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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Black-owned stores work to end D.C.'s food deserts

The city has struggled for years to bring large grocery stores to wards 7 and 8



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When Mary Blackford became a vegetarian seven years ago, she spent hundreds of dollars in cab fares traveling out of the Benning Ridge neighborhood in Ward 7 to find fresh fruits and vegetables.

Amanda Stephenson had a similar story — when the D.C. Ward 8 resident wanted groceries, not fast food, she too had to look far from home.

“I felt like an immigrant going to other places for access to healthy food,” said Stephenson.

Blackford and Stephenson live east of the Anacostia River, which has the city’s highest concentration of “food deserts” — areas of poverty where many people live more than a quarter-mile from the closest grocery store and can have limited access to vehicles.

For years, the D.C. government has tried initiatives, including tax breaks, to attract chain supermarkets to Wards 7 and 8, with some success. Now a network of Black entrepreneurs, business owners and restaurateurs — funded through city grants — is leading the fight to end food deserts east of the Anacostia with small community food ventures.

“In the absence of big box [stores] that are not investing in traditional communities that have been underserved and disenfranchised, this is where there is a unique opportunity for smaller markets to step up,” said Blackford, who is about to start her own marketplace.

A lack of options

Full-service grocery stores proliferate across the city, but in majority-Black Wards 7 and 8, they can be counted on one hand. A D.C. Hunger Solutions report from November found that just three out of 75 such stores were located in those wards. A fourth, Good Food Markets, opened in Ward 8 in November.

Wards 7 and 8 lost four of their seven full-service grocery stores between 2010 and 2020, while the city's other six wards gained 37 grocery stores during that decade, according to an earlier D.C. Hunger Solutions study. Over 75 percent of the city's food deserts were in Wards 7 and 8 alone, the D.C. Policy Center reported in 2017, and 85 percent of the approximately 160,000 residents of the two wards lived more than a mile from a grocery store.

There is a correlation between good health and access to healthy food. When these are not available, people may turn to fast food and other foods that are higher in calories and lower in nutritional value, putting people at risk of obesity, diabetes and heart disease, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A 2019 Washington Post D.C. [poll](#) asked residents to rate their neighborhood for access to fresh fruits and vegetables: 74 percent rated their access as excellent or good, but only 49 percent felt the same east of the Anacostia River.

Access to grocery stores is lowest in wards with highest poverty

There were 75 full-service grocery stores in the city last year. Of those, only three were in wards 7 and 8. Ward 6 had 15 stores and Ward 3 had 13.

WARD	NUMBER OF FULL-SERVICE GROCERY STORES	PERCENTAGE BELOW POVERTY
1	12	12%
2	12	6%
3	13	2%
4	11	7%
5	9	8%
6	15	8%
7	2	23%
8	1	27%

Beverly Wheeler, director of D.C. Hunger Solutions, said when the organization started to conduct studies about grocery store accessibility 10 years ago, developers were only interested in investing in higher-income areas.

“They say it was not profitable,” Wheeler said. But, she pointed out, lower-income families can make a business profitable. SNAP holders, for instance, will spend more in big box stores — using their benefits to get groceries, but also usually buying more than just food.

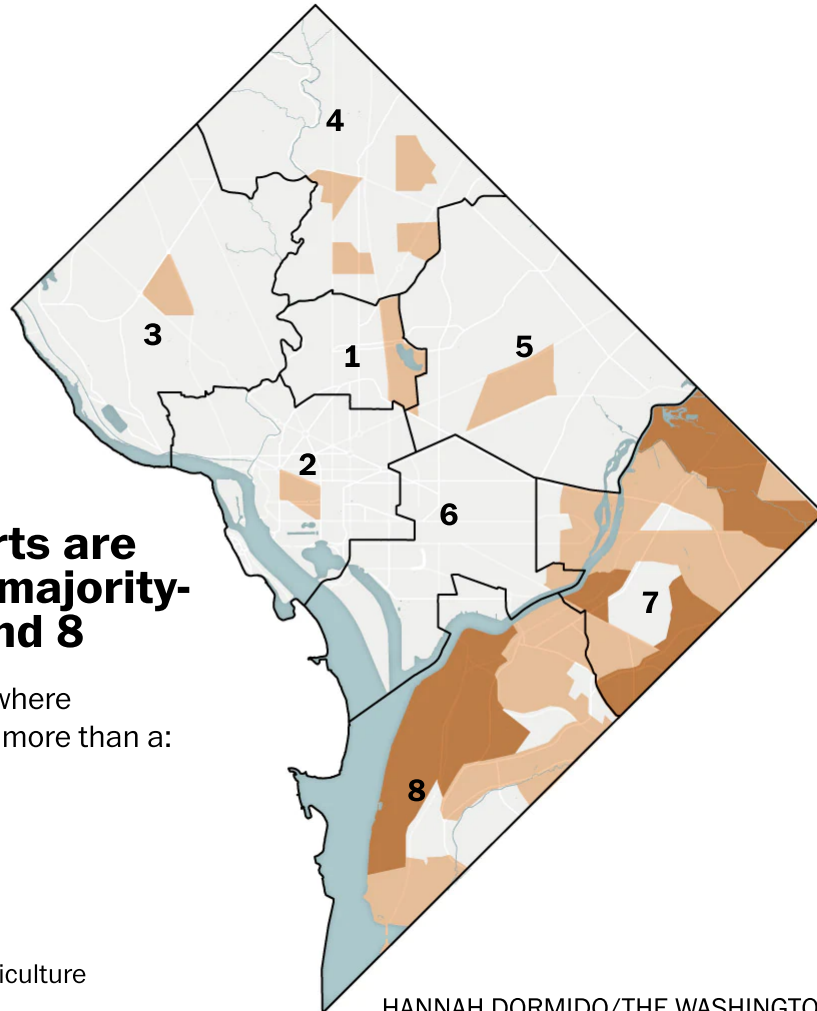
Still, the city is attracting some grocery stores to the area. A 55,000-square-foot grocery store will offer fresh food options to the community at the Capitol Gateway Marketplace in Ward 7, which the city is in the process of acquiring. The city has a letter of intent with Giant, and city officials hope they can reach an agreement with the supermarket chain by the fall, said John Falcicchio, deputy mayor for planning and economic development. Meanwhile, a Lidl grocery store at the Skyland Town Center in Ward 7 is under construction.

In recent years, Mayor Muriel E. Bowser’s administration has invested in funding, including \$22 million in the city’s fiscal 2023 budget, to support local initiatives to reduce food deserts through the city’s Food Access Fund. The city will have spent about \$70 million on the fund by 2024, according to Falcicchio’s office. Now, 42,000 people live beyond a mile from a fresh-food option, and the fund will cut the number by half in the next few years, Falcicchio said.

D.C.’s food deserts are concentrated in majority-Black Wards 7 and 8

Low-income census tracts where the closest grocery store is more than a:

● half-mile ● mile



Data as of 2019
Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture
Economic Research Service

HANNAH DORMIDO/THE WASHINGTON POST

Full-service grocery stores are needed because they give residents the ability to use federal benefits money, which not all small stores do, Wheeler said, but initiatives that inject capital in small, local businesses are critical. The Food Access Fund grants require that the local stores that receive them also apply to become authorized to accept SNAP and WIC.

“They tend to hire more community members and they tend to have a community connection,” she said. “People believe that a large chain grocery store is the only answer, and it’s not.”

Creating change

In 2019, Stephenson opened the Fresh Food Factory (FFF), a community-based grocery store in the Anacostia Arts Center, and received a grant through the Food Access Fund to open a second FFF in Kenilworth in Ward 7.

The store sells fresh salads, fruit and other produce, allows customers to pay with SNAP, and, with the help of Elaine Meredith, a Howard University public-health graduate student who is certified in nutrition and dietetics, is training local entrepreneurs who are interested in opening their own businesses.

Single mom Sherron Feggins has put months of work into what will be called Sha’s Creation, a start-up of healthy salads and lunchboxes that she hopes to sell to the schools in the area.

A medical assistant for three decades, Feggins decided to resign and start her own entrepreneurship. “That was not my passion, and I wanted to heal through food,” she said.

Millée Spears, 71, a longtime resident who lives a couple of blocks from the center, said she buys spinach and other fresh greens more often because she can use her benefits card at FFF.

“I remember when I first moved” to the area, Spears said. “One evening I decided to go to the little bodega because every neighborhood, I thought, had a bodega to get something I needed. I walked, and I walked, and there was nothing.”

Stephenson said “food deserts” are more like “food apartheid,” a term used by sustainable-food advocates to highlight racially discriminatory political structures that have created inequitable food systems.

“Food apartheid really speaks to a long history and legacy in this country of discrimination in communities of color that really make it difficult to attract retail in spaces and communities that are predominantly minority communities,” said Blackford, who founded Market 7, a food hall in Ward 7 that will open this year.

Blackford has been working for four years on a plan to open a decentralized market that will showcase eight Black-owned businesses and a hydroponic farm at the Benning corridor. When it launches sometime this year, [Market 7](#) will be a “nucleus of health and community,” Blackford said.

Blackford said she will be applying for a Food Access Fund grant this year, and Stephenson will soon open a 3,000-square-foot second grocery store in Kenilworth in Ward 7.

Blackford said that opening sustainable pathways for Black-owned businesses that are often left out of the food ecosystem is critical.

“This is the beginning of a very long journey, in terms of making sure that we have equitable communities, because at the end of the day, this is a health equity issue,” said Blackford.

CORRECTION

A previous version of this article incorrectly reported that the Food Access Fund grants require that the recipient stores also accept SNAP and WIC. It is required that they apply to become authorized to accept SNAP and WIC. The article has been corrected.