

INTRODUCTION

The city of East St. Louis, IL, is an urban, low-income minority community where residents living in and immediately surrounding this city struggle to find fresh, healthy foods. Different economic variables have led to the closure of supermarkets, making it a food desert. East St. Louis also has an extensive network of corner/convenience stores- which stock mostly liquor and unhealthy snacks and drinks. The lack of fresh produce and healthy options coupled with the ready abundance of processed foods & high fat take-out meals have contributed to the high obesity rates and prevalence of chronic diseases in the community.

People's choices of the food they eat are in large part influenced by their environment. Changing the neighborhood food environment allows people to make better choices about what they eat. Working within the current food model, the Make Health Happen Coalition decided to partner with the local corner stores to increase both the amount and variety of healthy foods available to the residents.



The community needs to have a system and environment that promotes health and wellness. Being educated on the impact of unhealthy behaviors at a WIC appointment does not help create change when the environment they live in fosters unhealthy behaviors and the healthcare system and area

businesses are not collaboratively working together to create a consistent message. Through the funding of the Make Health Happen coalition, WIC, businesses, hospitals, schools, fitness centers, faith-based organizations, and non-profits have made an effort to make a meaningful, long-lasting change to the food environment in East St. Louis.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The limited and uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods is a common concern among the residents of East St. Louis. The Make Health Happen partnership adopted the following multi-component intervention to address this food insecurity and create healthier communities.

- Increase the awareness of the available food resources in the community by providing the residents with information on local food pantries, hot meal sites and food assistance programs.
- Improve the food environment by increasing the availability of fresh produce & increase shelf space for healthy option in the corner stores.
- Marketing healthy messages to the consumers by encouraging the community to shop and eat healthy.
- Hosting in-store cooking demonstrations to promote new foods and encourage people to try and cook familiar foods differently.
- Establish partnerships with the local providers to promote and refer to WIC and encourage WIC moms to keep their child on WIC until age 5
- Provide education and outreach initiatives to ensure that SNAP participants know that they can double their dollars and receive free coupons by using SNAP at the local Farmer's market



East St. Louis Facts:

County Health Ranking 97/102

Unemployment 12%

WIC adult obesity rate 62%

Per capita income \$18,434

Corner stores 42

ACTIVITIES

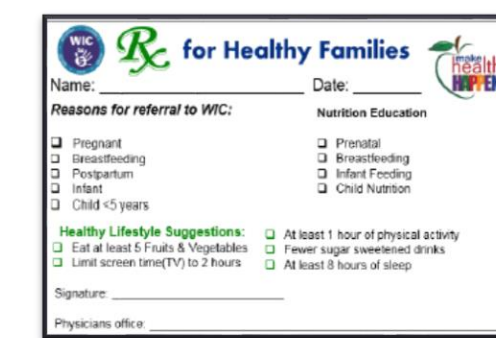
To improve the food environment in East St. Louis, the project adopted the following In-store signage, highlighting healthy options. They were prominently displayed in the 7 stores who participated in the project. The signage included shelf-talkers, recipe cards, nutritional messages, promotional posters, and aisle signs directing consumers towards choosing healthy options.



Cooking demonstrations with food tastings were conducted and recipe cards were distributed at each of the stores. We worked with the store owners to increase the inventory and variety of fruits and vegetables at each of the participating corner stores and provided resources and training for the store owners on best practices to maintain and sell healthy foods.

Addressed food insecurity by increasing awareness on food access in the community by distributing food pantry lists and food resource guides.

Promoted the Double Value Program & Fresh Bucks for SNAP recipients at the Farmer's Market.



The WIC to 5 promotion project was adopted to increase WIC participation and establish partnerships with local providers and other community agencies.

OUTCOMES

- During this project, we were able to build a diverse network of partnerships with support organizations and community members who took ownership over the projects in their neighborhoods.
- The visibility and display of healthy food options was increased and maintained in all 7 participating stores
- The variety of fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables increased from 2 to 10 or more in 5 of the 6 stores. One store closed during the project period.
- Over 250 customers sampled healthy recipes made with ingredients found in the corner stores.
- All the store owners reported that they sold more produce than they did prior to participating in the program.
- Over 5000 wallet-sized food pantry lists and 1000 food resource guides were distributed during the project period. Two of the food pantries reported ordering more healthy options and noted an increase in patrons in the last quarter.
- WIC to 5 brochures and green prescriptions for WIC were promoted and displayed at 11 provider offices in the community.



The farmer's market dispersed \$1227.00 worth of Double Value SNAP dollars and \$630 Fresh Bucks to the community during the season (August-October) towards the purchase of fruits and vegetables.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Most of the corner stores did not display prices on their products. Often times consumers are not comfortable asking for prices, which affects what they buy. We provided price tags for fresh produce and encouraged the store owners to price the items individually.
- The majority of the store owners we worked with were from Palestine. Most of their employees were family members, and there was a high turnover of the staff. Cultural barriers were a challenge when providing trainings.
- Tapping into local talent helps with community engagement. A local graffiti artist painted healthy foods on one of the corner store fronts, bringing a lot of attention to the store and helping to promote our program.
- The limited knowledge about the WIC program and its benefits among the local doctors and their staff was surprising. They welcomed information to promote and refer to WIC.



BEST PRACTICES

Implementing best practices for our coalition involved building positive relationships with store owners who are excited about selling healthier foods and who have a positive relationship with the community.

We found that bridging the supply and demand gap can lead to a balanced and sustainable marketplace that can operate after a healthy corner store initiative is over. In addition to direct partners, it is important to build relationships with support organizations like the local extension program and universities. Support organizations can provide technical assistance, research capacity, man power and other services and assistance that are highly specialized.



Establishing communication, to foster referrals back and forth, and to help provide WIC resources in a way that MDs will make sure their patients utilize like the green prescriptions.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, East Side Health District will continue to foster partnerships and host the MHH coalition meetings and work towards improving access to healthy foods in the community.



The Coalition partnered with the local YMCA and received partial funding from the Anti-Hunger Grant to support the Healthy Corner Store Initiative. The coalition will continue to support existing partner stores while also expanding the program to all 42 corner/convenience stores in East St. Louis by seeking long-term stable funding.

The coalition will be collaborating with elected officials, city regulatory staff, small business owners, business associations, residents, and academic researchers to bring about the Staple Food Ordinance in East St. Louis.