



Accomplishments in Food Access

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Credits



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A Note from Leadership



The Buffalo Center for Health Equity (BCHE) is proud to present this report, which captures the successful initiatives and partnerships that have strengthened our role as a leader in health equity and food access on Buffalo's East Side. Through strategic collaboration, authentic community engagement, and a steadfast commitment to data-driven action, BCHE has worked to advance a food system that places people over politics—and dignity over dependence. Our work is rooted in the belief that health equity begins with access: access to nutritious food, access to opportunity, and access to the resources required for communities to thrive.

The tragedy that unfolded on May 14, 2022, at Tops Market revealed the profound fragility of food access on the East Side for what it truly is—food apartheid. In the immediate aftermath, BCHE mobilized quickly, transforming crisis into both rapid response and long-term strategy. While others saw devastation, we saw a call to action—a call to rebuild a more just, resilient, and community-centered food system. The initiatives outlined in this report represent four distinct but interconnected avenues through which BCHE has advanced food access: innovation in food production, expansion of healthy food distribution, cross-sector partnerships, and community empowerment grounded in evidence and public health practice.

This document is written for those who know the East Side not as an abstract geography, but as home. It reflects the lived realities of residents, the dedication of partners, and the urgency that defines our work. This is not a report about what should be done—it is a record of what has been done. The health and nutrition of East Side residents can no longer wait, and BCHE has acted accordingly.

As you move through the pages ahead, I invite you to see both the progress made and the possibilities that lie before us. BCHE remains committed to building a healthier, stronger, and more equitable Buffalo—one initiative, one partnership, and one neighborhood at a time.

Warmest regards,

Allita Dockery, M.U.P.

Chief Operating Officer, BCHE

Introduction



Food Access in 2025

The nation's healthcare system continues to struggle to keep Americans healthy, particularly those living in economically disadvantaged communities. Individuals most vulnerable to preventable disease often reside in neighborhoods marked by deep financial insecurity and limited access to nutritious food.

The Buffalo Center for Health Equity (BCHE) was founded to confront these inequities head-on. Guided by its mission to address the social determinants of health, BCHE shines a light on the systemic challenges that prevent healthy living—while leading practical, community-driven solutions. The Center's work on Buffalo's East Side demonstrates that wellness begins long before medical intervention. Access to healthy food is a cornerstone of prevention, and BCHE has proven that food equity is not only achievable but essential to lasting community health and resilience.

This report presents BCHE's most successful food access initiatives in 2025.

- I. Indoor Food Production Facility**
- II. Invest Health, Strategies for Healthier Cities- The Buffalo Team**
- III. Food Access at Harvest House**
- IV. Healthy Options Student Engagement Program—Exposure to Food Safety and Career Pathways**



INITIATIVE ONE

Indoor Food Production Facility

ZENNER STREET LOCATION

INITIATIVE ONE

Indoor Food Production Facility



Overview

The Buffalo Center for Health Equity (BCHE) assumed ownership of the Indoor Food Production (IFP) Facility from the New York Power Authority following the completion of its EPRI National Research Study on food production's impact on New York State's power grid, electricity usage, and carbon emissions. This transition positioned BCHE to steward a state-of-the-art community asset while advancing the organization's commitment to environmental justice, sustainability, and equitable food access.

Advancing Urban Agriculture

The IFP Facility features a high-tech, hydroponic container system designed to strengthen urban farming initiatives on Buffalo's East Side. Its controlled, soil-free growing environment enables continuous, year-round cultivation of fresh, organic produce. Beyond food production, the facility promotes community learning by increasing awareness around gardening, sustainability practices, and the importance of nutrition—particularly for residents in underserved neighborhoods.



Operations & Partnership

Under the contractual ownership of the BCHE, the organization's COO provides budgetary updates to ensure the stability of its daily production and distribution which is managed by Buffalo Go Green, a trusted partner in community-based agricultural programming. This collaboration ensures:

- Continuous, soil-free production of fresh, organic produce
- Expert management of hydroponic technology and systems
- Community-centered distribution of nutritious food
- Workforce development through the Agricultural Technology Specialist role, supported financially by BCHE.

Environmental Impact

The IFP Facility directly supports New York State's clean energy goals by demonstrating low-energy, low-emission farming methods. The reduced carbon footprint associated with hydroponic food production aligns with priorities outlined in the State's Environmental Justice Program. Insights generated from the facility contribute to broader statewide strategies for sustainable, energy-efficient agriculture.

Statewide Leadership

The Indoor Food Production Facility has achieved exceptional success. It now produces and distributes **more organic, fresh hydroponic produce than any other facility of its kind in New York State**. Its impact extends beyond yield—serving as a model for community-centered innovation, environmental stewardship, and equitable access to healthy food.

To learn more visit:

<https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-announces-new-indoor-food-production-system-east-buffalo>



INITIATIVE TWO

Invest Health, Strategies for Healthier Cities

THE BUFFALO TEAM

INITIATIVE TWO



Invest Health, Strategies for Healthier Cities



Overview

Invest Health, Strategies for Healthier Cities is a project of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Reinvestment Health Fund with the following individuals selected as the team members: Rita Hubbard-Robinson, CEO of Neuwater & Associates (Team Leader), Oswaldo Mestre, Executive Director of DCS, City of Buffalo, Allita Dockery, COO of Buffalo Center for Health Equity Michael T.A. Smith, Save our Streets Coordinator, City of Buffalo Heather Orom, Associate Dean for Equity, Diversity & Inclusion, UB Doris Carbonell-Medina, Senior Community Development Officer, LISC Dee Johnson, President, Witness Cares, LLC Sharon L. Hanson, Board Chair of Health Care Trustees ECMC.

With a focus on structured collaboration for clearly planned and executed outcomes, the Buffalo Center for Health Equity served as the Community-Based Nonprofit Lead Organization that coordinated the activities of all Team Members to ensure quality outcomes.

Operation Clean Sweep-Effectively Targeting Resources

The Buffalo Team advanced its Medical Model Interventions as part of the City's highly successful "Operation Clean Sweep." Our data-driven framework helps the City of Buffalo make more informed decisions to effectively target resources and work towards equitable, inclusive, and sustainable community development. The Buffalo Team worked with TOLEMI to integrate City Health Dashboard health-related data into the Clean Sweep program's existing special database that already included crime and 211 complaint data. The Clean Sweep team started making decisions about where to deliver services based, not only on these data but also on high medical need and health inequities.

The site selection methodology encompassed three (3) primary areas: Census Tract Health Score, Community Block Grant Priority Score and Property Priority Score. The result is the evolution of the clean sweep program from being punitive, to restorative, to data-driven and now finally SDOH led. The Buffalo Team's work was most visible in its community engagement activities using Medical Model Intervention training and interventions which targeted adult residents using focus groups and middle-school youth using training workshops that focused on food access, quality and freshness.

To learn more visit:

<https://www.reinvestment.com/insights/invest-health-buffalo/>





INITIATIVE THREE

Food as Medicine Pilot

INITIATIVE THREE

Food as Medicine Pilot



Overview

To expand community access to healthy foods and fresh organic produce, BCHE drafted a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Harvest House Buffalo to relocate BCHE's First Fruits Food Pantry to the Good Neighbors Healthcare Center. This new location enables community members receiving medical assistance to also receive food and nutrition guidance directly from healthcare professionals, aligning food distribution with individualized health needs. The collaboration also reinforces a "food as medicine" model by positioning medical staff at the center to help bridge gaps in understanding and encourage a holistic view of wellness—one person at a time.

Opportunities for Self-Screening

Bridging gaps in health also includes empowering residents to self-screen for risk factors for health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, which are directly influenced by diet and food access. To support this, BCHE installed easy-to-use Higi health screening machines at Good Neighbors Healthcare Center, sponsored by the American College of Cardiology. In addition, BCHE supported training for Mental Health and Nutrition Clinical Specialist Certification, ensuring that food-as-medicine principles become embedded in the skillset of those working in food access spaces—strengthening the idea that "each one can teach one." Joining the New York State Food as Medicine Coalition further broadened BCHE's reach, connections, and shared learning opportunities.



To stabilize and strengthen this newly established food access site, BCHE coordinated an agreement with the African Heritage Food Co-op and Buffalo Go Green to ensure a consistent supply of fresh, healthy food. The agreement outlined clear expectations regarding delivery schedules and the amount of food to be supplied to the pantry at Good Neighbors Healthcare Center.

In DC to Spread the Word

To elevate the pantry's role and visibility, BCHE invited Harvest House leadership to Washington, D.C., to attend the Congressional Black Caucus Annual Legislative Conference. This visit was designed to educate and inform federal policymakers, foundations, and nonprofit leaders about the innovative food access strategies underway in Buffalo. A 1:1 meeting with leadership from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality provided valuable insight into potential avenues for federal support.

It became clear during these discussions that the CBC and BCHE share a strong alignment in their mission to address health disparities, promote healthy food access, and advance equity. They share commitment in several key areas:

I. Reducing Health Disparities:

Both the CBC and BCHE prioritize tackling health disparities disproportionately affecting Black and marginalized communities. While the CBC advocates for national legislative solutions to improve health outcomes, BCHE implements community-based strategies to address these disparities locally.

II. Advancing Health Equity:

The CBC champions federal investments in health equity initiatives, including public health funding and research. BCHE operationalizes these priorities on the ground, translating policy into tangible community benefits.

III. Policy Advocacy:

Using its legislative influence, the CBC advances national health policies that support equity. BCHE complements these efforts by contributing local data, community insights, and research that highlight where policy change is most urgently needed.

IV. Community Engagement:

Both organizations emphasize the importance of community voice and empowerment. The CBC amplifies underserved communities at the national level, while BCHE focuses on grassroots engagement and capacity building to address local health needs.

Formalizing the Commitment

Upon returning, BCHE formalized its commitment to the “food as medicine” movement by 1) joining the New York State Food as Medicine Coalition and 2) by connecting Harvest House to additional grant sources and 1115 waiver participation. In doing so, we expanded our collective network of partners dedicated to advancing equitable nutrition and health outcomes across the state.

The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of stylized, geometric fruit icons. These icons include apples, pears, carrots, and clusters of grapes. Each fruit is composed of several triangular and quadrilateral segments in a variety of colors: orange, yellow, blue, green, and light pink. The fruits are scattered across the page in various orientations and sizes, creating a vibrant and playful backdrop for the text.

INITIATIVE FOUR

Healthy Options Student Engagement Program

EXPOSURE TO FOOD SAFETY
AND CAREER PATHWAYS

INITIATIVE FOUR



Healthy Options Student Engagement Program



Overview

In the fall of 2025, (BCHE) began supporting a pilot workforce and wellness program designed by Aunt Connie's Ed-U-Kitchen in collaboration with Health Sciences Charter School. This initiative engages youth leaders in a meaningful journey to promote healthy eating, coordinate outreach activities, and become visible advocates for nutrition and wellness within their school community.

At the core of the program is comprehensive training in food safety, nutrition, and career exploration within the food and health sectors. Students participate in the National Restaurant Association's ServSafe Food Safety curriculum, which includes five instructional modules and a proctored certification exam. Each module covers a critical aspect of food safety and is paired with a hands-on food preparation activity that reinforces the learning objectives. This experiential approach ensures that students not only understand the material conceptually, but also develop the practical skills needed to apply it in real-world settings.

Certification

BCHE will support 20 high school students who are selected as Youth Leaders for Health and Wellness. Upon successfully passing the ServSafe exam with a score of 75 or higher, participants earn an industry-recognized Food Safety Certificate—an asset that can be used to secure employment in restaurants, community food programs, and other food service environments. More importantly, the certification lays the groundwork for potential career pathways in health care, culinary arts, nutrition, public health, and hospitality.

With certification in hand, these youth leaders will contribute to a pilot effort to provide healthy food options for student athletes at Health Sciences Charter School, positioning athletes as influencers of healthy behaviors among their peers. Their roles will expand to support family engagement and act as liaisons between students, faculty, and staff, helping to foster a unified school-wide approach to health and wellness.

Complementary Programming

The initiative is complemented by the 2024-2025 Summer Growth Program through Home Beneath Our Feet, which guides a class of students through hands-on learning in gardening, financial literacy, STEM, cooking, and stress relief to further reinforce a holistic understanding of health, self-sufficiency, and wellness.

Together, these components create a robust pathway for youth empowerment, skill-building, and community leadership, equipping students with both the knowledge and credentials needed to advance food access and promote healthier futures on Buffalo's East Side. As the program matures and information is collected, we will be able to assess and determine long-and short-term outcomes of the initiative.

Conclusion



The Buffalo Center for Health Equity affirms that food access is not merely a response to hunger—it is the backbone of prevention, wellness, and justice. The initiatives outlined in this report demonstrate that meaningful change is possible when strategy, community, and compassion align. These are not theoretical models or pilot concepts; they are proven, replicable solutions shaped by lived experience and ready to be scaled in any community confronting the realities of food apartheid.

Furthermore, BCHE's work underscores a central truth: no single agency, funder, institution, or policymaker can address these challenges alone. Transforming a fractured food system into one that is equitable and resilient requires shared commitment and collective action. It demands bold leadership willing to disrupt outdated systems, formalized partnerships that leverage cross-sector strengths, robust technology that guides decision-making, and authentic community engagement that honors the voices of those most affected.

Above all, it requires the political and moral will to recognize food as both healthcare and a fundamental human right.

As BCHE continues this work, we invite partners, policymakers, and community leaders to join us in advancing a future where every resident of Buffalo's East Side — and communities like it — has reliable access to nutritious food, opportunities for wellness, and the dignity that comes with self-determination. The path forward is clear, and with sustained collaboration, the solutions are within reach.

Acknowledgements



CONTRIBUTORS

Invest Health Buffalo Team: Rita Hubbard-Robinson (NeuWater and Associates), Dr. Heather Orom (University at Buffalo School of Public Health and Health Professions), Oswaldo Mestre (City of Buffalo), Doris Carbonell-Medina (LISC), Michael T.A. Smith (City of Buffalo), Sharon L. Hanson (Erie County Medical Center), and Dee Johnson (National Witness Project)

PARTNERING AGENCIES

African American Food Heritage Co-op
Aunt Connie's Ed-U-Kitchen
Buffalo Go Green
Good Neighbors Healthcare / Harvest House Buffalo
Home Beneath Our Feet
Invest Health, Team Buffalo
New York State Food Access Coalition
New York Power Authority
WNY Integrated Care Collaborative

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