

# healthy corner stores *issue brief*

by The Food Trust for the Healthy Corner Stores Network

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**SPRING 2011 ISSUE:** [Topic Overview](#) / [Views from the Field](#) / [Keys to Success](#) / [Additional Resources](#)

## featured topic

### FRESH FOOD RETAIL DEVELOPMENT: CORNER STORE CONVERSIONS

Lack of access to affordable healthy food is a problem that plagues many cities and towns across the country. Many public health and other nonprofit organizations are confronting this challenge by developing partnerships with established corner stores to expand their inventory of healthy food items.<sup>1</sup> Partnering with corner stores to assist them in the transformation of their retail spaces can be an effective fresh food retail development strategy, providing residents with access to healthy foods while improving the economic viability of corner stores.

Common strategies to creating a healthier corner store include a combination of modest infrastructural changes, store layout modifications and training for owners on selling healthy products and business management. The cost of store changes can range from \$1,000 to \$5,000<sup>2</sup> for basic refrigeration and shelving to \$30,000<sup>3</sup> to \$200,000<sup>4</sup> for major reconstruction, façade improvements and greening projects. These smaller startup investments of equipment and training, often referred to as a "corner store conversion,"<sup>5</sup> help to ensure that healthy changes are both profitable and sustainable. Once the initial conversion is completed, store owners can take full ownership of the changes and maintain them over time.

In addition to the infrastructure changes, training, providing assistance with marketing to promote these changes and community engagement are key to making a conversion successful. By working with store owners to create a comprehensive plan to successfully expand their business operations and capacities, store conversions can enhance business development while providing underserved communities with healthy food access at affordable prices. Additionally, corner store conversions



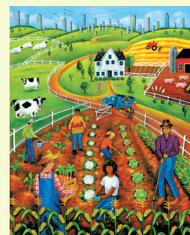
### healthy corner stores network

#### **The Healthy Corner Stores Network**

supports efforts to increase the availability and sales of healthy, affordable foods through small-scale stores in underserved communities. The Network facilitates information sharing through [webinars](#), in-person meetings, an [extensive website](#), and publications, with support from the J.R. Albert Foundation.

[healthycornerstores.org](http://healthycornerstores.org)

#### **The Network is convened by the following organizations:**



#### **Community Food Security Coalition**

#### **Community Food Security Coalition**

catalyzes food systems that are healthy, sustainable, just, and democratic by building community voice and capacity for change. It has over 450 member organizations.

are sometimes an attractive alternative to constructing a new store. While working with existing corner stores is less involved and can be more cost effective than constructing a new store,<sup>6</sup> there are a number of factors to consider when approaching this type of work. Important issues to consider before work begins include: store selection criteria, store participation requirements and project management. These issues will be discussed under the Keys to Success section of this article.

## views from the field

Public Matters, a California-based social enterprise that designs and implements media, education and civic engagement projects, is working to improve fresh food access in some of the most underserved areas of Los Angeles. Public Matters was first commissioned by a Healthy Eating Active Communities initiative to work with two stores in South Los Angeles. Now as part of a five-year National Institutes of Health grant in partnership with UCLA-USC Center for Population Health and Health Disparities (CPHHD), the organization is working with four stores in East L.A. Through these projects, Public Matters reconfigures existing local stores to carry healthier food inventory with the goal of increasing fresh food availability and consumption. Store changes range from \$5,000 to \$35,000 and include façade improvements, changes to store layout, lighting and electrical efficiency. Stores are also provided with business training. Local youth leaders are engaged in making the physical changes in stores and become health advocates who raise awareness through presentations, videos and other forms of media.



According to Public Matter's principal, Mike Blockstein and creative director, Reanne Estrada, their work is much more than the physical conversion of a store. In fact Estrada explains that they prefer the term "market makeover" to conversion because their work, "is both the physical renovation of a store and a transformation of a market of customers and their shopping patterns and behaviors, to create a participatory, community driven process that has long term sustainability." Their approach is to take what is already present in communities, such as existing stores, customers and community resources, and "provide an opportunity for the people to own the



## The Food Trust

**The Food Trust**, a nonprofit founded in 1992, strives to make healthy food available to all. Working with neighborhoods, schools, grocers, farmers and policymakers, we've developed a comprehensive approach that combines nutrition education and greater availability of affordable, nutritious food.



## public health law & policy

**Public Health Law & Policy** works with public health leaders as they create laws and policies to make the healthy choice the easy choice. We build the capacity of advocates to use sophisticated legal and policy tools in their everyday practice, generating meaningful and lasting change on a wide scale.

## URBANE



**Urbane Development** is a community development firm that works with communities to build and strengthen their asset base – businesses, real estate, and people – to catalyze a truly comprehensive and sustainable revitalization process for communities in need.

solution for healthy food access,” says Estrada. This strategy builds a customer base and engages residents in healthy changes. With increased demand a store will continue to supply healthy options while improving the business’s bottom line, thus creating systematic and environmental changes with long-term effects. While Public Matters is currently in the process of working with East L.A. stores, South L.A. stores that were completed in 2009 continue to maintain and profit from their “market makeovers.”

The Food Trust is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to make affordable, nutritious food available to all. In response to the lack of fresh produce available to low-income families in Philadelphia, The Food Trust developed the Healthy Corner Store Initiative (HCSI) to increase the availability of healthy foods in corner stores and to engage young people in improving their snacking purchases to support the healthy store changes. Since 2004, the Food Trust has worked to create healthy stores and develop a network of healthy corner stores. The initiative has recently expanded corner store efforts across the city with support from the Philadelphia Department of Public Health’s Get Healthy Philly initiative. Since April 2010, over 500 corner stores have become members of the Philadelphia Healthy Corner Store Network by committing to introduce new healthy food options for their customers and participating in a Healthy Food Identification social marketing campaign. Stores that successfully complete these basic requirements are given the opportunity to apply for a “mini-conversion” ranging in price from \$1,000 to \$5,000, which can include shelving, refrigeration, point of sales systems and other equipment to sell healthy items as well as training on business management and on how to sell healthy perishables.



According to Brianna Almaguer Sandoval, project manager of the initiative, “Store owners are really embracing the program. Many of them already recognize the value of selling healthy products both for their business and for community health, saying that they just needed the help to get started.” A key component of this work is taking businesses that are sometimes viewed as a deterrent to public health and engaging them as allies in creating healthier communities. The initiative works alongside store owners to support them in their healthy efforts and to ensure that changes are profitable. Ramon Espinal, owner of Jarabacoa Food Market which received a conversion, says “When I first heard about

## **additional resources**

### **A Toolkit for Community Organizers and Storeowners.**

Delridge Healthy Corner Store Project, 2009. Combines a toolkit for storeowners and a manual for community organizers, both with extensive practical advice and tools for healthy corner store projects.

### **Market Makeovers.org.**

South L.A. Healthy Eating Active Communities Initiative and Public Matters. A dynamic, user-friendly online toolkit about the process of transforming small corner stores to carry healthier food choices.

### **Healthy Foods Here Produce Manual.**

Healthy Foods Here/Chuck Genuardi, December 2010. Directed toward owners of small grocery and convenience stores, this guide gives a wealth of advice about how to order, handle, display and store produce.

### **Healthy Corner Store Resource Guide.**

Live Well West Denver. Promotional guide for store owners, includes food safety tips, guide to shelf life, local purchasing options and list of vendors, and display and sales tips.

### **Improving Access to Healthy Food: A Community Planning Tool.**

Columbus Health Department, November 2005. Includes practical advice about community food assessment, community engagement and action planning.

### **Healthy Corner Stores: The State of the Movement.**

Public Health Law and Policy, 2009. This document takes a critical look at the successes and challenges of corner store interventions to date, presenting a three-stage strategic plan for developing sustainable models for future projects.

the program, I thought it was a great idea. A lot of people don't have a way to get to a large supermarket. Every small grocery store needs to have healthy options for their customers. I am doing this for the health of the community and for more business. When you sell healthy items it keeps the customer coming back." So far the initiative has completed 15 store conversions with an additional 85 scheduled over the next year. Stores are reporting that customers have noticed the new healthy options, are buying them and asking for even more healthy products.

## keys to success

- **Identify a project manager.** Before, during and after the conversion process, store owners need support to ensure that the owner feels comfortable with plans and changes are happening smoothly. A project manager should be able to oversee everyone involved in the store conversion and to identify any potential problems. Building a strong and trusting relationship with owners is key to establishing owner commitment.
- **Identify clear criteria for store selection and participation requirements.** Selection criteria should reflect program goals and may include items such as store location, size and current business operations. It may also require owners to make some initial changes before becoming eligible for a larger conversion. Requirements for participation should be clearly communicated before work begins. The owner may need to introduce certain products or commit to making a certain percentage of their inventory healthy. Other requirements may include acceptance of training, making layout changes or completing a business plan.
- **Select promising stores with motivated and experienced owners.** Choose stores that are well-maintained with owners who are experienced operators and dedicated to providing their customers and communities with healthier products. Corner store conversions are also more successful when the owner is not just interested in profits but is committed to long-term change and has experience working with members of the community where the store is located.
- **Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).** A written agreement between the program and the corner store outlines the responsibilities of each party during the conversion process. For example, the program may agree to provide the installation of new equipment as long as the store owner agrees to solely use that equipment for the display of healthy products.
- **Start small.** Making small, gradual changes can help store owners adjust to the demands of selling perishable inventory and enables project managers to gauge the store owner's level of commitment to making and maintaining the changes. Additionally, store conversions can be as simple as providing shelving, marketing and training, which may be more feasible for some store owners than a larger overhaul, which may require an owner with more business experience.
- **Create a plan to address training needs and post-conversion support.** During and after the conversion it is essential to provide ongoing in-store training on implementing the conversions, problem solving and general planning for new inventory to help corner store owners successfully adjust to the new changes. Owners may find it helpful to receive training on business management and buying, selling and handling fresh produce.

- **Develop a visibility plan.** Converted stores should be positioned as a community health resource and efforts should be made to set the store apart from other corner stores. Signage and marketing materials to promote changes should be prominently placed both inside, and directly outside of the store. In the community, store changes should be promoted with community groups and residents, including holding a grand re-opening event or considering advertising through radio, local television stations or social media outlets. By promoting store changes and engaging the community throughout the process, community awareness and participation in healthy changes will help drive traffic to the converted stores to ensure long-term success.
- **Have an exit plan.** Efforts should focus on helping owners overcome initial obstacles while working to have the store gradually take on full ownership of the changes. Continued subsidization and lack of owner participation is not likely to be sustainable or a viable business solution. If the MOU is not honored, and continued work with the store does not bring about changes, it may be necessary to end the partnership.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Health Law and Policy. 2009. Healthy Corner Stores: The State of the Movement, p 5. Available at <http://healthycornerstores.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/HealthyCornerStores-StateoftheMovement.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The Food Trust's Healthy Corner Store Initiative

<sup>3</sup> Mike Blockstein, Principal of Public Matters

<sup>4</sup> The Food Trust, Juan Romano Conversion

<sup>5</sup> Public Health Law and Policy. 2009. Healthy Corner Stores: The State of the Movement, p. 5. Available at <http://healthycornerstores.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/HealthyCornerStores-StateoftheMovement.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Flournoy, Rebecca. 2010. Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: Promising Strategies to Improve Access to Fresh, Healthy Food and Transform Communities. Policy Link. Available at [http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97c6d565-bb43-406d-a6d5-eca3bbf35af0%7D/HFHC\\_SHORT\\_FINAL.PDF](http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97c6d565-bb43-406d-a6d5-eca3bbf35af0%7D/HFHC_SHORT_FINAL.PDF)