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Minneapolis food desert infused with fresh produce

by Charles Hallman
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Twin Cities' storeowners participate in effort to combat obesity

Ten corner stores throughout Minneapolis have launched a new city-sponsored effort to provide their customers with healthier, fresh foods.

These stores — five from North Minneapolis, and five from the city's South Side — are located in "areas where primarily low-income [residents live] and [with] an existing base of corner stores," explains Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support (MDHFS) Project Specialist Aliyah Ali, program coordinator of The Healthy Corner Store Program.

After a 2009 Minneapolis health department assessment discovered that 36 percent of local corner stores did not have any fresh produce in stock and 64 percent had produce that was limited, expensive and often difficult to find in the store, officials initiated the program, which is part of a statewide health improvement program initiative.

A separate survey of Northside residents conducted by NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center showed that residents often don't buy produce in area convenience stores, which are easier to access than grocery stores.

Health officials say this could be a "food desert," which the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines as an area with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, primarily in predominantly low-income neighborhoods.

"If we are talking about North Minneapolis, I think it exhibits characteristics of food deserts," notes Ali, who added that the area has only "two full-scale" supermarkets, "and there is some data that shows us that there are some transportation issues in respects to these stores [as well]," she points out.

The Healthy Corner Store Program is part of the City of Minneapolis' larger effort to combat obesity and chronic disease. Its primary goal is to help stores increase the availability of fresh produce and healthy foods to residents, working closely with store owners and managers in handling, storing and displaying healthy foods, explains Ali. It also will help store owners overcome "barriers" that keep them from selling fresh foods, she adds.

Part of her job is to be a "facilitator of relationships for the store owners," asserts Ali, "like connecting them with the right produce wholesaler that will potentially be a successful partner in helping them stock affordable, good quality produce."

The following 10 stores were selected through an application process and will participate for the duration of the project, which is scheduled to end June 30, 2011:

North Minneapolis:

Vitalife Pharmacy, 4151 Fremont Avenue North

Lowry Food Market, 628 Lowry Avenue North

One Stop Station, 1604 West Broadway

Northside Food Market, 3559 Lyndale Avenue North

Glenwood Market, 1501 Glenwood Avenue North

Philips/Powderhorn:

Cedar Food & Grill, 2600 Cedar Avenue South

Neighborhood Grocery, 814 East Franklin Avenue

Seward/Cedar Riverside:

Shabelle Grocery, 2325 East Franklin Avenue

West Bank Grocery, 417 Cedar Avenue South

Standish-Ericsson:

Flag Foods, 2820 East 42nd Street

"The store owners wanted to work on this project to improve the health of their community," states Ali.

"We are trying to push [fresh foods]," says Lowry Food Market owner Bassem Kablaoui. "We always carried here bananas, apples, grapes, tomatoes, onions, potatoes and lettuce. Sometimes people ask for cabbage, but when nobody buys it, it gets thrown away."

In many cases, these stores already have what is needed to display healthy food items, such as refrigerated cases, adds Ali. "We really are capitalizing on what's already in the stores."

A series of one-hour food tastings and demos are being held at each of the 10 stores, which began November 6 and runs through December 18.

These kick-off events "show residents that they can actually come to these stores and make a healthy meal or snack out of what they buy at these stores," notes Ali.

A second city program, Home Grown Minneapolis, involved community residents and others in advising the City Council in designing ways to use available lands for community gardens. "We also piloted a food preservation program," a series of classes to teach community members how to preserve produce, says Ali.

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In addition to tracking the stores' fresh produce sales during the project, it also helps the stores comply with the City's Staple Foods Ordinance, which requires grocery stores to carry at least five types of perishable produce.

If it proves successful, city officials hope to expand the program city-wide.

"We are optimistic that it will increase that opportunity for community residents to access healthy foods by bringing healthy foods to the front of the store, and by working with the store owners to make it affordable," surmises Ali. "We've done initial surveys to help us actually stock the stores" along with conducting customer surveys as well, she adds.

However, Kblaoui is guardedly optimistic, admitting that changing many of his customers' buying habits isn't easy. "It's not going to be an easy process and might be a struggle. People like their chips," he points out. "I hope it works."

Charles Hallman welcomes reader responses to challman@spokesman-recorder.com.

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