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Lima, Ohio, Goes Mobile to Fight Malnutrition.

The city is taking fruits and vegetables on the road in an effort to combat obesity in its "food deserts." It's part of a growing trend of cities developing healthy eating initiatives.

Tired of near-bottom health rankings and growing obesity, the city of Lima, Ohio, is taking fresh produce directly to 18,000 residents on a converted bus.

That's the number of people in the 38,000-person metro area who reside in a "low-access community," where at least 500 people or 33 percent of a U.S. Census tract live more than a mile from a large grocery store. In rural areas, the U.S. Department of Agriculture definition of a so-called "food desert" extends to more than 10 miles.

Limited access to healthy foods has dragged down annual health standings, in which Lima's Allen County ranked 83rd out of 88 in a 2013 state survey, says Mayor David Berger. In Allen County, some 77 percent of adults are overweight or obese along with 32 percent of youth. Nearly 60 percent of adults and two-thirds of youth don't consume vegetables on a weekly basis. With just 12 full-service groceries serving the area and 260 convenience stores, it's not surprising, Berger said at a recent meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

"It's much easier to buy alcohol than an apple, and I think that's pretty telling," Berger said.

With the help of a $100,000 grant from the American Beverage Association, Lima took a donated bus from the regional transit authority, gutted it and rebuilt it with food racks and sales system that allows people to use credit cards or food stamps to purchase locally grown produce. In September the bus started making regular stops two days a week to places like churches, barbershops and nursing homes, averaging 77 customers and the retail equivalent of about $500 a day so far. The service is now running on an operating budget of $75,000 a year.

Lima is by no means alone in its problems or its solutions. One in three children in the U.S. are overweight or obese, a steady increase over the last quarter of a century, said Craig Moscetti, an associate for policy and programs at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Leadership for Healthy Communities. Cities and states are increasingly viewing the issue beyond the lens of public health, Moscetti added. "This is not just a health issue," he said. "It is a productivity issue. It's an economic issue."

There are some signs that the message is getting through, if only faintly: obesity rates decreased slightly in 19 states accordingh to an August 2013 Centers for Disease and Control report.

In Lima, the goal is to expand services and increase their frequency throughout the county through partnerships with community groups. They also want to persuade convenience stores to stock their shelves with fresh produce and allow people to use food stamp benefits to pay for them—an increasingly popular effort among cities nationwide.

In Philadelphia, a city with a serious obesity problem that got on board with converting corner stores

years ago, more than 350 locations serve fresh produce. Baton Rouge, which started a mobile food market last May, has established six corner-store partnerships. But the city has tried to combine the corner store initiative with business development, offering classes for participating stores, assistance in data collection and upgrading technology to accept food stamps, said Mayor Kip Holden. "Having a brother die of a stroke, a mother die of a heart attack at age 51, this has become a personal mission," he said.

A new farm bill, which is entering final debate in Congress, will likely cut the food stamps program by billions but include hundreds of millions to encourage use of the program at farmers' markets and money to encourage retail investment in "food deserts."

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