

The Cleveland Corner Store Project

Final report to the Healthy Corner Store Network

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Over the past 18 months, the mission of the Cleveland Corner Store Project (CCSP) was to improve access to healthier food options and reduce exposure to alcohol and tobacco advertising in low resource Cleveland neighborhoods. To achieve these goals, CCSP staff partnered with a diverse list of organizations, agencies, and businesses throughout Greater Cleveland. Moreover, a number of knowledgeable, committed individuals contributed significantly to the overall effort by dedicating both time and resources to the CCSP. This report details these partnerships, as well as, lessons learned, project barriers, individual store evaluations and the project sustainability plan.

Key partners

The Ohio State Extension (OSUE): OSUE provided technical support, staff time and expertise, and health nutrition information for dissemination. These resources were provided through the OSUE Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). EFNEP staff attended all 10 cooking demonstrations throughout the year, providing healthy food samples, nutrition literature, educational activities, and more. Furthermore, the CCSP Healthy Recipe cook book was a re-issue of an earlier EFNEP cookbook developed for EFNEP program participants. EFNEP support included the work of registered dietitians, which provided valuable knowledge and credibility to the CCSP. To assure mutual benefit, CCSP staff worked with EFNEP to develop different strategies to recruit residents from the cooking demo into an extended 6 part, 6 week EFNEP class pre- scheduled to take place in a location conveniently located in or near the neighborhood. This mutually beneficial partnership showcases the important role CCSP played in bringing new resources to participating communities.

Cleveland Department of Public Health: The Cleveland Department of Public Health (CDPH) was the initial funding agency for the CCSP, and continued to financially and organizationally support the project through September 2009 (Steps to a Healthier Cleveland was funded from September 2004 through September 2009 as part of the Centers for Disease Control Steps to a Healthier U.S. initiative). In addition to providing key staff for the CCSP steering committee, CDPH worked with the CCSP to develop *Operation Storefront*, a community intervention designed to work with youth to inventory and think critically about tobacco advertising and work with stores to replace tobacco adds with anti-smoking posters. The program was offered in 6 neighborhoods, and worked directly with three CCSP stores. Finally, CDPH played an active role in the grant writing process of numerous efforts to secure funding for future programming efforts concerning neighborhood food security.



Healthy Corner Store Network: In addition to providing funding and technical support to the CCSP, the Healthy Corner Store Network (HCSN) assisted the CCSP by connecting program staff to a larger network of food advocates and practitioners. These network connections were particularly useful for CCSP staff throughout the project because it enabled the team to share ideas, ask questions, and receive feedback from others working on the ground on similar projects. Being the only corner store related initiative in Ohio, this type of professional development was difficult to find, but the HCSN helped to address this relationship gap.

Local food retail store employees: A number of small, independent groceries were very generous with their time, sharing expertise and valuable industry know-how. Many of the marketing materials and techniques developed for the CCSP, including price tags, basket displays, product placement concepts, and brand design, were based on the work of these stores. Additionally, a number of industry experts, including store owners and staff, distribution company representatives, wholesale professionals, answered many questions throughout program development and implementation.

City Fresh: City Fresh provided local apples for all of the apple promotions. The mission of City Fresh is to increase access to healthy, fresh, and local food in communities across Northeast Ohio. City Fresh facilitates a weekly CSA type program. Instead of paying upfront for a year of produce, City Fresh participants pay week by week, spreading the cost over the summer. CCSP staff was able order local apples at wholesale prices to use in the apple promotions.

Cureton Design: Owner operator of Cureton Design, Robert Cureton, designed many of the promotional materials for the CCSP, including the large posters, logo, and leader head. Before any of the materials were finalized, they were vetted by neighborhood focus groups to ensure the intended message was being communicated. The designer made adjustments based on focus group feedback and recommendations. Cureton Design has many years of experience designing kiosks for retail products, which was an asset to the overall marketing planning process.

Cleveland City Council: The strong support of Cleveland City Council Members was a key to the success of CCSP. Many of the store owners approached for the program had existing relationships with council, and wanted to be in good standing. On occasion, members of council would stop by or attend a cooking demonstration and thank the store owner for their efforts to improve the neighborhood. Additionally, council members would at times recommend against working with a particular store, because of prior issues in the community such as liquor license violations, poor standing with residents, or suspicion of involvement with illicit drugs, gangs, or other criminal activity.

Stockyard Redevelopment Corporation: The Stockyard Redevelopment Corporation (SRC) played a key role in identifying potential stores for program participation, provided introductions between store owners and CCSP staff, and disseminated CCSP event flyers and information throughout their program service area. Additionally, SRC staff attended cooking demonstrations, helped identify locations for the EFNEP classes, and helped CCSP staff network with other neighborhood development corporations.

Slavic Village Development Corporation: The Slavic Village Development Corporation (SVDC) provided program guidance and recruited a number of stores



from the Slavic Village neighborhood as potential program participants. Furthermore, SVDC committed both staff time and organizational resources to conduct neighborhood food retail assessments to better identify city food deserts which will help inform future programming and neighborhood level food access improvement interventions.

Lessons Learned:

- Neighborhood partnerships are paramount. The assistance provided by the community development corporations (CDC) allowed CCSP to work in diverse neighborhoods around the city. Relationships between the CDC's and the local business community should be considered an asset for small store enhancement projects.
- Do not hesitate to ask store owners to sign an agreement, i.e. formal or informal contract, non-bidding agreement, or memo of understanding. Early CCSP efforts did not include written agreements, causing confusion and mistrust at times. Having a clear, well written contract can help prevent these issues.
- Many store owners expressed a sense of responsibility for the health and wellness of the community surrounding their store. While this is not true in all cases, it was true for many of the store owners who worked with the CCSP. Thus, framing store enhancement projects as a public health initiative – in addition to business improvement – can be an effective recruitment strategy.
- Store enhancement programs require strong partnerships with business and marketing professionals, as well as, public health and nutrition experts. In addition to having well organized and motivated program staff, access to technical experts is important when both developing program goals and mission, and when advising store owners and managers.
- Be patient and flexible. Store enhancement programs often take a long time, can be slow, and change frequently.
- Building relationships and trust are keys to program success. Without taking the time to build real relationships, based on mutual respect, it will be hard to implement a store enhancement program.
- Print exterior marketing materials in the dimensions of cigarette advertisement frames. These frames oftentimes have hinged sides that allow the store owners and distributors to switch ads for different promotions. Store enhancement projects can take advantage of this infrastructure by working with the store owner to replace the ads with healthy messaging.

Barriers:

- Store owners attitudes can present a challenge to small store enhancement projects. While many store owners are generally concerned with the wellbeing of their customers and community, some individuals did not see these issues as a high priority. On occasion, there were strong feelings of hostility and racial tensions between store owners and staff, and customers.



- On occasion, store owners committed to the program, but had very little influence or participation in the day to day operation of the stores. Program success can be limited without support and commitment from key staff and/or managers. Often, staff or managers have the power to make or break a project.
- There is a lack of distribution channels for fresh food available to small store outlets. Most of the fresh fruit and vegetable distribution companies have a minimum order requirement around \$160, which can be cost prohibitive for a small store taking a risk on a new product line. This leaves store with two options. They can order produce through their existing distributors (which can vary in quality) or they can purchase produce from local retailers (i.e. Walmart, Marc's) for resale.
- It can be difficult to define "healthy" food for the purposes of introducing new products. While there are numerous institutions working on healthy food definitions (Centers for Disease Control, American Dietetic Association, etc.), there isn't an easy-to-use resource to identify actual products to be branded as a "healthier choice." The change and expansion of WIC foods has helped and is a good resource for store owners.
- Many stores do not have adequate refrigeration for fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Some cigarette advertisements are required by distributors to receive product rebates, which allow stores to be competitive. In some cases, store owners unsure which advertisements are required (usually the behind the counter price displays and product display units) and which are not required (the common exterior 24" x 36" colored, and often framed, card board posters).

Evaluation:

Store A (Slavic Village Neighborhood): Store A was a very small store (approx.600 sq/ft), owned by two long-time residents from the neighborhood. Successes from this store include the removal of 100% of exterior tobacco signage and installation of a healthy food branding and baskets for both fresh fruits and vegetables. Apples and peaches sold well, but both potatoes and tomatoes were discontinued due to slow sales. Additionally, the owners worked with a local organization and hosted a group of bike riders touring the neighborhood as part of a community garden tour. As a first time host, the store provided free water and talked to the riders about their efforts to help improve the health of the neighborhood. It was noted that many of the bikers had never visited this part of the city, and appreciated learning more about different initiatives taking place at the neighborhood level to improve health and increase social capital.

Store B (Stockyard Neighborhood): This store was a highlight for the CCSP. They hosted a cooking demonstration and excelled in store branding and promotion of fresh fruits and vegetables. Though slow to try new marketing approaches, they worked with CCSP staff and increased the number of available fresh options from approximately five to ten to approximately fifteen to twenty daily options. Additionally, the store offered new low sodium soup options and whole grain bread.

Store C (Brooklyn Center Neighborhood): This store was one of the first stores to join the CCSP. In addition to rearranging the checkout area of the store to include baskets for fresh apples and bananas, the owner invested in a used open-front cooler to better



store and market fresh fruits and vegetables. A highlight from this store was the development of a new farmers' market for the neighborhood located in the store parking lot. The store partnered with a local organization looking to bring a CSA/market to the neighborhood for a Saturday market. Additionally, they worked with Cleveland City Council to repave the parking lot and replace part of the cement curb with landscaping, improving the aesthetic of the store and neighborhood. Finally, they replaced nearly all exterior alcohol and tobacco signage with CCSP provided signage.

Store D (Cudell-Edgewater Neighborhood): The initiative at this store had little success. Though the store owner expressed initial enthusiasm for the program, there was little follow through. Despite several verbal commitments, store staff did not follow through with signage replacement or display of branding materials. The initial apple campaign was successful, selling out 100% of product. However, as time progressed, pricing per piece was maintained, but the size and quality of the products diminished. When the quality and size went down, so did sales. Despite repeated conversations about product quality control, the store owner did little to improve the situation. Also, there was minimal support from store staff to maintain product quality, thus the program suffered.

Store E (St. Clair-Superior Neighborhood): This store was one of the earlier stores and had little success. The store owner did little to maintain the quality of the fresh fruit products, and even failed to sell apples given to them as part of a project promotion. Upon review of customer surveys, it was clear that there was significant tension between store owners and neighborhood residents. After the store owner missed several scheduled appointments with CCSP staff, the program was discontinued.

Store F (Eastside Neighborhood): There were mixed results with this store. The new store owner was young and enthusiastic about the program and arranged a highly visible, clean, and well branded healthy food display. Apples, bananas, and oranges sold well during the first two months of the program. Unfortunately, the store was victim to two robberies within two weeks, one which resulted in significant store damage. After this, the program took backseat to the owner's efforts to replace several windows and improve security. After six months, the store owner was doing little to promote the project and the overall aesthetic of the store declined, including plywood covers for two windows. Just after the eighth month, the store lost its liquor license and was planning to close.

Store G (Kinsman Neighborhood): This was the first store recruited into the CCSP, had a short program tenure, but the experience provided very valuable lessons. The store owner and manager each expressed enthusiasm for the project and met with CCSP staff several times to plan dates for survey collection. However, during the first two days of customer surveys, several situations occurred that would prevent future program. First, several of the store employees were observed insulting customers by using abusive and derogatory language. Next, a physical altercation nearly broke out between a customer and an employee. The site was determined unsafe for program staff and discontinued. CCSP staff met with the local CDC to discuss the discontinuation and learned the store had a long history of in-store altercations, police calls, and were suspected of allowing illegal drug sales on store property. After working with this store, it was put into protocol that both the Cleveland City Councilperson and the neighborhood CDC was to be consulted prior to store selection.



Store H (Stockyard Neighborhood): This store worked with the CCSP for nearly two years and had several program highlights, including installation of the first CCSP healthy food kiosk and significant exterior advertisement improvement. The kiosk was used to display apples, bananas, whole grain bread and both sweet and baking potatoes and was in use for nearly 4 months, before an area near the checkout counter was rearranged to make room for baskets to display fresh fruits and vegetables. Additionally, product in the front cooler was rearranged to display prominently a variety of fruits and vegetables. This store did a very good job trying new products, but at times needed prodding to rotate products and maintain freshness. Also, the three cooking demonstrations hosted by this store were the best attended, with approximately 75 people at each event. Finally, store owners removed or replaced nearly all of the exterior alcohol and tobacco advertising, then asked all of their distributors to no longer display signs or stickers (non-contractual) on store property. This resulted in a significant, long-term improvement to the overall aesthetic of the store.

Sustainability:

Both Healthy Corner Store Network and Steps to a Healthier Cleveland funding for the Cleveland Corner Store Project ended September 2009. As a result, programming has been discontinued. However, the Case Center for Health Promotion Research, which housed the CCSP, was awarded five year funding through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The funding established a CDC Prevention Research Center (PRC) at Case Western Reserve's School of Medicine, the Prevention Research Center for Healthy Neighborhoods. A core project of the Case PRC is to conduct research on the health impacts of neighborhood food environment improvement projects, including small store enhancement initiatives. The lessons learned and networks created through the CCSP shaped significant parts of the original PRC application and will provide a framework for small store enhancement efforts to be implemented and studied by PRC staff. Due to the help from the Healthy Corner Store Network and the Cleveland Department of Public Health, the CCSP had a number of early successes. The lessons learned from these early successes will now be used to inform PRC small store improvement projects over the next five years, thus helping to bring fresher and healthier food options to neighborhoods across the City of Cleveland. The new program is scheduled to start in fall 2010.

References:

Granville, K. [*Pushing Fresh Produce Instead of Cookies at the Corner Market*](#). The New York Times, October 30, 2009.

