Poverty, limited access to healthy food, and obesity often are intertwined. For too many people in the Memphis area, the results are poor health outcomes. That’s why a coalition of local collaborators is developing a plan to increase the number of people with access to healthy food and beverages. The initiative is focused on researching and developing guides to local healthy food and farmers markets that will be available in print and electronic forms in fall 2015.

The Challenge
Memphis, Tennessee, located on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, has been a commercial and social center for western Tennessee, northern Mississippi, and eastern Arkansas. Over the last few decades, however, the city has been struggling with disinvestment, specifically with grocery stores. This has left behind areas called food deserts, which are places with few healthy, accessible food options to serve a community. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, large swaths of Memphis qualify as food deserts. At the same time, Memphis is the most obese city in the country among metro areas with more than 1 million residents, according to the Gallup Well-Being Index for 2013. When healthy, nutritious food is unaffordable, or getting to a supermarket is difficult because of distance or transportation, people may rely on convenient but unhealthy food from corner stores, gas stations, or fast food outlets.

“Our partnership promotes eating local healthy food, which has a positive impact on our community and food system.”
-Carole Colter, GrowMemphis Executive Director

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The Solution
The ANCHOR coalition reached out to key community members in government agencies, nonprofits and farmers markets to help develop a local community action plan, with the primary goal of developing and distributing a farmers market directory and a local healthy food guide. The partners are creating a local communication campaign to educate the community on the availability and affordability of local nutritious food options at farmers markets, and increase the use of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits at the markets. SNAP offers nutrition assistance to eligible, low-income individuals and families, and the use of benefits at farmers markets can help SNAP recipients purchase more healthy foods and beverages.

Sustainability Efforts
The coalition will continue to work together to develop more ideas to increase availability of healthy food and beverages in the Memphis area. The group has partnered with an AmeriCorps Vista Consultant, who is serving as the GrowMemphis Food Policy Coordinator, to draft a plan to reach the larger Memphis community and to target low-income areas with limited healthy food access. Also, approval is being sought with the Tennessee Department of Human Services Division of Family Assistance Programs to have the printed directories available at local SNAP offices.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
Currently, local farmers markets, local non-profits, and other Memphis institutions are collaborating to increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in low-income and food desert areas. For example, the Cooper Young Farmers Market and the Downtown Farmers Market participate in a program called the “Double Coupon Voucher Program” for purchases using SNAP. When a customer buys up to $10 of produce from local vendors, the matching program gives them an equal amount of extra “green tokens” that can be used to buy fresh produce. Some farmers markets also are accepting “Senior Vouchers,” which allow for low-income seniors to purchase fruits, vegetables, honey, and fresh-cut herbs. All of this encourages behavior change and awareness that can lift whole communities.

Results
The program already has encouraged community members and organizations to examine food systems within the community. The coalition shared its plans on local television, through Local Memphis Live and Good Morning Memphis. Each of these live shows reached more than 38,000 residents in Tennessee, Mississippi and Arkansas. The program is also engaging the local American Heart Association Multicultural Leadership Committee, which is focused on transforming inequalities, injustices and disparities in health and healthcare into heart disease and stroke equity for multicultural communities by implementing healthy living strategies via faith-based, housing and strategic alliances. The partnership with the Multicultural Leadership Committee has expanded ANCHOR’s reach and impact; together they are working to improve the health of all citizens in Memphis.

The ANCHOR coalition’s leadership includes the Memphis Common Table Health Alliance, the Shelby County Health Department, the Memphis and Shelby County Food Advisory Council, and GrowMemphis.

Get Involved
The ANCHOR effort in Memphis to increase healthy food access is growing and drawing in many partners. To support this effort, or to share a local success story, contact Twanda.Wadlington@heart.org. Or, simply visit one of the many farmers markets in the Memphis area.

Want to know more? Visit: www.heart.org/ANCHORMemphis.