There is growing evidence that access to healthy foods is associated with better health outcomes and that increased access is an important component to any comprehensive strategy to combat obesity. However, for corner stores, providing access to healthy foods can be challenging as they face a supplier-retailer gap that can make sourcing produce, particularly local produce, very difficult. Organizations partnering with corner stores to increase healthy offerings often come up against these sourcing issues and are increasingly looking at ways to build a connection between local suppliers and corner stores at an affordable cost. Connecting local healthy foods with corner stores can meet the triple bottom lines of profit, people and planet: it stimulates the local economy by investing in produce from local farmers, provides fresh food access to communities, thus helping to improve the health outcomes of residents and can help the environment by reducing long-distance transportation and supporting small farms which tend to have a less of an impact on the environment.

One of the reasons corner stores have difficulty sourcing healthy products is that they lack the same purchasing power of larger food retailers. Corner stores purchase in small volumes which increases their prices. The distribution of fresh produce, particularly in small amounts, can make produce too expensive for owners to stock. To address these issues, professionals are increasingly looking at ways to leverage the collective purchasing power of corner stores to lower the cost of produce and facilitate the distribution process. This can be accomplished by creating distribution hubs where produce is dropped off in certain areas to either be picked up by store owners or by distributors that can then make short-distance deliveries. This can help reduce higher delivery costs.
costs for store owners. Additionally, a single store owner or a group of owners can purchase larger quantities of produce to then divide among other store owners, thus allowing them to purchase in larger volumes at a lower cost.

Connecting corner stores with local food sources can improve profitability and customer demand. Local produce tends to have a longer shelf life and fresher taste compared to non-local produce. Therefore sourcing local foods can help to reduce food costs from quick spoilage and attract returning customers looking for delicious high-quality produce. While working to connect local farmers, suppliers, distributors and corner stores can have many benefits, there are some important issues to consider when starting this type of work including:

- Identifying and selecting a supplier and/or distribution model
- Ensuring profitability of the model for both suppliers and store owners
- Accounting for limited seasonality of produce in many parts of the country
- Understanding consumer preferences and creating customer demand
- Improving corner store infrastructure and owner familiarity with selling produce
- Building long-term sustainability and economic benefit.

These issues will be discussed further in the Keys to Success section of this article.

**Views from the field**

GrowNYC, a nonprofit based in New York City, improves New York City’s quality of life through a number of environmental programs. GrowNYC’s Fresh Bodegas and Creating Healthy Places programs partnered with Red Jacket Orchards, a local farm in New York State, to build infrastructure to provide residents with access to affordable and locally grown produce at corner stores. GrowNYC connects corner stores with local produce through their wholesale Greenmarket program, in which farmers from across the region drop off produce to one central point in Brooklyn where retailers can purchase it at wholesale prices. Brian Goldblatt, project coordinator at Grow NYC, works with store owners in Brownsville, Brooklyn, who have the potential to sell fresh produce. GrowNYC is leasing a truck that is used by Goldblatt to make short-distance deliveries from the Greenmarket to corner stores. Goldblatt serves as both buyer and distributor by managing store inventory and purchasing produce on behalf of store owners. Mimicking the model used by other food companies, this approach has proved very convenient for store owners to adopt. Goldblatt explains that “neighborhoods can’t always sustain a farmers market, but they can sustain local produce in neighborhood bodegas.” That positive attitude and incentives, such as refrigeration from the Fresh Bodegas program, have successfully engaged thirteen stores to participate in the program. Although corner store owners do not report their sales, Goldblatt states that products are selling, as he makes deliveries to stores one to two times per week.

GrowNYC has tapped into a new market that is mutually beneficial to farmers and store owners. By sourcing locally, prices may be...
lower because seasonal produce is often competitively priced, or less expensive, than non-local produce. Helping neighborhood businesses and local farmers can boost the local economy. Local distribution may also help reduce economic and environmental costs. However, it is not without challenges. Supply and demand is a challenge for both farmers and corner store owners in the program. During the growing season, inclement weather can destroy local crops and the limited seasonality of produce means that not all produce can consistently be provided to store owners. Goldblatt says that they “may need to begin sourcing produce from regional supply sources to counter the local produce shortages.” Also, the program is working to combat negative perceptions of corner stores through marketing, consumer education and professional produce displays. While these challenges remain, Goldblatt claims that there is a growing demand and that customers have become familiar with the local produce and appreciate that they now have access to high-quality produce at an affordable price.

**additional resources**

**Community Food Enterprise: Local Success in a Global Marketplace.**
Wallace Center at Winrock International and the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, 2009.
This report provide a detailed field report on the performance of 24 CFE’s, half inside the United States and half international. It shows that CFE’s represent a huge diversity of legal forms, scales, activities and designs.

**Market Forces—Creating Jobs through Public Investment in Local and Regional Food Systems.**
Union of Concerned Scientists, August 2011.
This report details economic benefits of farmers markets and other local food outlets.

**Is Local Food More Expensive? A Consumer Price Perspective on Local and Non-Local Foods Purchased in Iowa.**
Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, December 2009.
A study found that during peak season, local produce items sold at farmers’ markets were competitive with the same non-local items sold at supermarkets.

**Healthier Food Retail: Beginning the Assessment Process in Your State or Community.**
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Nutrition Physical Activity, and Obesity.
This resource offers information for those interested in assessing the availability of healthy food retail in their area.

**Local Harvest.**
This website maintains a national directory of small farms and CSA’s that corner store organizers can use to find sources for local produce. The database is searchable by zip code, city, and state. Results include contact information, crops produced, and reviews.

**Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit.**
This report provides a toolkit of standardized measurement tools for assessing various aspects of community food security. It include a general guide to community assessment and focused materials for examining six basic assessment components related to community food security.
Lane Coalition for Healthy Active Youth (LCHAY), a non-profit based in Eugene, Oregon, works to prevent childhood obesity through advocacy and action. As part of its nutrition focus area, LCHAY has implemented a Healthy Corner Stores program with funding support from the Northwest Health Foundation and the Spirit Mountain Community Fund to increase access to healthy foods. Kayla Schott-Bresler, coordinator of LCHAY’s Healthy Corner Stores program, says “customers go to convenience stores looking for fast, affordable options.” She believes that by partnering with corner stores there is an opportunity to “implement a valuable intervention that could raise nutrition standards in the community.” In order to do this, LCHAY targets their efforts to low-income areas with a dense proportion of families that lack access to grocery stores. Dari Mart, a local retail chain with stores in high-need areas that is committed to sourcing product locally, proved to be an ideal partner. LCHAY is implementing the Healthy Corner Store program in three Dari Mart stores. The program provides healthy product recommendations to Dari Mart along with marketing materials and pricing and promotion strategies. In addition to in-store efforts, LCHAY collaborated with partners to start a seasonal farm stand outside the store providing farm fresh organic produce to consumers on a weekly basis. As a result of these efforts, store management reports that they have witnessed a significant increase in fresh produce, healthy beverages and other healthy food sales.

This strategy has helped reduce distribution issues, as the farmer is directly bringing their produce to sell at a busy location and the profits go directly to the farmer. This model can also increase foot traffic to the store from shoppers stopping at the farm stand. Overall, the LCHAY model is a low cost strategy, but admittedly they have reduced leverage as they do not provide monetary or equipment incentives. Additionally, while the farm stand has helped reduce distribution issues, it has not eliminated them. Dari Mart has experienced difficulty meeting distributors’ minimum order requirement and healthy product placement can be challenging due to previous corporate contracts for less healthy products. Schott-Bresler recommends that “when working with a retailer you should set up a formal agreement that illustrates expectations of all parties, which can help abate some of these issues.” Having financial or equipment incentives could also help offset some of these obstacles. Despite these challenges Schott-Bresler says that LCHAY’s partnership with Dari Mart has “demonstrated that small food retail chains may be a good partner for creating healthy changes in the community as they may have more capital for product marketing and infrastructure than smaller independently owned stores.”
• **Assess the sourcing landscape.** It is important to understand the current sourcing options available to retailers in a community. Information on locations, delivery options, ordering methods, pricing, quality and volume requirements can all help to guide planning and create a strategy that incorporates current market practices while addressing the largest barriers.

• **Create a sustainable business plan.** Don’t rely solely upon funding from grants or foundations. Start devising a business plan that will be able to operate independently from grants. Strategize creative methods to develop a financially viable project and identify store owners that are committed to making changes. There is a strong demand for fresh and local produce, and corner stores can fill that need!

• **Develop a model that fits the market.** Solve the supplier-retailer gap by creating a solution that works within the current market framework. This can make it easier to implement and can help to ensure profitability and sustainability. Mimicking distribution systems of food companies, incorporating healthy foods into a current distribution system or taking advantage of existing product aggregation points can all help naturally facilitate the distribution process.

• **Leverage the collective buying power of corner stores.** Consider models that generate demand by engaging multiple corner store owners. Increasing purchasing volume and creating distribution hubs can reduce product and delivery costs, allowing store owners to maintain lower prices while also helping farmers access more retailers.

• **Use seasonality to your advantage.** Pricing is a common concern when trying to connect stores with local produce. Use seasonality to your advantage by focusing on produce that is in season in order to maintain low prices. When products are not in season, source from non-local suppliers in order to maintain consistency and affordability.

• **Think outside the corner store.** Not all store owners are ready or willing to take on the increased risk, perceived or real, associated with selling perishable products. If a store owner is not willing to take this on, consider alternative models, such as a farm stand or community supported agriculture (CSA), which can be located at a corner store. The store benefits from increased foot traffic with no risk, the farmer benefits from a new market opportunity and the community benefits from improved healthy food access.

• **Understand customer preferences and overcome customer perceptions.** Make sure the local produce being introduced in stores reflects customer tastes and preferences. Consider community demographics and level of familiarity with different produce. Take time to test out customer preferences to assess which products sell best in each store and in what volumes. Also, work with store owners on produce handling and display in order to create attractive displays of high quality produce that will encourage customer purchases.

• **Collaborate with the experts.** If you are in the planning and implementation phases, research resources and organizations that have plenty of experience in corner store outreach and healthy food retail and seek their advice. Any expert advice is invaluable when initiating a project and can save you time and money, and perhaps create an informal professional relationship.


