SUMMARY

Community Partnerships for Healthy Mothers and Children (CPHMC), Richmond Healthy Corner Store Initiative (RHCSI), VA WIC Vendor Team and local businesses are working together to increase community-level access to healthier staple foods and WIC vendors in Richmond City.

Small food retail owners can now request a healthy food procurement training to help them select healthier foods for their store and utilize a point-of-sale labeling system at a local wholesale distributor to easily identify WIC approved food items when shopping to meet the WIC program’s minimum stocking requirements.

CHALLENGE

Large portions of Richmond’s North Side, East End and South Side are USDA-defined food deserts. Only 18 of nearly 300 food stores (mostly small corner stores) in Richmond City participate in the WIC vendor program. In 2015, 60% of 660 Richmond City WIC participants surveyed said they would shop at a local corner store if they accepted WIC benefits while 21% of participants said transportation to a store that sells fresh produce is always or sometimes a problem.

A 2011 study from Altarum Institute demonstrates stores that accept WIC benefits offer a wider variety of grocery items increasing access to healthful foods like whole grains, fruits and vegetables to all customers. Therefore, RHCSI encourages stores to consider applying to the WIC vendor program to lessen the negative health impacts of living in a food desert for their customers; however, storeowners face many barriers when applying to the WIC vendor program including difficulty identifying WIC approved items, completing the online application and managing fresh produce. Many storeowners are also unaware of recent improvements to the WIC program like the switch to electronic benefit cards instead of check vouchers.

SOLUTION

To help storeowners satisfy WIC stocking requirements, CPHMC developed a partnership with a local wholesale distributor to label all WIC approved items with shelf tags. CPHMC also worked with the VA WIC Vendor Team to develop outreach strategies to inform storeowners of WIC vending policy changes and to provide a 60-minute training on how to successfully complete the WIC vendor application. CPHMC developed an interactive healthy food procurement training for all storeowners participating in the RHCSI to learn and practice key skills like reading food labels to select lower sugar, sodium and saturated fat products for their store as well as healthy food placement and marketing strategies.

RESULTS

The WIC labeling system helps aspiring WIC vendors select the right items to meet VA WIC vendor requirements and those already participating expand the WIC approved foods available at their stores. Since December 2015, five storeowners have completed the WIC vendor training prior to beginning an application, and CPHMC has provided information on the WIC vendor program to over 20 stores. In February 2016, CPHMC piloted the healthy food procurement training and helped a store reorganize their grocery section to implement choice architecture techniques like displaying healthier food at eye-level and increase their inventory of healthful food options like whole grain cereals, no salt added vegetables and canned fruit in 100% juice. RHCSI will require storeowners to complete the training as required technical assistance moving forward. Two additional trainings are scheduled for March 2016.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

When new stores join the RHCSI, storeowners will participate in the healthy food procurement training as required technical assistance in the first tier of the participation to ensure they have the skills needed to continually increase the amount of healthy food available to customers. The labeling system will be maintained at Cash and Carry to reflect any changes to the WIC food package by RCHD staff. The VA WIC Vendor Team will share the newly created WIC vendor training with WIC Vendor Liaisons across the state. Together, we hope these initiatives will increase the amount of healthy foods available at the community level and increase the number of WIC vendors in Richmond City.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY!

Is there a store in your community who could benefit from the healthy food procurement training or would like to participate in the WIC vendor program or in the Richmond Healthy Corner Store Initiative? If so, email Hannah Robbins at hannah.robbins@vdh.virginia.gov to learn more or provide information on the store!

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