



Improving the Health of our Communities: Promote the Availability of Healthy Food in All Neighborhoods March 2010

Communities of color and immigrant populations experience higher rates of illness, hospitalization, and death. These health disparities result from many factors both inside and outside the health system. Efforts to address environmental factors that affect people's daily lives, such as access to healthy foods in all neighborhoods, is an important prevention strategy for healthier living.

What's the need?¹

- *Communities of color, particularly in low-income areas, have more limited access to healthy foods.* There are fewer supermarkets selling affordable and nutritious foods in communities that are predominantly black and Latino than in predominantly white neighborhoods. Residents may have to depend on local convenience stores for groceries, which often charge higher prices and sell more high-fat, high-sugar products.
- *Many in underserved communities also lack access to transportation to get to stores in other areas.* Without cars or accessible public transportation, individuals in these communities often have to arrange rides with friends or family, pay for taxis, or take multiple buses to do grocery shopping.
- *Obesity and related health issues, such as diabetes, are more prevalent in low-income communities of color.* In the United States, nearly one-fifth of all black children and a one-fourth of Mexican children are obese, compared to one in 10 white children.
- *Access to healthy foods corresponds to healthier eating habits and fewer health issues.* One multi-state study found that blacks living in areas with access to supermarkets were more likely to eat the federally recommended amount of fruits and vegetables. Another study in Indianapolis found that adding a new grocery store to a neighborhood corresponded with weight loss of three pounds on average for adults in that neighborhood.

What can be done to make healthy foods more accessible?

- Help identify barriers, including zoning and development rules, and investigate ways to remove them.
- Help identify grant or other financing opportunities for local initiatives to increase access to healthy foods, such as store conversions, new store startup, food financing projects, etc.²
- Take on a “corner store conversion” to create an environment with healthy food options from an existing neighborhood store.³
- Start and sustain local farmers markets as an alternative to retail stores. These can also benefit immigrant farming communities and create more foot traffic in neighborhood business districts.⁴

- Work with local government to establish permit-based “Green Carts” programs to make mobile food carts selling fresh produce available in underserved communities.⁵
- Champion statewide financing to increase food shops in underserved communities.
- Create a co-op of neighborhood stores to negotiate for discounted wholesale prices on fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Develop new grocery stores by identifying land or existing buildings to use and funding to help with startup costs.⁶

Keys to success

- *Ensure community involvement from the beginning.* Participation and interest from community members from the beginning builds trust and ownership in the vision and helps shape the solution so that healthy food initiatives are sustainable long past a single campaign.
- *Assess the needs, wishes, and barriers of communities to help identify the right solutions to increasing access to healthy food options.* Different strategies can work for different communities, but for any solution to be successful, it’s important to understand what’s needed and what community members want for their neighborhoods. For example, a new grocery store may seem like the right solution for a large community that has only a few bodegas or corner stores, but the residents might prefer to help the smaller stores to improve and expand the healthy foods available.
- *Partner and collaborate with others interested in the availability of healthy foods.* In addition to health organizations, store owners and local government leaders, think about ways to work with school officials, parent organizations, business owners, health centers or health departments, community development organizations, etc to make healthy foods available.
- *Identify solutions that are achievable.* It’s important to find the balance between the ideal and the reality. Create a vision for the ideal, but set goals that can be achieved and make a tangible difference in people’s lives. The more successes to celebrate, the greater the momentum will be to take on bigger challenges later.
- *Take on local initiatives in parallel with statewide policy solutions that are moving in the same direction.* Develop campaigns that integrate community ideas into statewide system change. For example, a local program to allow farmers to sell fresh fruits and vegetables to school cafeterias could build success and establish proposals to create incentives for school districts statewide to do the same.

Examples

A study by The Food Trust in Philadelphia sparked a statewide initiative to finance new supermarkets.⁷

In 2001, The Food Trust, a national nonprofit organization, studied supermarket access in Philadelphia and documented the link between lack of supermarkets and deaths from diet-related disease.

In response, the Philadelphia City Council asked The Food Trust to create the Food Marketing Task Force to address the grocery gap. The task force included community leaders, representatives from the supermarket industry, and city government officials. It identified financial obstacles as one of the key barriers and recommended a statewide initiative to fund development of retail food shops.

State Representative Dwight Evans, of Philadelphia, championed the recommendation in the Pennsylvania General Assembly, with the support of many other key lawmakers. The Assembly created the Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI), a public-private partnership to provide one-time loans and grants to fresh food retailers who locate or remain in underserved communities. The Assembly started the program with an initial investment of \$30 million over three years. The Reinvestment Fund, a community development financial institution, provided an additional \$90 million from private capital. These FFFI loans and grants are available to existing or new food retailers for expenses related to land purchase, environmental remediation, equipment, construction, and workforce recruitment and training.

Since the program began in 2004, 78 grocery stores and other healthy food retailers have been approved in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, as well as in rural areas of Derry and Williamsburg. Elected officials in New York City, New Orleans, Illinois, Louisiana, and New York State have approved policies that simulate the FFFI program.

In addition, in February 2010, the Obama Administration announced the formation of the national Healthy Food Financing Initiative with an initial investment of \$400 million. The initiative is designed to bring grocery stores and other healthy food options to underserved urban and rural communities across the country.⁸

Local advocates in Fresno, California, changed zoning laws to allow for farmers markets.

Local health advocates identified the lack of access to healthy foods as a factor in the rising rates of obesity and diabetes in their community.

Building on the fact that Fresno is home to 1.88 million acres of farmland⁹ and 6,000 farmers, community advocates decided that they should be able to access some of the fresh fruits and vegetables being grown in their own backyard. However, zoning laws in Fresno did not recognize farmers markets, making it difficult to set them up in any neighborhood of the city. The few local farmers who succeeded in starting markets endured up to a year of waiting to get an exemption from the city and often had to pay large fees.

The Fresno Metro Ministries and Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program, along with local farmers, other stakeholders and the City of Fresno, submitted changes to the zoning law to define farmers markets in all commercial districts and some conditional use residential districts. With unanimous support from the Fresno City Council, the new zoning code took effect in August 2008.

The Market on the Mall, which celebrated its grand opening in May of 2009 in Fulton Mall in Fresno, is a recent success story since the zoning change. The Market on the Mall is a partnership among the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission (EOC), the Downtown Association of Fresno, and the City of Fresno. The market offers a variety of herbs, fruits and vegetables including ethnic and specialty produce sold by minority and immigrant vendors.¹⁰

Other resources

- [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) policy brief on state farm-to-school policies and database of legislation on strategies to increase access to healthy foods.
- PolicyLink, UCLA Center for Health Policy Research and California Center for Public Health Advocacy study: [Designed for Disease: The Link Between Local Food Environments and Obesity and Diabetes](#).
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation slideshow from Commission to Build a Healthier Future and report on [Improving Access to Healthy Foods: A Guide for Policy-Makers](#).
- California Pan Ethnic Health Network Communities of Color Briefing Paper: [Addressing the Obesity Epidemic – Public Policies for Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Environments](#).
- California Center for Public Health Advocacy fact sheet: [Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: Making it Happen in California](#).
- Urban & Environmental Policy Institute policy brief on [Transportation and Food: The Importance of Access](#).

¹ Flournoy, Rebecca. 2010. “What’s the Need?” is drawn from PolicyLink Report: Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: Promising Strategies to Improve Access to Fresh, Healthy Food and Transform Communities Available at http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97c6d565-bb43-406d-a6d5-eca3bbf35af0%7D/HFHC_SHORT_FINAL.PDF

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene website: http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/cdp/cdp_pan_green_carts.shtml

⁶ Flournoy, Rebecca. 2010.

⁷ Case Study on the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative drawn from: Karpyn, Allison, Miriam Manon, Sarah Treuhaft, Tracey Giang, Caroline Harries, and Kate McCoubrey. 2010. Policy Solutions to the Grocery Gap. Health Affairs 29, NO. 3 (2010): 473–480. http://www.thefoodtrust.org/catalog/download.php?product_id=170 and PolicyLink report regarding strategies to improve access to healthy food (2010) http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97c6d565-bb43-406d-a6d5-eca3bbf35af0%7D/HFHC_SHORT_FINAL.PDF

⁸ United States Department of Health and Human Services website: <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2010pres/02/20100219a.html>

⁹ Fresno County (California) website: <http://www.co.fresno.ca.us/DivisionPage.aspx?id=26599>

¹⁰ Downtown Fresno Market on the Mall website: <http://www.marketonthemall.com/content/about-us-0>