



Joint Meeting on Growing Food Equity Bills
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**The New York City Council Committees on
Economic Development, Education and General Welfare**

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My name is Charmaine Ruddock and I am the Project Director of Bronx Health REACH at the Institute for Family Health. Thank you to Chairpersons Paul Vallone, Mark Treyger and Steven T. Levin as well as the members of the City Council Committees on Economic Development, Education and General Welfare for holding today's joint hearing on legislation to advance food equity in New York City.

Bronx Health REACH (BHR) is a coalition of more than 80 community-based organizations, faith-based institutions, health care providers, schools, small business groups, housing and social service agencies that work to address racial and ethnic health disparities. We are a grantee of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) initiative whose goal is to eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities with affected communities leading the effort. It is the only federal program of its kind. The Bronx Health Coalition led by the Institute for Family Health, a network of Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC), has focused its efforts to eliminate disparities through health promotion activities directed towards increasing access to healthier foods, nutrition education, and opportunities to engage in safe, fun physical activities. The Coalition also works to address social determinants of health and the root causes of disparities through policy, systems, environment and infrastructure changes.

Currently, Bronx Health REACH is a leader of the Bronx Bodega Partners Workgroup, a multi-sector coalition of non-profit organizations dedicated to increasing the availability, affordability, and demand for, fresh, affordable, healthy food options at bodegas in all Bronx neighborhoods. The Bronx Bodega Partners Workgroup collectively work with 54 stores in the Bronx, helping them to procure, sell, and market healthier food and beverage options. Bronx Health REACH is also a member of the Healthy Food Retail Action Network, a coalition of organizations dedicated to improving healthy food retail options and advocating for those food retail businesses in New York City.

The Bronx Health REACH Coalition is supportive of the bills being considered in today's hearing and appreciative of the Council's attention to building an equitable food system for all New Yorkers. Health Bucks, addressed in Int 1650, are a valuable way of increasing affordability of fresh, healthy, locally grown foods. However, we are disappointed that there is no discussion of policies that support increasing access to affordable healthy foods and beverages in bodegas or corner stores. Bodegas are ubiquitous in the Bronx especially in low-



income communities of color such as the south Bronx where health disparities are greatest and access to fruits and vegetables is limited. According to a 2014 report by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene on the food environment of the Crotona-Tremont neighborhood of the South Bronx, 77% of the food retail stores in this neighborhood were bodegas (NYC DOHMH Epi Data Report: Describing the Food Environment in the South Bronx Neighborhood of Crotona-Tremont, April 2014). Residents in these communities visit these stores frequently.

According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation County Health Ranking Report, the Bronx has been ranked 62 out of New York State's 62 counties in health outcomes and health factors for the past 9 years. Access to fresh, affordable, healthy food and beverages is a major barrier to living a healthy lifestyle in the borough, where 32% of residents are obese, 36% have hypertension, 16% are diagnosed with diabetes, and almost 18% had no servings of fruits or vegetables the previous day (NYC DOHMH Community Health Survey 2017).

The food system of the South Bronx and other poor communities like it in the Bronx and across New York State have been aptly termed "food apartheid." While great efforts have been made to increase the number of farmers markets and fresh food box programs, improve supermarkets, and other programs that increase access to healthy, affordable foods and beverages, the reality is that many Bronx residents continue to not have these resources in their communities and/or the food is unaffordable.

Bodegas are an important part of New York City's food system as there are over 12,000 bodegas in the city. Advancing food equity in New York City must incorporate bills that aim to increase access to and reduce the price of healthy food and beverages in bodegas where many members of our community shop for snacks, drinks, and made to order items. We recommend that future City Council bills address consumer demand and access as it is our experience that you cannot make an impact in improving health outcomes in the South Bronx without both. Many bodega owners are interested in offering healthy food options in their stores; however, they cannot sell the products if no one buys them. Conversely, many residents want to purchase healthier food and beverage options, but either the food is not available in their communities or it is too expensive. Below are a few ideas from our Coalition and Bronx Bodega Partners Workgroup for how to achieve these goals:

- Support community-led, multi-lingual marketing campaigns such as the Don't Stress, Eat Fresh Bronx Bodega Marketing Campaign developed by community groups and the Bronx Bodega Partners Workgroup that promote healthy food options sold in bodegas;
- Eliminate marketing of unhealthy foods at bodegas;
- Develop a pilot program in the Bronx that provides financial incentives for bodega customers to purchase healthier foods and beverages
- Expand the FRESH initiative to include bodegas

Increasing access to affordable, healthy foods and beverages at bodegas is an integral component of food equity and should be included as part of the greater food policy conversation. While we hope the programs we recommend above are implemented soon, they could be included in the



10-year food policy plan discussed in Int 1654, which requires the Office of Food Policy to formulate a 10-year food policy plan.

Finally, as a grantee of the New York State Department of Health’s Creating Healthy Schools and Communities program, we know how important it is for children to be educated about nutrition and food, including having opportunities to taste fresh, healthy food in schools, in order to make informed consumer decisions. Therefore, in regards to Int 1676, requiring the NYC Department of Education to report on implementing scratch-cooked school food service, we believe that the bill language should be clarified to include the following: create “an implementation plan to ensure that every school child has access to scratch-cooked, healthy, delicious, and culturally-appropriate menu items;” identify “barriers to” the department’s ability to implement a city-wide scratch-cooked food service program that incorporates culturally appropriate meals and age-appropriate “food and nutrition education;” “and suggest potential ways to overcome these barriers.”

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to working with the City Council to make sure healthy, affordable options are available at bodegas in the future.