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**New Ochs Center Study Links Food Access to Health and Economic Issues
in Low and Moderate Neighborhoods in Hamilton County**

Analysis Finds that Most Retailers in County that Accept Food Stamps and WIC are Fringe Food Outlets, Including 60 Gas Stations; Subregions with Highest Program Participation Rates Have Least Access to Supermarkets and Groceries

In the first of a series of studies by the Ochs Center for Metropolitan Studies on access to healthy food, researchers found that 70% of Hamilton County retailers that participate in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps) were fringe food retailers who generally do not sell fresh produce or unprocessed foods. Sixty gas stations are SNAP retail outlets. In five Hamilton County subregions, where approximately 45% of all SNAP and WIC participants live, nearly 90% of retailers are fringe food outlets.

“Access to quality, affordable food is an important part of any strategy to improve the health and economics of low and moderate income neighborhoods,” said David Eichenenthal, President and CEO of the Ochs Center for Metropolitan Studies. “Lack of access limits the ability of many residents to make healthy choices when it comes to the food they eat. At the same time, the absence of supermarkets leaves many low and moderate income neighborhoods without an anchor for economic development.”

Other key findings from the report include:

- In 2007, eight percent of all households nationally received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits on a monthly basis. By comparison, 11.1% of households in Hamilton County and 16.7 % of households within the City of Chattanooga received SNAP benefits. In parts of Hamilton County, SNAP participation is greater than 50% of all households.
- SNAP participants in the five subregions of Hamilton County with the highest participation rates account for approximately 45% of all participants countywide.
- In Hamilton County, 156 out of the 220 SNAP retailers (70.9%) – including 60 gas stations -- were “fringe food” retailers who generally do not provide fresh produce or unprocessed foods; nearly 22% of the SNAP retailers are supermarkets, 4% are small or medium groceries, and 2.7% are farm stands.
- In five subregions of Hamilton County with the highest rates of SNAP participation, nearly 90% of SNAP retailers are fringe food. Three of these five subregions -- Bushtown/Highland Park, Downtown and East Chattanooga -- lacked a single supermarket. Countywide, one other subregion with a high SNAP participation rate – Bakewell – also lacked a supermarket.

- By comparison, 43 of the 63 Women Infants and Children (WIC) retailers in Hamilton County are supermarkets or small/medium groceries. Of the twelve WIC retailers in the five subregion focus area, eight were fringe food retailers including seven convenience stores and one pharmacy; two were supermarkets and two are small or medium groceries.
- Of the \$3,536,082.00 in benefits redeemed countywide by SNAP participants in June, over 86% of these benefits were redeemed at supermarkets, while 6.8% and 6.3% of benefits were redeemed at small/medium grocers and fringe food outlets, respectively.
- Redemptions at retailers in the five subregion focus area represented 17% of the countywide total even though participants in those areas represented approximately 45% of the countywide total. This strongly suggests that many SNAP participants in these subregions are forced to travel outside of their neighborhoods to have greater choice. Among the retailers in the five subregion focus area, just 49% of benefits were redeemed at supermarkets, 31% at small/medium grocers and 19.4% at fringe food outlets.
- In Hamilton County, 37 retailers (17%), including 23 fringe food outlets, received 15% or more of their sales through SNAP. In the focus area, 17 retailers (35%), including 14 fringe food stores, received 15% or more of their sales through SNAP.

In 2008, the Ochs Center and the Chattanooga Hamilton County Regional Planning Agency convened the first-ever Food Desert Summit to begin to explore the issue of lack of access to quality, affordable food in parts of the region. Last November, with Crabtree Farms and funding by the Benwood Foundation, the Ochs Center conducted the first ever report on food consumption and production in the Chattanooga foodshed.

The report on **Food Stamp and WIC Use in Hamilton County** is the first of a series that will examine access, health and economic issues over the next six months. The report was authored by Lori Quillen, Policy Analyst. A copy of the full report is attached

The Ochs Center for Metropolitan Studies is a Chattanooga-based nonprofit organization that conducts independent data analysis and policy research to improve the quality of life in the Chattanooga region. For more information about the Ochs Center, visit www.ochscenter.org.

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