



New Jersey Economic Development Authority

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION (“RFI”)
2021-RFI-OET-COVID19-125
for
Addressing Food Insecurity in New Jersey’s Food Deserts

March 15, 2021

1. INTENT/SUMMARY OF SCOPE

The New Jersey Economic Development Authority (“NJEDA” or “Authority”), an independent Authority of the State of New Jersey, in conjunction with its state agency partners at the Department of Community Affairs, Department of Agriculture, and the Office of the Governor, is issuing this Request for Information (RFI) seeking information and ideas to:

- (1) Help inform the creation of a New Jersey-specific definition of “food deserts,” uniquely suited to the needs of the Garden State, as described in the Food Desert Relief Act (Sections 35-42 of the New Jersey Economic Recovery Act of 2020, which was signed into law by Governor Phil D. Murphy on January 7, 2021)¹;
- (2) Better understand the unique challenges faced by communities across the state regarding food security, food quality and nutritional value, including specific obstacles and disparities; and
- (3) Learn about potential solutions to increase the accessibility and affordability of healthy, nutritious food for all New Jersey residents.

NJEDA is seeking responses from qualified entities (“Respondents”) including, but not limited to: municipalities and school districts; hunger relief organizations (e.g., food banks); food retailers, producers, processors and suppliers; advocacy organizations; social services providers; supermarket and grocery store developers and operators; community stakeholders; policy and academic researchers; technical assistance providers; agricultural organizations and farm markets; developers of innovative anti-hunger and nutrition programs; and foundations and

¹ Learn more at <https://www.njeda.com/economicrecoveryact/>. The full text of the New Jersey Economic Recovery Act of 2020, including the Food Desert Relief Act (Sections 35 through 42, pages 33-43) can be downloaded as a PDF at https://1e7pr71cey5c3ol2neoaoz31-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/A4_R1-NJERA-PL-2020-c156.pdf

philanthropic initiatives that address hunger and food insecurity. We are interested in receiving responses from entities based within New Jersey as well as those located outside of the state.

The information gathered in this RFI may subsequently be used to help the Authority, its partner agencies, and other concerned entities develop strategies, programs, or other initiatives to help accomplish this goal.

THIS RFI IS NOT A REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL and may not result in a subsequent RFP or further action.

2. BACKGROUND

The New Jersey Economic Development Authority serves as the State’s principal agency for driving economic growth. The Authority is committed to making New Jersey a national model for inclusive and sustainable economic development by focusing on key strategies to build strong and dynamic communities, create good jobs for New Jersey residents, and provide pathways to a stronger and fairer economy. Through partnerships with a diverse range of stakeholders, the Authority creates and implements initiatives to enhance the economic vitality and quality of life in the State and strengthen New Jersey’s long-term economic competitiveness.

New Jersey faces a crisis of food insecurity that has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impacts on families across the state. In 2018, approximately 775,000 New Jerseyans reported difficulties putting food on their table at some point in the year. That number is now projected to grow by more than 50%, to a total of over 1.2 million New Jersey residents (13.5% of all residents), facing food insecurity. An estimated 365,000 New Jersey children – approximately one in five children – will experience food insecurity this year, an increase of 75%². Even prior to COVID-19, significant numbers of New Jersey residents had limited access to a supermarket or grocery store; according to a 2018 analysis by the Reinvestment Fund, nearly 880,000 New Jerseyans had limited supermarket access³.

The Food Desert Relief Act (“Act”), part of the [New Jersey Economic Recovery Act of 2020](#)⁴, directs NJEDA to address the food security needs of communities across New Jersey by providing up to \$40 million a year for six years in tax credits, loans, grants and/or technical assistance to increase access to nutritious foods and develop new approaches to alleviate food deserts.

² Community Food Bank of New Jersey, “COVID-19’s Impact on Food Insecurity in New Jersey,” September 2020, <https://cfbnj.org/covidimpact/>

³ Reinvestment Fund, “Assessing Place-Based Access to Healthy Food: The Limited Supermarket Access (LSA) Analysis,” July 2018, <https://www.reinvestment.com/research-publications/2018-update-analysis-of-limited-supermarket-access/>.

⁴ Learn more at <https://www.njeda.com/economicrecoveryact/>. The full text of the New Jersey Economic Recovery Act of 2020, including the Food Desert Relief Act (Sections 35 through 42, pages 33-43) can be downloaded as a PDF at https://1e7pr71cey5c3ol2neoaoz31-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/A4_R1-NJERA-PL-2020-c156.pdf

Specifically, the Act authorizes the Authority to:

- Identify up to 50 food desert communities across the state, in coordination with the Departments of Community Affairs and Agriculture. Each food desert community will consist of a distinct geographic area with a single defined border⁵.
- Award tax credits to incentivize businesses to establish and retain new supermarkets and grocery stores⁶ in food desert communities.
- Provide grants and loans for food retailers of all sizes⁷ to fund:
 - Equipment costs to store, refrigerate, transport, and/or maintain fresh food
 - Technology costs to support online ordering/e-commerce, including for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, Children (WIC)
 - Initiatives to ensure food security of residents in food desert communities
- Offer technical assistance to assist in implementation of best practices for increasing the accessibility of nutritious foods in food desert communities.

This RFI seeks information to better understand the short- and long-term food accessibility challenges faced by communities across the state; potential initiatives to increase accessibility and affordability of healthy foods; and considerations for the Authority and its partner agencies in defining the state’s food desert communities.

3. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA (if applicable)

This is not applicable to this RFI. All responses are welcomed.

4. RFI RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Please answer all questions that are relevant to you or your organization, to the best of your ability. The Authority recognizes that respondents may not be able to answer all questions. Answers to these questions are understood to be preliminary and non-binding.

Respondents are free to structure responses as necessary to increase clarity and efficiency of responses.

⁵ The Food Desert Relief Act does not define “food desert.” It directs the NJEDA, in consultation with the Departments of Agriculture and Community Affairs, to develop criteria to initially designate not more than 50 separate geographic areas as food desert communities, each consisting of a distinct geographic area with a single defined border. See question 6 of this RFI for more details.

⁶ “Supermarket or grocery store” is defined as a retail outlet with at least 16,000 square feet, of which at least 90 percent is occupied by food and related products.

⁷ In addition to supermarkets and grocery stores, this includes “Mid-sized food retailers” defined as a medium-sized retail outlet with at least 2,500 but less than 16,000 square feet, of which at least 75 percent is occupied by food and related products and “Small food retailer” defined as a small retail outlet, with less than 2,500 square feet, that sells a limited selection of foods and other products, such as a bodega, convenience store, corner store, neighborhood store, small grocery, or small-scale store.

Description of your role and qualifications:

- 1) Please provide information on your organization, group, government entity, or self including:
 - a. Your name and title
 - b. Your operating/business location(s), including municipality and county (if located in New Jersey)
 - c. Your organization type, e.g. public entity (municipality, county, school district), private business, non-profit organization, private citizen, other (please explain)
 - d. Your capacity and qualifications as they relate to food security and/or food retail

- 2) Which best describes your organization (list all that apply)?
 - a. Food retailer (e.g. operator of supermarket/grocery store, mid-sized or small food retail business)
 - b. Municipality/school district
 - c. Real estate developer
 - d. Supermarket/grocery store developer
 - e. Community-based/social services/hunger relief organization
 - f. Advocacy organization
 - g. Agricultural organization/farm market
 - h. Financing source/investor
 - i. Farmer/food processor/distributor/supplier
 - j. Technical assistance provider
 - k. Research/academic institution
 - l. Philanthropy/foundation
 - m. Other, please explain

- 3) Which key areas are you/your organization most qualified to address (list all that apply)?:
 - a. Healthy food retail
 - b. Food security and anti-hunger programs
 - c. Supermarket and grocery store development
 - d. Food retail operations
 - e. Technical assistance for food retailers
 - f. Other, please explain

Food Desert definition criteria:

- 4) What are the key criteria the Authority and its partner agencies should consider in defining food desert communities with low accessibility to healthy foods (e.g., income, distance to food retailer, health factors, public transportation)?

- 5) The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food deserts based on such factors as income, distance to supermarket, and vehicle accessibility. Are there limitations

on this definition for its application to New Jersey? What are the strengths and shortcomings of this definition the State should be aware of?

- 6) The Food Desert Relief Act states that the criteria to be designated a food desert in New Jersey should “at a minimum, incorporate analysis of municipal or census tract poverty statistics, food desert information from the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, and healthier food retail tract information from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The departments may also consider data related to municipal or census tract population size and population density in making food desert community designations.” Are there other specific data sources that should be considered when establishing this definition?
- 7) Are there models or best practices from other states or localities regarding definitions of food deserts or areas of low healthy food accessibility? How could New Jersey incorporate these approaches as it creates its own definition?

Healthy food accessibility challenges in New Jersey:

- 8) What are the biggest challenges New Jersey communities face in accessing healthy foods? Please describe challenges that existed prior to COVID-19, as well as new challenges that emerged or were exacerbated due to the pandemic.
- 9) What are the challenges faced by food retailers of all sizes in regards to:
 - a. Purchasing, storing, transporting and offering a variety of healthy, affordable foods including fruits and vegetables?
 - b. Accepting SNAP and WIC benefits?
 - c. Setting up online ordering and other e-commerce systems to facilitate food purchasing and delivery, including the transition to electronic SNAP and WIC?
- 10) Can you comment on financial, regulatory and/or land use challenges related to:
 - a. Developing and building new supermarkets/grocery stores in food desert communities, e.g. capital needs, construction costs
 - b. Operating new supermarkets/grocery stores in food desert communities, e.g. operating costs, revenue supports
- 11) Can you comment on the particular challenges facing different types of communities across the state in accessing healthy, affordable foods, as well as any targeted strategies that could help address them? These include:
 - a. Urban communities
 - b. Rural communities
 - c. Suburban communities
 - d. Communities with limited English proficiency
 - e. Communities with low levels of vehicle accessibility and/or public transit access
 - f. Communities with limited digital literacy and/or digital access

g. Other, please explain

Ideas to support healthy food accessibility:

- 12) What are specific supports that could help make developing and operating supermarkets and grocery stores in food desert communities more financially viable?
- 13) What types of financial support, training and technical assistance would be most helpful to existing food retailers to provide a greater array of healthy food options in their stores, including retailers that speak a language other than English?
- 14) What are examples of innovative strategies have been effective in increasing access to healthy, affordable foods, either in New Jersey or elsewhere? Are there models from other states or localities that New Jersey should draw from to increase access to healthy foods in food desert communities?

5. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

All questions concerning this RFI must be submitted in writing no later than 11:59 PM EST, on Monday, March 22, 2021 via e-mail to: fooddesertrfi@njeda.com.

The subject line of the e-mail should state: "QUESTIONS-2021-RFI-OET-COVID19-FoodDesert-125]".

Answers to questions submitted will be publicly posted on the Authority's website on or about Wednesday, March 31, 2021 at: <https://www.njeda.com/bidding/#OET> as Addendum.

IT IS THE RESPONDENT'S RESPONSIBILITY TO CHECK THIS URL REGULARLY FOR UPDATES.

6. RESPONSE DETAILS (Info Provided to Respondents Regarding Document Submission)

All RFI responses must be submitted in writing no later than 11:59 PM EST on Monday, April 12, 2021, via e-mail to: fooddesertrfi@njeda.com.

The subject line of the e-mail should state: "RFI Response-2021-RFI-OET-COVID19-FoodDesert-125".

7. FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS (from EDA) / ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Respondents may be asked to provide additional information to allow the Authority to better understand the responses or proposed solutions.

8. PROPRIETARY AND/OR CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

The Authority reserves the right to copy any information provided by the Respondents. The Authority reserves the right to use ideas that are provided by Respondents, applicants, stakeholders, or vendors. By submitting a Response, the submitter represents that such copying or use of information will not violate any copyrights, licenses, or other agreements with respect to information submitted or product solutions demonstrated, if applicable. Responses must clearly be marked for any information the Respondent deems Proprietary and/or Confidential.

9. DISCLAIMER/NO OBLIGATION

This RFI is not a request for qualification/proposal. It may or may not result in further action.

This RFI is issued solely as a means of gathering information and ideas regarding the Authority's desire to understand strategies to strengthen access to healthy, affordable foods in New Jersey. Interested parties responding to this RFI do so at their own expense. There will be no monetary compensation from the Authority for the time and effort spent in preparing the response to this RFI. All expenses incurred are the sole responsibility of the Respondent.

Should the Authority decide to move forward and issue an RFQ/P or announce a program/product related to this RFI, Respondents need not have submitted a response to this RFI in order to be eligible to respond to the RFP. Should an RFQ/P be issued, responding to this RFI will not affect scoring or consideration for that process.

The Authority is under no obligation to contact Respondents to this RFI.

10. NEW JERSEY OPEN PUBLIC RECORDS ACT

Respondents should be aware that responses to this RFI are subject to the "New Jersey Open Public Records Act" (N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq.), as amended and including all applicable regulations and policies and applicable case law, including the New Jersey Right-to-Know law. All information submitted in response to the RFI is considered public information, notwithstanding any disclaimers to the contrary, except as may be exempted from public disclosure by OPRA and the common law.

Any proprietary and/or confidential information submitted in response to this RFI will be redacted by the Authority. A person or entity submitting a response to this RFI may designate specific information as not subject to disclosure pursuant to the exceptions to OPRA found at N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1, when such person or entity has a good faith legal and/or factual basis for such assertion (i.e. information that may be included in another ongoing public procurement or solicitation). The Authority reserves the right to make the determination as to what is proprietary or confidential and will advise the person or entity accordingly. The Authority will not honor any attempt to designate the entirety of a submission as proprietary, confidential and/or to claim copyright protection for the entire proposal. In the event of any challenge to the Respondent's

assertion of confidentiality with which the Authority does not concur, the Respondent shall be solely responsible for defending its designation.