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Deborah Halperin on West Bloomington's Food Desert

Judith Valente

WGLT Radio, Illinois State University

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Debra Halperin, February 7, 2018

Mike McCurdy: This is Sound Ideas. I'm Mike McCurdy. There are ten large supermarkets all in a row on the east side of Bloomington and Normal. But the west side remains what the U.S. Department of Agriculture describes as a food desert: an area where people have to travel a mile or more to get to a supermarket. Instead, the west side is a fast food haven. Some small grocery stores have tried to make a go of it on the west side only to close. Community activists have been asking for a large chain to come in but none seems willing. Why is it so difficult and what is the human cost of not having access to fresh produce and other healthy foods? Debra Halperin is a West Bloomington Revitalization Project board member. She oversees the Veggie Oasis – a program that collects fresh products and other items from the farmer's market and supermarket chains to give away to those in need. She tells GLT's Judie Volante that poor people often end up paying more for less healthy food.

Debra Halperin: You're definitely spending more money for the convenience of buying those items at a convenience store but they are very – I mean, incredibly limited healthy options there, which is an additional burden on low-income families that are often facing other health challenges, you know. If you have diabetes or if you have heart trouble, you don't wanna be eating your meals sourced from a convenience store. You have to really pay attention to the food you're putting in your body and if you can't get to a grocery store to make better selections, you're really limited and it exacerbates on I think ongoing health trouble that we can see in families.

Judith Valente: There are many, many supermarkets in Bloomington-Normal. They're just not in areas where poor people live, by and large.

Halperin: Right.

Valente: What is the reason for that? Why can't we get a supermarket, say in West Bloomington?

Halperin: We have been trying to get a supermarket on the west side because it's what our residents tell us they want the most. When we say, you know, what would make your neighborhood a better place, they say "You know, we would really love to have a more convenient grocery store." Well, there are a couple of challenges with that. One is that our understanding is to have a successful grocery store, you need to have people that are able to shop there and spend enough money because the margin profit in a grocery store is very small. So it is tough to recruit a business with a low profitability margin to an area that's low income, where just by the demographics alone you know that people don't have a lot of extra money to spend. The other challenge is finding the property that you could make available for the footprint needed for a grocery store. If they need enough space for the store itself and all the parking close to a high traffic street, you know, it's an old part of town and so, can we hold the building and all and it would require and what would need to make way in order for that, you know, building to come in. It's a tricky grid to try and put a – something with a big footprint into.

Valente: Do you think that city officials could step in? I mean, they've floated bonds when they wanted, an athletic center like the Colosseum. They have given – they've been willing to give tax breaks to hotels to come in. The town of Normal is willing to give a tax break for a shopping center to be built. Is there nothing that the cities, Normal and Bloomington, can do to help this situation in the poor neighborhoods?

Halperin: That's a good question. I think the WBRP has been fortunate have both Scott Black and Karen Schmidt on our Board of Directors. So we have a really great partnership with the city. I just think it's a complicated formula to find the right grocery store chain maybe to come in on the right location so that they're successful and it's the right fit for the neighborhood... and that, the families we work with on the West side mostly shop at the Walmart, that there's a bus line that will take them out there, that's where they do most of their shopping. Some of them shop at the Kroger on Main, so I think our families are just looking for how far can I stretch my grocery dollar and it's a matter of, you know, looking for sales, where can I get to this week, how much money do I have left in SNAP benefit, can I get to other food banks or food pantries. I think juggling that food budget is an ongoing battle for a lot of the families we work with.

Valente: Yeah, what you're talking about is that there is – it's a constant struggle to figure out if you're going to be able to feed your family week to week.

Halperin: Oh, absolutely, which... which breaks my heart, really. I just can't believe that in a community of plenty that we have families that are really struggling with hunger, and it's true. So the trick of, you know, after I pay my rent and I pay my bills, how much money do I have left for my family to eat. If my kids are maybe eating at school for breakfast maybe lunch, do I – can I cover dinner? Can I get to these different food pantries during the time that they are open and available? Can I get shelf stable canned goods from this place and so I can spend my money on the fresh produce that I need – it is really hard I think and ongoing and growing challenge for families to buy everything they wanna buy to feed their family. And, you know, and I think that's when people start making choices of- well, I have to work late so I can only stop by a convenient store to pick up milk on my way home and they end up having to choose to buy more expensive milk even though they know they could get it cheaper elsewhere, but they're having to make a lot of sacrifices in terms of their time and if they have access to a car or if they can – access to a bus or a bike, you know, there's a lot of choices that a family has to consider about how they get food to the table.

Valente: The weeks that I visited your Veggie Oasis, most of the people who come there are working.

Halperin: Oh, absolutely!

Valente: They're the working poor.

Halperin: They're absolutely the working poor. So they're working one job, one and a half jobs, two jobs, right? But everyone in the family is pitching in to try and get income to cover all the bills and groceries are just one of them. But I think, you know, groceries are sometimes a flex category, right – that if I have to pay my car, I have to pay my insurance, if you're paying your car and your insurance I have to pay rent, I have to pay utilities, therefore, what's left for groceries? And it becomes a category of what's left instead of saying, you know, I wish this could be a higher budget priority for my family to feed everyone healthy meals and cook the meals I like to cook and like to eat and I know my family should be eating but it's an area where we're gonna have to make sacrifices.

Valente: That brings me to another point that it's almost a vicious cycle because food that is bad for you is often the cheapest food that you can buy.

Halperin: I know. So when you think about all the fast food places, you would need to pass before you got to a grocery store, right? That you could go through any number of drive-throughs down Market Street before you hit the Walmart out on Market. It's really tempting, I think, for a busy family to go 'Okay, I'm gonna go to Walmart. I'm gonna buy fresh produce. I'm gonna cook. I'm gonna do the dishes. I'm gonna [giggles] pack the leftovers. I'm gonna make, you know, healthy lunches,' and then you think, 'oh wow, look at that, you know. Cheap value meal. I could get five things off of that for a lot less money,' and I can't blame them for being tempted by that. Of course!

Valente: The state legislature has proposed tracking food deserts, now, forcing the state agriculture department to study this and to report back to the legislature where these food deserts are. Will that help?

Halperin: I hope it will. I also hope that we can come up with some creative ideas as a community that maybe, until there's more long-term solutions to food deserts that we can look at other communities in ways that maybe they've been successful in making sure that the families living in food deserts have greater access to fresh produce or cooking classes or meal delivery programs or community-supported agricultural programs. Maybe there are other ways that while we're waiting for the legislature or for a budget or for us to move up the priority, there are still plenty of things for us that I think we can do and we have to be creative in coming up with some of those ideas. Some people think, well, just 'cause you don't live next door to grocery store there's grocery stores all over, right? You could drive to any number of grocery stores of your choice. But I think another challenge for low-income families is that they don't have a car. And so, you know, they rely on a bus, maybe the bus comes once an hour and if you're buying – if you're hoping to buy a lot of fresh produce, will it last till the next time you can do that? Will it last until the next time you're SNAP card is reloaded? So again, we see people choosing foods that are maybe frozen or canned and those – there are some very good nutritional options there but maybe it's not what you would buy if you could – if you had all the money you wanted in your grocery budget and a car to get you to the grocery store. I just think the low-income families that we work with and we meet through programs like Veggie Oasis are thinking about dinner in an entirely different way than families that have money and have access to cars.

Valente: Debra Halperin is a board member of the West Bloomington Revitalization Project. She's also Director of the Action Resource Center at Illinois Wesleyan. Thank you so much.

Halperin: Thank you.

Valente: I'm Judy Valente.

McCurdy: The Veggie Oasis that Debra Halperin helps oversee offers free produce on Saturdays from June to October in front of the West Bloomington Revitalization Project building on W Washington St. Beacon of Hope offers free food on Saturdays at the Revitalization office throughout the winter.