



How Salt Lake City Increased Equitable Access to Healthier Foods for Kids

Resident Food Equity Advisors Built Community-Centered Solutions and Launched a Resolution to Increase Food Access

Salt Lake City tackled issues of fresh and healthy food availability via a newly formed group of Resident Food Equity Advisors. Their goal was to create an equitable community food system that increases access to healthy, organic, and culturally relevant foods for historically underrepresented and underserved communities.

Multiple studies show connections between a healthy diet and protection against toxic substances, including those that harm babies' brain development (neurotoxins). Eating more fruits and vegetables during pregnancy may protect against reduced prenatal growth related to PAH exposures¹. And the CDC advises parents to give children foods high in iron and vitamin C to reduce lead absorption into the body.²

Salt Lake City's Resident Equity Advisor (RFEA) program is a new and more equitable approach to food policy, as the city seeks to **move away from doing food projects and policy "to or for" residents, toward a model of "doing with and by."** Despite unforeseen challenges and bumps along the way, the Equity Advisors worked in partnership with SLC City staff to voice their concerns and help shape the City's food policy agenda.



BRIGHT CITY: SALT LAKE CITY, UT

CONCERNS:

- Limited fresh and healthy food availability

PROJECT OUTPUT:

- Resident-developed strategies to improve access to healthy food
- City resolution to increase access to healthy food for all residents
- Launch of a community food assessment update

KIDS IMPACTED:

- More than 58,000 kids under 5 years old live in Salt Lake City



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“As a city, we can—and must—do more to ensure that all residents have reliable access to the healthy, culturally appropriate foods they need. The Resident Food Equity Advisors have provided us with a menu of recommendations to help us achieve these goals and we look forward to getting to work.”



Erin Mendenhall, Salt Lake City Mayor

Launching the Resident Food Equity Advisor Program

City staff reached out directly to residents, neighborhood organizations, and faith-based communities to recruit participants. Using an in-person and online application, the program received over fifty applications. **From this pool, 13 RFEAs** engaged in a collaborative, inclusive process to strategize solutions to improve healthy food access with a priority on healthy, organic foods.

Typical meetings focused on understanding a particular topic, such as food environments, the meanings of “food deserts” and “food swamps,” and how residents might perceive these labels. Often advisors met with different stakeholders to learn about local food resources, e.g., urban farming organizations, local restaurants, and grocery stores. Co-learning, sharing diverse perspectives, and respectful dialogue were key elements of each meeting.

Over 12 months — all while facing COVID-related challenges — their commitment resulted in focused, insightful, and productive meetings. After establishing trust through a process of facilitated decision making, RFEAs made their recommendations.



Mayor Mendenhall and seven of the inaugural Salt Lake City Resident Food Equity Advisors.

RESIDENT FOOD EQUITY ADVISOR RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDED:

- Continue the RFEA program and create a resident food equity leadership academy to support the program, developing more effective community outreach and education around community food resources.
- Create **healthy corner store and food cart initiatives**, e.g. **Denver Healthy Corner Store Initiative**, **Navajo Healthy Store Initiative**, and **Philadelphia’s Healthy Corner Store Initiative**.
- Develop programs to give all residents access to personally and culturally relevant foods in a dignified manner (cash or food voucher programs and/or support for client choice food pantry).
- Create resources to help residents grow more healthy food for themselves and their communities.

Their full report: www.slc.gov/sustainability/rfea

"I participated in this program because food has meant so much to me, from my mother's culturally authentic food to my own personal wellbeing," Cristobal M Villegas Jr., a 2020-21 SLC Resident Food Equity Advisor, said.

Perhaps the biggest testament to the project's success and impact was the core recommendation from RFEAs to continue this initiative. **Two expected short-term outcomes are:**

- **A Mayor-Council Resolution declaring Salt Lake City's commitment to advancing food equity and increasing access to healthy food for all residents; and**
- **The launch of a community food assessment update that centers equity in its scope, process, and outcomes.**

The RFEA program also increased the level of trust between residents and the City by creating an authentic platform for underrepresented and underserved residents. In doing so, the program cultivated new food equity leaders in the community, said Brian Emerson, Salt Lake City's Food and Equity Program manager.

In addition to grant funding, the Salt Lake City Sustainability Department leveraged \$66,000 in staff time and consultant technical support to facilitate the work of the Resident Food Equity Advisors, and the Sustainability Department committed over \$200,000 to begin implementing some of the RFEA recommendations.

What Next?

The pilot program was a learning process for all involved, but its success encouraged the Sustainability Department to continue the program, likely organized around co-designing and implementing recommendations. The RFEAs also identified people and communities the City should prioritize when creating opportunities for food leadership in the community and co-developing food policies.

Three Tips to Kick-Off Your Food Equity Advisor Program



- 1 Don't recreate the wheel.** There are lots of cities using this resident-led model. Reach out to staff from other cities to learn from their experience, such as Salt Lake City, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and others.
- 2 Build trusted partnerships.** Forge partnerships with community-based organizations who have trusted relationships with the communities you want to involve. This is especially important during the recruitment phase.
- 3 Conduct an internal and community readiness assessment.** Make sure your city staff have the cultural competence to facilitate this kind of resident and equity-centered process and are prepared to honor the process and act on some of the resident advisors' recommendations—even if they are different from what you expected.

Make sure the residents you want to involve are prepared to participate, that they trust the city enough to invest time and energy into the project, and that they clearly understand the goals of the project.

"RFEA program has been a great platform, empowering local residents to have their voices heard. I felt heard when I saw taro leaves at my local Lucky grocery store!"

Lisia Satini,
2020-21 SLC Resident
Food Equity Advisor





“Everyone should have access to healthy, delicious, and appropriate food. Having conversations with residents about barriers to accessing the food they need and enjoy will bring a variety of perspectives, better solutions, and help create a more welcoming city for all.”

Debbie Lyons, Director, Department of Sustainability

Questions for Project Staff?

Contact SLC’s Food & Equity Program Manager **Brian Emerson** at Brian.Emerson@slcgov.com.

What Have Other Cities Done to Address Low Food Access?

Many cities are tackling low food access by passing resolutions that support turning vacant lots into community gardens, eliminating food waste, and working with schools to provide healthy meals and snacks for students. Other cities are working with corner markets, food cart vendors, and supermarkets to make healthy changes in neighborhood food environments.

Learn from examples in [Anderson, Indiana](#); [Austin, Texas](#); [Baltimore, Maryland](#); [Columbia, South Carolina](#); [Madison, Wisconsin](#); and [Seattle, Washington](#).



The Bright Cities program provides up to \$35,000 in grant funding for US cities and community based partner organizations to reduce exposures — in pregnant women and children under 2 years — to the nine neurotoxins with the strongest associations to developmental delay.³ These neurotoxins are arsenic, flame retardants, lead, mercury, combustion byproducts called PAHs, banned industrial chemicals PCBs, organophosphate pesticides, a rocket fuel component and fertilizer contaminant called perchlorate, and plastic additives called phthalates.

Curious about funding and technical support to reduce neurotoxic exposures in your city? Contact **Kyra Naumoff Shields**, Bright Cities Program Director, at knaumoff@hbbf.org



The Mayors Innovation Project is a national learning network for mayors committed to shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democratic government. Around the country, mayors are taking the lead on pressing issues— climate change, racial equity, economic revitalization, housing, and more. The Mayors Innovation Project supports mayors by providing cutting-edge thinking and concrete examples that mayors can implement.

Looking for peer networking and best practices for city leaders focused on equity, sustainability, and democracy? Contact **Katya Spear**, Mayors Innovation Project Managing Director, knspear@mayorsinnovation.org.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pedersen M et al. Bulky DNA adducts in cord blood, maternal fruit-and-vegetable consumption, and birth weight in a European mother-child study (NewGeneris). *Environ Health Perspect*. 2013 Oct;121(10):1200-6.
- 2 Centers for Disease Control <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/docs/publications/leadandpregnancy2010.pdf> (page 77), accessed August 2021.
- 3 Bennett D, Bellinger DC, Birnbaum LS, et al. Project TENDR: Targeting Environmental Neuro-Developmental Risks The TENDR Consensus Statement. *Environ Health Perspect*. 2016; 124(7):A118-A122.