



April 06, 2012 - Capitol Desk

Food Distribution Inequity a Target of Talks

by David Gorn

Paula Daniels is the senior advisor on food policy in Los Angeles County, but a lot of people don't really understand what she's working on.

"People don't always get it," Daniels said. "There's an enormous amount of policy that's related to the food system. When you think about the whole system, the kind of food, how it's grown, how you get it, where it's distributed, there's regulatory policy, there's economic policy. And from an environmental justice point of view, it cuts across every line."

Daniels spoke yesterday in Los Angeles at an event called "An Appetite for Equity: Ensuring Access to Healthy Foods." It's the first of three meetings across the state sponsored by the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network. The next event is Apr. 11 in Fresno; the final one is Apr. 19 in Oakland.

Several pieces of pending legislation in California deal with food distribution or improving Californians' health through better access to healthful foods. Getting people to understand the import of those policy changes, and the importance of such things as buying local or organic produce can be a challenge, Daniels said.

Explaining food policy, she said, is "a little like water issues, where you ask people where it comes from and they point to the faucet. You ask them where their food comes from, they say the grocery store."

Daniels, a member of the Los Angeles Food Policy Council, said many people don't have access to healthy food. Some people refer to urban "food deserts," but Daniels says the term is misleading.

"They're more accurately food swamps," Daniels said. "There are lots of stores, but they're convenience stores, where you can get calorie-dense but nutrient-poor food." When you compare south Los Angeles to the more affluent west side of the city, she said, "an area like south LA has quite a few convenience stores, but there are less grocery stores. It's almost an inverse ratio, compared to west LA."

Los Angeles started a program, funded by redevelopment agency money, that converts corner stores in low-income urban areas into community markets that offer fresh produce. "We want to create an infrastructure to enable delivery to smaller providers," she said. "To create a market for healthy produce, including the refrigeration necessary to sustain that."

Now that redevelopment funds have dried up due to state budget cuts, Daniels is looking elsewhere for the funds to run that program. "Now we have to go looking for it," she said. "We identified it as a good program, and now we have to see what we can do."

The food system in California is dysfunctional, Daniels said. "It's about trying to help even out the inequities in the system," she said. "I mean, it works for me, I can get the food I want and I can afford the food I want, but there are people it doesn't work for. And then there's a struggle on the production end, with the small and intermediate farmers and food producers. We're thinking about a shift."