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NLC: A Snapshot of Healthy Corner Store Initiatives.

Local governments across the country are coming up with creative solutions to ensure all residents have easy access to healthy, affordable foods.

For many Americans, buying fresh fruits and vegetables is as simple as walking a few blocks to the neighborhood grocery store or getting in the car and driving a short distance to the supermarket. There are many, mostly low-income people however, who do not have such easy access to healthy, affordable foods.¹ For these Americans, the long distance between home and supermarket, coupled with a lack of public transportation options and/or privately-owned transportation, limits their ability to maintain a healthy diet. Communities in which residents are unable to easily overcome the geographic disparity between the location of their residence and healthy food retailers have increasingly been described as food deserts. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food deserts as areas in which “at least 500 people and/or at least 33 percent of the census tract’s population must reside more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store.”

An estimated 23.5 million people in the U.S. live in communities without access to healthy foods.⁴ The USDA has developed the Food Access Research Atlas to help identify such areas. Within these areas, the primary food retailers tend to be small food stores, i.e. convenience stores, corner stores, small rural markets, bodegas, etc. A study done in 2008 by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, PolicyLink, and the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research found that there is a 20 percent higher prevalence of obesity and a 23 percent higher prevalence of diabetes among adults living near abundant convenience stores, compared to those who live near supermarkets and produce vendors.

In response, city and community leaders are promoting healthy neighborhoods by encouraging small food shops to provide nutritious, affordable options for residents living in food deserts as a means to address the lack of access to healthy and affordable foods and contribute to improved nutrition and health outcomes. Many city-led or city-supported programs nationwide focus on enabling corner stores and smaller markets located in food deserts to provide healthy foods. These programs vary in scope, geography, the types of incentives they provide, and the policies they utilize to improve access and consumption of healthy foods. For instance, programs that are larger in scope are able to encourage small food markets to sell healthy foods by offering training, marketing materials, technical assistance, refrigeration equipment, and even vouchers for fruits and vegetables. Through incentives, these programs encourage stores to add new, healthier items to the shelves. Other programs work with community leaders and interested small food shop owners to make healthier options more visible in stores and more available to the public. In addition to increasing access to healthy foods, these programs can promote neighborhood economic development because they include business development components for participating store owners. Finally, these programs also encourage community development through engagement with neighborhood groups and citizens.

This guide highlights the efforts of four cities:

- Tupelo, Mississippi

- St. Louis, Missouri
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Minneapolis, Minnesota

Each of these cities is taking action to increase access to healthy and affordable food in their communities. The city programs highlighted here vary in size and scope and are intended to provide a snapshot of the range of opportunities that city leaders have to address issues of healthy food access in their communities. Tupelo, Mississippi's Health on a Shelf program provides incentives for small food owners to prominently display healthy food options in their stores. The City of St. Louis' Healthy Corner Store Project necessitates direct engagement between local government departments, the community, and corner stores to increase nutrition education and expand access to healthy and affordable foods. As part of the Get Healthy Philly Initiative, the city and its partners work with over 600 local corner stores to provide healthier food options. And since 2008, when the City of Minneapolis passed an ordinance requiring small food stores to carry at least five varieties of fresh produce, the city and its partners have worked with these small stores on education, planning, and implementation to provide healthier food options to residents.

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