northwell Health, told the Advance/SILive.com last year.](#)

The dearth of large grocery stores along the borough’s North Shore has long been a point of frustration for residents, some of whom must take multiple buses to reach the nearest supermarket before lugging their food home on Staten Island’s limited public transportation system.

The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) [Food Access Research Atlas](#), formerly known as the Food Desert Locator, shows numerous low-income areas along the borough’s North Shore where a significant portion of households live more than a half-mile from the nearest supermarket and, just as importantly, don’t have access to a car.



This map from the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food Access Research Atlas, shows numerous low-income areas along the borough’s North Shore where a significant portion of households live more than a half-mile from the nearest supermarket and do not have access to a car. (Courtesy of USDA) Courtesy of USDA

Experts say that eliminating food deserts can be a complicated endeavor, as even if the need for additional supermarkets in an area is known, and the desire for them is made clear by residents, there’s no way to force major grocers to set up shop in these neighborhoods.

The limited availability of fresh produce in food deserts poses a major risk to the immediate and long-term health of residents, as they are often forced to rely on cheaper, processed alternatives with low nutritional value to fill their stomachs.

Dr. Ana Mendez, chief of ambulatory pediatrics at Richmond University Medical Center (RUMC), explained that the innutritious diets that many living in food deserts consume often lead to obesity and the various weight-related conditions that can accompany it.

“If you only have access to foods that are not real food, but processed foods which are cheaper, your nutrition is not going to be the best. The food that you have available to you is really processed food that increases your risk of developing obesity and developing the side effects of obesity, which include diabetes, high cholesterol, hypertension, sleep apnea and things that can actually shorten your life,” Dr. Mendez told the Advance/SILive.com last year.

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