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## Assessing the Racial Equity Impact of Legislation to Establish a Virginia Grocery Investment Program and Fund

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Assessing the Racial Equity Impact of Legislation to Establish a Virginia Grocery Investment Program and Fund

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*In 2018 the Commonwealth of Virginia’s General Assembly considered, but did not pass, legislation to combat food deserts via the creation of the Virginia Grocery Investment Program and Fund. The Fund introduced a \$3.75 million per year appropriation intended to leverage public-private partnerships to support construction, rehabilitation, upgrading, or expansion of grocery stores or other food retailers in underserved communities. African Americans disproportionately face low access to healthy food. This research utilizes data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Access Research Atlas and demographic data on race/ethnicity from the U.S. Census Bureau to examine the racial/ethnic make-up of low healthy food access populations in Virginia and the potential racial equity impact of the Fund. The findings show that using a low access/low income definition of underserved, compared to the proposed low access-only definition in the legislation, would target the Fund’s impact more in urban areas that are more diverse in general and more heavily African American.*

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA 2017b), over 19 million people in the U.S. live in “food deserts” – areas where a significant number of low-income residents need to travel more than one mile in urban areas and 10 in rural areas to access healthy, affordable food options. Despite so many people estimated to be impacted by food deserts, robust research into the phenomenon is relatively recent, and the lack of common definitions remains a challenge. For example, in a comprehensive literature review, Walker

et al. (2010) found only 31 studies on food deserts, but nine different methods for defining and measuring them were used, making refined policy solutions more difficult. An increased level of available data resulted from the 2008 Food, Conservation and Energy Act, which charged the USDA with researching the prevalence and effects of food deserts on populations (Walker et al. 2010) – the creation of a Food Desert Atlas in 2010 (updated in 2015) is one evidence of increased attention and data availability around the issue.

At the state level, healthy food financing initiatives (HFFI) aimed at incentivizing grocery stores to locate in underserved areas and reduce the scope of food deserts are still relatively new, with models developed in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, and California (The Food Trust 2019; Treuhaft and Karpyn 2010). Though one argument for the creation of such programs is an expected positive impact for communities of color, there is relatively little research examining the racial equity impact of proposed or instituted programs. If data on the prevalence and impact of food deserts is a previous blind spot being gradually eliminated by research, the extent to which food deserts have a disparate impact on communities of color in the U.S. and whether generic (i.e. non-race conscious) policies in the context of continued institutional racism serve to mitigate or exacerbate disparities in healthy food access remains an additional blind spot that requires attention.

This research, first undertaken by the authors as a final project during their participation in the 2018 Minority Political Leadership Institute (MPLI), uses a proposed additional HFFI—the Virginia Grocery Investment Program and Fund (hereafter called, the Fund)—as a basis for analyzing potential racial equity impacts of the legislation and potential (grocery store) sites mentioned by Fund advocates. The proposal to establish the Fund mirrors, in broad terms, the HFFIs created in other states—the state provides initial funding for a public/private partnership that incentivizes private capital investments in qualifying food access initiatives.

This could be by way of opening a new supermarket or the expansion of healthy food offerings by existing food retailers (The Food Trust 2019). MPLI, a program of Virginia Commonwealth University in partnership with the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus, requires capstone projects to analyze the goals, stakeholders, and racial equity impact of a Virginia legislative bill and present findings to an audience of Virginia-based practitioners. However, for a broader audience of academics and policymakers, Virginia is an interesting context for examining racial equity and food access due to the state’s increasing diversity, recent political transition from reliably conservative to increasingly progressive (Tavernise and Gebeloff 2019), and sizeable population living in food deserts (1.4 million with low access, 342,000 who are low access and low income – USDA 2017b).

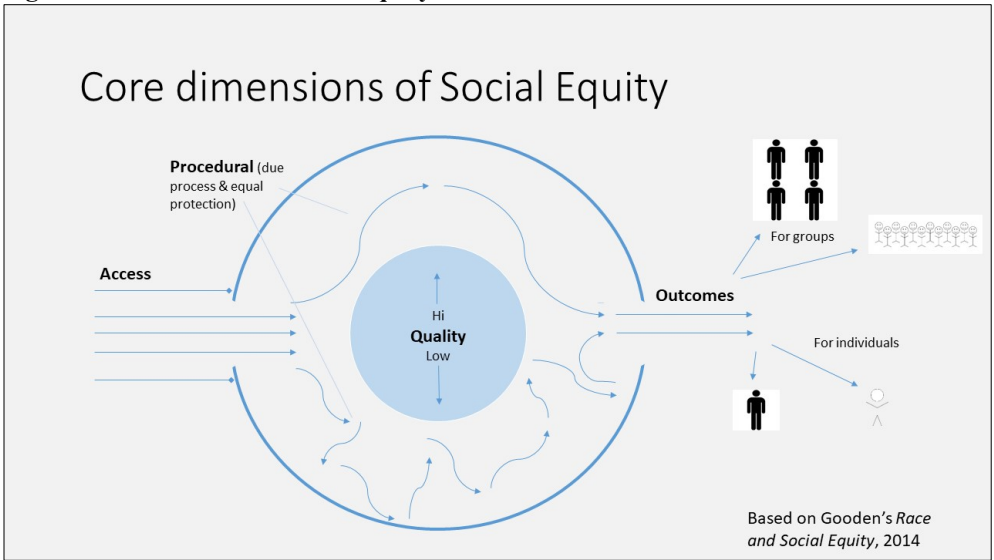
After a brief literature review on food deserts, their disparate impact on communities of color, and efforts to ease them, an overview of the 2018 legislative context, and a review of the bills proposed to create the Fund is provided. The methodology and findings of the racial equity analysis are reported and discussed before the research concludes with recommendations on how the proposed legislation could be improved to increase racial equity and reduce the likelihood that embedded institutional racism could extend, rather than diminish, racial injustice.

## **Literature Review**

Before approaching the specific issue of food deserts, let us briefly highlight a conceptual understanding of four core dimensions of social equity articulated by Gooden (2014) and summarized in the visual below: equity of access; procedural equity, equity in quality of

services, and equity in outcomes. Gooden makes the point that a lack of equity on any of these dimensions can preserve or extend inequitable treatment of underrepresented groups, and that this can result from both continued individual bias and action by government officials (conscious or not) or from institutionalized processes that are seen as neutral in intent but preserve past discrimination. Promoting greater racial equity requires analysis of the likely impact of a change in policy on racial or ethnic minorities, because a generic “color-blind” policy is likely to preserve embedded or structural inequality.

**Figure 1: Dimensions of Social Equity**



The issue of food deserts is not solely one of race/ethnicity. First used as a phrase by a public housing resident in Scotland in the early 1990s, the metaphor of a “food desert” for areas without easy access to healthy food options proved to be compelling for policy discussions but subject to a variety of specific definitions (Walker et al. 2010). Walker et al. point out that some limit their definition to only urban areas (Cummins and Macintyre 2002), while others identify rural areas where residents depend more on small convenience stores than full-service groceries (Kaufman 1999).

The USDA (2017a) defines “food deserts” as areas where people cannot access affordable and nutritious food due to some combination of distance to a grocery store, low income, and no access to a vehicle. However, the USDA’s widely cited food atlas is not based on operationalizing one clear definition – in calculating “low access” it provides two different distance options for both urban (.5 or 1 mile from a supermarket) and rural (10 or 20 miles) areas.

From a racial equity perspective, the choice of definition for low access matters. Using GIS analysis of census tracts in Maryland, Giacalone (2016) shows that applying a .25 mile urban definition alongside a low-income measure attached to the federal poverty rate (compared to the USDA 1 mile definition) results in a similar overall estimate of residents living in a food desert but increases the number of African American residents so identified by 31%, the number of Hispanics by 28%, and reduces food desert-identified white residents

by 31%. Walker et al. (2010) also cite eleven articles that analyze racial/ethnic disparities in healthy food access and highlight the following findings:

- The likelihood of having a neighborhood supermarket was four times higher in predominantly white neighborhoods than in predominantly black neighborhoods (Morland et al. 2002);
- For every supermarket in a predominantly African American neighborhood, predominantly white neighborhoods have two; for every supermarket in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, predominantly non-Hispanic neighborhoods have three (Powell et al. 2007).

While research that highlights disparity in access to full-service grocery stores typically points to a need to attract more such stores to food deserts, Raja et al. (2008), after finding a lack of supermarkets in neighborhoods of color but an “extensive” network of smaller grocery stores, argue that a quality focused policy of supporting such smaller stores to expand healthy offerings would be more effective than large ticket efforts to attract an entirely new supermarket. Additionally, Block and Subramanian (2015) sound a note of caution, showing that empirical evidence is “weak” when it comes to a direct link between ready access to healthy foods and reductions in outcomes, such as diet quality disparities. They recommend policy initiatives also include school and childcare-based initiatives, changes to nutrition assistance programs, and taxation of unhealthy foods.

In summary, existing research shows improvements in racial equity under new policies like HFFIs that aim to shrink food deserts will depend on the definition of low access used for implementation, the relative focus on attracting large supermarkets or resourcing existing smaller stores, and the range of other nutrition-related policies that are simultaneously deployed. With these factors in mind, we turn to examining the proposed 2018 legislation to create an HFFI Fund in Virginia, followed by analysis of the likely racial equity impact.

### **Methods for understanding the legislation and issue context**

To establish a robust understanding of stakeholders and underlying motivations to create the Fund following the 2018 General Assembly session, researchers reviewed blogs and public communications mentioning the bills or Fund (identified via a Google search) and conducted semi-structured interviews with four legislators (or in one case their chief of staff), including 2018 chief patrons Delegate Delores McQuinn (D-70) and Senator William M. Stanley, Jr. (R-20). Because our primary interest was understanding the context of the bill and reasons for support, researchers purposefully sampled as key informants those legislators who were among the list of chief or co-patrons, making sure that interviewees included members of both parties. Interviews ranged from roughly 20-60 minutes. Researchers reviewed notes from interviews and public documents to establish a timeline of the proposals’ development and identified a list of goals and motivations of support by respondents for this legislation.

## **Legislative Context**

During the 2018 General Assembly session, a bipartisan group of 33 members acted as patrons or co-patrons across three bills for a grocery investment fund in Virginia to address the lack of grocery stores and food retailers in underserved communities around the Commonwealth. This level of support developed over a period of years.

Attention to the issue of “food deserts” first emerged in the General Assembly in 2012 when Delegate McQuinn introduced House Joint Resolution (HJR) 88, which called for a study of food deserts in the Commonwealth. Although the study bill failed, the study was re-introduced the following year under HJR 646 and resulted in a letter from Speaker of the House, William Howell, requesting a study of the issue of food deserts in Virginia. This request resulted in the 2014 Virginia Food Desert Task Force, chaired by faculty of Virginia Tech and Virginia State University. The task force focused on eight lower-income localities (Fredericksburg, Hampton, Harrisonburg, Lynchburg, Martinsville, Petersburg, Richmond, and Wise County) and four localities with higher incomes (Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax, and Manassas) to assess the disparities and extent of food insecurity within urban, rural, and affluent neighbourhoods. The study showed evidence of food deserts in urban and rural areas with some evidence of food insecurities in Northern Virginia (Virginia Food Desert Taskforce 2014).

Following the announcement of these findings a series of public awareness campaigns (Eat Smart, Move More in 2014; Voices for Healthy Kids in 2015) unfolded with key support from then-First Lady of Virginia, Dorothy McAuliffe (Loeffler 2014). Each of these statewide campaigns used various communication tools, such as billboards, Facebook, hashtags, and Twitter. The primary focus of these initiatives was to expose children to healthy foods, including the Governor’s council, which worked to eliminate childhood hunger in Virginia (Feed Virginia 2019).

After a series of campaigns, The Food Trust released a special report in July 2015 entitled *Food for Every Child: The Need for Healthy Food Financing in Virginia*. This report highlighted the finding that “more than 1.7 million Virginians, including 480,000 children live in low-income areas with limited supermarket access” and recommended that Virginia pursue a state-wide healthy food financing program to increase healthy food access throughout the Commonwealth (Waldoks et al. 2015). The local American Heart Association affiliate collaborated with The Food Trust to start an advocacy campaign for state investment in a healthy food financing initiative. This was a new strategy/direction aimed at the food desert challenge.

In 2016, following the success of a food financing initiative program in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the local metropolitan Richmond chapter of the American Heart Association (AHA) promoted the Fund under a well-financed campaign called *Closer to My Grocer*. The campaign operates under a diverse coalition of national and local non-profit organizations, such as The March of Dimes, the Virginia Municipal League (VML), and the Virginia Chamber of Commerce. Some of their outreach strategies include lobbying for support from elected officials, a public opinion poll, promoting a public fact sheet on program impact, creating a *Closer to My Grocer* hashtag for social media, and a *Closer to My Grocer* video (American Heart Association 2019).

The Virginia Association of Counties (VACo) publicly endorsed the Virginia Grocery Investment Fund (VGIF), lobbying support through county elected officials and promoting benefits of the Fund (VACO 2018). Localities like Roanoke and Richmond launched community efforts to reduce food deserts, often with vocal support of former First Lady of Virginia, Dorothy McAuliffe (Forman 2016; Smith 2017). Her work with the Virginia Food

Access Network (VFAN) marked September 29, 2017 as the Feed VA Day of Action, producing over 1,160 opportunities to get involved in broad hunger relief efforts (Virginia Food Action Network 2018). Prior to leaving office, former Governor Terry McAuliffe proposed over \$7 million in his last two-year budget to finance the Fund. Additional efforts to broaden public awareness included op-eds in local newspapers from champions like Delegate McQuinn (2016) and Senator Jennifer McClellan (2018).

While some segments of the state’s population are aware that food insecurity and food deserts exist through personal experiences, a 2018 VCU poll of public opinion found that 70 percent of Virginians reported not having a problem obtaining healthy food, but those listing a lack of transportation as the key barrier to access were disproportionately African American (Office of Public Policy Outreach 2018). That aside, a 2016 survey by Public Opinion Strategies found 82 percent of respondents supported a state program like the Fund when the concept was described to them (Bolger 2016). However, one General Assembly staffer interviewed noted that in the 2018 session, few constituents called to support or oppose any one of the Fund’s bills (Personal communication, Chief of Staff to Senator McClellan, July 6, 2018).

Overall, the broad level outreach tactics had limited impact in inviting advocacy from local grassroots organizations for the Fund. It remains a challenge to identify or assess the level of outreach to citizens directly impacted by the lack of a local grocery store in low-income, low-access communities. These critical voices tend to be left out of the broader conversation and, therefore, fail to validate the most practical or useful need(s) of the impacted communities.

**Legislative overview**

**Stakeholders in the 2018 General Assembly Session**

In 2018, three separate but identical bills to create a Virginia Grocery Investment Program and Fund were filed. Delegate McQuinn was the chief patron for HB 69, the most popular version in the House, while Senator Stanley acted as chief patron of the Senate version. Table 1 summarizes the chief patron and party split of co-patrons who signed on to each respective bill (Virginia Legislative Information System 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Notably, while the leading bills in each house drew more Democrats as co-patrons, each bill drew Republican support, and two (of three) bills were carried by Republicans. In a January 11, 2018 press conference with other supporters of the bill, Senator Stanley stated, "Some of my conservative friends have asked, is this a conservative bill? And I say, yes. Because if we are creating healthy choices for children, we're allowing those children to grow up, safe, happy and healthy, then they are going to be great taxpayers to the Commonwealth, not tax burdens" (CBS7, 2018).

**Table 1: 2018 bills to create a healthy food financing initiative in Virginia**

<b>Bill</b>	<b>Chief Patron</b>	<b>Party affiliation of co-sponsors</b>
<b>HB 69</b>	Delegate Delores McQuinn (D-70)	(22 Democrat – 2 Republican)
<b>HB 85</b>	Delegate Richard Bell (R-20)	(2 Democrat - 2 Republican)
<b>SB 37</b>	Senator William M. Stanley, Jr. (R-20)	(8 Democrat - 2 Republican)

In addition to individual legislators, many groups publicly supported a greater focus on the issue of food deserts and the establishment of the Fund. Key interest groups included



representation of the following sectors: associations of localities, healthcare advocacy and service providers, food access advocates, children’s advocacy organizations, community businesses, and finance organizations.

While support for the Fund appeared broad and bi-partisan, the bills failed in the 2018 session. Only four of 40 senators voted against SB37 as it passed out of the Senate, but the bill failed to receive a hearing in the House Appropriations Committee. An explanation suggested by a Republican legislative associate was that the bill required significant funding, and so it ran afoul of a broader commitment from Delegate S. Chris Jones (R-76), chair of Appropriations, to hold the line against new spending in the budget being negotiated. Senator Stanley stated, “The bill did not pass by Republicans because it was [seen as] big government, and \$2 million dollars was taken from the House appropriations.”

### **Goals and Implementation of Legislation**

As with any policy proposal, a diverse range of motivations and goals could lead stakeholders to support legislation. Based on the interviews and document reviews conducted, the researchers identified the following categories of goals for the legislation:

- Economic development and community revitalization
- Employment opportunities for people directly in their communities
- Opportunities for healthier lifestyle choices to increase long term health benefits
- Additional tax revenue opportunities
- Establishment of public/private partnerships

The Fund, as proposed in 2018, would be administered by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), which would select and collaborate with a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) provided by the US Department of Treasury. Additionally, the legislation charges DHCD with developing guidelines for the program with input from an advisory committee that would include representatives from the selected CDFI, the Department of Agriculture and Community Services, and “other relevant stakeholders” (Virginia Department of Planning and Budget 2018).

The bill itself only requires that funded projects be located in an “underserved community,” which it defines as “a census tract determined to be an area with low supermarket access either by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), as identified in the USDA Food Access Research Atlas, or through a methodology that has been adopted for use by another governmental or philanthropic healthy food initiative.” This definition for underserved is quite broad for two reasons. First, as noted in the literature review, the USDA atlas provides three alternative definitions of low access based on varying distance combinations for urban and rural areas. Second, the USDA (2017a) notes that most definitions of a food desert combine a distance access measure with either individual or neighbourhood indicators for income or vehicle access.

According to a fact sheet prepared by the American Heart Association (AHA 2018), there are 18 localities identified as sites expressing early interest for the potential funding: Abingdon, Clifton Forge, Farmville, Harrisonburg, Highland, Kenbridge, Lexington, Luray, Lynchburg, Martinsville, Nelson County, Parksley, Petersburg, Pound, Richmond, Roanoke, South Boston, and Suffolk. The fact sheet identifies eligibility criteria for the Fund as median income, market test, community readiness, local community buy-in, and inclusion of Virginia grown products. However, these criteria do not appear in the legislation as written, nor is it clear whether DHCD would adopt all these criteria in developing guidelines if the legislation

passed. The racial equity impact of the legislation, then, would also depend significantly on procedural dimensions during implementation.

**Racial impact analysis**

Assessing the racial impact of this legislation required combining data on grocery store access (a key part of the definition of a food desert) with data on racial demographics, both statewide and for particular localities listed as interested in partnering with the proposed fund. This analysis draws data from two primary sources - the USDA Economic Research Service Food Access Research Atlas (data last updated in 2015, (USDA 2017b)), which provided data at the census tract level on estimates of the population who have low access to grocery stores, and the general population demographic information from the 2015 Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates. Recognizing that in many localities non-white groups are quite small and that both sources of data are drawn from a sample and subject to sampling variability, researchers deemed the greater accuracy of 5-year ACS estimates preferable to 1-year estimates (3-year estimates were discontinued in 2013). Additionally, because cities/counties are more readily understood as places than census tracts, data was aggregated up to the city/county level, which in Virginia are non-overlapping jurisdictions. The specific indicators used from the USDA are detailed in Table 2.

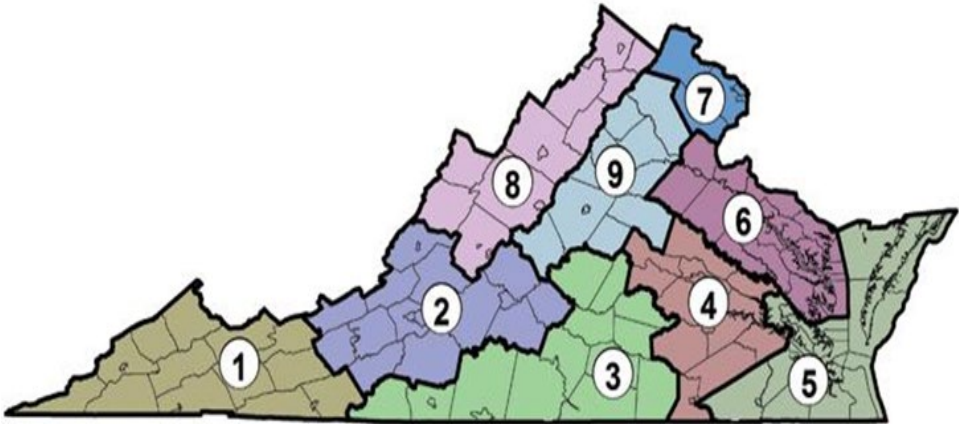
**Table 2: Key definitions of access**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Geographic Level</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Population, low access to grocery store (LA)</b>	County	The number of people in a county living more than 1 mile from a supermarket or large grocery store in an urban area, or more than 10 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store in a rural area.
<b>Low access and low income to grocery store (LA/LI)</b>	County	The number of people in a county with low income and living more than 1 mile from a supermarket or large grocery store in an urban area, or more than 10 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store in a rural area.

While the data on low-access population estimates from the USDA provides demographic breakdowns by race, the same is not provided for the joint low-income and low-access population figures. This analysis argues elsewhere that low access and low income should both be part of meeting eligibility criteria for participating in the Fund. However, due to the lack of demographic data on that population, we present racial/ethnic breakdowns only for low-access populations. Additional racial/ethnic classifications exist in the census data, but this analysis reports only those with significant representation in Virginia: White, African American, Hispanic, and Asian.

Due to the complexity of representing 130+ Virginia localities in table form and recognizing the role of the proposed fund as an economic development initiative, the following analysis is simplified by aggregating the data up to the nine regions (see Figure 2) used in the Growth and Opportunity (GO) Virginia initiative. GO Virginia is a collaborative economic development legislative package created in 2016. The Virginia DHCD is the state agency responsible for administering the GO Virginia Program, strengthening the case for aggregating at this level.

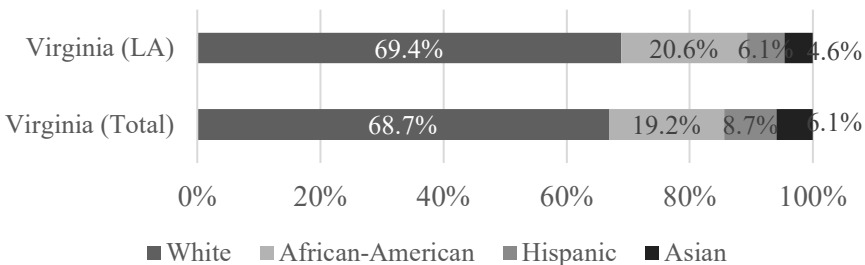
**Figure 2: GO Virginia Regions**



The first step in assessing the racial equity impact of the Fund is to examine the demographic makeup of the total population in Virginia and compare it to the makeup of the low-access population.

Figure 3 shows the overall racial demographics of the Commonwealth, as well as the racial/ethnic breakdown of Virginia’s low-access population. If the challenges of low access were equitably distributed among Virginia’s diverse populations, the percentages for low access would be very similar to those of the total population. The chart makes it possible to see that Whites (by +.7%) and African Americans (by +1.4%) are over-represented in the low-access population (i.e. their portion is greater among low access than in the total population) while Hispanics (by -2.6%) and Asians (by -1.5%) are underrepresented.

**Figure 3: State-wide comparison, low access and total population by racial/ethnic group**



Similar to the statewide breakdown, a regional breakdown shown in table 3 shows that the White population is the majority in every region, both in the general population and the low-access population, with a peak of 92% low access and 95% of the general population in Region 1. Regions 3, 4, and 5 contain 30% or more African Americans. Region 7 has the highest Hispanic and Asian populations at 17% and 14%, respectively. In general, regions that are primarily rural have a population that is more than 80% White. Likewise, those areas

that contain more urban communities have the highest percentages of African American, Hispanic, and Asian populations.

Several takeaways are apparent from this analysis. First, whites are overrepresented in the low-access population in five regions, African Americans in five regions, Hispanics in one region, and Asians in three regions. Additionally, inequity can be assessed by comparing the portion of each racial group that are faced with low access. Hypothetically, if 10% of whites and 20% of African Americans in a region have low access to grocery stores, then African Americans are disproportionately represented among the low-access population. The results by region are shown in Table 4.

**Table 3: Summary of Low Access Population (including Racial Ethnic breakdown), Low Access/Low Income population and Low Access/No Car households - by Go VA Region**

Go Virginia Region	Low Access		Portion of Low Access Population that is. . . [Portion of Total Population that is. . .]				Low Access & Low Income	
	Pop.	Pct.	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Pop.	Pct.
Region 1	38,287	9.8%	92% [95.1%]	<b>4.9%</b> [2.7%]	1.5% [1.7%]	<b>0.6%</b> [0.4%]	16,704	4.3%
Region 2	129,937	16.8%	81.6% [82.4%]	<b>13.4%</b> [12.4%]	2.4% [2.9%]	1.9% [2.1%]	41,790	5.4%
Region 3	71,849	19.2%	62.5% [64.2%]	<b>33.9%</b> [31.9%]	2.9% [3.0%]	0.5% [0.6%]	31,941	8.5%
Region 4	303,161	24.8%	<b>61.3%</b> [60.9%]	<b>31.1%</b> [30.7%]	5.1% [5.7%]	2.7% [3.7%]	74,986	6.1%
Region 5	350,312	20.6%	<b>62.2%</b> [58.8%]	29.6% [31.8%]	4.7% [6.4%]	3.2% [3.7%]	91,929	5.4%
Region 6	77,168	15.7%	71.8% [72.1%]	<b>19.0%</b> [18.9%]	<b>8.1%</b> [7.2%]	<b>2.4%</b> [2.0%]	14,079	2.9%
Region 7	345,770	14.3%	<b>70.5%</b> [64.3%]	9.8% [11.9%]	11.0% [17.1%]	11.6% [14.4%]	37,213	1.5%
Region 8	74,998	14.4%	<b>90.7%</b> [90.3%]	4.1% [4.7%]	4.5% [6.8%]	0.9% [1.4%]	21,715	4.2%
Region 9	51,874	12.5%	<b>84.3%</b> [81.3%]	7.8% [11.6%]	5.1% [5.5%]	<b>3.4%</b> [2.6%]	11,998	2.9%
Virginia	1,443,355	17.4%	<b>69.4%</b> [68.7%]	<b>20.6%</b> [19.2%]	6.1% [8.7%]	4.6% [6.1%]	342,355	4.1%

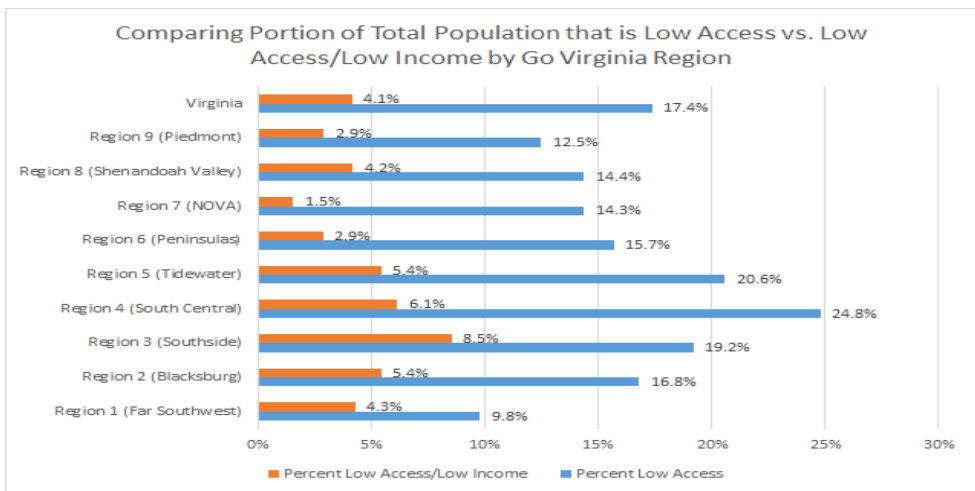
The data reveal some interesting results. In Region 1, more than 9 in 10 people are White. However, less than 1 in 10 Whites are low access (compared to 1 in 6 African Americans). Similarly, 1 in 6 Asians are low access. This data shows in better detail the racial disparities depending on the region. As noted in table 4, regions 3, 4, and 5 have the highest proportion of African Americans. These regions are also the areas with the highest amounts of low access and low access within African Americans. By breaking the data down to the regional level, it enables the picture to show the true racial disparities. Regional geographic location plays a substantial role in low access and clearly identifies which racial groups are impacted the most. Again, as noted in Table 4, the data shows the existence of racial inequity, sometimes for African Americans (Regions 1, 2, and 3), sometimes for Whites (Regions 5, 7, and 8) or for Asians (Regions 1, 6, and 9). It is important to note that this picture of mixed racial inequity at the level of low access (based purely on distance) may be different than what would emerge if income or other factors were considered. Included in the low-access population would be persons who may live at a distance from a major grocery store, but who

are also wealthy enough to afford a vehicle and gas to drive that distance.

**Table 4: Portion of each racial group that are low access by region**

Go Virginia Region	Low Access		Portion of Low Access Population that is . . . [Portion of Total Population that is . . .]				Low Access & Low Income	
	Pop.	Pct.	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Pop.	Pct.
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Region 5	350,312	20.6%	<b>62.2%</b> [58.8%]	29.6% [31.8%]	4.7% [6.4%]	3.2% [3.7%]	91,929	5.4%
Region 6	77,168	15.7%	71.8% [72.1%]	<b>19.0%</b> [18.9%]	<b>8.1%</b> [7.2%]	<b>2.4%</b> [2.0%]	14,079	2.9%
Region 7	345,770	14.3%	<b>70.5%</b> [64.3%]	9.8% [11.9%]	11.0% [17.1%]	11.6% [14.4%]	37,213	1.5%
Region 8	74,998	14.4%	<b>90.7%</b> [90.3%]	4.1% [4.7%]	4.5% [6.8%]	0.9% [1.4%]	21,715	4.2%
Region 9	51,874	12.5%	<b>84.3%</b> [81.3%]	7.8% [11.6%]	5.1% [5.5%]	<b>3.4%</b> [2.6%]	11,998	2.9%
Virginia	1,443,355	17.4%	<b>69.4%</b> [68.7%]	<b>20.6%</b> [19.2%]	6.1% [8.7%]	4.6% [6.1%]	342,355	4.1%

**Figure 4: Comparison - Low Access to Low Access/Low Income by Region**

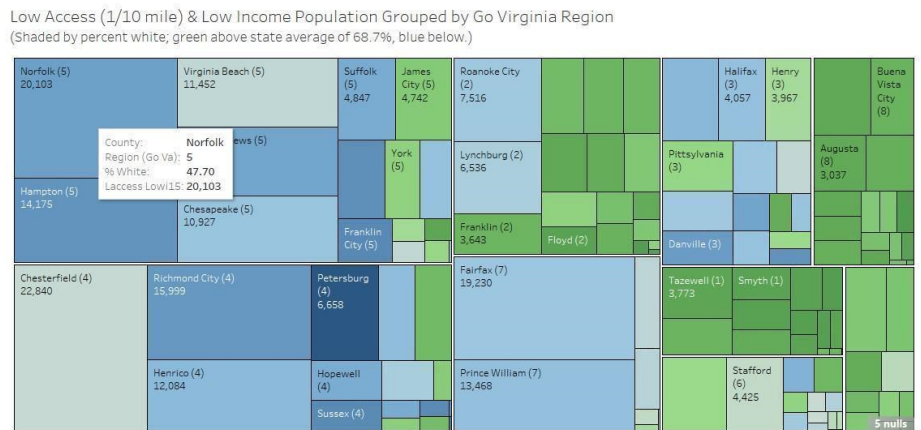
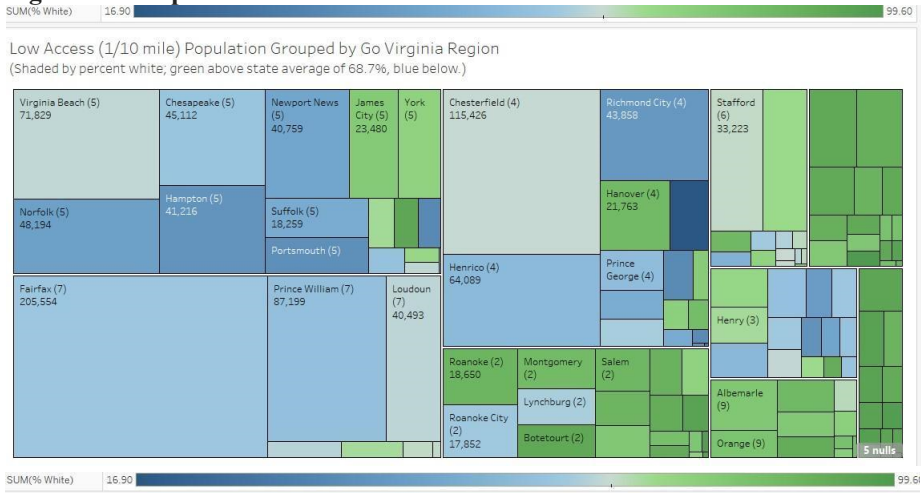


Without the racial demographics of low-access/low-income (LA/LI), it is not possible to assess definitively if any racial inequities exist. However, given known gaps between white and non-white median wages (National Equity Atlas 2019) and the difference in

estimates of the LA versus the LA/LI population in each region suggest that including a low-income measure would significantly change the picture. As shown in Figure 4 below, while both Region 7 (Northern Virginia) and Region 8 (Shenandoah Valley) have just over 14% of their population classified as low access, the LA/LI portion of the population in region 7 (1.5%) is almost one-third the portion of the LA/LI population in Region 8 (4.2%). This conclusion is strengthened by comparing data at the local level.

In the two graphics below (Figure 5), the size of each locality is based on the number of residents who are either low access (top graphic) or low access/low income. Comparing where localities appear shows that the prominence of a county like Fairfax changes when the population analyzed moves from Low Access to LA/LI. Fairfax has four times the number of low-access residents as Norfolk but approximately the same number of LA/LI residents.

**Figure 5: Comparison of Localities**



This graphic is also shaded based on the proportion of the population that is white, with blue indicating a lower white proportion than the state average and green a higher proportion. This demonstrates the sizable portion of low-access/low-income (LA/LI) population that live in regions 4 (Richmond metro) and 5 (Hampton Roads area). Close to half of the

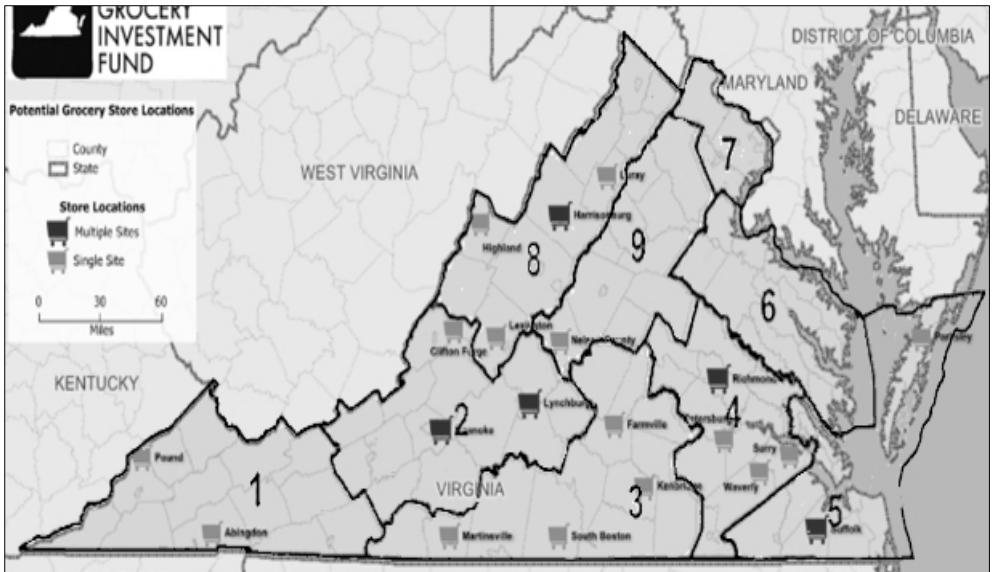
Commonwealth's LA/LI population live in these two regions, which are more racially/ethnically diverse.

Other factors, in addition to low income, could arguably affect access to healthy foods (e.g. party of political representative, access to and cost of public transportation, and roadway connectivity). Though beyond the scope of this research, these factors represent key potential areas for additional study.

**Findings**

Noting the Closer to My Grocer Coalition identified 18 localities interested in the potential financing (listed above on page 13 and mapped below (Figure 6)), analysis of these localities provides a better idea of who may be likely to be served should this bill pass. Region 1 contains two localities with potential project locations, which are 97% and 91% white and fewer than 10,000 will be impacted. Region 2 has three interested localities, and two of the three (Lynchburg and Roanoke City) would enhance racial equity outcomes as they both are roughly 65% White, 30% African American, 5% Hispanic, and 2% Asian (compared to the region as a whole, which is 82% White, 12% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 2% Asian.) This potential impact is repeated in regions 3, 4, and 5 with the placement of the potential projects in localities with lower proportions of white residents than the regional average. Regions 6, 7 and 9, which rank lowest in proportion of the population that is low access and low income, have no potential projects. The three potential project locations in Region 8 have a higher white population, though non-white populations face low-access challenges at lower rates than in the majority of the regions.

**Figure 6: Proposed sites for Fund**



In summary, the racial equity impact analysis shows the following:

- Analysis of low access data by region and race shows a mixed picture: In some regions, whites are overrepresented; in others, African Americans or Asians are overrepresented.

- Low access shows a very different picture than low access/low income. Once income is considered, heavily urban areas, such as Hampton Roads (Norfolk) and Richmond, make up a larger portion of the focus population, and these areas tend to be more diverse in general, but more heavily African American in particular.
- Researchers were unable to analyze specific racial breakdowns for the LA/LI population because this data is not available, which in-and-of itself is a systemic equity issue. Since the research revealed African Americans and Hispanics are disproportionately overrepresented among Virginians facing poverty, it is inferred that the low access findings would shift towards a heavier over-representation of those groups in the LA/LI population.
- Using LA/LI as the definition of underserved would more accurately reflect the meaning of that term and result in the inclusion of a greater portion of minority residents while not excluding Whites who also face the combined challenges of low access and low income. This would be more targeted and efficient.

## Recommendations

The proposed Fund seeks to build stronger self-sustaining and healthy communities throughout Virginia through investments in food accessibility. At the turn of the century, Pennsylvania led the way with the support of The Food Trust in establishing the first healthy food financing initiative (HFFI) in 2004 (Food Trust 2019). Recognizing the credibility of The Food Trust as a national leader in providing data and resources in promoting access to healthy, affordable food, the District of Columbia (Gandhi 2010) and Maryland (Maryland Department of Legislative Services 2014) passed legislation, respectively, directly related to food deserts several years later. Also following the example of Pennsylvania, proponents of legislation in Virginia advocated the creation of a Grocery Store Investment Program and Fund, believing that such a policy initiative would improve healthy food access in Virginia. Drawing on the findings and existing literature above, this research identifies the following recommendations to improve outcomes for this proposed Virginia investment fund to better reflect the needs of all persons fighting to acquire access to healthy foods.

First, provide a more precise definition in the legislation of “underserved communities.” This would provide more clear indicators of where true needs exist. Specifically, following Giacalone’s findings, this measurable definition should focus not only on “low-access” populations, but those with low access who are also low income. This, along with population density data, would better indicate likely areas for store placement to mitigate existing low access to healthy foods.

Second, increase access to transportation as a way of increasing access to healthy food. Noting that access means different things in rural, urban, and suburban areas, increasing the availability of context-appropriate transportation needs to be added as a valid use of Fund resources, especially for persons deemed low access/low income and SNAP eligible. From a racial equity perspective, recall that the 2018 VCU Poll found that, of those who had problems accessing healthy food, minority respondents were more likely to name transportation as the key barrier to access. Following Raja et al.’s (2007) findings, allocation of a portion of the Fund to businesses in low-income and low-access communities, potentially including Virginia-based farmers, store owners, and health-focused organizations desiring to get fresh food options to local convenience stores/markets, would also maximize racial equity



outcomes.

Third, increase both internal and external education through the Fund. In keeping with Block and Subramanian's (2015) findings that improved health outcomes need more than simple access, a portion of the fund should be used for outreach and education with a defined curriculum to benefit the surrounding low-income/low-access communities in partnership with existing efforts directed at health and wellness. Education should include interactive demonstrations and tools related to the evaluation of impact through the Fund. Finally, strategically create alliances with existing organizations doing pertinent work for quicker implementation:

- Enlist DHCD/GO Virginia to administer the grant funding process as part of existing economic revitalization/workforce development efforts and structures,
- Utilize Feed VA to continue to study, assess, monitor, and evaluate the elimination of food deserts and to be an outlet to increase public engagement around findings, and
- Enable Virginia Cooperative Extension to identify local farmers, farmers markets, and healthy food curriculum and food demonstrations.

The common thread in all of these (healthy food) initiatives is recognizing the necessity to eliminate food injustice and achieve racial equity in underserved communities that may not have the financial ability, transportation, or economic tax base to establish grocery store financing initiatives without legislation to develop funding streams for public/private partnerships.

## **Conclusion**

People of all racial/ethnic backgrounds face barriers to healthy food access in the United States, but existing research shows that low-income neighborhoods, which are disproportionately communities of color, face such barriers more frequently. Policy initiatives, like the Fund examined here, are an opportunity to build collaborations in underserved communities for a stronger local economy and to support healthier lifestyles for residents. Future passage and implementation of the Fund still holds significant potential value in communities across the Commonwealth, as the Fund would create a broader funding stream for leveraging public/private partnerships and establish a central source for technical assistance, education, and program implementation. However, the racial equity impact of such policies, in Virginia and elsewhere, will depend on a host of implementation decisions, including whether a low-income/low-access definition is used for determining eligibility, whether funds can be used to create access through transportation initiatives, and whether sufficient investment is made in associated outreach and education efforts.

## **Post-Script**

Despite the failure in 2018, similar legislation was introduced for the 2019 session, with Delegate McQuinn sponsoring legislation on the House side and Senator Stanley on the Senate side. The bills again died in the Appropriations Committee (Virginia Legislative Information Systems 2019). In the 2020 session, which took place after submission of the original manuscript and state legislative elections, Democrats now enjoyed a 53-47 House and 21-19 Senate majority. Similar bills sponsored by Delegate McQuinn and Senator McClellan, respectively, finally passed the House (approved 77-19 with one abstention) and

Senate (unanimous support) and were signed into law by the Governor in April 2020 (Virginia Legislative Information Systems 2020). However, with major revenue shortfalls emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, many new expenditures were frozen for the 2020-21 fiscal year, which started July 1, and the fate of the Fund's implementation is not clear at the time of this writing.

### **Author Biographies**

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**Taryn Anthony** holds over ten years of professional experience with community building, service minded organizations in multiple sectors. She is a member of the NAACP, Urban League, VCU Alumni Association, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated. With a strong passion for volunteerism and community engagement, Anthony envisions a world where every citizen no matter, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, income level, or criminal record has the opportunity to step into leadership as a caring neighbor equipped with a voice that renders results and tools to ensure no one is without basic human needs, such as shelter, food, clothing, and education.

**Stephen Miller-Pitts** is a military retiree originally from Newark, NJ currently residing in Virginia. He has an advanced degree from Regent University in Masters of Public Administration with a concentration in Federal Government. Miller-Pitts is currently an Acquisition Specialist with the Department of Defense. He has a passion for the political process, legislative policy, and service to underserved areas.

**Barbara Williams-Lewis** attended graduate school at Strayer University where she received her MBA in 2016. She is the owner of Virginia Int'l Business Exchange, Inc (VIBE). Williams-Lewis is active in several community associations and organizations. She resides with her husband Earl Lewis, III, the father of their four children since 1985 in Richmond, Virginia.

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