

Healthy Foods, Strong Communities

*Fresh
fruits and
veggies
are good
for more
than just
your
health.*

By Rebecca
Flournoy

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In the 1960s and 1970s, when white, middle-class families left urban centers for homes in the suburbs, supermarkets fled with them, taking jobs, tax revenues and their offerings of healthy, affordable foods. The lack of local access to healthy foods makes it difficult for families who remain in low-income urban communities to maintain a well-balanced, nutritious diet. With limited transportation options, these families must resort to purchasing unhealthy foods from nearby fast food restaurants or local corner stores. These small, corner stores, though more convenient, generally offer fewer healthy foods, are poorly maintained and charge higher prices, sometimes as much as 49 percent higher than those of supermarkets. Their selection consists mainly of canned and processed foods and very little, if any, fresh meat and produce.

Many studies have documented the disparity in the number of supermarkets in poor communities of color, compared to wealthier, whiter communities. For example, a study by the [Center for Food and Justice](#) at the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute found that middle- and upper-income communities in Los Angeles County have twice as many supermarkets per capita as low-income communities; the same study found that predominantly white communities have three times the supermarkets of predominantly black communities, and nearly twice those of predominantly Latino communities. A study of several states found that wealthy neighborhoods had over three times as many supermarkets as low-income neighborhoods.

While individuals make choices about their eating and exercise habits, the environment in which they live affects their choices. According to research published by the American Journal of Public Health, African Americans living in neighborhoods with at least one supermarket were more likely to meet dietary guidelines for fruit and vegetable consumption and fat intake than African Americans living in neighborhoods without supermarkets. Having more supermarkets in the neighborhood resulted in even greater

fruit and vegetable consumption.

Conversely, the lack of access to healthy foods can have adverse effects on individuals' health. A diet poor in fruits and vegetables increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, cancer and other illnesses that disproportionately affect people of color. Poor dietary behaviors also contribute to the obesity epidemic, which is increasing at an alarming rate nationwide.

The good news, however, is that there are now many strategies being implemented across the country to address the lack of access to healthy food in low-income communities. There is proof that the challenges to increasing healthy food access (from changing businesses' misperceptions about local purchasing power to addressing corner store owners' fears about stocking new food items that might not sell) can be overcome. Communities and policymakers are developing innovative solutions to the "grocery gap." The results are profits for food retailers and social, economic and health benefits for residents, their families and their communities.

Creating Community Benefits

Grocery stores, along with other types of retail and services like banks, pharmacies and restaurants, are essential components of livable and well-functioning communities and can enhance their broader economic and social health.

Distressed, high-poverty communities that have experienced years of population and job loss and physical and economic decline benefit from new grocery store developments because the stores can contribute to the area's economic development and revitalization. The stores create jobs for local residents, capture dollars currently being spent outside of the community, recycle money in the local economy and increase local sales tax revenue. Plus, large grocery stores and supermarkets can serve as high volume "anchors" that generate increased foot traffic, drawing in other retail stores that sell complementary goods and services.

New stores and supermarkets that locate in disinvested communities reap benefits as well. They often have a competitive advantage because there is a density of purchasing power, limited competition and an available labor

force. Because they are located in low-income communities of color, these stores also have the opportunity to understand how to better meet the needs of the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the suburbs.

But not all communities have the opportunity to bring in large stores or supermarkets. Some choose instead to focus on increasing or improving healthy food options at existing smaller grocery or specialty stores, ethnic markets or convenience or corner stores. By turning a smaller store into a community asset, local merchants can build positive relationships with residents and contribute to the community's revitalization. This strategy may be more feasible in communities that face significant development challenges or that wish to see more immediate improvements in the local food supply. The challenge lies in convincing stores to change their merchandise selection. Produce, unlike chips and sodas, is perishable; therefore, to make a profit, corner store owners must have the capacity to stock fresh produce and to move it quickly.

Community-Driven Solutions

Some communities have struggled for years to bring a grocery store to their neighborhoods. Obtaining funding, convincing retailers to invest and securing land in densely populated areas are a few of the challenges they face. But there are increasingly more examples of how states and communities across the country have overcome them. Community development corporations, local and state government and organized community residents can all play important roles in addressing these challenges and making a new grocery store a reality. Understanding the obstacles and collaborating with stakeholders are two critical components to developing sustainable food retail markets.

In Harlem, two community organizations – the East Harlem Abyssinian Triangle (EHAT) and the [Abyssinian Development Corporation](#) (ADC) – worked for 10 years to bring a supermarket to the community. The neighborhood, consisting largely of Latinos and African Americans, is home to a plethora of fast food restaurants, small bodegas with a scant amount of healthy food options and a few small local grocers. Public transportation exists, but residents who wanted to shop for moderately priced fruits and vegetables often had to travel up to one hour by bus to find a suitable

grocery store, an option that was either difficult or impossible for seniors and women traveling with small children.

Although the majority of residents welcomed the store, its development faced challenges along the way. Small local grocers protested it, worried that they would be driven out of business by the new supermarket. EHAT worked with the community to advocate for the development, and eventually the protests subsided. EHAT and ADC secured project financing by leveraging three dollars of private sector funds for every dollar of public funding. They also negotiated an agreement with Pathmark to guarantee that at least 75 percent of the new jobs would go to local residents.

The store, located on Harlem's 125th Street, has been extremely successful. Data from 1999 showed that the supermarket met or exceeded industry averages in almost every category. An in-store bank branch opened in the supermarket, providing residents with a safe, secure environment to do their banking. The store now has one of the largest produce departments in New York City. Since the first Pathmark opened its doors seven years ago, another opened in 2005 – 20 blocks away on 145th Street. The second store created about 200 jobs, with three-quarters of its workers from the community.

In another community across the country, African-American and Latino residents had hoped for years that the city council would allocate funds to improve their West Fresno, California, neighborhood. Similar to existing small stores in Harlem, the corner stores in the area charged high prices for a limited food selection, and many residents had to depend on the bus to access better selections, quality and prices available at supermarkets in other, distant parts of the city. In 1995 concerned residents came together to spur development and to prioritize what they wanted most from the city. The construction of a supermarket was at the top of their list. Together with the Affordable Housing Coalition, which includes churches and community groups, residents began advocating for a supermarket. They held news conferences and demanded that the city council set aside money from its \$11 million Community Development Block Grant to build a shopping center in their community. Over several years, these concerned residents attended public hearings, met with city council members and other public officials, turned out

hundreds of residents at city council meetings and worked with the media to get coverage of their struggle. Once the supermarket campaign gained political support, the coalition continued its advocacy efforts to ensure that the city allocated redevelopment funds, helped local government officials negotiate with local property owners to secure the land for the site, got a police sub-station built to ensure security at the shopping center and urged the city to approve final zoning for the market.

Four years later, in 1999, the West Fresno Food Maxx opened. It has been serving the community for more than six years and provides a good selection of high quality, affordable produce and other healthy foods. A health education center, a locally owned Mexican restaurant, a chain video store and a variety of other retail outlets now surround the supermarket.

[Literacy for Environmental Justice](#) (LEJ), a community-based nonprofit organization in Bayview Hunters Point, a low-income community of color in southeast San Francisco, launched the Good Neighbor Program, a partnership between Bayview's community-based organizations, businesses and city government to improve the quality of foods available there. They began by surveying local residents about their shopping habits and desires, to determine interest in buying healthy food from a local corner store. The program developed criteria that define "good" store neighbors – including devoting at least 10 percent of inventory to fresh produce and an additional 10 to 20 percent of inventory to other healthy foods, accepting food stamps, limiting tobacco and alcohol promotion and adhering to environmental and health standards. Stores that agree to comply with these criteria receive technical assistance and training, energy efficiency upgrades, marketing assistance and grants to make initial purchases of healthy foods and to test how the items sell. LEJ also engages in outreach and promotion through activities such as nutrition education and food tasting, encouraging community residents to patronize the stores. The program is now being expanded to other stores.

Supportive Policies

In 2003, Pennsylvania created the nation's first statewide economic development initiative aimed at improving access to healthy food in underserved rural and urban communities.

Since then, its legislature has devoted \$100 million of Governor Ed Rendell's \$2.3 billion economic stimulus package to agriculture projects, including the development of grocery stores and farmers' markets. At the same time, the governor created a leveraged fund, the [Fresh Food Financing Initiative](#) (or FFFI), which supports the development of new stores in underserved urban and rural communities across Pennsylvania.

The Fresh Food Financing Initiative was awarded \$20 million by the governor, money that is being leveraged with \$60 million in private bank loans and New Markets Tax Credits to form an \$80 million financing pool for fresh food retailers that enter communities underserved by conventional financial institutions. The initiative provides pre-development grants and loans, land acquisition and equipment financing, capital grants for project funding gaps and construction and permanent finance. The first supermarket to be funded by FFFI was the ShopRite in southwest Philadelphia, which opened in September 2004 and created 258 jobs, over half of which went to local residents.

In California, PolicyLink, along with the [California Center for Public Health Advocacy](#) and the [California Pan-Ethnic Health Network](#) sponsored a bill (Senate Bill 1329), authored by Senator Elaine Alquist (D-CA), to address healthy food access. Modeled after the Pennsylvania initiative, the California bill, known as the Healthy Food Access Act, proposed to bring together state and private dollars to create an Innovations Fund that would provide one-time assistance to help communities develop creative, economically sustainable models to meet the healthy food needs of underserved residents.

The bill garnered support from 36 organizations, representing a wide range of community-based and health organizations, economic development groups, grocery associations, local governments and private sector supporters. It passed two policy committees in the California Senate, the Senate Appropriations Committee, the Senate Floor and two Assembly policy committees before being voted down in the Assembly Appropriations Committee this fall.

Despite the setback, the process built a strong and growing

coalition around the issue, increased policymakers' awareness and interest in improving healthy food access and educated the public about the need and potential for positive change to make the healthy choice an easy choice in low-income communities.

Everyone should be able to make affordable, healthy food choices. Community organizations, policymakers, concerned residents, business leaders and other stakeholders can join together to identify and implement innovative solutions to improve access to healthy food. These solutions improve the health of residents, while also bringing a range of economic and social benefits, helping to ensure that all residents live in communities of choice and opportunity.

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Rebecca Flournoy is senior program associate at [PolicyLink](#). She leads a project designed to improve access to grocery stores and other healthy food retailers in underserved communities and advises coalitions on advocacy strategy. She is author of Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: Improving Access and Opportunities Through Food Retailing, on which this article is based. The report is available at www.policylink.org/Research/HealthyFood.

Small-Scale Healthy Food Options

There are many options for improving healthy food access, each with a unique set of advantages to residents and community health. **Farmers' markets** (www.localharvest.org) provide a public space that supports social interaction and can help support small-scale farmers while providing fresh, high quality food to residents, and can serve as small business incubators when the markets provide opportunities for residents to sell items such as baked goods or other products. **Community-supported agriculture** (www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa), where participants purchase shares for a portion of the crops from a farm at the beginning of a growing season in exchange for regular deliveries of produce, supports small farmers and provides high-quality produce. **Community gardens** (www.communitygarden.org) provide opportunities for environmental education and can

improve neighborhood green space.

Resources

Healthy People 2000

www.crisny.org/health/us/health7.html

The Persistence of L.A.'s Grocery Gap: The Need for a New Food Policy and Approach to Market Development. The Center for Food and Justice at the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute. Los Angeles, CA: Occidental College, 2002.

“Communities and Health Policy: A Pathway For Change,” by Judith Bell and Marion Standish. *Health Affairs*, 24, no. 2, 2005.

Building Stronger Communities for Better Health. PolicyLink, October 2004.

Stimulating Supermarket Development: A New Day for Philadelphia, 2003.

www.thefoodtrust.org

Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative

www.trfund.com

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