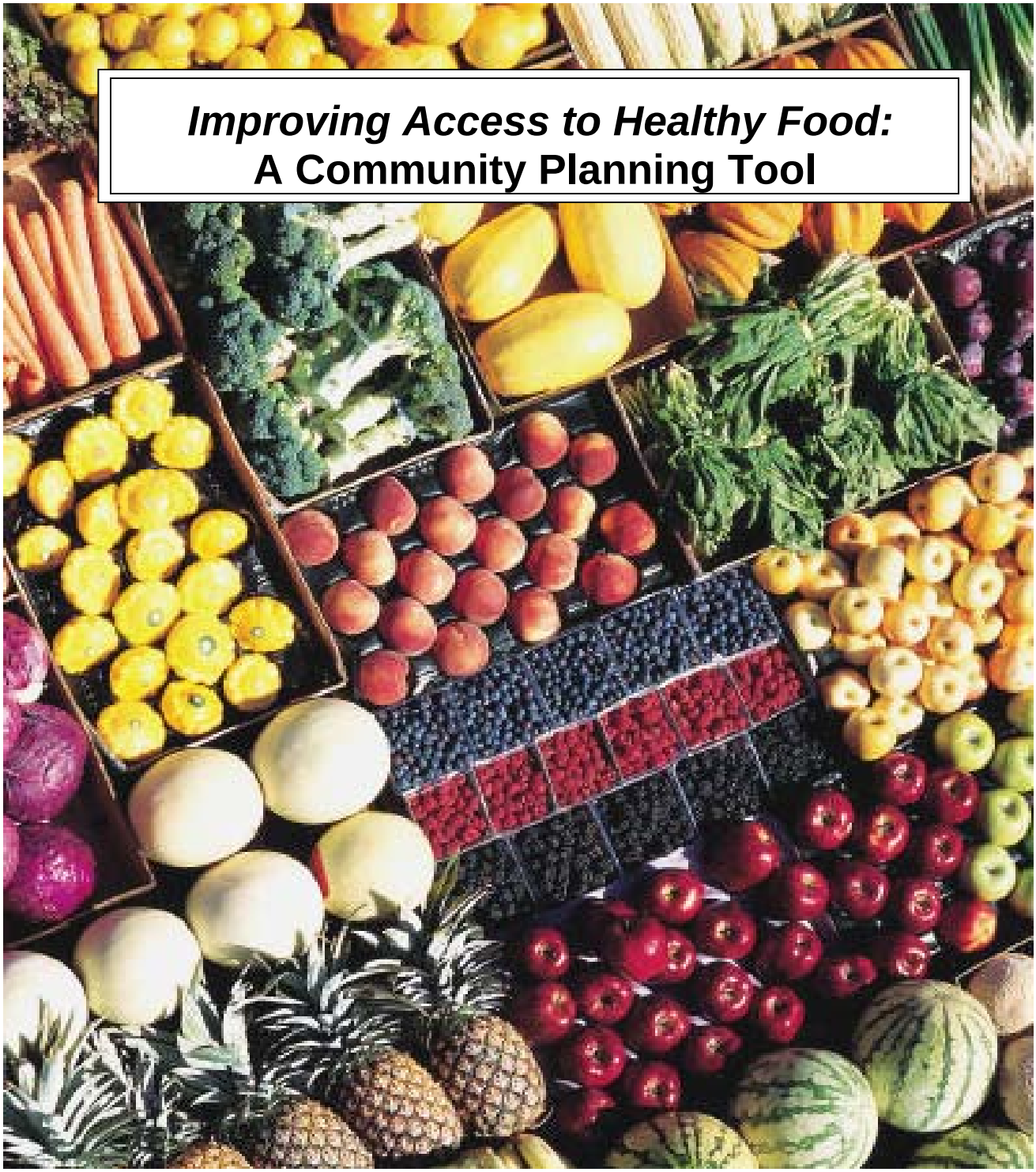
Improving Access to Healthy Food:
A Community Planning Tool



November 2005

COLUMBUS HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Good nutrition is a critical part of an individual's health, well-being and quality of life. Many major causes of disease and death in the United States are related to poor nutrition and a lack of physical activity, including heart disease, diabetes, overweight and obesity, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and certain cancers.

Poor nutrition can also impact day-to-day life by affecting concentration, work or school performance. For children, a poor diet can have a significant effect on proper growth and development. Low-income populations often experience a greater burden from chronic diseases caused by poor nutrition; however, these problems affect entire communities, cities and states – which is evident in rising health care costs and insurance costs.

■ What does it mean to "Eat Healthy"?

People who want to follow a healthier eating plan should try to:

- Increase the amount of fruits and vegetables eaten as part of an everyday diet.
  - ► Buy fresh produce in season for the best prices;
  - ► Select canned fruits and vegetables as a convenient way to include more produce in the diet. Look for fruits canned in light syrup or natural juices;
  - ► For vegetables, choose *"No Salt Added"* versions if sodium intake is a concern;
  - ► Choose frozen fruits and vegetables, which are available year round and are rich in important nutrients.
- Choose whole grain products when possible. Look for *"Whole Wheat Flour"* or *"Whole Wheat"* as the first ingredient on the nutrition facts label.
- Include up to three servings of fat-free (skim) or low-fat (1-2%) milk and milk products each day.
- Select lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts as quality protein sources.
- Focus on choosing food items low in saturated fats, trans-fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.
- Use proper serving sizes for all foods to prevent excess calorie consumption. Information on the correct serving sizes for each food group is available at www.Mypyramid.gov.

Many factors can affect the nutritional health of both individuals and communities, including an individual's knowledge about healthy nutrition, cultural practices related to food choices, and ***having access to information about an adequate and healthy diet.***

■ Barriers to healthy eating

Although healthy eating is important to good health, there are often barriers that make it difficult. Examples of these barriers include:

- Dependence on small "corner groceries" that generally have limited food choices and higher prices than supermarkets.
- Lack of accessible transportation to food resources.
- Stores that have inconvenient hours of operation.
- Easy access to fast food restaurants that typically serve high-fat and high-sodium (salty) foods and offer big portion sizes at low prices.
- Schools providing easy access to sodas and other non-nutritious foods containing empty calories and excess sugar.

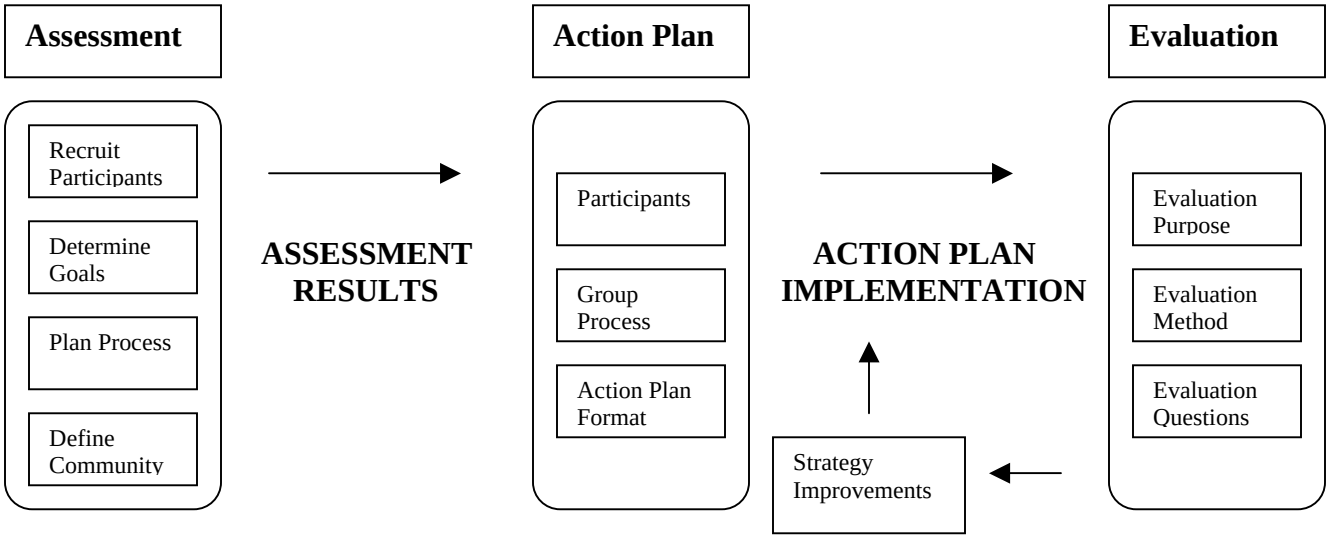
■ What communities can do

Despite these barriers to healthy eating, communities are finding creative ways to make nutritious food more accessible to their residents. *"Improving Access to Healthy Food: A Community Planning Tool,"* has been developed as a self-help resource for anyone wanting to work with others to find ways to bring healthier foods into their neighborhood.

This document outlines a process that communities can follow to:

1. Determine whether healthy foods can be found in a specific community;
2. Develop specific strategies to bring more healthy foods into that community; and
3. Determine whether these strategies are effective.

The three-part process of **Assessment**, **Action Planning**, and **Evaluation** is a proven method that can be used to increase the availability of healthy foods in your area and improve the health of those in the community.



Part 1. Conducting a Community Food Assessment

■ What is a Community Food Assessment?

A community food assessment is a process of gathering information that answers some questions about the food available in your area -- questions such as: what food is available, where it can be found, and what foods may be lacking? The assessment gathers a variety of facts, examples, and perspectives to tell the story of what is happening with the community's food system. Community food assessments can be powerful tools for raising awareness of food system issues and for creating lasting, positive change in a community.

While the assessment requires a lot of work, it is a critical step in working to increase access to healthy foods. The assessment informs residents about problems with their local food system. It provides the necessary groundwork for suggesting strategies that will bring healthier foods into the community and it helps the community prioritize its efforts.

Each community food assessment is unique based on a variety of factors, including the assessment's goals and method, the participants, and the resources available to conduct the assessment. However, all food assessments have some characteristics in common. They identify and build on existing community resources, and they often use community members to develop them.

The process of developing your assessment can be broken down into six basic steps:

Step 1 **- Recruit participants / Organize your assessment team.** A community food assessment requires significant time and resources to plan and carry out. Ideally, the food assessment is planned, conducted and used by people living and working in the community. Community members can play important roles, not only in planning, but also in recruiting other participants and in gathering assessment information. Perhaps more importantly, working with community members can help ensure that the assessment process is accepted by the community and is accountable to its concerns.

Step 2 **- Determine the purposes and goals of the assessment.** Two major questions that need to be answered are:

- What does your group want to know, and
- Why?

In order to get these answers, each member of the assessment team should first identify his or her own goals and interests related to the community's food system.

Then, the group should develop a process to prioritize these stated goals and agree to address a select number.

Step 3 **- Develop a planning and decision-making process.** Conducting a community food assessment should be a collaborative process involving a great deal of group planning and decision-making. Before getting started, it is important to develop an organizational structure and a decision-making process that the group understands and supports.

How group members are organized and participate in the assessment should depend on their interests, abilities and the time they have to devote to the process. Some participants may best be suited for a broader planning or "steering" capacity --- establishing the overall direction for the assessment, developing project policies or goals, and identifying needed or potential project resources. Other participants may help best as committee or task force members who can coordinate and manage day-to-day project activities, conduct project research or bring specific questions back to the steering committee for consideration.

Step 4 **- Define the community and identify required resources.** Identify geographic (physical) boundaries for the assessment. This can be a neighborhood or a larger area. The team should also develop a budget for the assessment process and work to secure the necessary funding.

Step 5 **– Develop the assessment and collect the information.** The assessment should identify the location and quality of the community's existing food resources. Determine what you want to know about the area's food system and develop specific questions designed to get this information. Be sure and consider all of the available sources for finding the information (local residents, local businesses, government or non-profit organizations, etc.). Examine the information once it is collected to see if anything important is missing or if gaps remain. If so, you may need to develop additional questions.

Possible Assessment Questions

- Where do residents of my neighborhood get their food? (large groceries, corner grocery stores, schools, WIC programs, food pantries, clinics, etc.?)
- What is the quality of food available to residents?
- How does my neighborhood compare with other areas in regard to access to nutritious food?
- What are residents' eating habits, food purchasing habits and interest in fruits and vegetables?
- What are the barriers to finding (or providing) healthy food choices in my neighborhood?

- What do residents know about preparing food in a nutritious manner?
- How much can residents learn about preparing food in a nutritious manner?
- What are the best ways to teach residents about preparing nutritious food?
- If healthy food is available in my neighborhood, why aren't people buying it? If healthy food is not available, why not?
- What opportunities for improvement do people see for accessing nutritious food?

Additional Information That Might Be Useful

- Community and household demographics
- Community food assets or resources (grocery stores, food processing facilities, community gardens, etc.)
- Community-based organizations involved in food issues
- Food and nutrition resources and services
- Information on the frequency and impact of diet-related illnesses
- Information on local policies and practices related to food issues, such as preserving agricultural land, promoting small businesses, attracting supermarkets, etc.

Step 6 **- Present and disseminate assessment findings.** Once the assessment is complete, it is important to share the findings with the broader community. The assessment team should identify several ways to distribute the information as thoroughly as possible. Whether this is through community meetings, formal presentations, leaflet drops or other methods, the goal is to inform as many residents as possible.

The assessment results should provide valuable information about the community's food system and the availability of healthy food –- how much there is, what kind of food is available, where it is located, how much it costs, if cost changes by location, and other important information. At the same time, the assessment should also include key information about the people who make up the community.

The results should help identify both strengths and problem areas about the availability of nutritious food in the community. This information is important because it provides the groundwork for the next step in the process --- selecting the best strategies for "fixing" the problems. This next step is the development of an Action Plan.

Part 2. Developing an Action Plan

An Action Plan contains the **specific strategies** that will be used to increase access to healthy foods, and the specific ways in which those strategies **will be put together.** Specifically, the plan should include information on the following for each strategy that is included:

- What action or change will occur?
- Who will carry out the action or change?
- When will the action or change take place?
- What resources (money, staff, etc.) are needed to carry out the action or change?

Many promising community initiatives fail because of shortcomings in action planning. Identifying "problems" through a community assessment is an important step, but all of the valuable information that the assessment provides is wasted unless a plan is developed and carried out to address the identified problems.

Work on creating an action plan should begin as the assessment process is nearing completion. This will help ensure that none of the project's momentum is lost as the emphasis shifts from the assessment phase to the action phase. Once the assessment is complete, project members then can quickly and seamlessly move into action plan development.

■ How to write an Action Plan

Step 1. Determine who should be involved. As with the assessment process, it is also important to involve the community in developing solutions. Consider representatives from the business community, schools, youth organizations, parent groups, media, religious organizations, social service organizations and health organizations. Some specific community members might include:

- Influential officials affected by your initiative (e.g., city officials responsible for enforcing regulations, approving permits, etc.);
- People who are directly involved in the problem (e.g., local high school students and their parents who can speak personally about issues related to food access and consumption); and
- Members of the community's ethnic and cultural groups.

Some of the same people involved in the assessment phase will undoubtedly continue their involvement by helping to develop the action plan. This can be extremely helpful because their participation ensures that project knowledge, experience and expertise are retained as the project continues.

However, it is important to note that there can (and should) be some change in the make-up of project participants once action planning begins. New participants help to bring new life to a project. In addition, the skills and abilities needed to develop action plan strategies are often different from those needed in an assessment process. Project organizers should recognize this and recruit participants that are interested in and best suited to developing an action plan.

Step 2. Begin organizing the action plan process. This may be done by the same people who will actually develop the action plan strategies, or it could be done by a smaller group of project decision-makers. As the action plan process begins, however, there should be general agreement and understanding among all involved regarding key components:

- The Group's Purpose. What is the group's purpose? What will it attempt to do? What does the group hope that the community will look like after completion of its work? There are numerous ways to think about increasing neighborhood access to healthy foods. These could include developing and promoting local policies, developing nutrition programs, establishing new locations for offering healthy foods, etc. General agreement about why the group has formed and what it will work toward is important.

- The Action Plan Form / Format. Deciding up-front on the form and format of the anticipated action plan can save time later. Will it be a detailed report? Will it be an abbreviated summary of recommendations? How will it be organized? Who is your audience? Who should receive the action plan and how will it be used?

Step 3. Develop action plan strategies to address desired changes. Work should now turn to developing specific strategies to address the problems you have found in your assessment. In doing so, participants need to differentiate between an idea and a strategy. There may be many ideas suggested for action plan strategies. But not every idea proves to be workable. Some ideas may seem promising, but aren't feasible after further consideration. Criteria should be established to determine which ideas should be further developed into actual strategies, which strategies offer the best chance of success and which should be included in the final completed action plan.

Potential Criteria to Help Determine Which Ideas Can be Developed Into Action Plan Strategies

- Number of people who will benefit
- Ease / difficulty of implementing
- How much will it cost?
- How much time will be required?
- How certain are the results?
- Is it legal?

Figure 1 contains a worksheet that can help in considering and developing action plan strategies.

Figure 1:

Suggested Action Plan Worksheet
For Strategy Development

Action Plan Strategy _____ Number _____ of _____

Action Steps: What needs to be done?	**By Whom?** Who will take the action?	**By When?** By what date will the action step be done?	**Resources and Support**		**Potential Barrier or Resistance**
			Resources Available	Resources Needed	What individuals or groups might resist? How?
Step 1:					
Step 2:					
Step 3:					
Step 4:					
Step 5:					
Step 6:					

(Adapted from The Community Toolbox: Action Planning Form, http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/developstrategicplan/actionplanningform.jsp)

Part 3. Evaluation

Congratulations. At this point you have:
1. Identified the availability of healthy foods as a possible community concern.
2. Completed a community assessment to determine the extent of the problem.
3. Developed an action plan to address it.
4. Put strategies in place to increase amount and type of healthy foods in your community.

It seems like your work is complete. However, a very important piece still remains – evaluating the performance and outcomes of the food access strategies you have put in place.

■ What is an evaluation?

An evaluation is simply a process to determine whether your food access strategy is doing what you expect it to do. It is the collection of information that helps answer questions on how well your strategy is working.

People often think that an evaluation is a complex process –- that it has to be done by experts in a certain way and at a certain time. However, this is not the case. An evaluation can be done in many ways, providing that a sufficient amount of information can be gathered to answer your questions. An evaluation can be relatively simple and straightforward, and can be conducted by those with no special training or experience. Most importantly, it provides the ability to get feedback on a strategy and make the necessary adjustments.

■ Evaluation methods

There are many possible ways to conduct an evaluation. Some methods may be more useful than others. For example, some methods may produce very detailed information, but they may be costly and take time to complete. The most appropriate evaluation method will depend on the evaluation's purpose and a variety of other factors affecting an individual project. ***Figure 2*** summarizes a number of methods that could be used to evaluate food access strategies.

■ What information should be collected?

The specific evaluation questions depend on the individual strategy being evaluated and the information needed to make decisions about its performance. Are you interested in examining your strategy's day-to-day operations? Do you want to specifically address customer complaints? Do you want to know if the strategy is meeting established goals? Do you want to know the impact that your strategy is having on those using it? You may want to know information about a number of these questions.

Figure 2:

Possible Evaluation Methods

Method	Overall Purpose	Advantages	Challenges
Questionnaires, Surveys, Checklists	To quickly and/or easily get lots of information from people in a non-threatening way	• Can be completed anonymously • Inexpensive to administer • Can be administered to many people • Can get lots of data • Many sample questionnaires already exist	• Might not get meaningful feedback • Wording can bias responses • Are impersonal • Sampling expertise may be needed • May not get the full story
Interviews	To fully understand one's impressions or experiences, or learn more about answers to questionnaires	• Gets full range and depth of information • Can be flexible	• Can take time • Can be hard to analyze and compare • Can be costly • Interviewer can bias responses
Documentation Review	To get impression of how program operates without interrupting the program; from application review, finances, memos, documentation, etc.	• Gets comprehensive and historical information • Doesn't interrupt program routine • Information already exists • Few biases about information	• Takes time • Documents or data used may be incomplete • Need to be clear about information needed • Data restricted to what already exists
Observation	To gather accurate information about how a program actually operates, particularly about processes	• View program activities as they are actually occurring • Can adapt to events as they occur	• Can be difficult to interpret observed behaviors • Can be difficult to categorize observations • Can influence behaviors • Can be expensive
Focus Groups	To explore a topic in depth through group discussion, e.g., about reactions to an experience or suggestion, understanding common complaints, etc.	• Quickly and reliably gets common impressions • Can be an efficient way to get range and depth of information in a short time • Can convey key program information	• Can be hard to analyze responses • Need a good facilitator for safety and closure • Difficult to schedule 6-8 people together

(Adapted from Basic Guide to *Program Evaluation, Overview of Methods to Collect Information*. Carter McNamara, MBA, Ph.D., http://www.managementhelp.org/eval.org/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm#anchor1585345)

Questions to Consider in Determining Evaluation Information Needed

- Why is the evaluation being done? What are the specific issues the strategy trying to address?
- What are the stated goals of the strategy being evaluated? What specific changes are expected as the result of your strategy?
- What kind of information do you need to make decision(s)?
- How accurate will the information be for the selected evaluation method? How accurate does it need to be for you to make necessary decisions?
- From whom should you collect information?
- Will the method selected get you all of the information you need? Do you need to use more than one method?
- When do you need the information? Are there time constraints?
- What resources are needed to collect the information?
- Who will be reviewing the information? Who is the audience?

Figure 3 provides an example of a worksheet showing how some of this type of information can be organized to help in evaluation efforts.

The Importance of Engaging the Community

Throughout this document, we have discussed the importance of involving the community in the process –- using neighborhood residents to help develop both the Community Food Assessment, and resulting Action Plan. Community assistance can also be helpful in obtaining the information necessary to evaluate the success of Action Plan strategies.

This community engagement helps people become involved in decisions that affect their lives. Those people most affected need to be an integral part of the decision-making process. This is particularly important in efforts to improve access to healthy food at the neighborhood level.

Encouraging the community to examine the area food system will help to identify and mobilize the kind of local human and material resources that are needed to bring about sustainable community change. These efforts should result in programs that are small enough to manage, yet large and durable enough to produce a significant impact on the neighborhood food system.

Figure 3:

Suggested Evaluation Worksheet

1. Strategy What is being evaluated? Which specific food access strategy?	**Introduction of Healthier Food Items at Corner Grocery Store**					
2. Questions What do we want to know?	**3. Evidence** How will we know it?	**4. Time Frame** When must data be collected?	**5. Data Collection**			
			Sources: Who will have the information?	**Methods:** How will the info be gathered?	**Results**: Who will get results?	**Results:** How and when?
1. Is the grocery offering healthier items?	1a. Number and type of items displayed b. Product inventory		1a. Grocery manager b. Grocery manager	Observation, interview or checklist Checklist		
2. How much is available?	2a. Product inventory b. Delivery schedules		2a. Grocery manager b. Food distributor	Documentation review Documentation review		
3. Are people buying these items?	3a. Sales receipts b. Customer information		2a. Grocery manager b. Grocery customers	Documentation review Survey or interview		
4. How often?	4a. Delivery schedules b. Restocking frequency c. Customer information		4a. Food distributor b. Grocery manager c. Grocery customers	Documentation review Interview Survey or interview		
5. Are items affordable compared to other locations?	5. Price comparisons with other groceries		5. Area groceries & managers; grocery associations	Survey		

(Adapted from University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension, Program Development and Evaluation. http://www.uwex.edu/ces/planning/pdf/EvaluationPlanWorksheet.doc)

■ Who should be involved?

Communities are made up of people with a broad range of abilities from different backgrounds and cultures. Using a variety of people to carry out the process helps ensure that a wide range of expertise, opinions and ideas are brought to the table. Consider the value of inviting the following:

- **Community residents** are the foundational core of community action planning. They know their neighborhood and can identify their community's assets, deficiencies, and needs. They provide an authentic knowledge base of community consumption patterns and represent the community's interests. Residents should be involved in each step of the process to bring more healthy foods into their neighborhood.

- **Including ethnic interests** will encourage a broader scope in both the assessment and design of any resulting strategies. These interests can provide useful information regarding cultural influences on food consumption patterns. For example, foods that are consumed or sold in African American communities may not be the same as foods that are popular in Hispanic neighborhoods.

- **The local health department** has access to important health information and government funding, and has experience in community-based initiatives. It can be a resource for the community by providing nutrition information, disease statistics, and information on various government grants. It can advise project organizers on initiative planning, and act as a liaison between the community and other government agencies.

- **The local clergy** are often well-established and well-respected community leaders. Their perspective on the community's assets and needs can be helpful in designing the assessment. Because they are already in positions of leadership, they can be helpful in leading community meetings, motivating the community to get involved and promoting possible food access strategies.

- **Civic organizations and neighborhood commissions** like the YMCA, local neighborhood associations or councils, American Red Cross, etc., may have staff, leadership experience and funding for planning and developing an assessment or action strategy. Since these organizations already have an established community base, they may be able to provide the project with volunteer assistance.

- **Schools/colleges** are key educators. They may provide materials, programs or classes about healthy foods, which can help create an awareness and market for such foods. They are familiar with food consumption patterns and needs of the community and can help promote new gardens, markets, etc.

- **Grocery store owner(s)** can provide background information about retail prices, food availability, shelf life of food, food distribution issues, present food consumption patterns, etc.

- **Community gardeners** have a strong interest in healthy food and have experience in working with community members.

■ Getting People to the Table

Network. Talk with people who are known to be interested in the issue of improving access to healthy food. Find other organizations, groups and individuals that share some of the same concerns and get in touch with them. Form partnerships with other groups if necessary. Go to the meetings of other groups and to places and events where people gather. This is particularly important if involving different cultural and ethnic groups, youth, seniors and others who may not come to you. Remember to ask -- most community volunteers become involved because they were asked to participate by a friend, a family member, or a neighbor.

Develop a newsletter and leaflets. Newsletters keep group members in touch and inform the rest of the neighborhood about the project. Delivering leaflets to a wide range of people in a neighborhood will help attract new members. Create one leaflet that includes talking points about the issue. It can be a helpful recruitment tool.

Go door to door with information. Going door-to-door and talking with neighbors may be a great place to begin community awareness. You can also recruit interested neighbors to your project team.

Plan an event. Events (block parties, healthy foods festival, etc.) are planned get-togethers that help to create relationships between community members, local and state agencies, and private and non-profit organizations. An event focused on access to healthy foods should include community residents, local grocers, and interested neighborhood and community organizations and agencies.

Community residents working together provide a unique opportunity to identify and develop new or additional neighborhood sources of healthy foods. In going through the process, residents can develop leadership and public speaking skills, learn more about their community, help improve the local economy, and make the community a better place to live. Those involved in these efforts provide a role model for others in showing how community involvement can be a positive force for change in helping residents to live healthier and more fulfilling lives.

EXAMPLE FOOD ACCESS STRATEGIES

Neighborhoods around the country have been involved with increasing community access to healthy foods. Many different strategies to address the issue have been developed. This section contains a general overview of strategies that have been used by some communities.

In reviewing this information, remember that it is important to thoroughly analyze the completed assessment before considering a specific action plan strategy. The assessment results will help determine whether a strategy from this section may be useful.

For example, if an assessment shows there are no gardens in the area, but a number of people who enjoy gardening, you may want to consider creating a community garden. If people love their corner grocery but want healthy food added to the inventory, then working with the corner grocery is one strategy that should be considered.

Based on its assessment, a community may have to develop and implement more than one action strategy. If so, prioritize and begin with the strategy that's the best choice for your community.

Increasing neighborhood access to healthier food may be hard work, but it can be very satisfying. It can bring the neighborhood together in a way that will make the necessary work worthwhile.

Strategy 1:

Working With Corner Grocery Stores

Being able to find healthy food in smaller neighborhood stores is often a problem. Small corner grocery stores often do not have a wide selection of food choices and their prices are sometimes higher than those in a supermarket. However, a supermarket may be located many miles away, and available transportation to the supermarket may be expensive or non-existent.

Existing groceries are an obvious starting point improving availability of healthy foods. Money is not needed to start a new grocery -- rent, insurance, utilities, etc. are already covered. What is needed are ways to help existing grocery owners; they need to know that customers want healthier food choices and that offering them can be profitable.

This strategy of working with corner groceries may work best when:

- You have corner stores whose owner/operator you know and can talk with about the issue of wanting to see healthy food added to their inventory.
- You have an experienced store owner/operator, with thorough business knowledge and a commitment to the neighborhood.
- You can give information to the owner/operator that shows the neighborhood supports this idea and wants to help.
- You can offer expertise of someone in the industry who can provide technical assistance and training for the storeowner, operator or employees regarding what they will need to change to add healthy food to their inventory.
- You can help the storeowner find space for the additions you want to add to the market.
- You can help the store owner/operator familiarize existing customers with the new additions to the inventory. For example, this can be done by providing food samples or cooking demonstrations.
-
- You can help the store owner/operator find financial assistance for any changes the grocery needs to make.

Strategy 2:

Working with Existing Supermarkets

Establishing a relationship with existing supermarkets to increase access to healthy foods can be easier than bringing in new supermarkets. Nationwide, supermarkets have added new offerings, often as the result of consumers voicing their desire to purchase these products.

If an assessment shows there are existing area supermarkets, but that they are not offering affordable healthy food, working with them is a good option. Access to transportation also should be considered. If transportation to existing supermarkets is available or can be arranged, then working with these facilities may be a viable strategy.

These efforts can begin with a meeting between local residents and supermarket officials to discuss the community's needs and what the supermarket can offer in response to these needs. For example, in some communities the supermarket may be carrying healthy foods, but the community lacks accessible transportation. In other communities, the supermarket may not be carrying locally grown produce and market officials need to be made aware of a demand for such a product.

This strategy of working with existing supermarkets may work best when:

- You have an existing supermarket that is easily accessible to a large segment of the community via a variety of transportation methods.
- You have a strong, experienced store owner/operator, with a thorough knowledge of the business and a commitment to the neighborhood.
- You can give information to the owner/operator that shows the neighborhood supports this idea and would purchase foods from his or her facility.

Strategy 3:

Bringing New Supermarkets to a Neighborhood

Establishing a new supermarket may not be the answer for every community. However, if a community decides the best option is to establish a new supermarket, a task force should be created. The task force should examine all aspects of establishing a potential facility, including determining a possible location, and managing the community interests involved with research, funding, site selection, market development, etc. Consequently, the task force should be comprised of experts from the public, private and civic sectors, as well as community residents.

This strategy of establishing a new neighborhood supermarket may work best when:

- You can bring together a task force of interested community residents to explore establishing a supermarket in their neighborhood.
- You can collect or produce data to educate business, governmental, civic and private agencies about the assets and needs of the community, including health-related concerns, cultural demographics and economic indicators.
- You can identify areas for supermarket development and promote them to real estate developers and the supermarket industry.
- You can identify public/private partnerships to explore sharing of investment, risk, responsibility and reward related to establishing a new supermarket.
- You can identify community development funding grants or donations available from federal, state, city, private or non-profit organizations.

Strategy 4:

Starting a Food Cooperative

A food cooperative may be an ideal resource for a neighborhood working to increase access to healthy foods. A "Co-op" encourages employee and community member participation in most of the important decision-making processes. A food cooperative can engage the community on many levels — from facility ownership, to management decisions, to simply creating job opportunities — and it keeps resources in the community. The co-op's emphasis on community control and accountability creates a win-win situation for both community residents and outside interests.

Cooperatives are generally organized in four ways:

1) Worker-owned: Businesses owned and operated by employees
2) Producer-owned: Organized by small businesses, producers and farmers to provide goods and / or services
3) Consumer-owned: Owned by the members, employees and businesses that have invested in the cooperative
4) Purchasing / shared services cooperatives: Offer a variety of products and services -- from food to hardware -- and can be structured in any of the ways described in 1, 2 or 3.

This strategy of starting a food co-op may work best when:

- You can identify a committed core group of people – at least five – who are interested in starting a co-op.
- The co-op can be centrally located in a safe and convenient location.
- The co-op location can be leased, which is generally more affordable and allows the community to be flexible when adjusting to ever-changing real estate costs.
- Community members can work with the co-op manager(s) to help in ordering healthy foods that the community will buy. (Keep in mind varying cultural preferences for different types of foods.)
- Continued neighborhood promotion of the co-op is possible, through announcements in church, social gatherings, school meetings, local papers, etc.

Strategy 5:

Creating a Buying Club

If organizing a food cooperative is too labor / time intensive or too expensive, a "buying club" is another way to bring healthy foods into a community. The main idea of a buying club is for people to save money by buying food at wholesale and bulk prices rather than at retail prices. This can be done if enough people get together so that the food can be purchased in a higher volume.

This strategy of creating a buying club may work best when:

- You can identify seven or more families who will commit to sharing the work, including placing orders with food distributors, collecting money from buying club members, unloading delivery trucks when they arrive at the drop-off site, dividing the individual orders, notifying purchasers that their orders have arrived, and/or delivering individual orders.
- You can identify and locate local food distributors who can supply the buying club. (Research local distributors at www.coopdirectory.org/distributor.html)

Strategy 6:

Food Kiosks

Food kiosks are another way for communities to access healthy foods. During the growing season, people may see food kiosks in parking lots, by the roadside or other public places selling seasonal foods. These kiosks are typically small structures with one or more open sides used to sell goods like fresh sweet corn, eggs, tomatoes and apples. Food kiosks are often a way for a local farmer or market gardener to supplement his or her income and provide an easy way to help neighborhoods to improve access to fresh, local foods.

This strategy of creating a food kiosk may work best when:

- The community has local gardeners and farmers that can supply the kiosk. Local farmers and gardeners may be found through local and statewide farm and gardening organizations, through the state's Department of Agriculture and on national web-sites like www.foodroots.org and www.localharvest.org.

- Other food distributors (i.e., food bank or private grocery) can be located to stock and operate a community kiosk. Local food distributors may be in the phone book, or found on-line at websites like **www.coopdirectory.org/distributor.htm**.
- A centrally located site can be found that offers convenient parking, access to pedestrian traffic and access to a bus line.
- Local municipal regulations permit the establishment of a kiosk structure.
- Continued promotion of a kiosk is possible through the distribution of neighborhood flyers and posters, door-to-door canvassing, and ads in local newspapers or radio.

Strategy 7:

Farmers' Markets

At farmers' markets, growers sell basic produce like apples, tomatoes, collard greens, spinach, onions and potatoes. These markets can be an important way to revitalize business areas, support the local economy and create a sense of community.

Farmers' markets are a place where neighbors can chat with their friends and neighbors. They can buy healthy food, get to know the person who grew their food, educate their children about where food is grown -- and in an ethnically diverse market, learn about other cultures. A farmers' market is a colorful addition to neighborhoods that need some stimulation to help boost the local economy. In neighborhoods where there is little or no access to fresh, healthy food, a farmers' market may be a necessity.

Farmers' markets in low-income areas have special challenges. Urban market gardeners and small farmers cannot compete with supermarket prices. At the same time, area residents may not have the disposable income to pay higher prices for market produce. To help with this problem, some programs have been established to support small growers.

One such program is the federal Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), which provides $20 per year in coupons for free produce to low-income seniors, pregnant women or women with young children. This modest funding can provide significant benefits to low-income consumers and family farmers and is helpful in making it possible for Farmers' Markets to be located in low-income neighborhoods.

In order to successfully establish a neighborhood farmers' market, it may be important to work with non-profit groups, churches, and local, state, and federal agencies. These organizations may have access to funding, or may be able to help with nutrition education efforts. These efforts can play a key role in encouraging people to support farmers' markets.

This strategy of establishing a Farmers' Market may work best when:

- You can identify a group interested in establishing the market. This group should form a planning committee to consider all aspects of market planning and establishment, including property rental or leasing, market stand style and layout, dates and hours of operation, etc.
- You can locate potential farms or vendors to supply the market.
- You can identify the applicable local laws, regulations and procedures that must be followed in order to establish a farmers' market.
- Sources of any required start-up funding can be identified.

Strategy 8:

Community Gardens

Community gardens are pieces of land where residents of a neighborhood grow food, flowers, herbs, etc., for their personal use, for selling at Farmers' Markets or for donating to food pantries. Community gardens promote healthy communities and can provide access to affordable healthy food for low-income residents. Community gardens strengthen community bonds and create recreational and therapeutic opportunities for those gardening. They can also promote environmental awareness and provide opportunities for nutritional education.

This strategy of establishing a community garden may work best when:

- Two to four who are interested in starting a community garden are available and others will agree to join as needed.

- You can identify a garden coordinator who has gardening knowledge and is able to inspire and lead others.
- You can locate a suitable garden site. The site requires access to water, direct sun for 4-6 hours a day, should be free of trash and litter, and close to potential gardeners.
- The garden site is available for use through purchase or multiple-year lease.
- Get permission to use the site, preferably for at least ten years or buy the site, if possible.
- You can identify the applicable local laws, regulations and procedures that must be followed in order to establish a community garden.
- The garden site can be reasonably well protected against crop loss by animals or potential vandalism.

Some Procedural Notes on Establishing Food Kiosks, Farmers' Markets and Community Gardens

Food access strategies that require a physical location – food kiosks, farmers' markets and community gardens – may require organizers to work through a number of regulatory issues before they can be successfully established. These regulatory issues generally involve two factors: 1) the specific items that the facility will offer, and 2) the facility's physical structure and desired location.

1. Items Offered

In Ohio, food licensing and facility inspection requirements may apply in establishing some food access strategies. Generally, these requirements depend on the specific items produced or available for sale.

- **Fresh fruits and vegetables and unprocessed foods** can be sold without a required inspection or license. Although food safety laws do not require inspections as a protection against illness, health officials caution that customers should always wash these foods thoroughly to ensure that any contaminants on the food's skin, rinds, and outer covering be removed.

- **"Cottage Industry" foods** (baked goods; canned jams, jellies, honey, etc.) are regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), primarily as a protection against disease from improper processing (i.e., botulism). These foods must be produced at a registered location to be legally sold to the public.

- **Local health departments** serve as the local arm of the USDA and are responsible for the inspection and licensing of retail food establishments and food sales. More specifically, facilities selling any "processed" foods (involving slicing, dicing, liquefying, pureeing, cooked) are subject to plan review, inspection and licensing by local health departments. The primary concern here is the possible bacterial contamination of foods and resulting illness from issues of improper utensil use and temperature control.

2. Physical Structure and Location

In Columbus, the procedures for establishing any new site for offering healthy foods – whether a kiosk, farmers' market or community garden – depend on whether the location is on private property or public right-of way. Different city agencies have regulatory responsibility depending on a property's location.

On Private Property: The Columbus Building Services Division (BSD) of the Department of Development administers the zoning and building codes that regulate land use construction to help ensure the health, safety and welfare of its residents, while protecting the rights and privileges of property owners. The division reviews building plans, licenses contractors, coordinates re-zonings and variances, conducts inspections and issues building permits.

Many factors must be considered before any potential food access strategies can be established. Community organizers must be careful to work through all of these factors with appropriate city regulatory agencies to ensure that the anticipated land use is both appropriate and legal. Though there may be a variety of land use issues to consider, BSD officials say they can generally be placed into two categories:

How is the property currently zoned?

The city's zoning code includes more than 35 different zoning districts, most of which fall into residential, commercial, and manufacturing classifications. The zoning district determines the permitted land use and establishes standards for developing the property (i.e., setbacks, parking requirements, etc.).

While food kiosks, farmers' markets and community gardens are permitted in most commercial zoning districts, there may be specific use restrictions and development standards that could prohibit these uses in some instances. Community organizers should carefully consider all the elements of any proposed food access strategy and prepare a thorough description for review by zoning staff.

Some of the many factors that need to be considered by zoning officials include:

- How you wish to use the property
- Hours of operation
- Anticipated sales
- Site configuration
- Required parking
- Lighting
- Screening
- Storage requirements
- Display areas

A request for property re-zoning or a variance to accommodate a proposed use may be required. If so, BSD officials would require a site plan to scale, showing the property's configuration and proximity to streets and alleys, the location of any existing and proposed buildings or parking areas, and other details.

What specifically will be placed on the property?

Any buildings, fences and paved areas may require permits. Building and zoning codes regulate the construction and placement of various structures. The permit process ensures that structural, electrical, grading, drainage, and construction methods are in compliance with applicable codes. Information regarding the permitting and zoning processes, as well as on-line forms and contact information, is available on the Columbus city website: **www.columbusonestopshop.com**.

On City Right-of-Way: The Columbus Department of Transportation maintains city streets, highways, alleys and bridges, and regulates the use of city "rights-of-way." City rights-of-way typically extend beyond the limits of roadway pavement to include sidewalks, ditches, utility strips, etc.

Transportation officials report there are various permits and permit-like processes that may be required, depending on what food access strategy may be desired, where it may be established, and for how long. These are handled by the Right-of-Way Services unit, which reviews individual applications. Officials say that permits are generally granted if the proposed use will not interfere with the health, safety or general welfare of the public.

However, because there are many factors to consider, Transportation Division officials strongly advise anyone wishing to utilize any portion of the public-right-of way to contact the office well in advance of the proposed implementation date. Once contacted, Transportation Division officials will walk residents through the process. Those with questions on use of city rights-of-way can call the Transportation Division's Permit Section at 645-7497, or E-mail the Division at: **streetsofcolumbus@columbus.gov**.

Strategy 9:

Transportation

Many people have difficulty accessing fresh, healthy foods because of transportation limitations. Lower than average vehicle ownership, transportation policies that favor automobile use and the trend for supermarkets to be located in middle/upper income communities can all create significant hurdles toward providing equal access to healthy foods. According to *"Transportation and Food: The Importance of Access"* by the Center for Food and Justice:

- There are typically 3 times as many supermarkets per capita in upper and middle-income neighborhoods than in low-income neighborhoods;
- There are fewer full service food markets per capita in neighborhoods with predominately low income, minority, or immigrant residents; and
- Low-income households are 6 to 7 times more likely than other U.S. households to not have a car.

Since "chain" supermarkets and farmers' markets are scarce in some communities, it can be difficult for residents to travel to locations where they can buy healthy foods like fruits and vegetables.

Overcoming community transportation barriers can be very difficult. Transportation issues can require the involvement of local and state government agencies and officials, as well as private businesses. Problems can range from lack of transportation access (no sidewalks, bike lanes, and bus lines, etc.) to an economic issue of transportation affordability. Solutions to these problems can take years to identify and to address successfully.

However, those wishing to consider this issue can explore some relatively simple solutions. They include:

- Working with store or market owners to establish shuttle service for potential customers.

- Promoting new bus routes with city or regional transportation officials.

- Providing reduced or subsidized travel vouchers for participating cab or bus services.

- Establishing a bike-sharing program in the community. These cooperative, free-bike programs have been established in many U.S. and European cities. Though the programs vary, all generally provide free bicycles at various community locations, which can be used temporarily by residents for little or no cost. The bikes are specially designed and marked. When finished, residents return the bicycles to selected community locations.

Acknowledgments

Noreen L. Warnock, Project Coordinator, Greater Columbus Foodshed Project, and Sarah J. Straley, research assistant.

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Appendix A

FOOD ACCESS CASE STUDIES:
SUCCESS STORIES FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES

The following pages contain information on specific food access initiatives that have been successfully implemented in various communities. These stories were compiled by Noreen Warnock, Project Coordinator for the Greater Columbus Foodshed Project., an organization established to nurture a strong and vibrant local food system in Columbus, OH.

If you are interested in learning more about these case studies, or in obtaining information about other successful local food access strategies, contact Warnock and the Greater Columbus Foodshed Project at (614) 447-2868, or go to their website: www.greatercolumbusfoodshedproject.org.

Homemade and Home Grown
Food for May Fete, 2004

Mary Ida Compton ran into some resistance when she tried to get local farm-grown produce included in the school meal program at her children's school in Cincinnati, Ohio. Not one to be discouraged, Compton decided to try another tack, and volunteered to organize the menu for the annual school carnival, May Fete.

Compton decided that "Home-Made and Home-Grown" would be the theme for the lunch provided at the May Fete. The goal was to provide a nutritious, enjoyable lunch, with students making as much of the food as possible using local, organic ingredients.

In previous years, the food for the fete consisted of standard institutional food – grilled burgers, hot dogs, chicken with a side salad, chips, pulled pork sandwiches, soda and water. The kitchen manager ordered most of the food and parent volunteers served it during the event.

Compton proposed a different menu: cheeseburgers with field greens, Caesar salad and gazpacho with a roll, build-your-own peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, build-your-own ice cream sundaes, popcorn for snacking, and iced tea, water, or fruit juice. The school staff, knowing the work that this approach would involve, was skeptical. However, since she was taking on all of the work and organization of the event, Compton said, "I didn't have to do a big song and dance and try to convince the administration or any part of the community that this would work or this would be better, I simply…ran with it."

One of the first steps was to recruit volunteers to help with the “home-grown” part of the fete. Instead of just one food booth used in other years, Compton planned for six food booths – requiring additional labor. Parent volunteers were recruited via personal phone calls. “I think that (calling) is the most effective way… you can easily throw away a letter,” she said. People proved willing to take on large tasks, such as harvesting with children at a farm, or working with students to bake bread.

Starting in January, local farmers were contacted to provide what the students would not be making. Grass-fed beef was ordered from a local farm. Tomatoes and big leaf lettuce for the burgers were ordered from farmers in adjacent counties. Cheese from grass-fed dairy cows would come from mid-Ohio. Strawberry and raspberry jams were made from berries that were harvested and frozen the previous summer. Parents also contributed some ingredients, such as milk and eggs for ice cream production.

In March, students planted Romaine lettuce at a local farm for the Caesar salad and field greens. April was for making ice cream. Groups of up to eight students made ice cream on six consecutive afternoons. Flavors were limited to vanilla, using a real bean, chocolate, and mint chocolate chip, using mint from the garden.

In May, the fifth grade made apple butter over a campfire for the PB&J sandwiches. The pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes offered after school peanut butter making. Field greens and Romaine lettuce were harvested by the second graders just before the event. The last activity was bread baking. One group of students went to a local bread maker to form and bake 12 large loaves of farmhouse bread. Another group had a two-day event using a recipe from one of the student’s grandmothers from Latvia.

The lunch was a great success. Students showed their parents the food that they had helped prepare. A kindergartener insisted that her mother have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich using the peanut butter that she had helped make. Everyone enjoyed the ice cream, specially topped with (organic) chocolate sauce or locally-produced blackberry topping. And the cheeseburgers made from local grass-fed beef sold out.

Compton sees her approach to the carnival as returning to its roots, when children played a larger part in organizing the event. The Home-Made and Home-Grown concept provides an “opportunity to really engage the kids in May Fete, really be part of the process…take ownership of the event,” she said.

Source: Marion Kalb, Community Food Security Coalition, Venice, CA.

Reviving a Corner Store: School Market

School Market in Oakland, California's Fruitvale district is typical in many ways of the corner stores that populate low-income urban neighborhoods across the Bay Area. However, School Market has moved beyond other corner stores by becoming an important source of fresh produce and other nutritious foods for its customers.

Located on busy School Street in a residential neighborhood, School Market is the sole commercial establishment in the surrounding 12-block area. The nearest supermarket is half a mile away, situated on the other side of the I-580 freeway. While the neighborhood – a mixture of multi-unit buildings and single-family homes – is predominantly African-American, its concentrations of Southeast Asians, Latinos, and whites reflect Fruitvale's tremendous ethnic diversity. The median annual household income for the Fruitvale district is $25,866; 19.7 % of its residents receive some form of public assistance.

Store Profile

School Market has been owned and operated for the past 19 years by Tom Ahmed and his family. The market, 1,300 square feet in size, is open seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. Like most small urban markets, School Market had long depended on sales of alcohol (primarily beer and wine), convenience foods, and cigarettes as its major income generators.

Snack foods had been the market's top-selling food item. While drug dealers congregated on the sidewalk in front of the market in the mid and late 1990s, community pressure and increased police presence have almost completely eliminated this source of friction between the market and its neighbors. The store's location on a well-traveled street and its status as the only market in the neighborhood combine to make it economically viable.

The Project

California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) approached School Market in September 2000 and asked if the store would be interested in selling fresh produce and expanding their sales of dairy and other nutritious foods. This project, funded by Food For All, grew out of a 1998 study by CFPA and Bay Area Community Services (BACS) on food access issues faced by Fruitvale seniors. The study was prompted by reports from BACS' meals-on-wheels drivers that the delivered hot meal was, for some seniors, their only nutritious food of the day.

Working with Fruitvale community groups, BACS and CFPA identified four strategies for improving food access for senior citizens:

- Expanding and improving public transportation to nearby supermarkets.

- Initiating a shopping service that would match a homebound senior with a volunteer shopper.

- Improving Fruitvale's system of 10 food pantries and soup kitchens.

- Starting a fresh produce market, or enhancing an existing market by helping it to sell produce and other fresh foods.

After the first three strategies were implemented during 1999 and 2000, CFPA began the market enhancement project in August of 2000. The project first identified eight corner stores in Fruitvale with good locations, sufficient floor space, and an interest in boosting their sales of fresh food. After interviewing the stores' owners, CFPA selected School Market for the pilot project. The selection was based primarily on Ahmed's interest in the project's potential to increase sales and to improve his store's neighborhood image.

CFPA offered School Market technical assistance, training, and equipment. Perhaps the most important of these items, the mentoring, was provided by Nathan Cheng, a Berkeley, California, resident who was operating a successful, free-standing produce market in a low-to-middle income area of Berkeley. In return, Ahmed agreed to learn the produce business in order to sustain significant fresh food sales after the CFPA training period was over. In addition, Ahmed volunteered to pay nearly $3,000 for equipment improvements that would facilitate fresh food sales.

Cheng first worked with Ahmed to make more efficient use of floor space and backroom storage areas in order to display fresh foods more prominently. By moving flats of soft drinks and other beverages to a reorganized storage room, they made room for a large open area at the front of the store. Chen then purchased and installed a used, but attractive, 12-foot produce display case in the newly opened front sales area. Finally, he worked with Ahmed to reorganize his grocery and dairy displays, placing them directly opposite the produce area.

After the produce display was installed, Cheng assisted Ahmed in redesigning the outside of the store. The store's front and sides were repainted, and long-boarded windows were replaced with secure Plexiglas, bringing in additional natural light. These changes alerted the neighbors that the store was doing something new. Cheng then trained Ahmed and key family members in produce buying, pricing, and selling concepts.

The market needed significant promotion, since many potential produce customers shopped at the nearest area supermarkets. Cheng designed weekly promotional flyers in English and Spanish, which were distributed door-to-door in a 15-block area, as well as at a neighborhood church and in community meetings. The flyers listed produce specials for the week and gave general information on the store. School Market held an open house after the store had been selling produce for three weeks, and distributed free bags of fruit to over 300 individuals. Produce-related prizes were also raffled out, and information was distributed on nutrition and other health issues.

Results

In the first month of the training period, School Market increased gross sales of produce from under $50 per week — typically from a few bags of potatoes — to more than $500. By the end of the second month of training, the market averaged $600-$700 in produce sales per week. The store sold more than 25 different fruits and vegetables, including some requested by new customers. The biggest sellers included bananas, apples, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, avocados, greens, onions, and lemons. During the same time period, milk sales increased five-fold.

School Market's initial success has been sustained since the training period ended, and produce sales have remained constant, in the range of $600-$700 per week. Dairy sales have also maintained their higher levels.

Ahmed and his family have now taken over complete operation of the store and are able to manage this new effort effectively. More recently, Cheng and CFPA collaborated to help with a complete makeover of a second corner store, Jalos Market, in a different section of Oakland's Fruitvale neighborhood.

Source: Neighborhood Groceries: New Access to Healthy Food in Low-Income Communities, California Food Policy Advocates, San Francisco, CA., Ed Bolen & Kenneth Hecht, January 2003.

Cooperative Farming in Pembroke Township, Illinois

The University of Illinois Cooperative Extension supported African American family farmers in Pembroke Township in developing their Pembroke Farmers Cooperative. The 20 farmer-members produce organic and specialty crops such as purple-hulled peas and speckled lima beans, earning $400 to $1000 a day at farmer's markets and selling 1,000 to 4,000 chickens a month, usually for $2.40 per pound.

Compared to Chicago and its bustling suburbs 70 miles north, Pembroke Township remains a relatively quiet, economically depressed area. Farming has been part of the local culture since the mid-1900s, when one of the township's most prominent businessmen began to market his land to Chicago's African Americans, trying to encourage them to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors by working the land.

The marketing strategy worked. However, the new farmers have been faced with a host of challenges from the onset. The soils are sandy, water is scarce, roads are bad, and farms are small. In addition, most of the landowners have limited experience in farming, or with business-skills needed to be successful agricultural entrepreneurs.

Key Entrepreneurial Developments

Today, Pembroke farmers see signs of hope. Their positive outlook grew out of the success of the Pembroke Farmers Cooperative, created in 1999 by a few local farmers with help from the Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture and other organizations.

More than 20 farmers claim membership in the co-op, the only farmer-owned co-op in Kankakee County. The co-op stands out because the farmers use their land to produce specialty crops, such as purple-hulled peas and speckled lima beans. The remaining 97 percent of the county's farmland (nearly 320,00 acres) is used for more traditional Midwest farming, such as corn and soybeans.

The co-op boasts another unique feature: its producers use only chemical-free growing methods. The vegetables are grown with alternative pest management strategies and the livestock is raised using range methods that justify their "natural" labeling claims.

Once a week, members of the co-op take their show on the road. They pack up their refrigerated truck and bring their bounty to the Austin Farmers' Market in Chicago. Austin is a predominantly low-income African American community that does not have a full- service grocery. Racial tension in the 1970s contributed to the loss of many businesses and residents. To bring fresh food and grocery dollars back into Austin, local churches approached the Pembroke farmers several years ago about the idea of opening a Farmers' Market.

Co-op members also sell to a half dozen restaurants and a few health food stores in Chicago, as well as several Farmers' Markets in Kankakee County.

Partners, Collaborators and Community Networks

Organic farming has long roots in Pembroke. Farmers grow organically, partly because of the lack of funding for chemicals. Direct marketing is not new, either; since the mid-1990s, a handful of farmers have taken advantage of sales opportunities in Chicago. The uniqueness of the venture lies in their ability and desire to work together to sell organic food.

"The hardest thing you can do – organize farmers – becomes especially challenging because they're very independent, especially family farmers," said Basu, the president of the co-op. Farmers were inspired to organize, though, when they began to think about the economic benefits.

"On weekends, you would see 10 or 12 pickup trucks leaving the community," Basu said. "Many of them had old, raggedy trucks that were always breaking down. We started helping one another and buying things together."

As they worked to create the co-op, they tapped into a variety of groups for assistance. The Kankakee County USDA-Farm Service Agency (FSA) was one of the

most prominent players. Local FSA Director Merrill Marxman helped the farmers raise approximately $500,000 in funding over three years.

“When it became obvious to me that our federal farm programs did not meet the needs of Pembroke's specialty farmers and under-served producers, I wanted to find some way to help,” said Marxman. In addition to writing grants, Marxman helped the farmers locate a small-scale processor to slaughter and package their birds, create a co-op label, buy seed and drive to workshops in Ohio and Wisconsin.

Lasting Impact

As a result of this project, there is a greater sense of community in Pembroke. "Our whole intention is to build community," said Basu. "What we are trying to do at the farming level will help make our community sustainable. When agriculture is healthy and strong and when dollars stay in the community, then stores and businesses stay, young people find jobs and many other opportunities open up for the community."

Source: Hot Peppers & Parking Lot Peaches: Evaluating Farmers’ Markets in Low-Income Communities, Andy Fisher, Community Food Security Coalition, Venice, CA., January 1999.

Stockton Certified Farmers’ Market

"These beans are from my home in Laos, these are from China and these are from the Philippines," said Pheng Ong, patting piles of skinny beans on his table at the Stockton Certified Farmers' Market in Stockton, CA. He does not mean he flew his produce here from overseas. Like Ong, who is a Hmong refugee, the bean varieties are Asian in origin only. Ong grew them on leased land in his adopted nearby home of Lodi.

For Southeast Asian refugees, culinary traditions are a lifeline. Their best bet for finding fresh old-country ingredients is Farmers' Markets such as this one in Stockton, serving 30,000 customers a year under a cross-town freeway. While Ong's long beans might send many Californians scurrying for an exotic cookbook, his customers know exactly what to do with them. "I like to cook them with a spicy lemon grass fish sauce and chicken," says Orn Snguan, who was born in Cambodia. Besides the 55 vegetable and fruit stands, the market hosts six seafood vendors and - something no supermarket offers - four live-poultry vendors.

For farmers, these markets make economic sense. When Ong drives his pickup to the Stockton market, he avoids wholesale distribution costs of packing, storing and cooling, netting as much as twice what he would from a wholesaler. Daily vendor gross receipts range from $400 to $800.

The Certified Farmers’ Market Program of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, launched during the late 1970s, eased conventional distribution regulations to help small farmers sell their produce locally. Today's vendors - more than 4,000 farmers at the 416 certified Farmers' Markets - are exempt from strict

size, shape and packing regulations. This translates not only into a smoother process for farmers, but also into less food waste and a more variegated produce selection.

While an overpass wouldn't seem the ideal awning for a market, this one is high and wide enough that the traffic noise, dust and exhaust don't land here. The only cloud hanging over the market these days is a pending change in the way low-income shoppers will buy food. These shoppers now use food stamps, as well as coupons from the Woman, Infants and Children (WIC) and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition programs. Food stamp sales alone average more than $600,000 a year.

The worry is an anticipated switch to digital swipe cards. The system, called Electronic Benefits Transfer or EBT, will require farmers to buy a gadget that will automatically deduct dollars from a customer's account and deposit it in the farmer's account. Sounds simple, but the technology is complex and costly. In addition to buying the card-reading machine, vendors will have to set up accounts with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), a potentially intimidating transaction for those with limited English skills and experience in dealing with government bureaucracy.

"Some of our farmers don't have bank accounts and aren't yet integrated into the same small-business world as are other food sellers," said Carlos Dutra, manager of the Stockton Certified Farmers' Market Association. He takes hope from state officials' promises to find ways to ease the transition both for farmers and consumers. Stockton already got a lucky break in the scheduling of the county-by-county transition. "We will be the last market to adopt EBT," he said, smiling. "By that time, the other counties should have worked out the bugs."

As Dutra watches buyers chatting with sellers, sampling and taking home bags bulging with fresh, high-quality local produce, he can't help but believe the digital turbulence will pass. "It's better than the grocery store," he said. "There's no competition."

Source: World Hunger Year, New York, NY. www.worldhungeryear.org

Washington Heights (175th Street) Farmers' Market

The busiest low-income market in New York lies at the corner of 175th and Broadway in front of Reverend Ike's famous revival church. Though in an impoverished area in the shadow of the George Washington Bridge, the Washington Heights Greenmarket bustles with throngs of shoppers.

The Washington Heights market was started in the mid 1980s in conjunction with Washington Heights Community Development Corporation. It was a bustling market before the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) program took hold and has developed substantially since then.

One important component of the market's success has been its ability to match farmers with consumers; the growers that sell here have been chosen deliberately because of their affordable prices. Greenmarket operates under the principle of linking larger farms (more than 50 acres) to low-income markets, assuming that these farmers will be able to sell at lower prices than smaller farmers with less volume.

The market's nine growers sell basic produce - lots of corn, apples, tomatoes, onions, potatoes and the like - as well as food more attuned to the local palate - like calabaza, a pumpkin-like squash commonly used in soup by Latin American families. According to market manager Jose Ramos, the success of vendors at Washington Heights is largely due to their attention to the cultural preferences of consumers. Many of the farmers have even offered to cultivate seeds brought from the home countries of their customers. Said Ramos, "The farmers have changed the neighborhood and the neighborhood has changed the farmers."

The market has maintained excellent relations with the neighborhood by promoting its role as a vehicle for community economic development. One wise decision was to allow street vendors to sell nearby. A flea market occupies the same space the other days of the week, presenting job prospects to local residents. By allowing the vendors to continue to sell nearby, the market has built up goodwill and avoided alienating the community. Similarly, the market staff has collaborated with the local WIC offices to identify women with an interest in working and connected them with farmers in need of assistance. As many of the shoppers are Spanish speakers, it is imperative to have Spanish-speaking personnel at each stand.

The market's relationship with the city has remained very positive over the years. Washington Heights enjoys excellent assistance from New York Police Department, which has aggressively towed cars that block access. In a city where connections can make or break any venture, community and political support have been critical to the success of the Washington Heights Market.

Source: Hot Peppers & Parking Lot Peaches: Evaluating Farmers' Markets in Low-Income Communities, Andy Fisher, Community Food Security Coalition, Venice, CA., January 1999.

Green Thumb Community Garden, New York, N.Y.

Fiercely proud of their efforts, New Yorkers of fortitude and grit bestow such evocative names upon the city's most hidden and beloved treasures - GreenThumb community gardens. Through imagination and hard work, thousands of neighborhood activists have transformed vacant, derelict land into beautiful gardens overflowing with vegetables, flowers, laughter and love. From the South Bronx to South Jamaica, from East Harlem to East New York, GreenThumb's 700 community gardens represent the dreams, traditions, aspirations and cultures of the people who create them.

GreenThumb is sponsored by New York City's Department of Parks & Recreation and funded by federal Community Development Block Grants. Since 1978, GreenThumb and hundreds of community groups throughout the city's five boroughs have worked together, turning neighborhood eyesores and dens for vermin, drug dealers and stolen car rings into safe, thriving and productive oases of green.

GreenThumb leases city-owned land at no charge to neighborhood groups and trains them in garden design, construction, and horticultural techniques. GreenThumb provides gardeners with tools; fencing; lumber to build growing beds, picnic tables, gazebos and grape arbors; soil; ornamental and fruit trees; shrubs; seeds and bulbs. The gardeners, in turn, are responsible for developing and maintaining their garden sites.

How gardeners design, plant and use their gardens reflects their cultural and ethnic backgrounds as much as their needs for open space. There is no typical GreenThumb garden. Community gardens, in their exuberance and rakish beauty, celebrate in their quirkiness and individuality. GreenThumb gardens require commitment and dedication rather than grand plans and major financial investment.

Gardeners do, of course, require assistance and New York is indeed fortunate to have so many greening, open space and resident organizations, all eager to offer materials and advice. Yet, these resources are for naught unless they are matched by the assets every neighborhood can supply in abundance: the people who live there.

Successful community gardens prosper because they are initiated and sustained by neighborhood residents. Their success is an example of grass roots efforts from the bottom up. GreenThumb gardens thrive because New Yorkers have made the gardens their own, on their own. Green Thumb has helped create over 700 community gardens, which together produce $100,000 worth of fruit and vegetables per year.

Source: Jane Weissman, Director, GreenThumb, New York, NY. www.greenthumbnyc.org.

Plant a Row for the Hungry

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, one in ten households in the United States experiences hunger or the risk of hunger. Many in these households frequently skip meals or eat too little, sometimes going without food for an entire day. Approximately 25 million people, including 9.9 million children, have substandard diets or must resort to seeking emergency food because they cannot always afford the food they need.

The purpose of Plant a Row for the Hungry (PAR) is to create and sustain a grassroots program whereby garden writers utilize their media position with local newspapers, magazines and radio/TV programs to encourage their readers/listeners to donate their surplus garden produce to local food banks, soup kitchens and service organizations to help feed America's hungry.

PAR's success hinges on its people-helping-people approach. The concept is simple. There are over 70 million gardeners in the U.S. alone, many of which plant vegetables and harvest more than they can consume. If every gardener plants one extra row of vegetables and donates the surplus to local food banks and soup kitchens, a significant impact can be made on reducing hunger. Food agencies will have access to fresh produce, funds earmarked for produce can be redirected to other needed items and the hungry of America will have more and better food than is presently available.

PAR's role is to provide focus, direction and support to volunteer committees who execute the programs at the local level. The organization helps gather the human resources necessary to form a nucleus for a local committee, then provides training and direction to enable the committee to reach out into the community. Finally, PAR assists in coordinating the local food collection systems and monitors the volume of donations being conveyed to the soup kitchens and food banks. PAR is proving that every individual can make a difference in his/her community. (Last year, PAR had over 600 volunteer committees with an average of 45 people involved in each program totaling 27,000 volunteers!)

PAR began in the garden column of Jeff Lowenfels, former Garden Writers Association (GWA) president, when he asked gardeners to plant a row of vegetables for Bean's Cafe, an Anchorage soup kitchen. Since then, PAR has grown exponentially through continued media support, individual and company sponsorship, and volunteerism.

It took the first five years to reach the major milestone of a cumulative total of one million pounds of donated produce. In the next two years, a million pounds of food was donated each year. This is a significant contribution considering that each pound of food makes four meals. Last year, more than 1.3 million pounds of produce were donated generating meals for over 5.5 million needy recipients. All this has been achieved without government subsidy or bureaucratic red tape — just people helping people. PAR's current goal is to make more than 8 million pounds of produce available to food banks, soup kitchens and service organizations by our tenth anniversary in 2004.

In 2002, GWA established a supporting 501(c)(3) charity called the Garden Writers Association Foundation to administer and expand the PAR program.

Source: GWA Foundation, Plant a Row for the Hungry, Manassas, VA. www.gardenwriters.org.

Transportation Access

Despite the difficulties in overcoming food access obstacles related to transportation, there are examples of various grocery stores aiding and expanding their clientele by providing transportation services. These services range from shuttles and van services to carpools.

One privately-owned grocery in Los Angeles, El Tapatio, runs a well-known shuttle service from 7:00 AM to 9:30 PM, seven days a week. There is no charge for the service, except customers are expected to buy at least $25 of groceries. While this program costs the grocery around $4,000 monthly, it lists good public relations, a larger customer base, increased sales, and low shopping cart theft as some of its many benefits.

Another way local stores are helping their customers is through home-delivery services. Generally stores that offer this service are in middle-income communities, but home delivery services may provide an option for low-income communities, as well. Kroger stores in Atlanta offer "Groceries-to-Go." A customer simply calls, faxes, or emails her or her order into the store. A Kroger employee does the shopping and the order is delivered the next day at a designated time. The cost of the service is $7.50 for seniors, and $10 for all other customers. Food stamps are accepted.

State/Community Initiatives

In Austin, TX, the Texas Capital Metro (the local transit) and the Austin/Travis County Food Policy Council started a "Grocery Bus" line. The purpose was to provide improved food access to residents of the primarily low-income, Latino Eastside. The bus route was designed to run at regular intervals seven days a week, 12 hours a day, and to link the community with two major supermarkets just north and south of the area. It costs passengers 50 cents to ride and has helped Capital Metro improve its public image.

In Los Angeles, community residents helped organize the development of a shuttle service, *DASH*, which was specifically designed to help with shopping needs, medical appointments, etc. It costs only 25 cents to ride, with the majority of its funding coming from sales tax. Community members helped develop the routes and many *DASH* riders cite price and convenience as their primary reasons for using the service.

While state and local efforts to provide transportation in low-income communities can result in positive change, the federal government can sometimes provide assistance with funding and policy initiatives. For example, the Transportation Equity Act creates transportation policies and programs which can increase access transportation to

supermarkets, Farmers' Markets, and other sources of affordable, healthy food in low-income communities.

Source: Homeward Bound: Food-Related Transportation Strategies in Low Income and Transit Dependent Communities. The Community Food Security Coalition and UCLA Pollution Prevention Education and Research Center. http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cfj/resources/TransportationAndFood.htm

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