Corner stores are a common feature of many communities, often located near schools, parks and other community settings. Youth often shop at these nearby corner stores and as a result, corner stores can be a significant environmental influence on the snacking habits of youth. One Philadelphia study found that 53% of youth were visiting corner stores at least once a day and on average, youth were spending $1.07 per visit to corner stores, consuming 360 calories in snacks and beverages.\(^1\) While these stores often carry energy-dense, packaged foods, many organizations are engaging youth in efforts to create healthier corner stores and promote healthy eating in the community. Youth engagement builds leadership skills and can foster social and emotional development while empowering youth to create healthy changes in their communities.

Working with youth to create healthy changes in corner stores is a smart strategy not just for improving the health of communities, but also for ensuring the success of the corner stores themselves. Youth involvement can help ensure the sustainability and profitability of adding more nutritious foods to store inventories. When young people guide the selection and marketing of healthy foods, they help ensure the items and associated marketing will appeal to young customers. For example, youth can help development social marketing materials with colorful designs and messaging that will encourage other youth to eat better. Youth can contribute to healthy corner store projects by evaluating the nutritional value of a store’s inventory, encouraging store owners to sell fresh produce and other healthy products, designing and setting up product displays, and marketing these new foods in the community. Youth may promote the healthy items outside of the store, to their peers and to their families, further increasing the popularity of those items.
Additionally, youth involvement may help attract customers who prefer to shop at stores that support the community.

Incorporating youth into corner store programs can benefit communities by increasing the profitability of healthy changes to a store’s inventory while promoting the development of leadership and social skills among the involved youth. Additionally, when young people are involved in making their communities healthier, they may also improve their own eating habits and encourage their families and friends to eat healthier. While youth engagement has the potential to create community change and empower youth, there are a number of important factors to consider when approaching this type of work. Motivating youth to work on a project instead of socializing or doing another fun activity and finding time to meet that doesn’t conflict with other youth commitments might be two main challenges. Other factors to consider before work begins include: offering youth a variety of projects, offering an incentive for participation, and being patient with youth who may not yet have professional skills. These issues will be discussed further under the Keys to Success section of this article.

The views from the field

The California Center for Public Health Advocacy (CCPHA) is a nonprofit organization that raises awareness about public health issues and mobilizes communities to influence local and state policies. CCPHA convenes People on the Move, a group in Baldwin Park, CA, working to increase healthy eating and exercise and to reduce obesity and diabetes. Healthy Teens on the Move is a youth subcommittee of 8th–12th grade youth that advises People on the Move. Rosa Soto, the regional director for CCPHA, oversees Healthy Teens on the Move and believes that youth have been a crucial component in People on the Move’s success. Healthy Teens has been working with store owners and policy makers to help corner stores carry healthier foods. Youth in the program presented their vision of improved health for the community to city council, created YouTube videos about the healthfulness of foods available in their community, and as part of a contest, designed a logo for corner stores that highlights foods in compliance with the state’s

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 Development

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.
requirements for healthy snacks and beverages in schools. Rosa Soto believes that having youth involved has been a key factor in getting store owners to embrace healthy changes to their stores. “It’s not always easy for stores to want to make changes, but they do want to support kids and their community. The kids tug at the heartstrings of the owners,” she says. She also believes they have helped policy makers understand the needs of the community. “The passion that youth convey to corner store projects is beyond the passion of adults,” she says. “They speak openly and passionately in a way that adults often do not.”

As important as youth have been to garnering the support of corner stores and the city, involving youth can be challenging. Thoughtful development of Healthy Teens on the Move has ensured its success. Healthy Teens on the Move is organized around the school day and school year calendar instead of around adult work schedules. Young people are also offered a variety of ways to participate. “Not every student wants to stand up in front of city council,” Soto says. Youth may also design displays, assist in hands-on conversions, make videos, assess stores and present data to store owners, and participate in store upgrades, like a new coat of paint. Youth are also offered a stipend for their hard work. To receive the stipend, youth must be available to volunteer, they must have a good attendance record at meetings, and they must demonstrate commitment to the project they select. Working towards a monetary goal, in addition to an improved community, can help keep young people motivated. Youth involvement is at the heart of the corner store program. Youth are, says Soto, “carriers of the vision.”

West Oakland Youth Standing Empowered (WYSE) is an afterschool program that teaches leadership skills to youth, ages 15–21. WYSE advocates for healthy communities through involvement in food security projects, like the Healthy Neighborhood Stores Alliance (HNSA), which works to improve the affordability and quality of fruits and vegetables in corner stores and to strengthen store’s relationships with the communities they serve. WYSE employs youth to deliver locally grown, fresh fruits and vegetables to HNSA corner stores. Quinton Sankofa is the program director for Mandela Marketplace, the Oakland CA, nonprofit that launched the HNSA project, and he oversees and guides WYSE in the produce delivery business. Sankofa explains that until youth became involved, corner stores did not sell quality produce—or make

**additional resources**

**The Food Trust’s Snackin’ Fresh Youth Website.**
The Food Trust, 2010.
This website highlights youth involvement in a corner store project. It includes a blog, maps of the community, photos, and youth-made videos.

**Photovoice as a Tool for Youth Policy Advocacy.**
Healthy Eating Active Communities, 2009.
This tool allows youth to use photographs of their community to identify problems and create solutions.

**Healthy Snacking at the Corner Store: A Healthy Corner Store Program Curriculum for Middle School-Age Youth.**
D.C. Hunger Solutions, 2009.
This curriculum teaches middle school students about nutrition and healthy eating in corner stores.

**Market Makeovers Website.**
Market Makeovers is a toolkit that outlines a process for corner store conversions with youth involvement.

**Baldwin Park Teens Help Create the “Healthy Selection” Campaign.**
This video shows how youth from Healthy Teens on the Move are helping corner stores be healthier, and customer choose healthier options, through the Healthy Selection campaign.
the profit from fruits and vegetables they do now. “The produce is priced low just to draw in customers,” he says. “The stores made good money.”

Youth are heavily involved in helping the stores successfully carry produce. Youth employees complete a produce inventory, which is used for ordering. They pick up the produce from the warehouse by bike, deliver it to the store, set up the displays, post prices, and talk to customers. WYSE youth participate in quarterly trainings on topics such as nutrition and business management, and plan the development of the bike delivery project. In addition to youth helping stores meet the demand for produce, Quinton believes that partnering with youth is viewed positively. “The community’s response has been tremendous,” he says. “The community wants to support businesses that support kids.” One challenge, Sankofa points out, is that young people often come into the program enthusiastic and excited, but without professional skills. “Patience!” he says. “It’s all about patience and dedication to the kids as they develop time management skills and a sense of responsibility.” Participating store owners are patient, and provide feedback and walk youth through many aspects of a business, instead of just receiving the produce youth deliver. Youth value the development of the stores, and the store owners value the development of youth.

The community has reacted positively to youth involvement—not just to the produce they deliver and the stores that work with them, but to the youth themselves. “Our young people have built networks in the community. People recognize them and say hello, and even invite them to participate in community events,” Sankofa explains.

**keys to success**

- **Identify your youth.** Recruit youth who are responsible, committed, and have great leadership potential. Partnering with an existing youth program or school will assist in identifying youth that can strengthen a corner store program. Be sure to recruit youth that live or go to school near the corner stores to ensure that they have a stake in the success of the program and that corner store changes come from within the community.

- **Determine the youth role.** There are many aspects to a corner store program, and only some of them are appropriate for youth. For example, it might not be appropriate for youth to negotiate community partnerships or navigate the resource landscape, but it may be appropriate for youth to maintain healthy displays, design advertising, and convince store owners and other stakeholders that healthy corner stores will benefit the community. Choose an overall goal for youth engagement, and develop the role of youth around that goal. Store owners and youth will be much more committed to the program if there is a clear structure and responsibilities for stores, youth, and the adults working with youth.

- **Consider youth schedules and constraints.** Youth are in school for much of the typical work day and may be unable to travel far for a meeting. Consider holding meetings after school and at a central, easily accessible location. Successful youth programs organize around youth, instead of fitting them into an existing structure.

- **Plan your youth meetings.** Youth meetings need to have a clear purpose so youth accomplish something at each meeting and feel like they are making good use of their time. Consider incorporating
trainings on community building, leadership skill development, and time to complete program tasks. Planning meetings with a variety of purposes will keep them interesting and engaging.

- **Make it easy to “take it home”**. Encourage young people to make healthy changes in their own lives and to help family and friends to do the same. For example, consider offering youth easy recipes to take home using healthy ingredients from the corner store, or provide youth with healthy eating messages to share with family and friends. Working through youth to reach adults can be an effective method for delivering nutrition education to families and influencing their eating habits.

- **Youth lead, adults support**. Youth engagement means youth need to be part of the planning and not just the implementation. They know their peers, corner stores, and communities, and may have ideas for the program that adults may not have considered. Additionally, valuing their ideas, and not just their ability to execute plans, means that youth will feel empowered and further develop into leaders.

- **Capitalize on youth strengths**. Young people are frequently up-to-date on social media and technology. Utilize those skills by incorporating a youth-supported Facebook page, blog, Twitter feed, or text messaging campaign into your outreach efforts. Youth can help develop in-store marketing, such as fun and colorful messaging that appeal to other young people. Youth can also promote healthy eating through out-of-store marketing. This could include development of promotional items like t-shirts, producing a youth video, creating a youth website or writing comic books with healthy messaging.

- **Mix it up**. If youth are only offered one task, they may feel forced into something they don’t want to do. Youth need a variety of ways to participate, so they can choose what they do best and have the most fun doing it. Offer tasks that highlight and strengthen a variety of skills, like speaking publicly about the program, designing a display for the store, and writing a blog about youth efforts.

- **Offer incentives**. Whether it’s an end-of-the-year party, a prize, or a paycheck, offering youth an incentive for their participation and dedication will help them stay focused and engaged.

- **Make it fun**. Remember, youth care about their communities and their health, but they also play sports, spend time on the computer, and hang out with their friends. If youth aren’t having fun, they might choose another activity. Consider incorporating snacks, games, and “hanging out” into your meetings so they’re not all work, all the time.

- **Celebrate every win**. While many corner store improvements take months or even years to complete, youth need to feel that their efforts have an immediate impact. Build short-and-long term timelines into your program, and celebrate small wins along the way.

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2. *People on the Move* builds on years of collaboration between residents and teens in Baldwin Park and incorporates CCPHA’s 57th Assembly District Grassroots Team, Kaiser Permanente, and the City of Baldwin Park. From [http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/heacbp.html](http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/heacbp.html)

3. Students from the local high schools created a standing subcommittee that advises *People on the Move* on the barriers to healthy eating and physical activity that students face at school and in the community. *Healthy Teens on the Move* is the name the community’s teens give this advisory committee. From [http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/heacbp.html](http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/heacbp.html)