Increasing Access to Healthy Food in Milwaukee Corner Stores

INTRODUCTION

Around the Corner to Better Health and the Healthy Corner Store Initiative is a two year grant whose goal is to increase healthy food availability in Milwaukee’s central city through demonstration projects related to:

1. Improving store infrastructure to support stores’ abilities to stock fresh food (e.g., the purchase of coolers for storage/sale of fresh produce)
2. Targeted marketing efforts to increase sales of produce
3. Improved access to distribution channels which offer affordable locally grown fresh produce

THE PARTNERSHIP

Community-based Project Coordinator
Employed at Walnut Way, the coordinator serves as liaison to the four store owners, leads program activities within the stores, helps store owners access healthy food, sources project-related products (e.g., affordable coolers), conducts food sampling at corner stores and during neighborhood activities.

Evaluation and Grant Management Team
Comprised of representatives from MCW, Walnut Way Conservation Corp., and City of Milwaukee Health Department, members regularly review grant progress, develop evaluation tools, disseminate project results, and plan program implementation.

Corner Store Owners
The stores are small businesses in Lindsay Heights with staff of two to four people; store sizes range from 1,000 – 3,300 square feet.

Coalition
A diverse group of community partners provided insights to food access, business strategies, project activities, and marketing, among other topics.
MEASURING SUCCESS

**Store Owner Feedback**

Pre and post project interviews were conducted with corner store owners which described their attitudes and practices related to stocking and selling healthy foods, especially fresh produce.

**Before the Project**

*What’s in stock?*

Stores stock a wide range of dry foods, refrigerated meats and cheeses, condiments, drinks, baby food, fresh produce, and other items (toilettries, candy, cigarettes, beer, liquor, hair products, diapers).

*What affects the sale of produce?*

Adequate refrigeration (to limit wasted inventory), consumer demand, effective marketing of produce, cost of produce, equipment upgrades (coolers, expanded kitchens) were reported to affect sales.

**After the Project**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Store owners reported the following benefits associated with the project:</th>
<th>Store owners reported challenges and gave suggestions to improve healthy food access:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Store redesign</td>
<td>Increase marketing in the neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh produce signage</td>
<td>Greater organization with Alice’s Garden as a local source of fresh produce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-store cooking demonstrations</td>
<td>Increase technical assistance from the Milwaukee Health Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from project staff</td>
<td>Improve store access to produce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business development resources</td>
<td>Assistance maintaining storage coolers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining skills in storing and displaying fresh produce</td>
<td>Ensuring stores can process WIC payments for produce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with community members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining customers by selling produce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers increasing knowledge of fresh produce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Future Plans:** Owners plan to change furniture to accommodate and sell more produce, have outdoor summer events for promotion and be present more in the kitchen areas.
A six week youth-centered cooking and educational program focused on developing young leaders to be agents of change. Motivated by the common vision of a healthy neighborhood, youth learn basic leadership and culinary skills to facilitate cooking demonstrations and samplings at neighborhood corner stores and community organizations. This program is intended to complement existing youth programs in the neighborhood, which are engaging youth in urban gardening and related food justice activities.

The M.O.V.E. Crew was an integral part of the program. It consisted of a team of young leaders with a passion for food justice. Crew members grew produce at Alice’s Garden and sold it at select corner stores. They also assisted with food demonstrations and outreach education.

The graph displays results of the 4-item tool from all 5 classes. On a scale of 0 to 4, with 4 being the most positive, most answers indicated a positive response to the all five sessions.

The team used bi-weekly photographs of store produce inventory and brief discussions with storeowners about produce sales to provide a visual representation of how well produce is selling in the stores. This “produce journal” complements other measures to document produce available in the stores. This method proved challenging to consistently gather accurate and uniform documentation from storeowners. Pictured to the right is an example of photos taken.
ConSUMER SURVEY

Neighborhood residents completed a survey related to produce buying habits in corner stores conducted in the four participating corner stores. The following are key findings from the survey:

Lack of freshness and expense were reasons why people did not purchase produce from corner stores.

33% had a household of 5 or more people
91% ate fresh fruit and vegetables
47% were women
63% were under age 40
40% shop at the corner store at least 4 times per week

SHARING OUR WORK

Around the Corner to Better Health activities and results have been shared locally and nationally:

In the News
- “Fresh ideas are ripe in Milwaukee,” Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, August 13, 2013
- “Milwaukee effort to eat healthier starts at corner stores,” Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, October 26, 2013

Conferences and Community Sharing
- June 2013: Lindsay Heights Report to the Community
- September 2013: Wisconsin Health Improvement and Research Partnerships Forum
- September 2013: Healthier Wisconsin Partnership Program conference
- November 2013: American Public Health Association annual conference
- January/February 2014: Wisconsin Local Food Summit
- May 2014: Community-Campus Partnerships for Health annual conference

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Offering fresh, minimally processed produce requires an understanding of complicated city codes related to weights and measures, labeling, and pricing.

2. Partnering store owners are not in a position to make investment in the façades of the stores since they are not building owners; building owners were often unwilling to make façade changes for fear of increased property taxes.

3. Provision of healthy food requires commitment of additional time and resources into training of staff; most staff members in the partnering stores do not have food prep skills needed to offer healthy foods.

4. As the liaison to the store owners, the project coordinator shoulders a great deal of responsibility. It is challenging to accomplish the project objectives and resolve complicated issues in only 20 hours each week.