Making Baltimore’s Food Deserts Bloom with Healthy Food

Baltimore Food Policy Advisory Committee (Baltimore Food PAC) | Johns Hopkins WIC | Baltimore, Maryland | Presented By: Jasina Wise, Project Coordinator, Marycatherine Augustyn, PhD, Research Associate

Introduction

A primary objective of the Johns Hopkins WIC Community Partnerships for Healthy Mothers and Children (CPHMC) project was to increase the number of people in Baltimore City with improved access to environments with healthy food and beverage options. This objective was selected, in part, because the 2015 Baltimore City Food Environment Map and Report (Mapping Baltimore City’s Food Environment: 2015 Executive Summary) revealed that one in four Baltimore City residents live in Food Deserts and certain subpopulations, specifically Africans Americans and children, have disproportionately low access to healthy foods because they are more likely to reside in a food desert. A food desert is an area where the distance to a supermarket or other food outlet is more than 1/4 mile, the median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level, over 30% of residents have no vehicle available, and the availability of healthy foods in all food outlets is low. A significant number of Baltimore’s WIC participants live in food deserts.

Along with our coalition partners, the Johns Hopkins CPHMC project sought to address the lack of availability of healthy foods in Baltimore City by improving access to corner stores and Virtual Supermarket sites within food deserts, including enacting the policy and legislative changes necessary to recruit new food retailers into these areas while supporting existing vendors to stock and promote healthy foods.

Project Overview

According to the 2015 Baltimore City Food Environment Map the highest concentration of corner stores located in food deserts is in Baltimore’s west side. The Baltimore City Baltimarket Healthy Stores Initiative, a CPHMC coalition partner, assists corner stores in marketing, merchandising and selling healthy food options. Baltimore also sponsors the Virtual Supermarket Initiative which provides Baltimore residents with access to healthy foods at supermarket prices, especially food deserts where healthy food access is limited, through online ordering at locations such as senior apartments and libraries. Johns Hopkins WIC was integral to the implementation, support, and maintenance of these activities, as well as ensuring that consideration of the specific needs and circumstances of WIC recipients were at the forefront of the initiative’s activities.

Activities

Healthy Corner Store-Virtual Grocery Store Activities

- WIC Baltimarket are trained and secured corner store owners to stock and sell fruits, vegetables, whole grain foods, low fat dairy, and milk and dairy
- WIC Baltimarket established Virtual Supermarkets, thereby increasing healthy food availability in low healthy food availability communities
- Baltimarket and WIC coalition partners through WIC specific guidance to Baltimarket staff to promote WIC foods in corner stores
- Baltimarket and CPHMC coalition partners with other community residents help promote healthy shopping skills through the Share our Strength Cooking Matters at the Store initiative
- Baltimarket and CPHMC coalition partners in the Baltimore Food System Map were updated to include corner stores.

Legislation Activities

- Created Federal Legislation to address the high cost of food, waste development and financial security that Baltimore City’s grocers are facing
- Planned full scale effort with coalition partners to facilitate healthy food access in Baltimore Food Deserts through legislative changes

Provided support and attended the Baltimore City Council Meeting where the Personal Property Tax Credit – Food Desert Incentive Areas legislation received favorable recommendation and moved to 3rd Reading
- Personal Property Tax Credit legislation has subsequently been approved and reenacted by the Mayor’s signature.

Worked with our Coalition Members to disseminate information regarding the Personal Property Tax Credit and its effects on improving the food environment of Baltimore City.

Legislation has been introduced in the City Council to require warning labels in stores and restaurants that sell sugar sweetened beverages.

Outcomes

- As of February 2016, nine healthy corner stores have been launched and one additional store has been recruited
- As of February 2016, six Virtual Supermarket sites have been established and 600 people have been served.
- The Baltimore Food System Map was updated to incorporate Nutrition Assistance programs including WIC clinics, WIC retailers, and SNAP Retailers.
- Baltimore City Council passed the Personal Property Tax Credit – Food Desert Incentive Areas.
- Completed the implementation of the Share Our Strength Cooking Matters Program at community events. We completed 66 shopping tours with 1196 participants. Additionally through these participants, we reached at least 2792 household members.

Lessons Learned

- Achieving the change necessary to reduce the chronic disease burden and access to healthy food in Baltimore City requires a multi-step process. This process includes: developing the community’s perception of importance; obtaining stakeholder and resident “buy in” and making that this group plays a significant role in decision making; ensuring that the players understand and support the mission and strategies, and incurring “ownership” to them; developing a strong communication network that ensures rapid dissemination of results; fostering continued commitment to the strategies; and developing plans to maintain momentum so that the change will be sustained.

- It is important to solicit feedback from our partners about their and their constituents needs. For example, we were made aware by a partner health care provider that her patients’ food access needs would be best served by a tool designed to assist them to “shop healthy on a budget.

- Recognition of disparities in healthy food access in Baltimore is increasing and politicians are becoming more likely to support legislation to increase healthy food access, particularly in the food desert areas in Baltimore City.

Next Steps

- The Johns Hopkins CPHMC has determined that the following steps will ensure project sustainability:
  - Continuing to work with our lead Coalition partner, the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative (BFPI), an inter-governmental collaboration with the Department of Planning, and the Baltimore City Health Department.
  - Continuing to serve on Baltimarket’s (i.e. healthy corner stores) Taskforce to provide guidance to ensure project implementation and continuation, including: new retail store recruitment; new virtual store recruitment; recruitment of Youth Neighborhood Food Advocates (YNFA); and YNFA projects.
  - Continuing to work with the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future to utilize the Baltimore Food Environment Map to produce tools to assist residents to access available resources, including healthy food retailers, health providers, and social and community services.
  - Work with the Farm Alliance to increase access of Farm Stands to WIC participants and to arrange for mobile Farm Stand to come to areas of the City without regular Farmer’s Markets.
  - Promote transit lines which include stops near healthy food stores.

Best Practices

1) Coalition Building

- We engaged in “Coalition building” by taking advantage of an existing group of organizations focused on a unifying issue, to create comprehensive policy and legislative changes necessary to recruit new food retailers into these areas.
- The Coalition supports the goals, needs, and activities of the individual organizations as well as the common goal.
- The Coalition meets regularly to share and seek ongoing feedback from the Coalition.
- The Coalition ensures regular communication with other Coalition partners and other stakeholders.

2) Community Action Plan

- We identified key food access challenges in targeted neighborhoods, including many factors contributing to housing, food access, and nutrition disparities.
- We developed an inter-agency collaboration to address food access challenges.
- We identified key stakeholders and partners and developed strategies to improve food access from many perspectives.
- We developed a strong communication strategy to ensure that stakeholders were aware of the Coalition’s activities.
- We developed a sustainability plan to ensure that effective strategies will be continued beyond the Project/funded period.

3) Sustainability

- We developed a sustainability plan to ensure that effective strategies will be continued beyond the Project/funded period.
- We identified potential future funding sources to support the continued implementation of our strategies.
- We developed a sustainability plan to ensure that effective strategies will be continued beyond the Project/funded period.

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