Corner stores are a convenient food source in rural, suburban, and urban communities across the country. Most corner stores sell packaged foods and beverages of minimal nutritional value, alcohol, and tobacco products, with few healthy or fresh options. However, these small-scale stores have tremendous potential to improve community health and promote economic development.

The convenience store sector is a $400 billion industry with an estimated 144,541 stores nationwide. While this includes large chains like Cumberland Farms and 7 Eleven, the industry is dominated by individually owned stores, which comprise 62% of convenience stores. Most small-scale stores are dependent on fuel and tobacco sales. However, profits from these segments have been in decline due to higher fuel costs to the stores and greater tobacco prevention efforts. Owners of small-scale stores are increasingly looking towards fresh produce and value-added products as a means to boost their bottom line, while community groups and public health advocates are looking at these stores as an important resource for improving access to fresh, healthy foods.

Working with corner stores to provide healthy options can be a strategic economic and public health investment. The convenience of small stores, both because they are so widespread and cater to on-the-go eating, makes them an important venue for increasing access to healthy foods in communities. Increasing healthy products in stores can also help stimulate local economies by creating jobs for local residents, capturing dollars that would otherwise be spent outside of the community, and revitalizing neighborhoods by serving as retail anchors.
Profit margins on fresh products are often higher than on packaged snacks and canned goods; therefore, selling fresh products can be a successful business strategy for small-scale stores. Introducing perishable goods may also bring increased risk and additional demands on labor and resources. Many corner stores do not have adequate refrigeration to store and display fresh produce and owners are often unfamiliar with selling perishable items. Training is needed to assist store owners in marketing healthier products and to promote proper food handling of fresh products in order to maintain quality, reduce losses, and ensure food safety. Many stores would also benefit from cosmetic improvements since customers are more likely to shop in stores that are clean and inviting.

Making strategic investments to expand business skills training for store owners, as well as investing in store equipment enhancements and upgrades to ensure profitability and sustainability, are critical to the success to small-scale stores. Forming a collaborative partnership between promising store owners and community groups can be a strong model for promoting economic development through improved access to healthy choices.

views from the field

Andy Toy is a firm believer that training and other resource investments for store owners can have tremendous power in both improving individual stores and stimulating local economies. As Director of the Retail Resource Network at The Enterprise Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Andy has years of experience providing technical support, capital access, marketing, merchandizing and other expertise to store owners across the city. Andy believes, “It is critical to support small business owners, particularly minority businesses, in order for them to thrive and ensure they are assets to communities.” The Enterprise Center’s strategy at the community level is to focus on neighborhood corridors for change. By selecting a small number of stores within a target corridor for improvement, a domino effect is created that benefits the overall corridor.

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. www.thefoodtrust.org

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. www.phlpnet.org/healthy-planning

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. www.urbane-dev.com
Andy states, “At the heart of every community is food. Food is what unites people and is the giant driver of communities and local economies. Whether a restaurant, coffee house, bakery or corner store, businesses that focus on food have great potential to enrich and enhance communities.” Andy has found that many small businesses need assistance getting started. From access to capital and marketing to keeping food costs down and store design, The Enterprise Center has developed a series of best practices for store owners to help them succeed. According to Andy, there are many resources and opportunities out there available to store owners; however, identifying and understanding them can be difficult for store owners. He suggests that “the key to helping these stores is to navigate the field for them and support them as they grow their business.”

Andy cites the example of West Philly Produce, a corner store in Philadelphia. The Enterprise Center helped the store owner to purchase their property in 2008, when it was an abandoned lot. With their assistance, the owner was able to build a new store that opened in 2009. The Food Trust and The Reinvestment Fund also partnered with the owner to provide over $10,000 in grant funding from the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative to complete the development of the store with an emphasis on providing a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables for the community. Through West Philly Produce’s participation in the Food Trust’s Healthy Corner Store Initiative, the store is now planning to expand its inventory from providing fresh produce, smoothies and fruit and vegetable salads to include additional healthy items like low-fat yogurt, milk and eggs. The store has been performing so successfully that the owner has hired seven youth from the community and plans to expand his operations by providing fresh products to other corner stores in the area.

This example shows how an entrepreneurial owner, with support from local groups, can make his dream a reality, and that collaborative efforts can impact an individual store, revitalize one block of a community, boost the local economy and improve the health of neighborhood residents.

**keys to success**

- **Find the hot spots.** Focus on areas of activity such as major intersections, transit hubs and neighborhood corridors and areas with strong community support. This helps to ensure that store changes will be successful and also to create a domino effect that supports other stores in the area.

- **Know the resource landscape.** Become familiar with the various organizations and institutions that can provide resources and opportunities for store owners, such as government programs, community development groups, business associations, non-profits and community-based organizations.

- **Know the market.** Assess what people buy from the store, the potential market for healthy foods, and nearby competition. Consider community demographics and nearby businesses or public spaces; these factors can all influence demand and what a store can successfully sell.

- **Select promising stores with motivated owners.** Find store owners who are excited about selling healthier foods and who have a positive relationship with the community. Take time to build relationships

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**additional resources**

- **Fresh Foods: A Growing Opportunity in the North American Convenience Store Sector.** January 2010, Canadian Government. This brief report gives an overview of the convenience store sector in the U.S. and Canada, and describes current “Fresh Programs” and the potential to expand fresh food sales.

- **Economic Development and Redevelopment: A Toolkit on Land Use and Health.** Planning for Healthy Places in partnership with the California Department of Health Services, 2007. This toolkit provides a fundamental, introductory understanding of the economic development and redevelopment tools available, their use, and how to effectively participate in decisions about their use.

- **Getting Fresh is Major Opportunity and Challenge for C-store Channel.** January 6, 2010, Convenience Store News. Coming from the perspective of the convenience store industry, this article encourages store owners to sell healthy and fresh foods.

- **Healthy Corner Stores for Healthy New Orleans Neighborhoods: A Toolkit for Neighborhood Groups that want to Take Action to Improve their Food Environment.** The Congressional Hunger Center, February 2009. This toolkit includes strategies and materials for neighborhood advocates to work with corner stores to improve access to healthy foods.

- **Healthy Food For All: Healthy Corner Store Strategies from Across the United States.** Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2009. This report provides short profiles of corner store projects around the country that have successfully expanded the selection of healthier foods.

- **Neighborhood Groceries: New Access to Healthy Food in Low-Income Communities.** California Food Policy Advocates, 2003. This report discusses primary causes of lack of access to healthy food in urban areas and the feasibility of various market-based solutions.
with them in order to gain their trust and to gauge their level of commitment to making and maintaining changes.

- **Provide support.** Identify what types of support will be most valuable to a store, and provide an integrated package of resources if possible. This might include equipment or infrastructure, marketing and publicity, introduction of healthier inventory, store design and layout and training on produce handling or business management. Make sure there is a clear agreement for what is expected in exchange for this support.

- **View healthy corner stores from a wider perspective.** Position healthy corner store work beyond the context of public health. Sell it as a way to improve community safety, community revitalization, environmental sustainability, economic development, community planning and general food retail. This will help to rally many stakeholders and integrate healthy corner store work into a larger framework of community improvement. It will also make it easier to replicate efforts.

- **Keep it local.** Develop an interconnected system of local businesses that support each other. For example, purchase refrigeration and other equipment from local companies, hire experts within the neighborhood to provide training and assistance, use local designers for your marketing campaign, and consider sourcing food from a community garden or local farmers. By keeping it local, you create a greater impact on the local economy and community.

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1. A corner store is typically defined as a small-scale store that sells a limited selection of foods and other products. Other terms that are commonly used to refer to this type of store include: small-scale store, convenience store, neighborhood store, and bodega. Healthy Corner Stores Q & A, Healthy Corner Stores Network available at [www.healthycornerstores.org/faq](http://www.healthycornerstores.org/faq)


3. The Enterprise Center provides access to capital, building capacity, business education and economic development opportunities to high-potential, minority and disadvantaged entrepreneurs. Learn more at [www.theenterprisecenter.com](http://www.theenterprisecenter.com)

4. The Reinvestment fund builds wealth and opportunity for low-wealth people and places through the promotion of socially and environmentally responsible development. Learn more at [www.trfund.com](http://www.trfund.com)

5. The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative is an innovate state program that increases the number of supermarkets or other grocery stores in underserved communities across Pennsylvania. Learn more at [www.thefoodtrust.org/php/programs/fffi.php](http://www.thefoodtrust.org/php/programs/fffi.php)

6. The Healthy Corner Store Initiative is a program of The Food Trust that works to increase the availability of healthy foods in corner stores and to educate young people about healthy snacking. Learn more at [www.thefoodtrust.org/php/programs/ corner-store.campaign.php](http://www.thefoodtrust.org/php/programs/corner-store.campaign.php)