

Sustaining Healthy Food Retail Initiatives



Increasing access to healthy foods and beverages is one strategy local health departments (LHDs) employ to improve nutrition in their communities. LHDs have implemented several types of interventions across the country, including healthy food retail initiatives. These initiatives are designed to increase the amount, variety, and quality of healthier foods and beverages available in underserved areas.^{1,2} LHDs work with local food retailers including small markets, corner stores, and pharmacies to implement and monitor healthy food retail programs.

Implementation of many of these healthy food retail programs is funded by government grants and can be difficult to sustain when the funding period ends. The National Legal and Policy Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN) convened a group of key stakeholders in 2012 to discuss opportunities and barriers for small-scale retailers involved in these programs when trying to shift to a sustainable business model.³ The group identified opportunities and challenges concerning financing, distribution, marketing research, government policies, multisector collaboration, and store owner capacity and recommended solutions in each category. One recommendation was to use business licensing to encourage healthy food offerings. The following story describes the experience of an LHD that uses business licensing to create a policy that sustains a healthy food retailer program.



An Example of Sustainability in Practice

In 2008, the City of Minneapolis enacted a staple foods ordinance requiring retailers with grocery licenses to stock certain basic foods from four different categories (see Table 1). The ordinance exempted several types of establishments, including many pharmacies, gas stations, and discount stores. The Minneapolis Health Department (MHD) conducted store assessments that revealed that many retailers were not compliant with the rule, in part due to insufficient store owner education and training and limited enforcement capacity.

Table 1. 2008 Staple Foods Ordinance Food Categories

- Fruits and vegetables
- Dairy beverages
- Breads or cereals
- Meat/vegetable proteins

In 2010, MHD launched a voluntary Healthy Corner Store Program to improve compliance with the staple foods ordinance and promote availability of healthier foods to community members. As a result of the program, MHD increased the amount of healthy foods available in stores and built strong relationships with store owners. However, MHD encountered some challenges to creating significant, long-term improvements, including limited participation by stores due to the voluntary nature of the program, the extensive MHD staff time and resources required to implement the program, and low staple food purchase rates despite demand from the community. Based on conversations with community partners, the low purchase rates among customers were likely due to a lack of awareness of the staple food availability and a customary use of corner stores to purchase solely convenience foods.

MHD addressed some of these issues by enhancing the staple foods ordinance in 2014 (see Table 2) and preparing a package of implementation resources for stores owners and

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managers. It improved the ordinance to reduce the number of store exemptions and increase the range and quality of required foods. Of approximately 330 stores in the city, 250 are affected by the revised ordinance. To aid implementation and increase compliance, MHD provided (1) free merchandising and promotional supplies; (2) reference materials in multiple languages; (3) connections to retail mentors and experts; (4) affordable small-scale produce procurement options; (5) access to low-interest loans for refrigeration equipment; and (6) community outreach and promotion. Early evaluation results show store owners and managers increasingly complied with the new ordinance compared to the original ordinance. By coupling a strong policy with a community program, MHD improved sustainability of their healthy food access strategies.

To learn more about the Minneapolis staple foods ordinance, visit <http://www.minneapolismn.gov/staplefoods>.

Table 2. 2014 Staple Foods Ordinance Food Categories

- Milk
- Cheese
- Eggs
- Meat/vegetable proteins
- Fruits and vegetables
- Whole grain cereals
- Whole grains
- 100% juice
- Canned beans
- Dried beans, peas, and lentils

References

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