

Strategies that Work

Real Solutions to Community Food Problems

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Healthy Food Retailers in Hartford's Neighborhoods

It's no coincidence that the same communities with the worst levels of hunger and poverty also have some of the highest rates of diet-related diseases. Conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity have reached near-epidemic proportions in many inner city neighborhoods, adding to the challenges that residents already face and creating new financial burdens for the communities that can least afford them.

Diet-related diseases are often viewed as a consequence of individual eating habits and preferences, with less consideration given to the external factors that might prevent healthier lifestyles. The truth is that *where one lives* is a major determinant of *what one eats*. For many low-income individuals who live in distressed urban neighborhoods, dietary choices have a lot to do with what's affordable and what's accessible. A closer look at the urban food environment helps explain why so many people in the same places suffer from the same diseases.

This issue of **Strategies that Work** describes an exciting new effort to confront these health problems by expanding food choices in low-income communities. In partnership with 25 neighborhood retailers, the Hartford Food System has begun to change the types of food available on grocery shelves. The project is called the Healthy Food Retailer Initiative.

A Public Health Crisis in the Inner City

Hartford is a sobering example of the cumulative effects of an unhealthy food environment. The city's rates of diet-related diseases far exceed state and national averages, with the prevalence of diabetes 120% higher and hypertension 29% higher than the rest of Connecticut.¹ More than half (51%) of Hartford adults are obese and almost one-third (32%) of their children are overweight.²

The full impact of these health disparities cannot be told by statistics alone. It is the story of school-age children now dependent on prescription medications to manage their diabetes, and the financial uncertainty that occurs when family breadwinners are too sick to work anymore. It is about the early deaths that occur without warning from heart attacks and strokes, and the loss of sight and mobility by senior citizens for whom health conditions have been left untreated.



Ivette Rivera-Dreyer is the owner of El Kiosko Grocery, one of 25 stores participating in the Healthy Food Retailer Initiative.

Statistics tell us that diabetes, hypertension, and obesity currently affect the majority of Hartford households, but they do not tell us *why* – or what can be done to change this situation. For those answers, it is necessary to examine the sources and patterns of food consumption in the city, and build real partnerships with neighborhood residents and grocery merchants to find solutions.

Several characteristics make Hartford's food environment different from the rest of Connecticut. Most importantly, family food budgets are very limited. Hartford has the fourth lowest median household income among major cities nationwide, and a staggering three-quarters of Hartford's households have low incomes as measured by federal guidelines (at or below 80% of area median income).³ These income constraints often lead to a reliance on low-cost items like macaroni and cheese, sugary drinks, and other highly processed foods to stretch the grocery budget through the week.

Over time, this concentration of poverty has also altered the city's grocery retail sector. In 1968 Hartford had 13 chain supermarkets. That number dwindled to 3 stores by 1983, following a steady migration of supermarkets to the suburbs. Today Hartford has only one chain supermarket, located on the city's western edge a few blocks from the suburban line.

As more and more supermarkets have abandoned the city, smaller grocery stores have multiplied. Hartford has more than 140 neighborhood grocery retailers, mostly consisting of corner markets and bodegas. With a few exceptions, these urban food retailers are doing a poor job of meeting community needs. The shelves of many stores are crowded with junk food while space for regular groceries is limited.

The reason for these inventory choices is largely a matter of economics: junk food sells quickly and has a higher profit margin than substantive food items like fresh eggs or canned soup. Yet given the scarcity of supermarkets, the decisions that small grocery stores make about their product inventories have a big impact on the community.

Some Hartford residents travel outside the city to shop at suburban supermarkets, but they also rely on local retailers for a significant percentage of their groceries. For the 36% of Hartford residents who do not have access to a car, an even larger amount of shopping is done close to home. A realistic plan to improve the food options at neighborhood grocery stores is indispensable to solving Hartford's public health crisis.



The Healthy Food Retailer Initiative

Last year the Hartford Food System launched an effort to persuade neighborhood retailers to reduce their junk food inventories and increase the shelf space devoted to more healthy grocery items. To kick off this campaign, we organized a Healthy Food Fair in April 2006 with six bodega owners, who were joined by Hartford's Mayor, the Director of Health and Human Services, various health professionals, and 130 neighborhood residents.

To qualify as a Healthy Food Retailer, each of the six grocery stores at the Healthy Food Fair committed to shift 5% of the shelf space allocated to junk food and soft drinks to healthier items. In addition to this aggregate shift in inventory, each store also agreed to stock a short list of healthy items such as whole wheat bread and reduced fat milk. While a 5% improvement is modest given the scope of Hartford's diet-related health problems, our goal has been to create a results-oriented program that is measurable and verifiable.

In return, the Hartford Food System has pledged to support these stores by directing them to wholesalers that can provide better food, and to survey residents

to ask what kinds of products they want local stores to stock. We have recognized those stores doing the right thing through door stickers and grassroots publicity, and are working with the city and merchant associations to help these businesses thrive.

The door sticker is dated for the current year. In order to re-qualify as a Healthy Food Retailer, each store must again shift 5% of their junk food inventory to healthier products next year. Over time, the amount of junk food that virtually saturates Hartford's low-income neighborhoods will be reduced.

Incentives for Store Improvements

Nineteen additional corner markets and bodegas have joined the campaign since the kickoff event, bringing the total number of Healthy Food Retailers to 25 stores. The pace of this recruitment drive has been faster than we initially expected. We have found that many store owners are motivated by the same concerns about personal wellbeing and nutrition as their customers

In fact some merchants have been diagnosed with diet-related health conditions themselves, making them particularly receptive to recommendations about how to improve the quality of food they sell.

A second motivation for joining the Healthy Food Retailer Initiative is the intense market competition among neighborhood retailers. Bodegas and corner markets frequently close and reopen in quick succession, as one merchant fails to stay afloat and another attempts to launch a grocery business at the same location. (This change in ownership occurred with one of our own Healthy Food Retailers last year; the new owner has agreed to remain part of the initiative). The door sticker, grassroots outreach to potential customers, and other benefits of participation are powerful incentives for store owners who are striving to distinguish themselves from their competitors.

For their part, Healthy Food Retailers are upholding the commitments they have pledged in joining the initiative. Each of the 25 participating merchants has allowed an independent inspection of their store inventory to create a baseline measurement for the 5% shift from junk food to regular groceries. These inspections were conducted by the Hartford Food System with the help of student researchers from the University of Connecticut's Urban Semester Program.

The chart to the left shows the amount of food merchandise in each store that is categorized as (1) regular groceries and (2) junk food and soda. For the purposes of these measurements, junk food has been defined as candies, chips, and other unhealthy snacks. Normal groceries have been defined as food items that

require at-home preparation, non-carbonated beverages, and a short list of healthy snacks such as nuts and unsalted pretzels. Among these 25 stores, 29% of retail space for food and beverage merchandise is currently occupied by junk food.

Seventy-two percent of participating stores sell reduced fat milk, 64% sell whole wheat bread, and 92% sell pure fruit juices. These baseline measurements reveal significant room for improvement. To comply with the terms of the Healthy Food Retailer Initiative, each store will be expected to carry a short list of healthy items by the end of its first year of participation. Positive changes are already underway, with nearly every store taking specific actions to improve their inventories and stock

Food and Beverage Inventories of Participating Retailers				
	Regular Groceries	Junk Food	Percentage of Regular Groceries	Percentage of Junk Food
Boricuas Market	505	290	64%	36%
Brito Grocery	364	190	66%	34%
Charter Oak Supermarket	417	273	60%	40%
Ciales Grocery	684	456	60%	40%
El Coqui Grocery	413	40	91%	9%
Cristal 2 Food Market	350	274	56%	44%
Cubanos Mitos	585	33	95%	5%
DiMauros	651	137	83%	17%
La Familia	359	72	83%	17%
Five Corner Market	361	450	45%	55%
Flatbush Market	304	162	65%	35%
El Gitano	1,827	361	83%	17%
Glorimar Grocery	879	358	71%	29%
Hernandez Market	789	671	54%	46%
Hot Corner Market	419	326	56%	44%
El Kiosko	535	72	88%	12%
Los Primos Market	519	100	84%	16%
Martinez Mini Market	810	621	57%	43%
Peoples Market	63	21	75%	25%
Ramon Market	413	466	47%	53%
Romny Market	1,099	297	78%	21%
Rumaldo's Grocery	1,692	257	87%	13%
Shop Fair	1,850	135	93%	7%
Williams Market	654	411	61%	39%
Y2K Market	271	445	38%	62%
Average:	16,814	6,918	71%	29%

(Measurements are in square feet of shelf space).

healthier food. A few have rearranged their merchandise layout to create new sections for additional groceries. Several retailers have followed our suggestion to move junk food to less prominent locations in the store. Others are partnering with the Hartford Food System to host cooking demonstrations that feature recipes for nutritious meals.

These initial steps demonstrate a spirit of partnership by store owners to make the Healthy Food Retailer Initiative a success. The results of our storewide inspections also provide a set of measurable benchmarks to assess progress in the months ahead.

Conclusion

The local food environment has an enormous impact on community wellbeing. For many urban residents, the difficulty of getting to full-size supermarkets and the inadequate grocery options at neighborhood stores make it almost impossible to eat healthily on a limited budget. These environmental factors help explain the high rates of diet-related diseases in poor communities.

Public health strategies to fight diabetes, hypertension, and obesity must go beyond efforts to modify individual behavior and also address how to make healthy food more available in urban areas. After all, no amount of nutritional education can change a person's eating habits if the recommended foods are simply not available.

The Healthy Food Retailer Initiative offers a practical model to improve the quality of grocery merchandise in disadvantaged neighborhoods. We have found that food retailers are willing to change their inventories if given the right incentives. These grassroots partnerships are essential to making healthy food more affordable and accessible to all.

Endnotes:

¹ Hartford health statistics are based on the *Hartford Health Survey* (2003), published by the City of Hartford Health Department; statewide health statistics are based on the *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System* (2003), published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

² Martin, Katie and Ann Ferris, "Food Insecurity and Gender are Risk Factors for Obesity". *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (In Press).

³ Welnaik, Ed and Kirby Posey (2005) *Household Income: 1999* (Census 2000 Brief No. 36). U.S. Census Bureau. The percentage of Hartford households at or below 80% of area median income is based on AMI for the Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford CBSA (2000) published by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

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HARTFORD FOOD SYSTEM

The mission of the Hartford Food System is to fight hunger and improve nutrition for disadvantaged members of our community through sustainable, non-emergency strategies. To this end, we implement programs that improve accessibility to nutritious and affordable food, help consumers make informed choices, and advance responsible food policies at all levels of government.

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