

Healthy Corner Stores: A Best Practices Brief

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The purpose of this brief is to share information gleaned from interviews conducted by the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at The Ohio State University regarding best practices for establishing and operating healthy corner store initiatives.

1. Introduction

The Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at The Ohio State University conducted research on best practices for the establishment and operation of successful healthy corner store initiatives as part of an ongoing healthy corner store pilot project. While the definition of a healthy corner store often differs from one site to another, the *Healthy Corner Store Network*¹ acknowledges that, “requirements to stock certain types of items (such as whole grain bread, low-fat milk, or fresh produce) and/or a minimum number of healthy items (such as six types of fresh produce),” are core values central to most projects.

In conducting our research, the Center primarily sought the advice of project leaders from other corners store efforts. **The purpose of this research was to assist our own efforts in promoting healthy corner store initiatives in Ohio, and, to the extent possible, inform others around the country wishing to launch and sustain healthy corner store initiatives in their communities.** This document is not exhaustive in scope, but it aims to offer general advice and lessons.

While individual community circumstances, demographics, and local needs will necessitate differences in approaches, some best practices can be gleaned from the experiences of others.

2. Our Project and Research

The Center for Farmland Policy Innovation (Center) at The Ohio State University received grant funding from the Ohio Department of Agriculture’s Specialty Crop Block Grant program to launch a healthy corner store pilot program in Ohio. The program, called Ohio Neighborhood Harvest, involves neighborhoods in five Ohio counties, including urban Franklin and Summit Counties, as well as the more rural Athens, Meigs, and Morgan Counties. Partnering with local

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¹ <http://healthycornerstores.org/>

organizations in each community, the Center provides funds and technical assistance to support the organizations in establishing healthy corner store (urban locations) and gas station or drive-thru (rural locations) initiatives in their communities. The purpose of the pilot program is to ensure access to healthy and sustainable food options, namely, access to Ohio-grown fruits and vegetables, in areas of need and to stimulate additional demand for their consumption. As part of this project, the Center hopes to learn from these experiences and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to the potential nutritional and public health benefits of our healthy corner store and gas station projects, these projects also involve economic benefits as they seek to place Ohio fruits and vegetables in corner store locations. **Tying the effort to community-based agriculture economic development by sourcing locally offers an added benefit to Ohio farmers and Ohio fruit and vegetable distributors.** This link between a pressing public need and Ohio farms makes this program beneficial on multiple fronts.

2.1 Our Framework

Our approach focuses on the **New Markets Model** articulated by Edward J. Blakely and Nancy Green Leigh in their 2010 book *Planning Local Economic Development: Theory and Practice*. This model is geared towards addressing existing market failures. In the case of corner stores, the market failure we focus on is market access. The New Markets Model recognizes that lower-income inner-city and rural areas possess untapped market potential with available purchasing power. Agricultural producers, fruit and vegetable distributors, and local retailers have a prime opportunity to expand their markets by tapping these underserved communities, and residents stand to benefit from greater access to nutritious foods. The current market failures that exist are often cited as contributing factors to growing problems with obesity and poor nutrition in low income communities. Expanding physical, cultural, and economic access to healthy foods creates positive public health and economic benefits for communities.

Understanding why markets are underserved requires an understanding of the spatial movement of people and capital as well as an understanding of consolidation and concentration in the retail industry. For the majority of the last half century, there has been a steady movement of suburbanization led by wealthier families leaving both urban and rural areas. **Seeking affordable land and distance from the perceived problems of cities and isolation of some rural areas, this movement of people and their money has resulted in economic and social consequences for remaining residents. These consequences include a declining tax base to support municipal infrastructure and services, as well as declining retail and service sectors.** In addition to this population migration, consolidation in the retail industry has been brought on by pressures for economies of scale in the retail industry. Mega-retailers have become the norm and have situated in areas with ample space and affordable land to accommodate their business models. This has resulted in many suburban store locations that are removed from low-income areas in the urban core and rural areas far from major population centers.

While there has been some population loss in certain urban areas, the underlying population density in most urban areas could still be conducive to supporting more commercial activity than

is currently being generated in these areas. In addition to greater population density, urban areas offer focused centers of activity, proximity to major employers, and in the area of nutritious food products, a market that currently lacks significant competition for customers.

The New Markets Model recognizes that there has been a market failure with respect to access in these targeted communities and accepts that an intervention is needed to correct this failure. This correction may involve one of four main responses to this issue:

- Creating new outlets for purchasing healthy foods
- Developing alternative distribution methods for healthy foods
- Enhanced transportation options to access these foods
- Increasing healthy new offerings at existing outlets

For the purposes of our project, we are focusing on increasing healthy new offerings at existing outlets through healthy corners store and gas station initiatives.

Some of the key work areas building on the New Markets Model include addressing separate, but related, issues of supply and demand. **It is not enough to simply make healthy food options available. Ensuring community residents know these options are available and that they want to purchase these products leads to a more balanced market.** Some of the grocers who left urban neighborhoods believed, sometimes with merit and sometimes without, that these markets either could not adequately support a grocery or that demand would be greater at an alternative location. By focusing on both issues of *supply and demand*, the New Markets Model is an effective tool for addressing the biggest issues that caused grocers to abandon certain communities. Increasing the supply and availability of nutritious and culturally appropriate foods can help to address present concerns about access. Aiming to establish efficient distribution systems during this process can help to control costs for consumers and boost profitability for store owners (see Figure 1). Ensuring adequate demand can be achieved by a market assessment, marketing efforts, and greater education about health and nutrition issues. By marketing healthy products and making constituencies more aware of the benefits of healthy products and how to best prepare meals with these foods, there can be benefits for both sellers and consumers. **Matching supply and demand can lead to a balanced and sustainable marketplace that can operate after a healthy corner store initiative is over.**

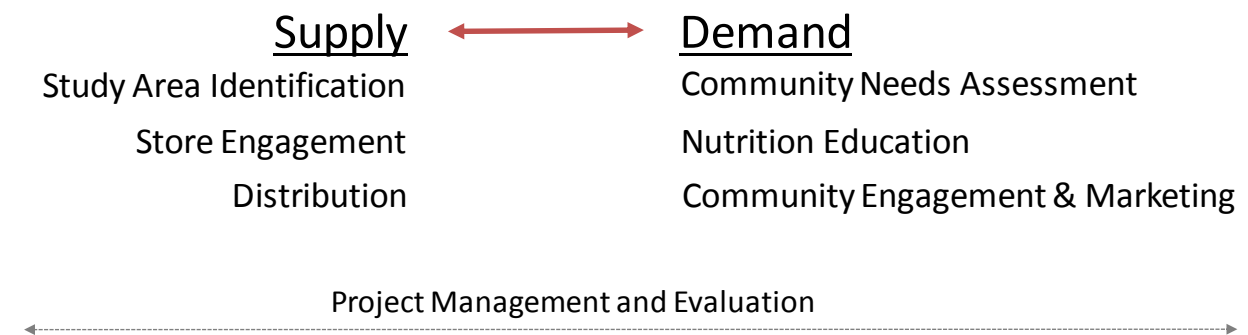


Figure 1. Supply and Demand in Healthy Corner Store Initiatives

2.2 Methodology

The bulk of the unique research conducted by the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation came from personal interviews with stakeholders in existing healthy corner store initiatives around the country. Interviews were conducted with nine representatives associated with healthy corner store programs between March and April 2011. There was an open call for interviews on the COMFOOD listserv that is managed by Tufts University.

While interview techniques were designed to be flexible, there were core areas that were discussed with each participant that coincide with the model shown in Figure 1. Interviewees were asked questions falling under the following categories:

- ✓ Process
- ✓ Project Evaluation
- ✓ Supply
 - Project Area Selection
 - Store Engagement
 - Distribution
- ✓ Demand
 - Community Assessment
 - Nutrition Education
 - Community Engagement & Marketing

3. Peer Best Practices

The results of our research are presented in the order of the core interview areas as listed above. Best practices were determined based on consensus opinions from an array of peers and through some information gleaned from previous research in this field. When inconsistent or conflicting advice emerged, we sought to discern best practices based on previously published literature or simply presented the various practices and differing options. A helpful list of literature and sources consulted can be found at the end of this report.

3.1 Project Management and Process

Project management and process were parsed into five subcategories: envision success, set goals and build partnerships, seek support from other organizations, consider opposition, and secure funding. What follows is an examination of each of these topics.

3.1.1 *Envision Success*

A successful healthy corner store initiative typically brings together project managers, community members, corner store owners, food distributors, and partner organizations to offer affordable healthy food options in corner stores located in areas designated as food deserts (see section 3.4 Project Area Selection for more information on how food desert identification plays a role in healthy corner store projects). Individual organizations may have corner store programs that differ in size and scope and may strive towards achieving an array of different goals. Some

programs may involve complete interventions in stores while others may involve more modest store enhancements. **Regardless of size and scope, it is important for healthy corner store programs to establish a clear idea of what a successful effort would look like and to remain focused on tailoring solutions towards this end.**

While specific food offerings can differ and should seek to be nutritious and culturally appropriate, the common threads are ensuring access and affordability. Many initiatives also feature locally produced food offerings that have the dual impact of supporting sustainable agriculture while also addressing a pressing social and public health need in targeted communities. It may be worth exploring this possibility if it fits within the scope of your group's work.

3.1.2 Set Goals

It might seem obvious that when launching a healthy corner store initiative, organizers should set end goals for the initiative. **Goal setting helps to establish a framework for meeting tangible benchmarks and can give definition and direction to work.** Goal setting may evolve as more partners get involved in a project, but establishing initial goals as a blueprint helps to spell out next steps and to measure progress towards successful outcomes.

Setting goals is also critical to conducting a solid project evaluation. In order to evaluate the success of a program, there need to be clear goals and objectives established at the outset of the project. Once goals are set and worked has been performed, the two can be compared to measure progress. Making evaluations is essential in order to make changes and learn as a project evolves.

3.1.3 Build Partnerships

The best way to begin to build momentum is to partner with the people and organizational leaders within the communities in which you plan to work. This is particularly critical if you are not from this community. **Building a diverse network of partners can translate into better, more informed project design and community members taking ownership over projects in their neighborhoods and provides greater access to the networks of human capital that each constituency has to offer.** While circumstances may vary in different communities, there are some common types of partners who have been engaged in successful healthy corner store initiatives across the country. Community groups and resident organizations, such as neighborhood associations, should be embedded in the community and can help to ensure buy-in from local residents. Aside from community groups and residents, many successful partnerships include organizations such as: public health organizations, food policy councils, local government agencies and officials, chambers of commerce, community development organizations, economic development organizations, affordable housing organizations, nutritionists, faith-based organizations, academic centers, and transit organizations.

Healthy corner store program organizers should assess possible partnerships, consider political dynamics that may be involved with selecting potential partner organizations, and

ensure that networks of partnerships are broad enough to ensure strength and depth without creating an overly cumbersome structure that is unmanageable.

3.1.3.1 Seek Support from other Organizations and Individuals

In addition to direct partners, it is important to build relationships with support organizations. Support organizations can provide technical assistance, research capacity, and other services and assistance that are highly specialized. In our role in facilitating healthy corner store pilot programs across Ohio, the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at The Ohio State University acted as a support organization in addition to a partner. We also put our pilot sites in contact with other support organizations and consultants providing graphic design skills, program evaluation expertise, distribution, and knowledge of food product handling, placement, and store design.

Identifying support organizations and other community partners, whether they be paid consultants, pro-bono professionals, or other forms of support, can supplement the expertise held by various partners and stakeholders.

3.1.3.2 Consider Potential Opposition

While the aims of healthy corner store initiatives may seem like an agreeable idea, project planners should do their best to anticipate sources of potential opposition. While specific groups or interests could potentially oppose a corner store initiative if it were to, for example, impact a particular competitor's market, but the most likely source of opposition is skeptical community members. **If a healthy corner store initiative fails to properly engage existing organizations in a community, seems to be operating in a way that is culturally inappropriate, or seems to be trying to impose an outside agenda on local residents, community members may be indifferent or even hostile.**

Respecting and including community members and leaders and their needs can help to give authenticity to a healthy corner store initiative and ensure that residents have ownership of the program. Healthy corner store initiatives should be collaborative partnerships within the community and organizers should take pains to not simply impose their ideas on the community's various constituencies.

3.1.3.3 Secure Funding

It is also important for organizations to seek out funding sources for their work. **While many initiatives are a product of organizations self-funding, having sufficient resources to offer incentives to store owners may necessitate seeking outside funding. In some cases, organizations require that store owners make financial commitments to couple with any support they receive from their partner organizations.** These incentives can include refrigeration, store enhancements (ex. paint, lighting, shelving), signage and merchandizing displays, and tailored technical assistance (ex. produce handling, marketing). While some peripheral assistance may be key to fostering success, it is also important to avoid direct subsidization of food that would create a false market. Part of what is required to ensure the

long-term success of a healthy corner store initiative is to build something that will be economical and self-sustaining once outside support is removed.

Sources of funding that other programs have pursued include local and regional foundations, national foundations (such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation), local, state and national governmental grants (such as the state departments of health and the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention), and corporate philanthropies. Our own project is funded by the USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant program run through the Ohio Department of Agriculture. Some of our local partners secured funding through local health departments (for nutrition marketing), a community foundation, and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant funds.

3.2 Evaluation

Developing an effective evaluation scheme is an important way to measure the success of a healthy corner store initiative. Evaluation can help to identify strengths and weaknesses in a program and provide valuable insights into what can be done more effectively. Evaluation also serves to communicate success to community leaders and potential future funders. By setting goals and establishing clear metrics to evaluate whether these goals have been met, the overall effort can operate with a level of credibility that would otherwise be difficult to achieve.

The first step in developing an evaluation plan is to determine what the evaluation hopes to measure. **A considerable amount of time should go into brainstorming what success would like and what metrics would best measure that success. Next, it is important to figure out what type of data is important to collect (and what is available) and evaluate in order to use it to measure the degree of success.** Common evaluation objectives include tracking the availability and sales of healthy foods, community nutritional habits before and after the program begins, corner store traffic, and consumer purchasing behavior. These measures can be tailored to the specific circumstances of a given program, but the metrics should be established at the outset in order to avoid potential bias and so that data collection can be part of the work plan instead of an afterthought.

In general, a simple evaluation plan format includes outlining a broad objective, the specific desired outcomes, the indicators/criteria for success, the data collection needs for measuring success, the proposed methods for data collection, proposed methods for data analysis and reporting, and, finally, how data collection and analysis fits into the work plan. For example, an objective might be “Increased knowledge and consumption of fruit and vegetables in food deserts.” This objective could be measured by the following outcomes: increased access to fruit and vegetables for community residents; community residents’ increased knowledge of nutritional benefits of fruit and vegetable consumption; community residents’ increased consumption of fruit and vegetables; and, community residents’ demonstrated intent to continue increased fruit and vegetable consumption in the future. Each of these outcomes would need indicators identified, data collected, analyzed and reported.

The most common evaluation tools are surveys that are conducted before and after the commencement of healthy corner store initiatives. The pre-program surveys are to establish a

baseline assessment of present conditions and later surveys are used to measure progress in measured categories. While dependent on the information being collected, the most successful survey methods include in-store observations and/or in-store interviews.

When extensive volunteer power is available, detailed surveys are often conducted over a significant period of time to capture a large sample of data. When volunteer support is limited or a swift turnaround is required, one approach that can be used is to apply the rapid market assessment model that is often used to measure traffic and purchasing behavior at farmers' markets.

The rapid market assessment model calls for taking small samples at repeated days and times. The surveying can be done in several different ways, but perhaps the simplest way is to have observers keep a tally sheet and monitor store traffic and/or purchases. Other options would be to conduct a dot survey or to directly interview customers. Both of these options would directly engage customers but are more labor intensive and some patrons may not wish to be approached while shopping.

Regarding evaluation of availability and consumption, it is often most feasible to have the store owner or distributor provide order volume over the course of the project period. Often small stores do not have the capacity to track bar codes or sales of specific items, so looking at order volume over time provides a proxy to sales and availability.

Another option for data collection and analysis that may yield the most accurate results is to partner with a university or other professional researchers. When building partnerships, it may be useful to reach out to any local universities or research units to be able to capitalize on their evaluation research expertise.

3.2.1 Community Capitals Approach

As part of our Ohio Neighborhood Harvest healthy corner store initiative, we are utilizing a community capitals evaluation strategy similar to the values articulated by Cornelia and Jan Flora in their community capitals framework. The community capitals approach examines how different roles, relationships and resources the individuals and groups bring to the project contribute to various outcomes. Understanding these differences helps to explain how community level processes impact the direction and success of each project. In addition, we are utilizing a cost-benefit approach (focusing both on fixed and variable costs), to better understand start-up costs, scalable costs, and the economic feasibility of project continuation.

To understand the project resources, how they are utilized and how they impact the success of the projects at each study site, we rely on the six capitals defined by Flora and Flora (2004)². We chose to focus on five of Flora and Flora's community capitals:

² Flora, C., & Flora, J. (with Fey, S.). (2004). *Rural communities: Legacy and change* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

1. **Human Capital** – the skills and abilities of each individual within a community.
2. **Social Capital** – the networks, norms of reciprocity, and mutual trust that exist among and within groups and communities. These can contribute to a sense of common identity and shared future. Both bonding and bridging networks are forms of social capital.
3. **Cultural Capital** – the values and approaches to life that have both economic and noneconomic implications, these include the cultural filter, and socialization processes that transmits values from the group to its members.
4. **Financial Capital** – the private or public money that is used for investment (using a financial tool to create additional value) rather than consumption.
5. **Political Capital**- the ability of a group to influence the distribution of resources within a social unit. Includes organization, connections, voice and power.

We are using an informal interview process with project partners, supporters, and store owners/managers to access capitals. By examining what each stakeholder brings to the table in a healthy corner store initiative, it is possible to identify critical components for success. While our evaluation strategy is still under development and our corner store projects are just launching, we believe that the Community Capitals approach can be instructive in evaluating how the presence or absence of different forms of capital can impact outcomes.

3.3 Supply

Ensuring supply is composed of three main areas of work: project area selection, engaging and working with store owners/managers, and securing stable distribution. Sourcing locally can add additional economic benefits, but the approach taken depends on opportunities available. For example, is a distributor willing to add small quantities for corner stores to larger orders from bigger customers? When securing a supply, it is important to be creative with finding the most economical approach to controlling costs.

3.4 Project Area Selection

Every person interviewed for this effort indicated that they used some form of food desert identification to determine where to conduct healthy corner store work. **The language in the 2008 federal Farm Bill defines a food desert as an “area in the United States with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower income neighborhoods and communities” (USDA, ERS, 2009).** Methods used for identifying food deserts can include broad aspects of accessibility - physical accessibility, economic accessibility, healthy accessibility and cultural accessibility. Food desert mapping can be quite sophisticated, for example, using spatial data in a GIS framework, or can be a community forum activity that uses a community asset mapping strategy. The USDA has conducted a literature review of food deserts

(<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/AP/AP036/AP036k.pdf>), in addition to developing some simple mapping tools (see Section “Links and Sources Consulted”). These resources can help start a community conversation.

3.5 Store Engagement

Selecting and building relationships with corner store owners and managers are critical for success. Prospective store owners and managers should be identified based on locations of need and proximity to existing customers who are currently underserved. **According to Kara Martin, Principal with *Urban Food Link*, there are a number of criteria for developing a strategy for store selection:**

- Community members currently shop at the location
- The business currently sells healthy items such as fresh fruits and vegetables
- The business accepts SNAP and/or WIC
- The store is located near a school
- The store is located in an area without a supermarket nearby
- The storeowner shows interest in the project by asking questions, requesting more information
- Consider working with established chain stores

Store owners and managers come from a variety of backgrounds and often have different metrics for deciding whether to participate in a healthy corner store initiative. What is important to remember when approaching any business owner or manager is that they are a businessperson first and foremost. Business owners will be concerned about profitability, impact on their bottom line, and whether participation will involve risk. Appealing to owners on the basis of civic importance and public health can be useful, but also be mindful of the business owner’s bottom line.

Keys to Store Owner Buy-In

- Build trust
- Make a purchase at the store
- Get a sense of the store owner’s personality and interests
- Remember that store owners are businesspeople
- Present any relevant market research
- Get to know their business model

3.5.1 Tips on Approaching Store Owners and Gaining Buy-In

Getting store owners to buy-in and participate requires a certain level of trust. Building a relationship with the store owners, often over multiple visits and conversations, can build trust. One interviewee suggested that it takes at least five visits to get a store owner on board. Another interviewee suggested that, if possible, community members should do the store visits. Initial conversations with the store owner can help to get sense of their mindset, personality, and perspective, often influenced by the store owner’s gender, age, and cultural background. Listening to the business owner can help organizers to learn about the neighborhood in question and make the business owner feel like organizers are genuinely interested in their business and

not simply imposing a program on them. Small gestures as simple as making purchases when visiting can help to build goodwill with store owners.

When talking strategy with a store owner, it can be helpful to be armed with research or to offer an approach to collecting data with the store owner's input on the potential market for nutritious food products (see section 4.1). **This initial research can also be part of the community engagement process.** If it can be demonstrated that there is unmet demand for certain products, this can persuade a business owner that integrating these new food products can be profitable. The experience of various healthy corner store initiative organizers has revealed that many store owners consider alcohol, tobacco products, and candy as their most profitable sale items and are reluctant to introduce new products with a questionable demand, especially if additional effort is required to stock these new products. Making a market-oriented case helps to persuade store owners.

According to JB Silvers, Professor at Case Western Reserve's Weatherhead School of Management and advisor to the Cleveland Healthy Corner Store Initiative, most corner stores do not employ the same sliding scale approaches to mark-up as grocery stores. Instead of adjusting, corner store owners often think in more simplistic terms that demand uniform mark up and demanding around 20% on all products they carry. **“Corner Stores won't accept ROI's [returns on investment] of 10%-15% on produce because they don't have the space or refrigeration to deal with low turnover. They are used to quick deals on liquor and snacks that require little to no effort. In the beginning, the challenge is to demonstrate stores can actually make a quick turn on any produce,”** said Silvers.

Another salient argument to make with store owners is that new food offerings will draw in new customers who will then make additional purchases. Just as some grocery stores sell 'loss leaders,' which are products that are not profitable but attract customers, store owners may be amenable to new efforts to get customers in the door. The convenience of picking up other items while in the store may bolster sales of other items.

3.5.2 Technical Assistance

Many healthy corner stores will require some degree of technical assistance to get up and running. Some key areas of concern include produce handling, ordering, and merchandising. One of the big reasons why technical assistance is often required is that corner store owners are deviating from their current business model to introduce new products. These new products may not be supported in the same way as current goods, such as packaged chips, where distributors will help with merchandizing, pricing and ordering. Therefore, this shift can require additional support and education.

If healthy corner stores are typically going to be stocking fruits and vegetables for the first time, store owners may be concerned about how to properly stock and handle produce. Unlike pre-packaged food products, fruits and vegetables are subject to quicker spoilage and often require refrigeration or other proper care. When proper training has not been conducted, some healthy corner store program organizers have noted that store owners will do things like pick off

portions of fruits and vegetables that appear to be browning or going bad instead of disposing of items that should no longer be sold.

Sometimes food distributors will conduct trainings on how to properly handle and stock their food products, so this is likely the best available resource for store owners to receive such training. If this is not an available option, sometimes convenience store associations, grocers associations, and other similar groups may be willing to conduct trainings, especially if a particular store is a member of such an organization. Other places to check are fruit and vegetable growers' associations or university Extension offices. Urban Food Link also has a helpful produce handling guide, merchandising advice, and other resources available online at: <https://catalyst.uw.edu/workspace/skt8/14501/101408>

3.6 Distribution

Individual healthy corner store programs often take different approaches to distribution. Most often this is a new product(s) or product line for the store, so owners/managers might need assistance in identifying potential distributors. What needs to be avoided is having the store owner purchase at retail prices from another retailer and resell these goods at a higher price in their store. The goal should be to set up a distribution channel that is economical and sustainable once the corner store project is finished. **While store owners/managers and project managers have to make their own judgments about what is available and what will work in their location, it can be useful to work with existing distribution channels. If a distributor can be identified who is committed to reaching new markets, this can be a win/win situation where distributors begin to get their product into new locations while the new products help to meet community needs.** In some cases, economies of scale can be reached by having distributors simply tack on extra product to larger orders and having small purchasers such as corner stores pick up deliveries from other, bigger customers. Finally, as mentioned above, distributors may offer technical assistance to store owners/managers on product handling and advice on purchasing, promoting and staging of goods.

Potential Distribution Options for Fruits and Vegetables

- Purchase from a wholesale or retail warehouse. This is a leading choice by corner stores because they are often more affordable at lower volumes. Products tend to have a shorter shelf-life, but are the most cost effective option.
- Purchase directly from individual farmers or producers. Often this is not a cost-effective option for farmers, but sometimes farmers will be willing to sell at a lower cost when existing relationships exist.
- Purchase directly from wholesale distributors. This option often involves coordination where a wholesaler will add additional, small quantities to larger orders placed by bigger purchasers.
- Cooperative purchasing. Groups of small stores can work to collectively purchase products (so they can split cases) and achieve better economies of scale.

3.7 Demand

Matching supply with demand includes three main areas of work: community needs assessment, nutrition education, and community engagement and marketing. Creating programming to stimulate demand should be tailored to the needs and characteristics of unique communities.

3.7.1 Community Needs Assessment and Customer Surveys

A community needs assessment can support a few areas of work in the new markets model. First, gaining an understanding of the current customers in corner stores and their preferences can create the baseline for project evaluation by store. **Further, knowing current customer preferences can help make the case for store owner engagement.** Conducting customer surveys can engage customers while capturing desired information that can help to demonstrate the existing demand for store owners and the purchasing habits of existing customers. There may be some reluctance on the part of store owners to have researchers surveying customers or customers may be unwilling to participate, but this kind of participation allows for researchers to collect a sample from the clientele and to get a full and accurate inventory of products being purchased. Taking an observational approach may seem less intrusive and allows researchers to assess the behavior of all customers without putting them on the spot. The biggest drawback of an observational approach is that it may be difficult for an observer to quickly log all purchases and it may be more labor intensive.

A broader community needs assessment can track potential customers by gauging current purchasing and dietary habits, as well as to identifying unmet demand. Allowing residents to tell researchers what food products they want helps to lend credence to suggestions being made to corner store owners by organizers and can help to determine specific offerings that will be most popular. The most common techniques for conducting community needs assessments are community surveys and/or interviews. Community needs assessments can be conducted through a number of different avenues, including random sampling through neighborhood organizations that have access to community members, non-profits who work in targeted communities, and religious institutions if they are widely attended by residents.

3.7.2 Nutrition Education

To drive demand, a number of healthy corner store initiatives conduct various forms of nutrition education in the communities served. Conducting nutritional education efforts can benefit healthy corner store communities in several key ways:

- Increasing awareness of the availability of nutritious foods in the community
- Raising awareness of healthy eating habits, exercise activities, and nutritional needs
- Providing information or demonstrations on how to prepare healthful meals

Communities have come up with innovative ways to address nutrition education. Some approaches have been as simple as providing healthy recipes in corner stores while others have involved in-store cooking demonstrations, body mass index (BMI) screenings in stores,

educational efforts in schools oriented towards children and their families, and nutrition and wellness seminars in the neighborhood. The best part of offering a nutrition education component is that it not only addresses education needs, but promotes purchasing and using the new healthy food products being offered in the corner store.

Another helpful aspect of conducting nutrition education efforts is that there are often numerous organizations willing to do pro bono programming. Often public health departments and SNAP educators do community education and outreach efforts as part of their routine operations. Many hospitals, doctors, non-profit organizations, and nutritionists have been engaged in nutrition education efforts spearheaded by successful healthy corner store initiatives and often these partnerships and the human and monetary capital they offer help to generate additional public awareness and networks for success.

3.7.3 Community Engagement & Marketing

Developing a plan for community engagement and marketing strategies can often be the definitive moment in a healthy corner store initiative. Without effective community engagement and marketing efforts, the project will fail to fully maximize awareness and participation.

The base of any community engagement and marketing strategy is to first understand the overall markets in the community and the customer base made up of community residents. Understanding demographic information, where pockets of people live, and the daily habits of where people live, work, and play will help organizers to understand how to most effectively reach these individuals.

Involving other community partners and organizations can help to build a better understanding of how to best reach people because of their knowledge of the people and groups within the community. A low-cost way to reach people is to focus campaign efforts on where these partners are already going to interact with their community members. Examples may include places like churches and local social service agencies.

Some of the most frequently utilized engagement and marketing approaches include mailings, coupon distribution, discount or reward card promotions, revamping window advertising in participating corner stores, and doing door-to-door distribution of flyers. When possible, some corner store initiatives utilize the assistance of graphic artists and marketing professionals who may be available for consulting to develop a local brand. Consistent use of an identifiable logo can help to create greater recognition of an initiative through the consistent display of the same visual representation. One healthy corner store initiative held a contest for youth to design the logo, which engaged school age children and resulted in a grassroots campaign. Market materials can be posted in areas frequented by potential customers, such as bus stops, local agencies, and libraries.

Other steps can be as simple as rearranging the interior of healthy corner stores to focus greater attention on new healthy products. While grocer associations and trade organizations may be the best people to consult regarding specific enhancements and marketing strategies, some stores have seen positive results by offering things like small, packaged fruit and vegetable

snacks near cash registers, prominently displaying baskets of fruit, and putting new products near the front of the store.

4. What's Next?

As healthy corner store initiatives proliferate around the United States there will be tremendous opportunities for collaboration and additional learning. Some of the most potent next steps will be to learn from the lessons of others and to foster a greater spirit of collaboration. Our work in this area has revealed a remarkable willingness on the part of healthy corner store groups to share their lessons, offer advice, and issues warnings about potential pitfalls. Taking the time to engage other groups who have been in a similar situation and who have the wisdom of their experiences can be a tremendous asset for new corner store initiatives or even existing corner store initiatives looking to grow and improve.

While it is impossible to say what the next great breakthroughs may be in this field of work, they will proliferate most quickly when groups are networking and sharing information. With this in mind, we are using our own pilot projects to monitor what works and what does not work. We will be monitoring the progress in our urban and rural sites alike and seeing what differences exist, what barriers may be different, and how challenges are best met.

Links and Sources Consulted

- Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy – Healthy Cornerstores Project
 - Provides helpful background information on the mission and structure of the program.
 - http://www.iatp.org/localFoods/project_healthyCornerstores.cfm
- Healthy Corner Stores Network
 - HCSN is a not-for-profit organization supporting efforts to increase the availability and sales of healthy, fresh, affordable foods through small-scale stores in underserved communities. Their website includes a FAQ, links to additional resources, academic articles on healthy corner stores, and quarterly corner stores issue briefs.
 - <http://healthycornerstores.org/>
- The Food Trust – Healthy Corner Store Initiative
 - The website for this program features briefs on existing programs, best practices, and educational tools to help create greater awareness both about the problem of food deserts and ways education can be utilized to improve eating habits and nutrition.
 - <http://www.thefoodtrust.org/php/programs/corner.store.campaign.php>
- Rural Grocery Store Sustainability Initiative
 - This program, sponsored by Kansas State University, confronts issues of business development, public health, and community sustainability by identifying and developing models to sustain retail sources of food for rural Kansas citizens. One research area is on ways to attract and sustain local grocers who offer fresh, healthy food products to rural communities.
 - <http://www.ruralgrocery.org/about/>
- Obama Administration’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative
 - Information on a federal program to providing financing to help bring grocery stores and other healthy food retailers to underserved urban and rural communities.
 - <http://healthycornerstores.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Obama-Administration-Details-Healthy-Food-Financing-Initiative.pdf>
- Food Environment Atlas
 - This resource through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service offers county-level statistics on food choices, health and well-being, and community characteristics.
 - <http://www.ers.usda.gov/foodatlas/>
- Healthy Stores
 - Healthy Stores is a not-for-profit organization promoting access to healthy food choices. Their website includes sample materials used in real healthy corner store programs and strategic information about successful programs.
 - <http://www.healthystores.org/>
- Local Harvest
 - Local Harvest is a network of organic local food growers. Their website provides information on locating farmers markets, family farms, and other sources of sustainably grown food in various communities.

- <http://www.localharvest.org/>
- Delridge Healthy Corner Store Project: A Toolkit for Community Organizers & Store Owners
 - A resource manual for planning, establishing, and operating healthy corner store programs.
 - http://www.healthycornerstores.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/Delridge_HCS_Toolkit.pdf
- Market Makeovers
 - An online resource about the process of transforming small corner stores to carry healthier food choices.
 - <http://www.marketmakeovers.org/>
- Neighborhood Groceries: New Access to Healthy Food in Low-Income Communities
 - A report chronicling potential market-based solutions to food access issues from California Food Policy Advocates.
 - <http://www.cfpa.net/Grocery.PDF>

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