

# Community Action and Retailer Engagement to Improve Food Marketing in Urban Neighborhoods

The Chicago, IL “Healthy Corner Store Project” creates opportunities for store owners and community residents to work together on healthy food marketing improvements



## THE ISSUE

**IT IS CRITICAL TO EXPAND** opportunities for all communities to have a healthy food system. Consumers are more likely to make healthy food choices in environments where nutritious foods are accessible and affordable.

Nevertheless, corner/small grocery stores serve as a key source of food for many residents living in urban communities. These stores often carry a limited variety of healthful food options and/or charge high prices for the options that are available. In recent years, a movement has been underway to organize community stakeholders around food justice and to create a dialogue that will generate action toward neighborhood level solutions to expand healthy food access. This movement is underway in Chicago, IL.

In 2013, the Healthy Corner Store Project was launched as a partnership between the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC)-Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion (CPHP), and the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN). The building blocks for this community-academic partnership centered on mission-aligned activities to provide residents the opportunity to lead change. The partnership activities have included two successful community conferences to support the initial introduction of the Healthy Food Financing Initiative<sup>1</sup> in Illinois, obtaining grant funding to expand the project reach, and a consulting contract to support efforts to develop healthy food retail and conduct community engagement in low food access communities.

Step by step, this partnership has worked to support and mobilize the public in creating community change. As new funding and policies provide opportunities to improve food environments in low food access communities throughout Chicago the challenge that remains is to create a “win-win” for consumer options for healthy food choices and economic benefits for store owners.

## THE QUESTIONS

**THE HEALTHY CORNER STORE PROJECT** in Chicago engaged in an Environments Supporting Healthy Eating (ESHE) Community Measures Pilot Project to explore the following food environment questions:

- How can corner store assessments provide a more detailed picture of the current food environment infrastructure and policies within the local community?
- What is the potential model for sharing community resident/consumer feedback with the owners of small stores/corner stores that will increase offerings of fresh fruits and vegetables, healthy product placement, sustainable sourcing, and positive community engagement?

<sup>1</sup>. The Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) is a federal and state program that improves access to healthy foods in communities that need it through critical loan and grant financing.

## THE SOLUTION

**THE OBJECTIVES FOR THE CORNER STORE** assessments were to **1)** assess food preferences of community residents; **2)** gather information on store offerings and environments; and **3)** identify recommendations for food environment improvements. Prior assessment work conducted by the Healthy Corner Store Project was helpful for identifying four neighborhoods selected for the Chicago Community Loan Fund (CCLF) initiative to help expand food access in areas underserved by traditional food retail. Funding came from the HFFI. The neighborhoods included: Englewood and West Englewood, Grand Boulevard, West Humboldt Park, and the Roseland and Pullman areas of Chicago. To help determine the impact of the CCLF initiative, the ESHE pilot project corner store evaluations were conducted within the same four neighborhoods.

Given the diversity of store owners (many are immigrants), the Nutrition, Obesity, and Health Equity Research Group at UIC (NOHERG) and IMAN collaborated to hire Arabic speaking research assistants to linguistically-match interview staff to Arabic-speaking store operators and conduct interviews. Black community residents and staff members conducted interviews with black store operators. Three data collection tools were created and utilized for the assessment: a store operator survey; a community resident survey; and a corner store observational tool (adapted from the [Southwest Chicago Food Store Audit Instrument](#)). Interviews were conducted with 100 store owners and 200 community residents. In addition, 140 store assessments were completed. Residents and staff based at community organizations in the target areas were trained to complete the store assessment and worked with NOHERG staff to collect the data.

The Healthy Corner Store Project found the standardized ESHE County and State scores to be an excellent tool for discussion. Project partners were particularly interested in how the low ESHE county rating (i.e., as relatively unsupportive of healthy eating) may differ from the environment residents encounter in their local neighborhoods. The ESHE community-measures pilot project also provided support for NOHERG staff to train and collaborate with the community-based organizations to conduct baseline corner store assessments prior to the opening of the HFFI food retail locations.

## THE IMPACT

**THE CHICAGO HEALTHY CORNER STORE PROJECT** is working to develop a long-term relationship with the network of corner stores identified as part of this project. The ongoing goal is to provide store operator nutrition training, community nutrition education, cooking demonstrations, and assistance with product placement and store transformation. This work will be implemented with neighborhood organizations all across the Chicagoland area. The findings from the project also directly supported or support the following advocacy activities:

- NOHERG developed an ESHE newsletter to disseminate the findings from the ESHE pilot project to a broader network of stakeholders including faith leaders, policy makers, community-based organizations, public health agencies, and community residents.
- In fall 2015 the Healthy Corner Store Project hosted their 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Food 4 Life community conference and engaged organizations throughout Chicago that were interested in working with small grocers and corner stores to help increase healthy food access in their communities.
- A toolkit is being developed by IMAN, NOHERG, and the Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion to train store operators on topics of nutrition, community engagement, sustainable sourcing, book keeping, marketing, product placement, and advertising.



**“Our partnership activities focus on building equitable healthy food access for residents of communities of color and low income communities who utilize or are eligible for SNAP.”**

—ANGELA ODOMS YOUNG, PhD, Associate Professor, Kinesiology and Nutrition, University of Illinois at Chicago

For more information on the Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion (CPHP) and Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) visit: [oceanhp.uic.edu/programs/cphp](http://oceanhp.uic.edu/programs/cphp) and [www.imacentral.org](http://www.imacentral.org)

This case study was produced in April 2016 by the Council on Black Health (CBH). To learn more about ESHE and the Council's ESHE technical assistance services email: [ESHEHub@gmail.com](mailto:ESHEHub@gmail.com)

