Experts advocate for healthy food access

By Maria DiMaggio and Judy Fallows
Healthy Waltham

Could we really grow more of our own food here in New England? Brian Donahue, the keynote speaker at Healthy Waltham’s recent Healthy Food Access Forum, believes that we can and that it would be a good idea.

An agricultural historian, farmer and associate professor of environmental studies at Brandeis University, Donahue is co-author of “A New England Food Vision.” This document describes a food system guided by four core values: everyone has access to adequate food, everyone enjoys a healthy diet, food is sustainably produced, and food helps build thriving communities.

According to Donahue, about 90 percent of New England’s food comes from outside the region. Only about 5 percent of New England’s land is currently used for food production. A fairly modest increase to 15 percent would have a dramatic effect on our ability to produce more food locally. The New England Food Vision sets a goal of “50 by 60”; building our capacity to produce at least 50 percent of food using fair, just and sustainable practices by 2060. The vision does not include growing all foods locally. Some foods, such as oranges, coffee, chocolate and most grains are best grown outside New England. However, New England has the ability to grow about half our food locally, which would provide numerous economic, health and environmental benefits.

The forum, which took place on Oct. 22 at the Waltham Public Library, was hosted by Healthy Waltham in honor of Food Day and to kick off Healthy Waltham’s 10th anniversary celebration.

Judy Fallows, Healthy Waltham’s executive director, addressed the group of about 50 attendees: “It’s clear that we need to make some changes to the way our food system works to ensure access to healthy foods for all. With the current rise in rates of overweight [people] and obesity and related chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers, it’s more important than ever to take a closer look at what we consume and find ways to eat a healthier diet. In particular, we all need to eat more fruits and vegetables, more whole and less processed foods.”

Forum topics included considering access to healthy foods as a basic human right; the need to change our diets to include more vegetables and fruits as recommended by current dietary models such as MyPlate; and the need to look at the health, environmental and economic costs of our current food system.

Waltham has some very active organizations working on the front lines of food access, including Waltham Fields Community Farm, Boston Area Gleaners, and the Nutrition Services Department of Jewish Family & Children’s Service (JF&CS). Healthy Waltham partners frequently with all three of these organizations as our programs focus on promoting healthy eating through cooking and gardening. All three organizations were represented on the panel for the forum.

Based at the “old Waltham Field Station” on Beaver Street, Waltham Fields Community Farm grows 20 percent of its food specifically for low-income populations. According to Executive Director Claire Kozower, the farm’s main methods for distributing its food donations are to food pantries and meal programs; supplying vegetables to educational programs such as Healthy Waltham’s for cooking and food distributions; farm-to-school programs with the Waltham Public Schools; the outreach market, which distributes locally grown vegetables to people in need at a very low cost; and through the farm’s half-price Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) share program.

The Boston Area Gleaners, also based on Beaver Street, is concerned with improving people’s access to healthy foods. By rescuing surplus farm crops for people in need, the Gleaners deliver high quality, local produce to pantries and meal programs in the Boston area by working closely with local farmers and providing volunteer labor to harvest crops from over 40 local farms. For various reasons, these crops can’t be harvested for sale at a profit by the farms and would otherwise be wasted. The Gleaners bring these vegetables to organizations that supply local food pantries.
and feeding programs. The Gleaners’ Executive Director Duck Caldwell projects that well over 100,000 pounds of produce will be harvested by the Gleaners this year.

Lastly, the attendees heard from Ali Kaufman, a registered dietician and director of Nutrition Services at the Jewish Family & Children’s Service, also based in Waltham. Ali stressed the strong link between poor nutrition and poor health. Some of the barriers to eating healthy include cost, convenience, familiarity and preference. JF&CS Nutrition Services empowers people to improve their health by learning how to shop for and prepare healthy and affordable meals. By learning these skills, their clients are able to prevent or alleviate chronic diseases, reduce health care and medication costs, maintain senior independence, sustain good physical and mental health, and promote optimal child health and development.

Where do we go from here? Healthy Waltham will now be convening a healthy food access coalition to continue these discussions and look at ways we can continue to increase healthy food access in the Waltham community. For more information about the coalition, please contact us at info@healthy-waltham.org.

Thank you to our speakers and to all those who attended for making our first Healthy Food Access Forum such a success! The event was videotaped and will be posted on Healthy Waltham’s YouTube channel soon. (Please see our website www.healthy-waltham.org for the link). Look for this program also on the Waltham Cable Access Channel. For more information and resources, please see the following websites:

- http://www.food-solutionne.org/
- new-england-food-vision
  http://www.community-farms.org
- http://www.bostonareagleaners.org
- http://www.jfcsboston.org