

AGENDA PRIORITIES

1. Expand and increase innovative methods to bring healthy foods to underserved areas as well as strategies to encourage their consumption.

GOOD FOOD IN CORNER STORES STARTS WITH BUSINESS SUPPORT, CONSUMER EDUCATION

A cutting board, kid-tested recipes, and measuring cups were among the items that residents of two Eastside Detroit neighborhoods took home with them in August after some “healthy food fair” fun and games.

The community gatherings brought young and old together to learn about choosing and preparing foods that can make a big difference in how well they feel and how well they do at school, at work, and at home.

The fairs also celebrated the arrival of more healthy food in the urban neighborhoods. They took place next to two corner stores that have added fruits and vegetables to their shelves. The stores are among 20 “party stores” and other small retailers participating in Detroit FRESH. This project helps these stores, many for the first time, carry the fresh produce that nearby residents need.

Neighbors are noticing. One resident who attended a fair provided organizers with this comment: “I’ve lived here all my life, and there’s never been anything like this fair before, to show people how to eat healthier and live better. Thank you.”

Detroit FRESH and related healthy food fairs are projects of SEED Wayne, a Wayne State University initiative, in conjunction with many community partners, to build city residents’ engagement in the process of increasing the amount of affordable healthy food in their neighborhoods. The combination of business assistance and healthy food outreach is needed to overcome challenges on both sides of the “food desert” equation.

On the consumer side, residents of Detroit, with very few quality grocery options, suffer high rates of dietary diseases in a nationwide public health challenge that has reached epidemic proportions. Highly processed convenience foods have replaced whole, fresh-prepared foods for many families.

On the retailer side, small businesses that remain in the city stock mostly snack foods, cigarettes, lottery and liquor. One significant barrier to healthy food in the stores is the retailers’ lack of employees and other resources needed to manage the perishable items cost-effectively. Another barrier is the fact that they have little, if any, regulatory incentive to do it.

“These are family operations run by one or two individuals around the clock,” says Kami Pothukuchi, Detroit FRESH director. “For many, produce is simply not part of their business model,” she says.



Photo by Kami Pothukuchi

Detroit FRESH provides supplies, such as baskets for managing and displaying produce. It connects stores with distributors that will make smaller scale deliveries than is typical for a mainstream supermarket. In fact, one of Detroit's newer mobile markets, Peaches and Greens, is involved. Detroit FRESH also helps the stores market the produce to nearby residents, by working with owners on merchandising, knocking on doors to spread the word, and holding events like healthy food fairs.

Opportunity

Experience and studies show that, even with limited incomes, people will purchase and prepare healthier food if provided easier and affordable access to items they want. Projects like Detroit FRESH and the related healthy food fairs are powerful on-the-ground steps toward improving lives, neighborhoods, and Michigan's future.

Need

Both urban and rural communities in Michigan need this kind of business assistance to bring healthy food to underserved communities, and to combine those steps with strategies to encourage healthy food consumption. Nine out of Michigan's 10 top counties with the highest rates of children living in poverty are rural counties. Rural populations are much smaller, yet the percentage of children in poverty in Lake County (#1) is 36 percent compared to Detroit's Wayne County (#10) at 29 percent.¹ The dietary diseases that are particularly problematic for families in poverty are a statewide challenge requiring comprehensive support for local community action.

Action

The Michigan Good Food Charter spells out a number of action steps in its "Good Food Access for Families and Communities" report, including:

- *Provide education and startup funding to help people and communities grow and market fresh foods.*
- *Invest in innovative food delivery models that have documented success in increasing healthy food access.*
- *Assist corner stores and markets to implement the new Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) requirements for participating stores to stock fresh fruits and vegetables.*

1-2-3 Go!

In your own community consider following SEED Wayne's example of bringing different community partners together to build a pipeline of healthy eating information and fresh produce for low-income residents. A first step would be to take stock of existing programs, such as nutrition education at local health departments, and existing outlets, such as a small retailer located near families in need. Learn about their resources and interests, and whether they might be willing to participate in a coordinated effort.

Take small steps and start with those businesses and organizations that are on board. This is a good way to generate early success and build momentum, including opportunities to secure funding.

¹U.S. Census Bureau. (2008) Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates. Estimates for Michigan Counties, 2008.