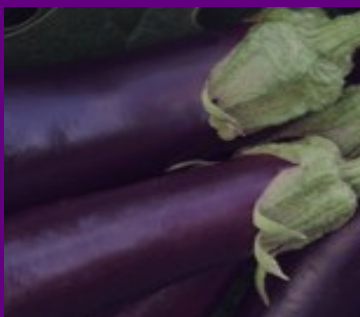


# Healthy Corner Stores for Healthy New Orleans Neighborhoods

A Toolkit for neighborhood groups that want to  
take action to improve their food environment



*February 2009*



This toolkit was prepared by Sarah Custer, with input from community leaders in New Orleans and healthy corner store advocates nationwide.

Sarah Custer is a Fellow with the Congressional Hunger Center. For more information, contact her at [scuster@hungercenter.org](mailto:scuster@hungercenter.org).

# Contents

Introduction	4
Obesity in New Orleans and Louisiana	4
<i>Obesity Fact Sheet</i>	4
Access to Healthy Food	6
Role of Small Neighborhood Stores	7
Shopping Patterns	7
<i>What Does Healthy Food Mean?</i>	7
<i>Results from a Food Purchase and Preference Survey</i>	8
Challenges for Corner Stores	9
Store Infrastructure	9
Profitability of Unhealthy Items	9
Prices	9
Vendor Contracts	10
Supplying Healthy Foods	10
Healthy Corner Store Strategies	11
<i>Five Reasons Why Working with Corner Stores Is a Good Idea in New Orleans</i>	11
Start Focused: Work with Store Owners You Know and Trust	11
Let Your Corner Store Know That There Is Demand in the Neighborhood	12
<i>Neighborhood Survey Tips</i>	12
Help Store Owners Identify Sources of Healthy Food	13
<i>Buying Fresh, New Orleans-Grown Produce</i>	13
Ensure That Healthy Foods Are Affordable	14
<i>How Changes in the WIC Food Package Can Benefit Your Neighborhood</i>	15
Help Change the Feel of the Store: Improve Infrastructure and Appearance	15
Promote Healthy Foods in the Store and Conduct Community Outreach	16
<i>Getting the Word Out</i>	17
Patronize Your Corner Store	18
Conclusion	19



# Introduction

The lack of access to affordable, healthy foods is a problem in many New Orleans neighborhoods. In some parts of the city it's much easier to buy fast food than it is to buy fresh fruit. This limited availability of healthy food can lead to serious health problems.

The term "food desert" is often used to describe areas with few food retailers. However, New Orleans, like other urban areas across the country, has an extensive network of small food stores – although the majority of them stock mostly snacks and drinks with low nutritional value.

Changing the neighborhood food environment allows people to make better choices about what they eat. *Community food security* is an approach that aims to build a community's food resources to meet the needs of all residents, in a manner that empowers people to be self-reliant and confident about implementing the changes they wish to see. This toolkit is intended for neighborhood associations and other community-based groups that want to bring



fresh produce and other healthy foods to corner stores.

## OBESITY IN NEW ORLEANS AND LOUISIANA

The United States is facing a true epidemic as obesity rates steadily increase. Patterns of obesity disproportionately affect low-income

### OBESITY FACT SHEET:

- Louisiana has the 4<sup>th</sup> highest rate of obesity in the nation.
- Since 1990, Louisiana's obesity rate has increased from 12.3% to 30.8% of the population
- Drinking one 12-ounce can of soda every day for a year will cause a weight gain of 9 pounds
- Eating one snack-sized (1.5 ounce) bag of potato chips every day for a year will cause a weight gain of 15 pounds
- In New Orleans:
  - 30.5% of adults are classified as obese compared with 22% nationwide
  - Only 20.6% of adults consume five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day
  - 40% drink soft drinks daily
  - 31% eat snack foods daily

Sources: Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals; CDC BRFSS; Weinsier RL et al. article in the International Journal of Obesity Related Metabolic Disorders (1993. 17: 693-700).

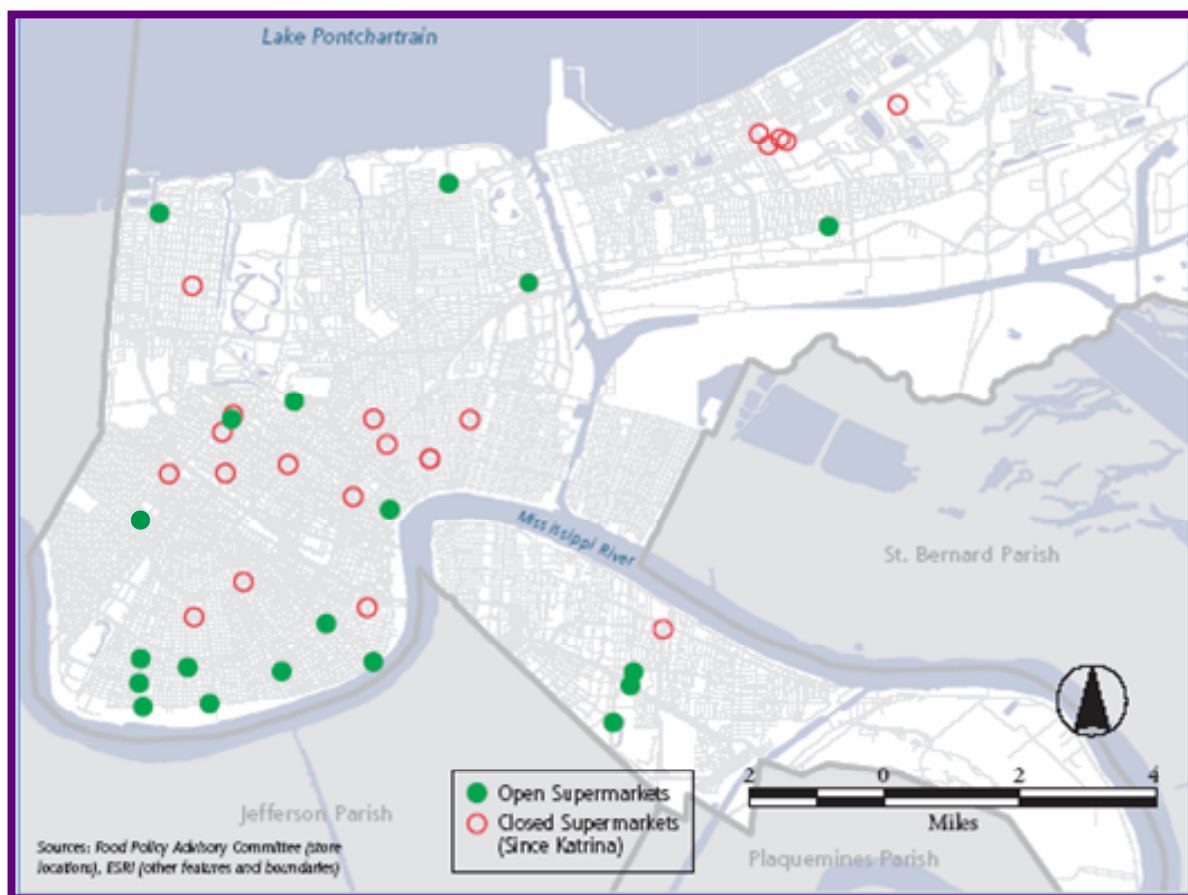
people and African Americans, widening health disparities faced by these groups.

Obesity increases a person's risk for developing serious health conditions, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, some cancers and hypertension. The obesity epidemic is affecting not only adults, but children as well: almost one third of children are overweight or obese, and many are being diagnosed with adult diseases. If current trends continue, this generation of children is predicted have shorter life expectancies than their parents for the first time in this country's history.

Louisiana was ranked the least healthy state by the *2008 America's Health Rankings* report, in large part due to residents' unhealthy diets. The

State of Louisiana has been consistently ranked among the worst in the country in terms of its residents' obesity rates. In New Orleans, over 30 percent of people are classified as obese. If those who are overweight are added to the group, the number increases to over 60 percent. Almost one in three adults in New Orleans has been diagnosed with high blood pressure.

Consuming too many calories and not getting enough physical activity are most commonly cited as the primary causes of obesity. However, while personal responsibility is a part of the equation, the obesity epidemic should not be viewed as being simply caused by a collection of individuals who are making bad decisions. People's choices about the food they eat are in



Prepared by the Louisiana Public Health Institute for the New Orleans Food Policy Advisory Committee. Current as of January 2009

large part influenced by their environment. For example, many people in New Orleans may choose not to walk to work or school because their neighborhood lacks adequate sidewalks, or because they are concerned about safety. Similarly, people may choose to eat fast food because in many New Orleans neighborhoods, fast food and high-calorie snacks are the only options available.

Working with corner stores and other small food stores to help them bring healthy food into the community can be a successful way to create an environment where people are able to make healthy choices.

#### ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

Several studies have confirmed that people buy food that is readily available in their community, and that improving access to healthy food significantly increases consumption of fruits and vegetables. One report states that for every additional supermarket in a census tract, African American residents consume 32 percent more fruits and vegetables. Unfortunately, many New Orleans neighborhoods do not have a full-service supermarket. Access to nutritious food was a problem before Hurricane Katrina, and since then it has only gotten worse: in 2005, there were 38 supermarkets in the city, while today there are

only 19. The average number of residents per supermarket has increased from 12,000 pre-Katrina to 18,000 today – which is more than twice the national average. If we add to the equation the unequal geographic distribution of the stores, the picture begins to look rather bleak, especially since many households do not have access to a car, and public transportation routes are not very extensive.

Given these realities, corner stores are the places where some people “make groceries” most frequently. Several studies associate the presence of corner stores with higher obesity rates. If these stores stock nutritious items such as fresh fruits and vegetables, they can instead become a valuable neighborhood asset, transforming the community into one that supports healthy eating.





# Role of Small Neighborhood Stores



Corner stores have long been an integral part of New Orleans history and culture. They are spaces where neighbors can run into each other and chat, building a community's social capital. People remember the stores as the only places that allowed families to buy food on credit in times of need – and some still continue that practice.

Many corner store owners have been in their neighborhood for years and care about their customers. Tulane University interviews with twelve corner store owners and managers throughout the city found that most had worked at their store for over 10 years. Neighborhood stores contribute to their communities through more than just product sales; store owners mentioned that they often make donations to local schools, churches and police departments, they give food away when people are not able to afford it, and they sponsor neighborhood events.

## SHOPPING PATTERNS

In the context of a food environment with few and unevenly distributed supermarkets, New Orleans corner stores are the place where many households shop for food most frequently. A

## WHAT DOES HEALTHY FOOD MEAN?

When talking about “healthy food” in corner stores, what does that mean? Here are some examples of healthy options you may want to bring to your corner store:

- Fresh fruits and vegetables
- Frozen fruits and vegetables
- Low-sodium or unsweetened canned fruits and vegetables
- Dried fruit and nuts
- Whole wheat bread, bagels, pasta and other grains
- Brown rice
- Low-fat or skim milk, yogurt and other dairy products
- 100% fruit juice
- Low-sugar cereals
- Lean meats and seafood
- Light dressings and condiments
- Water

Talk to your neighbors about what the benefits of choosing these foods are, and what they would like to see in their neighborhood stores.

Tulane University survey of low-income New Orleans residents found that they shop at corner stores an average of 14 times a month. Small neighborhood stores are within walking distance for most people, while the majority of those surveyed reported that they live more than 3

“Corner stores play a big role in the community. It’s where neighbors gather and talk, where you meet new people... Yes, I run a business, but I look at it as a human being: my customers are no different from me and I treat them with respect. We build friendships, it’s like a family.”

– Ray Khalaileh, *Jimmy’s Grocery*

miles away from a full-service supermarket – and many do not own cars.

Corner stores, however, tend to carry predominantly “junk food” and other processed foods that are high in sugar, fat and sodium. Not only do neighborhood residents shop at these stores, but before and after school, kids often stop by the nearest corner store to buy snacks. When interviewed, corner store owners and managers reported that an average of more than 20 students shopped at the stores each day, with stores located in close proximity to schools reporting much higher numbers.

In addition, almost all corner stores in New Orleans sell alcohol and tobacco; epidemiological

studies link sales of alcohol with increased crime rates. If we want to help create a healthier environment in our neighborhoods, working with corner stores to help them stock healthy and affordable food is an excellent place to start.



Food store in Philadelphia participating in the Food Trust's Corner Store Campaign.

#### RESULTS FROM A NEW ORLEANS FOOD PURCHASE AND PREFERENCE SURVEY

303 low-income New Orleans residents were surveyed about their shopping patterns at corner stores. Here are some of the results:

- Respondents shop at their local corner store an average of 14 times a month;
- 15% of respondents live on the same block as a corner store and 59% live only a few blocks away from a corner store;
- 66% of respondents usually walk to get to the store;
- Respondents reporting that their neighborhood corner store sells:
  - Bananas: 31%
  - Apples: 27%
  - Oranges: 24%
  - Strawberries: 10%
  - Peaches: 10%
  - Pears: 8%
  - Bell peppers: 33%
  - Tomatoes: 27%
  - Broccoli: 9%
  - Greens: 8%
  - Carrots: 7%
  - Okra: 6%

The Prevention Research Center at Tulane University, 2007. Survey by Randi Sokol and Thomas Farley, MD, MPH.



## Challenges for Corner Stores



Stocking fresh produce and other healthy foods may not be as easy as it sounds for small stores. Many corner store owners care about their community and are concerned about the well-being of their customers. However, they face several constraints when making decisions about which items to sell.

### STORE INFRASTRUCTURE

When thinking of a corner store, an image of cramped space and tightly-packed shelves with all types of food, toiletry, and cleaning products often comes to mind. Given the small size of these stores, shelf space is a limited and valuable resource. One fourth of the store owners and managers interviewed by Tulane mentioned that they would like to stock more fresh produce, but were constrained by the amount of space available in the store.

While some healthy food options do not require refrigeration (such as bananas and whole grain bread), many others should be kept cool to maximize shelf life. Investing in additional refrigeration units to accommodate produce is an expense that small food stores may find difficult to incur, especially if they are unsure of

the profit they will derive from selling those new items.

### PROFITABILITY OF UNHEALTHY ITEMS

What store owners *do* know is which of their current set of products sell the most and which are profitable now. Without any exceptions, all of the store operators interviewed reported that they make most of their money from a mix of liquor, beer, cigarettes, soda, candy, chips, and cookies. When asked what would happen to their profits if they stopped stocking snacks like potato chips or soft drinks like Coke and Pepsi, all twelve owners and managers interviewed by Tulane stated that they would suffer great losses of money and customers – one third said that they would have to close their store.

### PRICES

Unlike large supermarkets, corner stores cannot rely on a high volume of sales to stay in business. Their operational capacity does not allow them to take advantage of economies of scale: they purchase products in smaller quantities, so they generally have to pay more per item than larger retailers – and pass higher prices on to consumers.



Families with limited incomes face difficult decisions about what foods to buy. When offering healthy items such as fresh produce, it is important that corner stores work to keep prices reasonable to attract more sales. Excessively high prices can result in low turnover and eventually loss of merchandise due to spoilage.

#### **VENDOR CONTRACTS**

Corner stores have contracts with snack food and soft drink vendors such as Frito Lay, Little Debbie, Pepsi, and Coca-Cola. Terms and conditions vary, but in general, they offer attractive deals for store owners. Vendors stock the stores directly: it is very convenient to have deliveries made on a regular basis and for no fee.

Processed snack vendors compete to capture the most visible shelf space, and by doing this can crowd out other types of food. Soft drink companies provide the refrigeration units for the

corner stores, with the condition that no other items be stored in the coolers. This helps explain why many corner stores carry the same items, or why chips, cookies and soda are prominently displayed, while we may have to walk to the back of the store to find the milk and bread. This can also shed light on why the refrigeration units that store soda usually look new and inviting, while stores that sell produce may rely on old fridges for the fruits and vegetables, since the owners have to pay for those units themselves.

#### **SUPPLYING HEALTHY FOODS**

While most soft drinks and snack foods sold at corner stores are easy to keep in stock, it is more difficult for small neighborhood store owners and operators to obtain fresh produce. Some large wholesalers are not willing to sell to corner stores because they do not meet their minimum case requirements. Other wholesalers charge fees for delivery, increasing the sale price of the produce items. When interviewed by Tulane, almost half of the store owners that sold fresh produce (often in limited quantities and with little variety) indicated that they did not have any vendors deliver the fruits and vegetables, but that they purchased it themselves from supermarkets, wholesale stores like Sam's Club, or in two cases, from farmers' markets.



# Healthy Corner Store Strategies

## FIVE REASONS WHY WORKING WITH CORNER STORES IS A GOOD IDEA IN NEW ORLEANS

1. Most households can easily get to a corner store
2. Corner stores are *already present* – improvements take work, but are affordable and can start now
3. Independently-owned stores have the flexibility to change their product mix
4. Corner store owners and your neighbors already have established relationships
5. Corner stores can become valuable neighborhood assets and contribute to community revitalization

Given the realities of the food landscape in New Orleans, there is a great need for innovative ways to increase local healthy food retailing. Attracting supermarkets – especially to now closed locations where they operated prior to Hurricane Katrina – is a priority in many areas, and rightly so: supermarkets have a wide selection of goods, generally competitive prices, and they create many jobs. However, because of their size and business model, large, full-service supermarkets are often the hardest to attract. This is where corner stores can help fill the gap left by the absence of other types of food stores.

Access to nutritious and affordable food should be a basic right for all people. Be it the result of

Katrina, inauspicious market studies or grocery redlining, the reality is that many families in New Orleans find themselves in underserved communities. When the market does not provide access to healthy food, communities can assume leadership to change their neighborhood environment.

## START FOCUSED: WORK WITH STORE OWNERS YOU KNOW AND TRUST

As discussed earlier, corner store owners will only offer items that they believe will be profitable. When interviewed, store owners and managers explained that they decide to stock new items, including fresh produce, based on customer requests.

It's easy to get excited over the prospect of transforming all of the corner stores in your neighborhood, but realistically, even working with one store to bring a few healthy items can be a real challenge – for all the reasons noted earlier. It may be a good idea to start with just one or two stores. Identify store owners who you feel are the most interested in community health, feel most invested in your community, and seem open to working closely with neighborhood residents. Taking on too many projects could result in energy and resources being spread too thin, neighborhood partners losing interest, and the initiative losing momentum.

Large-scale corner store initiatives in other cities

**“The food justice movement is a different approach to a community’s needs that seeks to truly advance self reliance and social justice by placing communities in leadership of their own solutions and providing them with the tools to address the disparities within our food systems and within society at large”**

**– People’s Grocery. West Oakland, CA**

have started with a small number of locations. The successful Good Neighbor program in San Francisco (see box in Appendix) started with a single pilot corner store. On the other hand, the Healthy Bodegas Initiative in New York City started with a very large number of corner stores, then scaled down to a smaller set of committed stores with whom they had the best relationships.

Similarly, while it is important to have broad-based support for a healthy corner store initiative, it may work best to have a smaller number of committed residents who are willing to take the lead on implementing the changes. A new sub-committee may be formed in your neighborhood association that will be dedicated to the project, and function as a liaison between the store owner and residents.

**LET YOUR CORNER STORE KNOW THAT  
THERE IS DEMAND IN THE  
NEIGHBORHOOD**

The first step, then, is to document the need and the demand in the neighborhood for the products you would like to see in the store. One effective way to do this is to conduct surveys in your neighborhood. Record information about how often people shop at corner stores, what they buy, and what they would like to see

**RESOURCE:**

In the Appendix you will find an example of a corner store neighborhood survey and a sample postcard that neighborhood residents can send to their corner store. Also included is a leaflet for store owners that mentions the benefits of participating in your initiative.

**NEIGHBORHOOD SURVEY TIPS**

- Try to delve deeper than simply asking about broad categories of food: ask *which* fruits and vegetables or brand of 100% juice people would buy.
- Survey neighborhood residents that currently do not shop at corner stores: they may become new customers if different items are offered – a great incentive for store owners!
- Always ask *why* people make choices about the foods they eat and the places they shop: their answers can help focus or redefine your approach.
- Ask about the *change* in peoples' shopping patterns if new items were introduced: they may shop more often and pick up more items – another plus for store owners.

offered. When backed up by data and broad-based support, the statement “We would like healthier options in the store” has more weight than when uttered by a few individuals.

Large supermarkets have the resources to conduct market studies to determine which products to sell. Small neighborhood stores, on the other hand, don't have the capacity to do this so they rely on trial and error, informal conversations, vendors' stocking decisions, and assumptions. Ask your corner store operator to think of a neighborhood survey as a free market study! Stress that it will provide valuable information about the community's needs and outline the potential for the store's growth. While store owners are invested in their neighborhood in many ways, they have a

financial bottom line: they need to make a profit to stay in business. Frame your message in financial terms for them as well as speaking about the broader community health goals.

Community meetings or focus groups are another method to document demand in the neighborhood. Be sure to include store operators in such forums, so they may voice their thoughts and provide a different angle for discussion. Knowing what their needs and challenges are at the start will make collaboration later on more effective and predictable. Also, encourage parents to bring their school-age kids to discussion about healthy foods at corner stores – they are among the stores’ most loyal customers! Try to include people that work in the neighborhood as well: they may be interested in stopping by a store on their way home to pick up some last minute items. Finally, invite your local elected officials to attend. Let them know that you are taking the initiative to make their district a better place, and urge them to support your goals and point you towards available resources.

### HELP STORE OWNERS IDENTIFY SOURCES OF HEALTHY FOOD

We discussed how convenient it is for corner

stores to get chips and soda from vendors; identifying suppliers of fresh produce, however, can be more challenging. Community leaders can play the important role of connecting store owners to suppliers of healthy foods. A variety of sourcing options are available, from wholesalers to direct purchasing from farmers. The best approach depends on the needs and priorities of your neighborhood and corner store.

Louisiana has a year-round growing season, making fresh, local produce available for stores to purchase. Farmers’ markets are an excellent source of fruits and vegetables, and contrary to what many people may think, they are generally not more expensive than grocery stores. Quite a few vendors at New Orleans farmers’ markets already sell directly to grocers and restaurants. Visit a farmers’ market near you and talk to vendors about selling their produce to corner stores at wholesale prices, and possibly setting up a distribution network with multiple stores.

#### RESOURCE:

In the Appendix you will find a list of fresh produce markets and produce wholesalers in the New Orleans area. Many of the suggested vendors are already being used by some corner stores.

#### BUYING FRESH, NEW ORLEANS-GROWN PRODUCE

Visiting farmers’ markets can be an excellent way to connect with vendors from throughout Louisiana, and even Mississippi and Alabama. But there are excellent fresh fruits and vegetables being grown right here in the City of New Orleans! The New Orleans Food and Farm Network, a nonprofit that “works with neighbors to bring good food closer to home,” is an excellent resource; they have strong relationships with local growers, and can help connect your store with an urban farm. Parkway Partners maintains a list of active community gardens – contact them to find out which gardens are in your area. The Latino Farmers’ Cooperative has expressed interest in working closely with corner stores and neighborhood groups to deliver and help manage produce. The Hollygrove Market & Farm is a non-profit retail store selling locally-grown and organic produce. The goal of this unique store is to increase the accessibility of affordable, fresh produce in underserved neighborhoods. Ask them about their wholesale prices for corner stores!



While some stores simply may not have any relationship with fresh produce suppliers, virtually all corner stores buy items such as chips, soda, milk and bread. Without the hassle of finding new vendors and paying any additional delivery fees, store owners can choose healthier options within a supplier's product line: Brown's Dairy offers skim and reduced fat milk, Frito Lay sells baked chips, Wonder Bread has whole wheat options, and Coca-Cola has diet products, juice and water. Encourage your local store owner to spend some time looking at his or her vendors' product offerings, selecting healthier items whenever possible.

When interviewed by Tulane regarding their corner store clients, some produce wholesalers indicated that their small orders weren't necessarily the problem. They mentioned other challenges when dealing with corner stores, such as their failure to pay for deliveries on time and lack of organization when placing orders. Corner store operators are often cashiers, accountants, and inventory managers all at the same time. Offer to help record produce inventory or provide technical assistance in other areas to allow for better relations with healthy food suppliers.

#### **ENSURE THAT HEALTHY FOODS ARE AFFORDABLE**

While people may want to buy the best quality healthy food, preferences are not the only factors that come into the equation. Food choices are very responsive to price, especially among low-income households.

If the new foods you would like to introduce at your corner store are not affordable for the majority of residents, low sales of those items

will likely result in them being removed from the shelves. Because small neighborhood food stores cannot rely on large volume of sales to stay in business, they may charge slightly higher prices than large retailers. Try to incorporate creative strategies to reduce the cost residents will pay for healthy food – here are some ideas.

- Ensure that the stores are certified to [ACCEPT FOOD STAMPS](#) and have functioning Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) machines, which are used to swipe Louisiana Purchase cards. You may find that your corner store does not accept food stamps; let the owner know that he or she is missing out on additional sales and customers! Accepting EBT doesn't cost stores any money if they use the equipment provided by the State. There are criteria stores must meet in order to be authorized to accept food stamps: one of the requirements is that over 50 percent of gross sales must come from staple foods (not counting sodas, candy, liquor, and prepared foods, for example). If the corner store does not accept EBT because not enough sales come from eligible foods, use the profit argument again: by introducing fresh produce, whole grain bread, and other healthy foods, the percentage of sales of staple foods will go up, allowing the store to capture the benefits of accepting EBT.
- Encourage your store to be authorized to [ACCEPT WIC](#), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children. Traditionally, WIC participants could only use their vouchers to buy foods such as infant formula, eggs and cheese. But recently the WIC food package has expanded to include fresh fruits and vegetables. Accepting Federal Nutrition Program benefits is good for store profits and the community.
- Encourage several stores to [FORM A CO-OP](#) group for purchasing produce they would otherwise have to pay higher prices for if bought in small quantities. Stores can set up



a distribution network for delivering shares, or can identify a central location for pick-up. Down the line, local corner stores could benefit from forming a trade association to provide centralized guidelines, marketing and technical assistance.

Despite best efforts to keep healthy food affordable, prices at a corner store may still be higher than at a large chain supermarket. When talking to residents about where to buy food, urge them to factor in the cost of transportation and the amount of time spent traveling.

**HELP CHANGE THE FEEL OF THE STORE:  
IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE AND  
APPEARANCE**

Chances are your idea of a typical corner store is not one that reflects an atmosphere of a healthy food environment. Tobacco ads cover the windows, Coca-Cola has its logo proudly displayed at the front, and rows of chips, pork rinds and Little Debbie snacks fill the shelves.

Asking store owners to eliminate their stock of unhealthy items is likely not the best place to start, as this effectively amounts to cutting out some of the most important sources of sales. Instead, work with your corner store to place healthy foods in prominent positions, and help procure attractive displays and new equipment.

Most corner stores have been in business for years, and many would benefit from equipment upgrades. Others may simply lack the necessary infrastructure to carry the new items you would like to introduce. Certain perishable fruits and vegetables, such as lettuce and strawberries, need to be refrigerated to maximize shelf life and ensure quality. Spoilage costs can be prohibitive if the necessary investments for storage are not made. If the store you want to work with doesn't have sufficient refrigeration units to accommodate the new items, collaborate with the owner to explore financing options for capital improvements. If the corner store already has available units, but they are out of date or otherwise inadequate, discuss the money-saving and environmental benefits of choosing energy-efficient upgrades.

Help store owners identify and apply for sources of financing for store upgrades. There are a variety of grants, low-interest loans, and tax incentives available from the City, the State and the Federal government for small businesses, as well as grants and loans from foundations and nonprofits that are targeted for community

**RESOURCE:**

**In the Appendix you will find a list of funding sources for your corner store project.**

**HOW CHANGES IN THE WIC FOOD PACKAGE CAN BENEFIT YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD**

The regulations for accepted foods in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) have recently changed. The new WIC food package now includes items like fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain bread and brown rice. In order to be an authorized WIC retailer, stores must stock at least two types of fruit and two types of vegetables, and they must have competitive prices.

If your corner store accepts WIC vouchers, this can (1) increase the store's customer base and revenues, as women that participate in WIC will now be able to spend their money there, and (2) benefit the entire community as standards are put in place to ensure a source of healthy, affordable food.

health initiatives.

Other types of infrastructure are less expensive to replace but can make the store look appealing and be more functional. If the shelving is old or not very clean, replacing it may be a good and reasonably affordable investment. Purchasing a scale for produce, if not already in the store, is also a good idea: this ensures that there won't be the price variability of selling items per unit. Consider the lighting at the store: is it bright enough? Encourage your store owner to invest in energy-efficient lighting – it will save lots of money in the long run. If there are signs or other obstructions blocking natural light from the windows, discuss moving signage to other locations. Most corner stores have little space and lots of items; good lighting can make the store seem less cluttered and improves safety.

If safety is an issue at the store, discuss ways to address this with the store owner. Installing security cameras may be an option if they are not already being used. If it has caused problems in the past, discourage loitering outside the store. Contact your local police department to learn about other ways to deal with safety concerns.

Finally, changing the outside appearance of a corner store can go a long way. If you are able to convince the store owner to remove tobacco ads or other marketing of unhealthy products, that's great! This may be difficult to do – stores may receive payments for posting tobacco ads. A

#### **RESOURCE:**

In the Appendix you will find a sample list of criteria that you may want the corner store to abide by in exchange for support from your neighborhood group.

successful strategy could involve providing incentives for store owners to remove the ads. A conversation your neighborhood leaders can have with the owners may start something like this: “in exchange for removing those ads, we will...” – and this is where you list the benefits of working with your group. In fact, healthy corner store initiatives in other cities drafted standards of quality agreements that stores had to abide by to benefit from assistance and incentives.

Also, repainting the store, if necessary, can change the feel not only of the store, but of the whole block. A mural painted by local students or other community members can increase the neighborhood's sense of ownership over the store, and beautify the surrounding area.

### **PROMOTE HEALTHY FOODS IN THE STORE AND CONDUCT COMMUNITY OUTREACH**

Once the healthier options are introduced in the store, steps have been taken to make them affordable enough for low-income families to purchase, and store improvements have been made, those healthy foods and beverages have to be promoted to ensure the continuity of their presence.

One aspect of successful marketing is in-store promotion. Here are some ideas:

- Work on **PRODUCT PLACEMENT**: bring baskets of bananas to the front of the store, so people will buy *those* on impulse rather than candy. If the store has two Coca-Cola products fridges, ask the owner to keep the Dasani water and 100% Minute Maid juice closer to the front, and the soda towards the back. The endcaps – the hubs at the end of the aisles – are prime food-selling real estate because they are easily visible from the front of the store; if possible, replace whatever

unhealthy snacks may be there with featured healthy products, such as whole grain bread, dried fruit and other foods that don't require refrigeration.

- Clearly **LABEL HEALTHY PRODUCTS**. Create signs to be placed on shelves that identify healthy foods and beverages, briefly describing their nutritional benefits. You may even decide to place labels on products that are unhealthy, describing their calorie, fat, sugar or sodium content, and suggesting alternative options available in the store. Prices should always be marked and kept up-to-date.
- Give out **RECIPE CARDS** that feature foods available in the store. Keep the recipes simple and affordable to prepare, and make sure they are culturally appropriate for your neighbors. Turn recipe card giveaways into events at the store: advertise for a *recipe of the week*, label the featured ingredients on the shelves, encourage customers to collect all of the recipes, and encourage the store owner to offer discounts when recipe ingredients are purchased together.
- Host **TASTE TESTS** at the store. Offer samples of healthy foods and beverages, provide nutrition information, and compare healthy and less healthy versions of similar foods. Make the taste tests informative but not boring; providing visuals or other props can help get your message across. For example, when comparing different types of drinks, fill plastic cups with amounts sugar equivalent to how much is found in each. Ask customers to rank similar products based on taste – such as low fat and whole milk, or regular and baked chips – then reveal the characteristics of each. Invite people to taste local seasonal fruits. If feasible, conduct cooking demonstrations inside or outside the store featuring dishes promoted in the recipe cards.

Community outreach is the other element of successfully promoting new healthy items in your neighborhood corner store. Don't assume that

people will learn about the store improvements through word-of-mouth, or that people in a rush stopping in the store will notice all the new products: promote the store!

#### GETTING THE WORD OUT

- Talk about the store at *neighborhood meetings*
- Hand out *flyers* at community events
- Mail *leaflets* to neighborhood residents
- Knock on your neighbors' doors
- Collect *e-mails* and send updates
- Write an article for a local *newspaper*
- Design a *website* or start a *blog* with information and updates
- Give *students* information to bring home
- Place *signs* outside the store and in the surrounding area

More generally, conduct nutrition education outreach in the community to increase knowledge and consumption of healthy foods. Tailor the information you will share to fit the needs of your neighborhood. If you conduct surveys to learn about people's opinions about corner stores, include questions about eating habits and challenges faced when buying and

#### **RESOURCE:**

In the Appendix you will find examples of nutrition information cards to be placed on store shelves to promote healthy products, and a sample recipe card that uses ingredients you may want to bring to your store.

preparing healthy meals. Identify an action plan to address these challenges. Here are some nutrition education approaches that respond to common reasons why people don't buy healthy foods.

■ **"I DON'T HAVE TIME TO PREPARE HEALTHY MEALS"**

Focus on quick, healthy meals that are easy to prepare. Host cooking demonstrations using the ingredients that can be purchased at your corner store. Mention things that kids can do to help, such as scrubbing potatoes or mixing ingredients. Include preparation time in any recipe cards you plan to give out at the store. Snacks often make up a good proportion of a day's calories; promote healthy snacks that are ready to eat or require little preparation: fruit, cut fresh vegetables, low-fat yogurt, nuts and dried fruit are some examples.

■ **"I DON'T LIKE THE WAY HEALTHY FOOD TASTES"**

There are lots of misconceptions about what healthy food looks and tastes like. Share recipes and samples of healthy alternatives to foods commonly eaten by people in your neighborhood. Underline that a healthy diet contains a wide variety of foods, and that making small changes, such as switching to low-fat milk, can make a big difference.

■ **"HEALTHY FOOD IS TOO EXPENSIVE"**

Host workshops on smart grocery shopping. Cooking healthy meals often times means buying food that is minimally processed, thus usually cheaper than ready-to-eat meals. Compare two sample grocery receipts – one with ingredients to cook more nutritious meals, and one with processed, unhealthy items: if you shop smart, buying healthy food can be affordable.

Nutrition education efforts centered on the corner store initiative should be reflected throughout the community: it's vital that messages about healthy eating are reinforced at schools, health clinics, churches, and community groups. Link with these institutions to share

information and resources, and aim to adopt an integrated education strategy.

**PATRONIZE YOUR CORNER STORE!**

Once some of the changes you wanted to see have taken place at your corner store, do your best to maintain a high level of community support. Thank store owners for their effort and collaboration, and promise to continue to work closely with them. Really "brand" the store as a community asset and shop there for healthy foods!

## Conclusion

The serious problem of limited access to healthy food in New Orleans requires multiple solutions. Working with corner stores is one strategy that should be pursued in conjunction with other models of healthy food retail. Residents in your neighborhood may identify some other approaches to increase the availability of fresh produce and other healthy foods. Some ideas include establishing regular farmers' markets, bringing mobile vendors, starting co-ops, creating community supported agriculture groups (CSAs) or buying clubs, and attracting new food stores to the community.

Ultimately, the successful implementation of a healthy food retail strategy requires community ownership and buy-in. Involve your neighbors early on and welcome everyone's voice. When people participate in collective neighborhood efforts and see that they can make a difference, a corner store project can be a catalyst for future collaboration.

If your neighborhood group is bringing about changes that improve quality of life, share your success story. Collaborate with other neighborhood associations throughout the city. Meet with your local Councilperson or other government representative to let them know about the work you are doing. Urge them to build on the momentum you have created and support similar projects on a wider scale.

Reach out to other organizations that are bringing healthy foods to corner stores. Groups in dozens of cities nationwide are realizing the untapped potential of small food stores to help build healthy neighborhoods. The Healthy Corner Stores Network ([www.healthycornerstores.org](http://www.healthycornerstores.org)) is an online community of project leaders. Through monthly conference calls and occasional in-person meetings, the Network provides

updates on what members are doing, materials from the various projects, and cutting-edge ideas for healthy corner stores.

It's important not to be discouraged if changes take time or are not as revolutionary as you had imagined. It's unlikely that your corner store will turn into a green grocer overnight. Progress will be incremental, and the unhealthy items are probably not going to disappear from the store. Just remember that your work is providing people with healthy food choices, and what small changes can do for the neighborhood.

Good luck!

