

IN BRIEF:

Communities Promoting Healthier Living

Healthy Corner Stores in Sonoma County: *Healthy Food, Strong Partnerships, Good Policy*

In June 2012, as part of an economic development strategy, the City of Santa Rosa in Sonoma County, California, changed its General Plan and Zoning Code to create jobs and bring fresh food choices to more neighborhoods. Increasing the availability of healthy food as part of an economic development strategy did not originate in Sonoma County, but the work of the county's Healthy Food Outlet Project, its challenges, successes, partnerships and leadership, can shed light on how health departments and local governments can forge partnerships that lead to healthier and more economically viable communities.

The Corner Store Movement: Background

Poor food access is a major contributor to health disparities, high rates of disease and other health problems in low income communities. A joint study by Policy Link and UCLA found California to have more than four times as many fast food restaurants and convenience stores as supermarkets and produce vendors, and, further, that people living in neighborhoods where fast food outlets predominate have significantly higher rates of obesity and diabetes. Though efforts have been launched on several fronts to reverse these trends, including the very troubling obesity epidemic among young people, a recent study in *Pediatrics* reports that the prevalence of prediabetes/diabetes in US adolescents, 12-19, is at an all-time high, having increased from 9% to 23% from 1999 to 2008.ⁱⁱ The general population remains at risk as well. According to an article published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, by 2030, 51% of the U.S. population will be obese.ⁱⁱⁱ

The 2008 Federal Farm Bill defines "food deserts" as low income areas where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store.^{iv} One of the promising practices in eliminating food deserts over the last decade has been the corner store movement, which has seen a growing number of front-line advocates partnering with small store owners and local governments to change the accessibility landscape. While many products sold in corner stores today are unhealthy, it hasn't always been that way. Until the 1960s, many neighborhoods were home to single car families that traveled fewer miles to fulfill their basic needs, and small, conveniently located stores sold primarily healthy foods and other necessities. According to the Healthy Corner Stores Network, the shift to large supermarkets in wealthier areas and very small stores with primarily unhealthy items in low-income areas is due to various social and economic trends including middle class flight from urban areas and aggressive promotion of unhealthy items by manufacturers.^v



What do the Stores Get?

- Toolkits and technical assistance that specifically address areas needing improvement
- Marketing materials and displays
- Connections to WIC/CalFresh (formerly Food Stamps) accreditation
- Connection to infrastructure development/improvement resources
- Connection to local produce vendors
- Recognition/rewards/publicity
- Renewed sense of hope/possibilities
- Sense of fulfillment/helping



A corner market using the Harvest of the Month signage.

Today, transforming corner stores into healthy food outlets can be a viable strategy in a community's toolbox to eliminate food deserts. It can also be an important part of neighborhood revitalization efforts in coordination with local planning and economic development. For example, convenience store owners, whose regular customers purchase fast food and unhealthy snacks, can increase their profits by providing customers who already shop there with expanded choices of fresh produce and healthy snack items. Increasing the number of customers who purchase healthy food regularly can create more demand for healthy food, which in turn can result in business growth and job development.^{vi} In Sonoma County, both of these proved to be true.

Working at the Store Level

Current advocates and practitioners have identified a number of barriers to corner store transformation, many of which exist at the store level. These include infrastructure issues, such as limited shelving and refrigeration, language and cultural barriers, and the need for increased capacity not only in produce distribution, buying, handling and marketing, but also in record keeping and financing options. One of the most formidable barriers is the culture gap between the business community and the government or nonprofit agencies that employ local community workers. Bridging that gap means first respecting the bottom line. Profit margins on produce can be high with the right infrastructure, handling and marketing, so technical assistance and resources to build storeowner capacity are valuable. Just as important may be respecting storeowners' lack of time to think about, let alone implement, changes.

Working at the Local Policy Level

Across the country, communities are employing policy strategies to support a healthier food landscape. Successful strategies fall into three general categories: zoning, licensing, and tax incentives. The following are examples of how these kinds of food policy strategies can function to support the healthy food supply.^{vii}

Zoning

- Corner stores in certain areas must sell healthy produce
- Limit the sale of certain items near schools and parks
- Allow development if a certain amount of space is set aside for pedestrian or bicycle use around building

Licensing

- Store must meet certain requirements to get permit (similar to restaurants) e.g. Carry and promote sale of healthy food; welcome WIC (Women, Infant and Children's program) and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) customers¹

Tax Incentives

- Food retailers become eligible for tax credit if more than a designated percentage of receipts represent sales of fresh food (e.g., fresh fruit and vegetables, milk, eggs, meat & poultry)

Sonoma County Healthy Food Outlet Project

Sonoma County is home to close to 500,000 people. There are nine incorporated cities and seventeen unincorporated areas. Close to the San Francisco Bay Area, Sonoma County is a tourist destination, known for its wine, agriculture, and outdoor recreation. The City of Santa Rosa, with 33% of the county's population, is the most populous area. It was named one of the nation's most livable communities by Partners for Livable Communities in 2011.

The Sonoma County Healthy Food Outlet Project was created in 2007 to increase healthy food options in low income areas while spurring local business growth. The Community Activity and Nutrition Coalition (CAN-C) of Sonoma County, a group of individuals, professionals and community-based organizations concerned about the community's nutritional health, activity level and well-being, formed in 1998. Based in part on the strength of the Coalition's efforts, Sonoma County Department of Health Services (DHS) was approached by Kaiser Permanente Northern Region to apply for its HEAL (Healthy Eating, Active Living) grant in 2007. DHS would serve as the fiscal agent for funding and staffing, and the coalition would provide the critical partners for cross sector collaboration. In 2010, DHS received additional funding from a USDA Rural Business Enterprise Grant to expand the project to seven stores in more rural parts of Sonoma County. The project's success is due to successful partnerships between business, government and public health advocates.

¹ In California, the SNAP program is referred to as CalFresh.



"It's important to have an understanding of what's going on in the community beyond your specific goals. Every new project provides a chance to see what else can be accomplished and who in the community is working on what needs to be done."

**Erin Morris, Senior Planner,
Community Development Department,
City of Santa Rosa**



Food Outlet Quality Scorecard
January 2011

Categories	Actual Points	Possible Points
Products Stocked (Meets Standards ≥ 51)	29	60
Sells a variety of fresh fruit ¹	8	12
Sells good quality fresh fruit ²	6	8
Sells a variety of fresh vegetables ³	6	12
Sells good quality fresh vegetables ²	8	8
Prices for fresh fruit and vegetables are reasonable ³	0	10
Sells other healthy food items ⁴	7	10
Marketing and Promotion (Meets Standards ≥ 12)	5	20
Participates in the Network for a Healthy California Retail Program ⁵	0	3
Provides health promotion information near fresh produce ⁶	0	1
Store exterior conditions ⁷	2	4
Removes interior ads promoting high fat/sugar foods ⁸	1	2
Displays interior ads promoting healthy foods ⁹	0	2
Removes high fat/sugar foods from checkout area ¹⁰	1	2
Places healthy foods in checkout area ¹¹	0	2
Posts ads for healthy foods on store exterior ¹²	0	2
Removes exterior ads promoting high fat/sugar foods ¹³	1	2
Food Assistance: CalFresh & WIC (Meets Standards ≥ 5)	0	10
Accepts CalFresh (supplemental) ¹⁴	0	4
Accepts WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children) ¹⁵	0	4
Displays WIC and CalFresh signs ¹⁶	0	2
Safety & Walkability	4	10
Comply with Lee Law (ads on windows with street name) ¹⁷	1	1
No bars on windows ¹⁸	2	2
Safe and "walkable" within two blocks of the store ¹⁹	1	7
Total Quality Score (Meets Standards ≥ 75)	38	100

Food Quality Scorecard from an assessed corner store, identifying areas that meet Quality Score Standards and areas that need improvement

Store Selection

The project began with five stores in two south Santa Rosa communities that lie within the jurisdiction of both the city and the county. Many of the county’s poorest families, including recently immigrated Latinos, live in clusters of small, semi-rural communities in this area. Over 40% of the residents are Latino. The median household income is 20% below that of the rest of the city. Among those ages five and older, 43% primarily speak a language other than English and of this group, 37% report that they speak English “not well” or “not at all.”^{viii}

Once stores agreed to participate in the project, project staff used the *Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Prevention (CX3) Food Environment Assessment for Food Outlets* developed by the *Network for a Healthy California (Network)*. The framework provides a standard store quality threshold based on the availability and quality of fresh produce, healthy food, and advertising in stores. The assessed store receives a customized Quality Scorecard identifying areas that meet Quality Score Standards and areas that need improvement. The store then makes healthy changes needed to improve the score using the project’s toolkit and assistance from the project’s staff. After changes are made, a follow-up assessment is conducted to determine if the store meets the minimum requirements to be recognized for “Making Healthy Changes for a Healthier Community.” Stores that meet minimum Quality Score Standards receive promotional materials and publicity. Annual assessments are conducted to verify compliance with program guidelines.

The Team on the Front Lines: Working at the Store Level

Chronic Disease Prevention Program Manager Anthony Taylor directs the Healthy Food Outlet Project for DHS and the CAN-C collaborative. Laurie Hiatt, the collaborative’s Healthy Food Outlet Project Business Liaison, and Retail Program Manager, Angie Corwin, from the *Network’s* Northcoast regional office, are the project’s front line connectors to the business community. An active steering committee, including representatives from St. Joseph’s Health System and the culinary department at Bauman College, supports efforts, as do strong partnerships with County and City Community Development Departments.

Ethnic Market: Improvements Outside and In

By all accounts, relationship and trust building are the most important aspects of successful front line work, and incentives go a long way in building that trust. When the store façade of an ethnic market needed improvements and another small market needed to relocate, Laurie Hiatt worked with the owners to access resources through the Sonoma County Redevelopment Agency. The Agency created plans for façade improvements to an existing and new store front, including new paint, awning, signage and decorative window bars. Though redevelopment agencies closed statewide in 2011, Sonoma County’s Redevelopment Agency was able to secure funds before changes went into effect. Unlike typical convenience stores, this ethnic market carried a wide variety of produce, but handling and marketing techniques needed improvement, and supplies can be expensive. Retail Program Manager Angie Corwin created produce tags with a nutritional message on one side and a place to write the produce name and price on the other. Today, the market features seasonal fruit through the *Harvest of the Month* campaign with a variety of point of purchase materials provided by the project.

Liquor Store and Deli: **Increased Demand and Positive Messaging**

In spite of the many signs that advertised liquor, tobacco and sugary drinks, this store carried quite a bit of healthy food, so Laurie suggested highlighting these items so they would sell faster. She also recommended that since the store already stocked many of the required food items, becoming a Women, Infants, & Children (WIC) nutrition program vendor could increase customer demand. To help with the bottom line, the project provided the store with a list of local, affordable produce vendors developed with the assistance of the Sonoma County Food System Alliance. Once trust was established, Laurie and Angie were able to offset some of the unhealthy advertising signs by balancing them with healthy, colorful ones.

The Rural Roadside Convenience Store: Building on Strengths

Like many stores in rural settings, this small convenience store serves as a kind of community hub, and its owner demonstrates concern and care for her customers. Building on that strength, Laurie recommended getting accreditation to accept CalFresh (formerly food stamps). The owner, excited by new possibilities, began the process of getting the store's records organized to complete the application process. With the books up to date, the owner is ready to apply for accreditation, which



Liquor store and deli with balance of signage; Smart Snack Zone with produce display case.

will help more local residents to shop for the produce and the other healthy snacks the store is now carrying. The project provides healthy checkout (Smart Snack Zone) materials, including point of purchase media and a list of healthier snacks that meet nutritional criteria developed using 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. The store's new produce display case was made by a local artisan.

Sustaining and Expanding Efforts: Economic Development and Public Health Share Mutual Goals

Having invested in increasing the supply of healthy food and building the capacity of local outlets to provide it, the Healthy Food Outlet Project is partnering with local government entities to sustain and expand its efforts. On June 19, 2012, Santa Rosa's City Council voted to change the City's General Plan and Zoning Code to create more jobs and increase access to healthy food. These changes include allowing small grocery stores throughout the City's commercial districts and ensuring consistency between the General Plan and Zoning Code terminology to make it easier for small and large grocery stores to identify potential sites. One remaining part of the project will bring a grocery store to a designated food desert with city limits.^{ix} Erin Morris, Senior



"The Department is happy to provide technical assistance and resources to municipalities. I tried to introduce ideas and practices a little at a time so we could see every step of the way how the information served the projects we were both working on. This was one of the ways we built trust."

Anthony Taylor, Chronic Disease Prevention Program Manager, Department of Health Services, County of Sonoma

Planner in the City of Santa Rosa's Community Development Department, said the changes are part of an economic development strategy to fill vacant buildings with new stores and create jobs. "We did not set out to increase the healthy food supply," Morris said. "We were focused on economic development." But Morris knew about the successful and well-publicized work the of the Healthy Food Outlet project so picked up the phone to call Anthony Taylor at DHS.

Morris thought there was potential to work together, but their collaboration went beyond her expectations. Taylor provided connections to resources, technical assistance and essential research on how local governments across the country were finding ways to improve neighborhoods and increase healthy eating through zoning changes and ordinances. "As a planner it's important to know about all the issues a community faces, even if you'll never be able to specifically impact them," Morris said. "But a new project provides a chance to see what else can be accomplished, and who's working on what still needs to be done." Morris added that though this work is first and foremost an economic development strategy, increasing access to fresh food has now become one of the project's stated goals. Taylor believes that working with local municipalities is an important aspect of sustainability. "The Department is happy to provide technical assistance and resources to municipalities," he said. "Working with Erin, I tried to introduce ideas and practices a little at a time so we could see every step of the way how the information served the projects we were both working on. This was one of the ways we built trust."

Lessons Learned on the Front Line

- Take time to build relationships and gain trust
- Respect the store's bottom line, confidentiality and time constraints
- Find champions in the store, who can help the owner or manager make changes
- Recognize cultural differences
- Really listen and build on strengths
- Make everything as easy to implement as possible
- Be willing to retool as you go; if it doesn't work, throw it out or readjust
- Connect storeowners to quality free and low-cost materials and resources including ways to increase demand

- i. Center for Public Health Advocacy, PolicyLink, and the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. *Designed for Disease: The Link between Local Food Environments and Diabetes and Obesity*, California, April 2008.
- ii. Prevalence of Cardiovascular Disease Risk Factors Among US Adolescents, 1999–2008 Ashleigh L. May, Elena V. Kuklina, and Paula W. Yoon. *Pediatrics* peds.2011-1082; published ahead of print May 21, 2012, doi:10.1542/peds.2011-1082 . Web access: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2012/05/15/peds.2011-1082.full.pdf+html>
- iii. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Volume 42, Issue 6 , Pages 563-570, June 2012
- iv. 2008 Federal Farm Bill, Title VI, Sec. 7527: USDA publication web access: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/AP/AP036/AP036a.pdf>
- v. Healthy Corner Stores Network: <http://www.healthycornerstores.org/healthy-corner-stores-q-a>
- vi. Ibid.
- vii. Policy Approaches to Local Corner stores (Webinar): <http://www.healthycornerstores.org/policy-approaches-to-corner-stores>
- viii. South Santa Rosa HEAL-CHI Collaborative Summary Report: Progress and Accomplishments 2006-2011
- ix. City of Santa Rosa Community Development Department http://ci.santa-rosa.ca.us/departments/communitydev/Pages/GroceryStore_GPA.aspx

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Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention, IOM Report <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2012/Accelerating-Progress-in-Obesity-Prevention.aspx>

Healthy Corner Stores, the State of the Movement, 2009, Public Health Law & Policy, Healthy Places, <http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/healthy-corner-stores>

Center for Disease Control website on obesity: <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html>

Center for Disease Control website on childhood obesity <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/obesity/facts.htm>

Models and Tools

The Food Trust, Philadelphia, PA <http://www.thefoodtrust.org/>

Minnesota Staple Food ordinance

http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@regservices/documents/webcontent/convert_272863.pdf

Network for a Healthy California, California Department of Public Health <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/CPNS/Pages/default.aspx>

Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention (CX3 assessment)

<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/cpns/Documents/Network-Appendix13CX3Background.pdf>

Policy Link Health Equity and Place Toolkit

http://www.policylink.org/site/c.lkIXLbMNjRE/b.5136713/k.3948/Health_Equity_and_Place_Tool_Group.htm?msource=granholm

Healthy Corner Stores Toolkit: http://healthycornerstores.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/Delridge_HCS_Toolkit.pdf

Funding Sources

SNAP-Ed (USDA Supplemental Assistance Program – Education) <http://www.nifa.usda.gov/nea/food/fsne/fsne.html>

California Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) http://www.policylink.org/site/c.lkIXLbMNjRE/b.6197027/k.FD3D/California_Healthy_Food_Financing_Initiative.htm

California Freshworks Fund: public private partnership loan fund for healthy food access: <http://www.cafreshworks.com/>

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<http://www.sonoma-county.org/health/meetings/canc.asp>

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