

Re-Imagining Bodegas



Stories of community involvement in the

HEALTHY Bodegas initiative

Sarah Lyons

16th Class Emerson Hunger Fellow
Hunger Free Community Report

Field Site: The Healthy Bodegas Initiative of the New York City Department
of Health and Mental Hygiene



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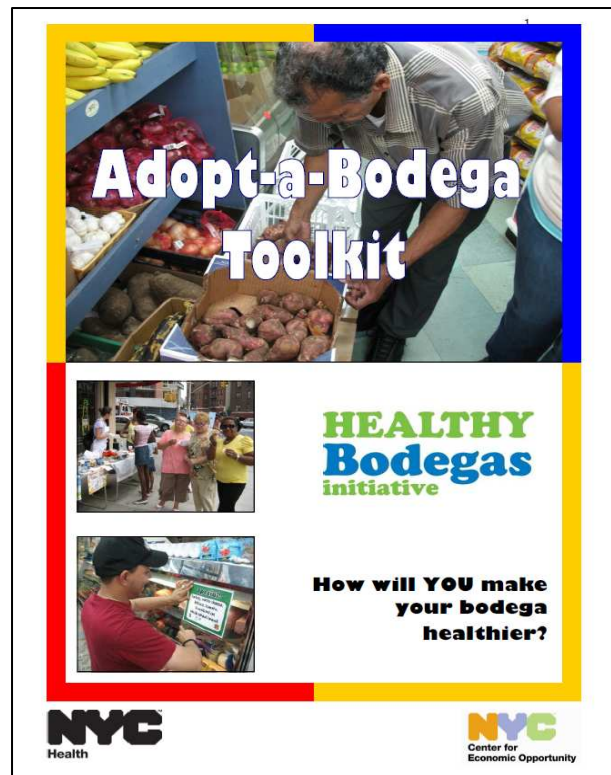
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Introduction: What is Adopt-a-Bodega?

The notion that a bodega stocks little more than chips, soda, and cigarettes is deeply ingrained in the minds of many New Yorkers. People commonly assume that bodegas (corner stores) just don't offer healthy options, period. This assumption is reinforced every time a New Yorker goes to a bodega, sees one sad looking apple and an enormous candy selection, and doesn't ask the store owner to stock more fresh produce. Bodegas are an extremely common food source for New Yorkers. In fact, 90% of food stores in the South Bronx are bodegas¹. The Adopt-a-Bodega project, which began in September of 2009, is a **community empowerment model geared towards increasing community buy-in, building relationships, and stimulating demand for healthier foods in NYC corner stores**. The project is a part of the Healthy

Bodegas Initiative of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). The name "Healthy Bodegas Initiative" often elicits comments such as "A healthy bodega? Isn't that an oxymoron?" The goal of Healthy Bodegas is not just to help stores stock fresh produce and low-fat milk but also to challenge New Yorkers' understanding of where, when, how, and by whom healthy foods can be accessed. It not only encourages store owners to begin introducing healthier items, but also invites the **community members to re-imagine what a bodega can be** and the role it plays in their lives. The Adopt-a-Bodega program serves as a spring-board for the community's collective imagination. In the future, instead of being considered an oxymoron, a **healthy bodega will be understood as a natural part of a more food secure community**.

The Healthy Bodegas Initiative, started in 2007, has worked directly with over 1,000 stores across the Bronx, Harlem, and Brooklyn. Neighborhoods in these three areas are targeted because they face the highest rates of chronic disease such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity. The **disparities among these areas and wealthier areas of NYC are stunning**. For example, there are 3 supermarkets per 10,000



Cover of the Adopt-a-Bodega Toolkit

¹ Wallis K. Philyaw A. Ellis J. Tirado F. Clarke K. & Bedell J. Food Assessment Community Board 1 in South Bronx. Unpublished Raw Data. 2005.

people on the Upper East Side compared to 2 supermarkets per 10,000 people in East and Central Harlem.² In Central Brooklyn, apples, oranges, and bananas (the most common fruit available in these areas) are only available in 28% of bodegas.³ In the Bronx, 66% of adults are overweight or obese⁴.

Currently, the Healthy Bodegas Initiative is working on the Star Bodegas campaign which began in 2009. The Star Bodega campaign is an intensive approach to working with corner stores. Approximately 60 stores are recruited to participate in a 6 month long cycle. During the 6 month campaign, outreach staff **develops relationships with store owners**, helping them stock and promote healthy foods. In the past, outreach staff found that many bodega owners would say, “I will sell whatever people buy. People do not buy fruits and vegetables.” This sentiment led to the creation of Adopt-a-Bodega, which is designed to increase community demand for fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods. Through Adopt-a-Bodega, members of an organization choose a nearby store to “adopt” and encourage the store owner to make healthy changes they think would be most beneficial for their community. The Adopt-a-Bodega project **strives to promote sustainability** by partnering a school or organization with a nearby bodega we are currently working with or have worked with in the past. We make an effort to connect with schools and organizations that the DOHMH already have relationships with through programs such as Wellness Council, Eat Well Play Hard, Move to Improve, and Health Bucks sites. We have even recruited the District Public Health Offices (DPHO’s) in the South Bronx, East Harlem, and Central Brooklyn to participate and adopt their own bodega, thus serving as a model for the rest of their communities.

The “Adoption” Process

Putting out the Feelers

I first created a script to use when approaching schools and organizations to participate in Adopt-a-Bodega. While most of the groups I approached had some familiarity with the DOH through other programs, most had not heard of the Healthy Bodegas Initiative or Adopt-a-Bodega. The script was helpful in writing introductory emails and making initial phone calls. On average it took 2 to 3 calls or emails to schedule a first meeting with any given school or organization. Three schools and organizations I attempted to meet with did not work out. In the end, I met with 8 groups in total, 4 community-based organizations (CBO’s) and 4 schools. For the most part, the Healthy Bodega Initiative and Adopt-a-Bodega were easy “sells,” meaning that the **idea resonated strongly** with most individuals with whom I spoke. The main obstacle was the fact that

2 Gordon C, Chai N, Purciel M, Talwalkar A, Goodman A. “Eating Well in Harlem: How Available is Healthy Food?” New York, N.Y.: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2007.

3 Graham R, Kaufman L, Novoa Z, Karpatis A. “Eating In, Eating Out, Eating Well: Access to Healthy Food in North and Central Brooklyn.” New York, N.Y.: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2006.

4 Matte T, Ellis JA, Bedell J, Selenic D, Young C, Deitcher D. “Obesity in the South Bronx: A Look Across Generations.” New York, N.Y.: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2007.

most schools and CBO's are **already overworked and extremely busy**. It was important to offer possible meeting dates, but also to be flexible when individuals asked to reschedule.

The First Meetings

For first meeting with schools and CBO's, I was accompanied by an Outreach Coordinator if the group was within the target area. We **always traveled to the school or CBO** for the meeting and began by giving them some background on the Healthy Bodega Initiative. The Outreach Coordinator would generally talk about the history of the Initiative and the outcome of Cycle 1. I would then introduce how Adopt-a-Bodega supports the Healthy Bodegas Initiative and would review the Adopt-a-Bodega Toolkit with the individual. We also **discussed the individual's vision** for their students or members, their current work, and ways to incorporate Adopt-a-Bodega into their current framework. We would talk about possible bodegas to adopt and encourage the individual to start asking their students, members, or staff where they shop. We would also suggest activities from the toolkit that might work well for the group and **emphasize the ability to customize the activities** to fit the needs of the group.



Bronx Outreach Coordinator, Alyssa Ruiz, at a community garden near an Adopt-a-Bodega school

A Second Date?

The second meeting took various forms and was **generally harder to schedule**. In total, I had 5 second meetings. One was a presentation to parents at a pre-school, another was a store visit with a high school health teacher, a third was table-ing at a high school health fair, another was a small meeting with high school students, and yet another was a presentation at a community recreation center. It took between two and six weeks from the first meeting to get a second meeting. Strangely, the pre-school which had scheduled the second

meeting soonest ended up trailing off. I could not schedule a store visit after the second meeting. I believe it was because my main contact person was the director of the pre-school. As a director, **she has many other responsibilities** and while she was interested in adopting a bodega, it was pushed to the bottom of her list. While I would have liked to pursue this site more aggressively, I had to let it go because it was not in any of the target areas and therefore not a priority.

It seems that the lag between meetings is symptomatic of the slow pace of community outreach. It is challenging to **find a balance between persistence and patience** in trying to move the Adopt-a-Bodega process forward. It is important to keep in mind the Adopt-a-Bodega program is **reliant on the time, resources, and motivation of the**

schools and organizations that are recruited. While it is important to manage your contacts carefully and keep in close touch with the organizations, it is also necessary to realize the lack of control one has over the ultimate outcome of the program.

Sustainable Relationships

In the end, I was able to sustain strong relationships with three organizations, one in each of our target areas. The lag between second and third meetings with these groups also varied, from a few days to over three weeks. These three groups have become the three main Adopt-a-Bodega organizations for this cycle. Two are high schools who have a Health Corps Coordinator⁵ and the third is actually a partnership with both WhedCo (the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation) and a high school. In Brooklyn, I worked with Franklin Lane High School. My contacts there were Jessica Anders (Health Corps Coordinator) and Audrey Castillo (Brooklyn DPHO Community Outreach Coordinator). In East Harlem, I worked with Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics. My contact there was Jenny Ninyo, another Health Corps Coordinator. In the South Bronx, my original contact was Kerry McLean at WhedCo, but we are now working together with WhedCo and Metropolitan High School. What is most interesting about the Adopt-a-Bodega program is **how different it looks with each organization**. The **people, their community, and their needs shape the evolution of the adoption** of their store.

Brooklyn: Franklin Lane High School

During the school year 2008-2009, the Healthy Bodega Initiative worked with Franklin Lane High School and its Health Corps Coordinator. The intention when reconnecting with them this school year was to sustain the relationship with them and the store, G-Cepin, which was part of Cycle 1 and located a few blocks from the school. Last year, a group of students and their Health Corps Coordinator created a "model" bodega in their school to show what they would like their bodega to look like. They also organized a game of "Bodega Bingo" where students answered questions about healthy eating and food access issues. We wanted to build on this energy that the students demonstrated last year and bring it out beyond their school walls. We hoped to have a group of students adopt a local bodega, build a relationship with the bodega owner, encourage the store to stock healthier options, and promote the healthy options amongst their classmates.

I first spoke with Jessica, the current Health Corps Coordinator, when I attended a Health Corps meeting in September. We knew two of the coordinators would be teaching at schools that fell into our current and past target areas. After giving a short

⁵ HealthCorps is a national service and peer mentoring initiative. In high schools, HealthCorps "Coordinators" empower teens in underserved populations to make simple lifestyle changes to enhance their well-being and resilience and take the message to friends, families and neighbors.

presentation about Adopt-a-Bodega to all the coordinators, I spoke to the two coordinators in our area and exchanged contact information. Jessica emailed me a day or two later, seeming excited about the possibility of working with us. We set up a meeting for a couple of weeks later. I went to the meeting with our Brooklyn Outreach Coordinator, Patricia, who had worked with Franklin Lane last year. We discussed working further with G-Cepin and having that be the school's adopted store. Jessica, however, was gearing up for a Health Fair in November and thought it would be best to work on Adopt-a-Bodega afterward. She asked us to participate in the Health Fair, to which we agreed.

Foray into the High School Health Scene

The Health Fair **served to initiate conversations with Franklin Lane Students about what they eat, where they buy food, and what “healthy eating” means to them.** I talked to students how often they shop at bodegas. Some students responded that they go everyday, some less often. Using a simple poster with pictures of various foods divided into categories of “Try these...” and “Instead of these...,” I asked students if they recognized foods they ate frequently. Many pointed to the chips, soda, cakes and candy. Some pointed to the fruit and yogurt on the opposite side. Some mentioned that they while they like wheat crackers, bananas, and baked chips, they can’t find them at the nearby bodegas. I asked them why the foods on the left are a better choice when looking for a snack. Most replied that they had less fat and sugar.



Health Fair poster

I found an effective technique to engage students was to ask them how they felt when they ate foods on the right, like soda and candy. They replied that they felt energized or hyper then tired and sleepy. This easy-to-answer question created an easy segue into talking about how simple sugars give you energy right away but then burn off quickly, leaving you feeling sluggish and sleepy. Instead, I suggested trying foods like nuts, whole wheat crackers, fruit, and yogurt which have fiber, protein, and other vitamins and



Franklin Lane students stop by the Healthy Bodega table at the Health Fair

minerals that keep you energized longer (and awake for class!). I also had students guess the calorie content of different types of fast food, soda, and candy. Those that got closest won bags and t-shirts. **While these were short interactions with the students, it was great to get a sense of how students think about their food environment and their own health.** Knowledge of calories and their own caloric needs varied wildly from student to student, signifying inconsistency in access to nutritional education. It was clear, however, **that bodegas did play a part in their daily lives** and was a regular source of food and snacks for many students.

After the Health Fair, Jessica had more time available to work with me on the Adopt-a-Bodega project. She runs an after school cooking and nutrition club called EATWISE and thought Adopt-a-Bodega would dovetail nicely with her plans for the students. Our first foray into the wilds of bodegas included a trip to visit G-Cepin, the store Healthy Bodegas had worked with in Cycle 1. The store still had the signage from the program and carried a respectable number and variety of fruits and vegetables. We introduced ourselves to the owner. Jose was extremely friendly and remembered the outreach coordinator who had worked with him a few months earlier. While there was a bit of uncertainty whether all was being communicated clearly, he seemed to welcome the idea of students visiting the store to learn about healthy eating and possibly doing a survey. I was glad that **Jessica and Jose were able to connect**, as relationship building is one goal of Adopt-a-Bodega. Sadly, Jessica and I agreed G-Cepin was probably too far from the school to be viable for adoption. Though G-Cepin is only 10 minutes from the school, the kids generally go to 75th Street Deli right across the street from the school. **It would be more practical for the students to work to improve the store that most of their classmates frequent.** This posed a **challenge of how to sustain the relationship** with G-Cepin while also concentrating on the more popular bodega.

Bumps in the Road

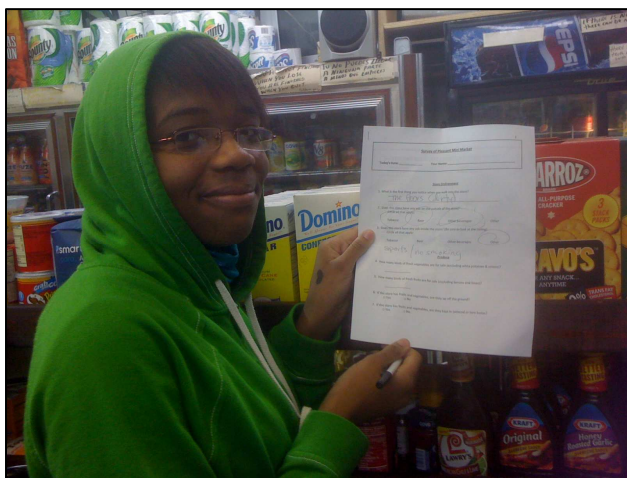
Things slowed down as the holidays approached and students were on vacation. Before the New Year, I helped connect Jessica to Audrey Castillo who works in the Brooklyn District Public Health Office. I realized that Audrey was also working with students in Franklin Lane on health and nutrition issues. While doing similar work, Jessica and Audrey had never met. Audrey is also interested in working with bodegas and in fact had already done a short survey of 75th Deli with her students to see what healthy foods were available. **Connecting Jessica and Audrey and their students** seemed a logical next step and in fact, both were excited to combine forces to get the bodega adoption off the ground. We planned to have both Jessica's EATWISE students and Audrey's Directions for our Youth (DFOY) students complete a survey of G-Cepin. This would allow them to compare a "healthier" bodega with their local bodega, 75th Street Deli. This plan was foiled, however, when we discovered that afternoon that Jose was not there, and man at the register was rather grumpy and did not want us to bring students in to do survey. It would have been a best to have had contact with the store owner before the day of the survey, or at the very least, **to have a backup plan** in the event that the survey would not be possible. The plan was further complicated by a gang

incident at the school which resulted in Jessica's students being told to leave. Fortunately (but strangely), Audrey's DFOY students stayed for the meeting. Some of these students had participated in the survey of 75th Street Deli. Audrey and Jonathon, another DFOY leader, led the group of students in discussing the creation of a video for their classmates about healthy eating and healthy options from 75th deli. There were many creative ideas and we helped to keep them focused on connecting it to the bodega. We also talked about a more immediate action that could be taken, namely creating and placing signs for 75th Street Deli highlight healthy choices available. The students thought that the owner was "okay" with them putting up signs.

East Harlem: Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics

Interestingly, while this partnership has come the farthest in the adopt-a-bodega process, it began a bit awkwardly. Like Jessica at Franklin Lane, Jenny Ninyo is a Health Corps Coordinator at Manhattan Center. It took a bit of emailing back-and-forth to overcome some confusion as to whether Jenny's school was in the target zone. Despite this minor setback, we got things moving quickly by scheduling a meeting in early October. Jenny is completing her second year at the school as a Health Corps Coordinator. During our first meeting she described her work and the school environment. She cited having a supportive principal as being very helpful. Like Jessica, she runs an EATWISE after school club focused on healthy eating and cooking. We discussed how Adopt-a-Bodega could complement her curriculum. She told us she would get back to us about what store most kids go to and which one would be best to adopt. We also discussed the possibility of doing a cooking demonstration in the school. She was very interested in this idea. I was impressed by her calm demeanor as well as her **willingness to plan action steps** right away. Looking back, **these are the qualities in Adopt-a-Bodega partners that we should look for and cultivate.**

A few weeks later, Dugeidy Ortiz (the Harlem Outreach Coordinator), Jenny, and I trooped over to the bodega next to the school. Pleasant Mini Market is where the majority of students seem to go for a snack, Jenny thought. Our goal was to recruit the bodega for Cycle 2, as it fell directly in the East Harlem target area. Walking into the tiny bodega, we were underwhelmed. A few bananas sat on the register, but other



Manhattan Center student completing a survey at Papito's bodega

than that, healthy options were nowhere to be found. Chips, candy and soda assaulted the eye. The owner, Felix, however, was a joy. Felix (affectionately known by students as Papito) listened with interest and a smile as we introduced ourselves. Dugeidy explained the Healthy Bodegas Initiative and we also talked about our hopes to involve students in

the project, having them complete a scavenger hunt or helping promote the healthy items Papito carries within the school. Papito seemed open and excited about the idea of working with us and seemed to have a **genuine connection to the community**. His **personal philosophy on food**, he confided, included an emphasis on eating fresh foods, especially fruits. He spoke about the accessibility and quality of fresh foods in his native Dominican Republic. The disconnect between Papito's personal views on health and healthy food and what he offered in his store was striking. But I realized how important it is to **understand the store owner's view on food** because, in this case, it offered us a way to **connect to him on a personal level**. He seemed excited about the idea of helping others see the importance of eating fresh foods and was open to helping make that happen.

Smart Students with Critical Eyes

Dugeidy and I returned to Manhattan Center a few weeks later to speak with Jenny's EATWISE group about adopting Pleasant Mini Market. The students were receptive and shared various ideas they thought would be effective, such as making a healthy snack section, advertising student discounts, and making the breakfast sandwich with healthier ingredients. A few weeks after this meeting, we created a survey for the students to complete at the store in groups of 3-4 students. We prepped the students by reviewing the survey and talking about the importance of being respectful inside the store. Jenny had the good idea to have students take photos with her camera of things they thought were barriers to eating healthy. This added a multi-media dimension to the activity. Unfortunately, Papito himself was not in the store when the kids were doing the survey. His sister, also a very nice person, was behind the counter. The students took about 6 or 7 minutes to do the survey in groups.



Manhattan Center students completing a survey at Papito's bodega

We reconvened at the school to discuss our findings. A student leader led the discussion. It really seemed that the survey helped the **students take a critical eye to their food environment**. They talked about how candy, chips, and beer were the first things they noticed when they entered the store,

as well as the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables. One student very astutely explained how the sugary drinks at eye level are cheap but a big money-maker for bodegas because the sugar causes you to crave more. They also **recognized that they were the audience being targeted** for many of the unhealthy foods. Agreeing that both the food industry and the individual owner decide what to sell, they also thought that consumer demand could influence what is offered at stores. We then **discussed what our next action steps should be**, which included creating signs highlighting healthy items, asking Papito to sell healthier options, creating a “healthy shelf”, and planning a “store clean up” day.

Multiple Constituencies Get Things Cooking!

In addition to planning activities which put the students in direct contact with the bodega and Papito, we also planned a series of three cooking demonstrations held in the cafeteria of the school during lunch hours. We partnered with City Harvest, New York City’s premier food rescue organization, who can wrangle volunteer chefs at the drop of a hat. Although Papito’s bodega did not stock the ingredients for the recipes we planned to make, he was more than willing to order all the necessary supplies, including lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. He was very excited about the idea of a cooking demo at the school and seemed genuinely supportive.

The morning of the first demo, we picked up the food at Papito’s. He even helped bring it to the school! Students snapped up the samples of ALT (Avocado, Lettuce, and Tomato) sandwiches and “Healthy Soda” (half juice, half seltzer, splash of lime). We raffled off t-shirts at end of each lunch period. Students had to answer questions in order to enter the raffle. This was an effective way to **collect evaluation information**. We asked questions such as “Would you make



Cooking demo at Manhattan Center High School

these recipes at home?" "Were you aware that Papito's bodega sells healthy food?" Recipes were available for students to take. We received many good responses from students. After trying the sandwich, one student exclaimed, "Avocado! I love avocados!" Another asked, "Can I have another? It is soooo good!" Jenny's students took trays of samples around and helped get students to the table. It really was a team effort. It was inspiring to see such **great synergy between diverse groups** like the DOH, City Harvest, Health Corps, Papito's Bodega, and the school.



Manhattan Center students win t-shirts during the cooking demo

The second and third demos also went very well and we worked out some of the kinks so student could move down the line more efficiently. In the second demo, we used the rest of the ingredients that we had bought from Papito's and supplemented with ingredients from the supermarket. The City Harvest chefs made Tuna Salad Sandwiches, Guacamole, and Healthy Soda. We distributed even more samples than last time: 400 samples of guacamole, 480 sandwich samples, and 650 soda samples! Students came back for seconds often. "Miss!" said one student, "The guacamole was delicious!" The students seemed happy that we were back. Jenny said students had **been telling her that they were making the recipes at home** and their families loved them. Now, **Papito is considering making the sandwiches at his store** and selling them to students for lunch!

On the day of the third demo, representatives from Gramercy Tavern, a famous New York restaurant, stopped by to observe the demo. They are interested in partnering with City Harvest and the Healthy Bodegas Initiative to host a cooking demo staffed by Gramercy Tavern chefs. These chefs would create recipes based on what we tell them one can usually find in a bodega. This is another exciting partnership that would help increase the visibility of the Healthy Bodegas Initiative. A yogurt parfait was the featured recipe in the third demo. The parfaits were very popular with the students, one of whom said, "I am **so** making this from now on." We handed out 700 samples of the parfaits and actually ran out towards the end of the last lunch period! We also received feedback from students who told us they were making the previous week's recipes at home with great success. Said one student, "I made the guacamole! It was great. Everyone in my house liked it!" We are hoping that the students begin to request and purchase the ingredients for these recipes and other healthy recipes at Papito's store. And it seems that this is a real possibility: According to the data we

collected from the questions students answered, 80% of students who responded said they would purchase the ingredients for the parfait or the healthy soda at Papito's in the future.

South Bronx: Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WhedCo) and Metropolitan High School

This relationship has shown to be both long-term and sustainable. The combination of **three committed organizations has given this project power and support.** The DOH and Healthy Bodegas had originally been connected to WhedCo through a relationship with City Harvest. Because of this connection, I was able to reach out to Kerry McLean, the Community Development Project Manager. The Bronx Outreach Coordinator, Alyssa Ruiz, and I met Kerry at Intervale Green Housing Development, WhedCo's newest affordable housing development. It is a gorgeous place. She gave us a tour and spoke extensively about WhedCo and the area surrounding the development. She and the residents are concerned about the Southern Corridor (1 mile stretch) in the neighborhood and hope to work with merchants to improve selection and quality of food access for residents. She expressed concern, however, about resistance from store owners to participating. We described the **success of working with owner in the past and spoke of the benefit of having community member buy-in to overcoming resistance.** Kerry also mentioned that WhedCo is about to lease a storefront to a deli and it may be possible to encourage the owner to carry healthy options.

While we talked about Alyssa and me attending the next community meeting at the housing development in November, it was the partnership with the school that took off first. Kerry connected us to Lissa Dodington an English teacher at Metropolitan High School. Kerry, Alyssa and I met with Lissa and some students who were interested in participating in community service. Kerry talked to the students about an opportunity to complete a resident needs survey and a community food assessment. Alyssa and I spoke about the Adopt-a-Bodega project and importance of healthy food access via healthy bodegas. While we were excited to work with WhedCo and the students, we were left feeling unclear about how the actual adoption of a bodega by the students was going to grow out of the partnership. It felt great to be working with Kerry, who clearly was invested in a long term project surrounding community food security, but we **wondered how we could achieve our objectives while working with other groups, each with their own goals.**

Our second visit to Metropolitan High School consisted of presenting to four different advisory classes over two days, which included 80 students in total. Using an interactive PowerPoint presentation, we discussed food access issues and health disparities in the South Bronx. We also included an explanation of our work and Adopt-a-Bodega. Kerry announced the community service opportunity which would have students completing a block-by-block community food assessment. They would also be completing surveys

inside bodegas around the school as part of this project. This proved to be the way that **we all three parties were able to work together but also achieved our respective objectives**. WhedCo would use the information from the block-by-block survey to complete a map of the community food resource, Healthy Bodegas would begin to develop relationships with specific bodegas which would pave the way for the adoption of one specific store. The students would earn their required community service hours while also exploring their food environment with a critical eye and (hopefully) feeling empowered to change it for the better.

Kerry and I visited the school twice more to hold surveying trainings for interested students. The first group was two men's advisory classes and the second was two women's advisory classes. The women's group was a much better experience because **they were self-selected group who came because they were interested**. The men's group was required to attend the training although not all of them were going to actually participate in the surveying. The women were much more respectful, engaged, and asked good questions. Although it was evident that some of the male students were interested, it was difficult to connect with them when others in the group were being rowdy and talking over us. Despite some of the difficulties during the trainings, on the day of the surveying, 12 students participated. Lissa and another advisory teacher, Jaclyn, went out with the students as well. We broke the students into four groups. Two students went with Chevonne Cato, the future Adopt-a-Bodega staff member, and two students went with me to do in-store surveys. Four students went with Lissa and four went with Jaclyn to complete the block-by-block surveying of a particular section near the school. Students were given name tags, Healthy Bodega T-shirts, and clipboards. For the block-by-block surveying, students took a section near the school and walked the streets, recording all the places to buy food, including restaurants, supermarkets, fast food, corner stores, street vendors, etc. Taking a photo of every place using disposable cameras, they also recorded whether or not they would go inside and why. For the in-store survey, students were given maps indicating a number of bodegas near their school. They found the stores and completed the survey which assessed the store environment, quantity and quality of produce, and the availability of other healthy foods. They also interviewed the store owners to gain an understanding of the challenges of selling healthy foods.



Metropolitan High School students conducting a block-by-block survey

We all reconvened at the school to discuss what the students found in the field. They had some great insights into their food environment. The team of students who did the block-by-block survey found mini markets, delis and combinations of restaurants and small grocery stores. They did not find any stand alone grocery stores or supermarkets. They noticed that some places “looked dirty and didn’t smell good” and noted many ads for sugar-sweetened beverages like Arizona Iced Tea, beer, and cigarettes. One store that stood out had fruit and vegetables displayed in the window at the front of the store, which made them want to shop there in the future. The teams who did in-store surveys also had some thoughtful comments. They only found one store out of four that carried a variety of fruits and vegetables. The other three only carried bananas or none at all. The store with fresh produce, they noted, also kept beer in the back of the store and had no ads on the outside of the store. One student said about the store layout, “Kids can go in and see healthy stuff not just beer and junk.” Another student agreed, saying “people can choose healthy things if they see it.” They also searched stores for healthy snacks, low-fat milk, and low-salt canned goods. About half the stores carried these items. The students also did a great job interviewing the store owners. They asked them questions about the difficulties in selling healthy foods like fruits and vegetables. They found that most store owners answered that “If people asked for healthy food, I would sell it, but no one does.” This answer led to the students discussing consumers’ power in changing the food environment. One student noted that, “Stores have to sell stuff the people are going to buy so they can make their money.” Another student agreed saying that consumer demand can work to increase healthy foods because “my mom buys avocados from the store by my house and they are always fresh and the owner likes her so he keeps them stocked for her.”

We wrapped up the discussion by talking about choosing one bodega to adopt in the future. Students agreed that there are two main stores that students frequent. They agreed that asking the stores to sell healthier breakfast sandwiches would be a good first change. They were also excited about the idea of creating a student combo, where they could buy a healthy sandwich, fruit, and water for a special price. They brainstormed about different healthy items they would like to see in the stores. The plan is for students to continue the surveying project throughout the month, with the support of Ms. Dodington and their advisory teachers. It appears that the store adoption will grow naturally out of this long-term project.

Next Steps

While it took significant time and effort for momentum to be built within these relationships, I believe it is sustainable. The Healthy Bodegas Initiative team is strong and committed to the vision of Adopt-a-Bodega, and while I will not be present to see the culmination of what I have begun, I am confident that the seeds I have planted will flourish.

It will be easier to sustain the relationship with Franklin Lane High School through next year because it is Jessica's first of two years as a Health Corps Coordinator at the school. With Franklin Lane, I would hope that Jessica and her students follow through with their plan to create promotional signs to hang in 75th Street Deli. It seems that it is important to continue working with both Jessica and her EATWISE students as well as the Directions for our Youth (DFOY) leaders and students. Both have similar visions and the project of adopting a bodega would only be stronger by facilitating this partnership. Supporting Jessica's and DFOY's vision of creating a farm plot on the school ground is also important. They want to have students take ownership of a share of the farm and be able to keep or sell a portion of the vegetables they grow. Having student sell their vegetables at their adopted bodega would be an extremely powerful message to the community about the importance of not just eating fresh, healthy food, but also eating locally and supporting students who are invested in the community. This is something I hope to see in the future.

At Manhattan Center, I think the relationship between the school, the students, and Papito's bodega is strong. Now it is time for Jenny and her students to begin asking for the changes they believe are needed for their community. I think asking Papito to sell the sandwich that was so popular at the cooking demo would be a great place to start. Having students create signs to promote the sandwich in the store and in the school would increase their feeling of ownership of the initiative. Because Papito is very enthusiastic about the project, I believe he would be open to creating a healthy shelf for Manhattan Center. Students could help choose healthy snack options and organize them in a visible area of the store, creating signage to highlight them. Because Jenny and her students often cook together as a part of the after school group, they could purchase their ingredients at Papito's in order to support his store and the healthy changes he is willing to make.

At Metropolitan High School, the group of students who participated in the block-by-block and in-store surveying seemed to be genuinely interested in continuing the project. It is important that their teachers, WhedCo, and HBI continue to support and encourage the students who have shown excitement about the project. It seems that this experience could be a great way to build leadership among these students, but they will need strong support from adult leaders as well. After completing the surveying, the students will create a public map on Google by uploading the information and photos they collected. This will be one way for the students to share their knowledge of the food environment with the community. The next step would be to take action to create positive change in the food environment. I hope that after surveying the different bodegas near their school, they would choose one to adopt. After discussing this possibility at the debrief session after their first foray into the field, the students seemed excited about the idea of creating a healthy combo for students, where they could purchase a healthy sandwich, fruit, and a water for a special price. The possibility of creating a "Healthy Snack Shelf" was also well-received. Students could create signs

and organize a shelf to highlight healthy snacks and place them in a way that is appealing and easy to find for their classmates. Students could also work to promote the healthy options at the bodega within their school through posters and speaking events.

Conclusion

A bird's eye view of the Adopt-a-Bodega project shows its interconnection not just with the Healthy Bodegas Initiative but also the larger framework of the Physical Activity and Nutrition department and the Chronic Disease Bureau of the Department of Health. Problems of unequal access to healthy foods, chronic disease like obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes, and poverty all have many causes. Hence, many different approaches are needed when trying to find solutions. Adopt-a-Bodega focuses on one facet of the myriad problems facing low-income communities in New York City. Adopt-a-Bodega is also constellated within relationships with many different stakeholders like teachers and students, community outreach coordinators, bodega owners, and other members of the community with a vested interest in anti-hunger and pro-health initiatives. The multiple constituencies give the project power and sustainability. The purpose is to empower the community to take notice, look critically, and take action toward positive changes in their food environment. This empowerment is the cornerstone upon which the Adopt-a-Bodega rests, as empowerment lasts longer than any project or program. Long after Healthy Bodegas staff members have gone, community members will continue to realize their power to increase access to healthy, fresh foods in their neighborhood.

12 Keys for Success

1. Emphasize the ability to customize the activities to fit the needs of the group you are recruiting.
2. Work to find a balance between persistence and patience as you build relationships with different groups and organizations.
3. When recruiting organizations or schools, try to identify leaders who demonstrate excitement and a willingness to take action immediately.
4. Always call to confirm a meeting, especially in the beginning stages of the relationship.
5. At any meeting or event, ALWAYS discuss next action steps and set dates then and there.
6. Sometimes it is best to work with a self-selected group of students. You know they will be genuinely interested in the project.

7. Connecting the members of the organization or the teacher and students at the school to the bodega owner is essential. Relationship building is what this is all about!
8. Connecting different community organizations and schools gives the project power and support. When working with different groups, work to find common goals so that the different parties can work together but also achieved their respective objectives.
9. Always have a back up plan! Especially if planning an activity in a bodega, have a “Plan B” because the owner might not be there and a grouchy employee might not be pleased to see you.
10. Make an effort to understand the all stakeholders’ personal philosophies on food and health. Have conversations with the store owner, the community organization leader or the school teacher in order to connect the work to them on a personal level
11. Collecting evaluation information helps you know if an activity or event was successful. Try to do this as often as possible.
12. Remember that the people, their community, and their needs shape the evolution of the adoption of their store. Allow the process to be creative, flexible, and fun!