The Importance of Food Access: Why We Need Your Help

Obesity in New Jersey is a very real and growing problem that affects both children and adults. In 2013, New Jersey was one of six states that saw a slight increase in adult obesity, and the state’s rate of obesity in toddlers who reside in low-income communities is the second highest in the nation. While multiple strategies are needed to address this serious health epidemic, one effective way to reduce diet-related disease is to increase access to affordable, healthy foods for all New Jerseyans.

It may be hard to believe that in one of the nation’s wealthiest states, thousands of New Jersey residents are living in communities where they are unable to make healthy food choices because there are no well-stocked grocery or convenience stores in their neighborhoods. However, this is the reality for nearly 10 percent of the State’s population. Without supermarkets nearby, many New Jersey families purchase food from neighborhood corners stores. These small retailers commonly stock highly-processed foods that are low in nutrients and high in fat, limiting customers to buying what’s available, not what’s healthy.

Lack of access to stores that sell fresh, nutritious food has serious health implications. Studies show that the incidence of obesity is disproportionately higher in lower-income neighborhoods—many of the same places that are underserved by supermarkets. Removing barriers to food access is a key step toward turning this around by enabling people to make the healthy choice the easy choice. This is where New Jersey’s Healthy Corner Store initiative comes in.

New Jersey’s Healthy Corner Store Initiative is focused on increasing healthy food access in areas underserved by supermarkets by linking community partners with corner store owners to help the small retailers profitably stock, promote, and sell affordable, fresh food to their customers. To date, many of the efforts in New Jersey have been small and localized, supported by private dollars. The New Jersey Healthy Corner Stores Initiative seeks to expand the scope of the program by replicating its success and bringing best practices to more communities in New Jersey that lack access to affordable, fresh food.

In order to expand the New Jersey Healthy Corner Store Initiative statewide, public resources are needed. This is where YOU come in. We need YOUR help in raising awareness about the importance of healthy food access and how expanding the initiative through public dollars is an important strategy in fighting obesity and reducing diet-related disease. The initiative is also a strategic economic development effort that can help

transform local retailers into anchor stores by capturing dollars that would otherwise be spent outside the community on fresh foods. Many participating stores are already seeing increased profits from their healthy product sales, and some have even hired additional workers to meet the increased customer demand.

We’ve created this New Jersey Healthy Corner Store Advocacy Toolkit to help you spread the word about the importance of healthy food access and the success of the New Jersey Healthy Corner Store initiative, so that together we can build support for the program’s expansion statewide. This toolkit includes a detailed backgrounder on the initiative, talking points, sample media pieces, social media strategies and other tips to promote the sale of healthy foods in more of New Jersey’s corner stores.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please visit www.njhealthiercornerstores.org/AHA or contact Corinne Orlando at the American Heart Association at Corinne.Orlando@heart.org or (609)223-3720.

Thank you for being our partner in promoting this impactful public health and economic development initiative! Your support will help ensure healthy food options are just around the corner for ALL New Jersey families!

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Raising Awareness & Building Consensus

Using media opportunities are an excellent way to raise public awareness about the need for more healthy food options in New Jersey’s corner stores. You can insert yourself into the public conversation through letters to the editor of newspapers, magazines and blogs, and writing opinion pieces to the local media.

Letters to the Editor
The Letters to the Editor (LTE) section is the most widely read section of the newspaper after the front page. The high readership offers a powerful avenue to promote the NJ Healthy Corner Store Initiative and why the sale of healthy foods in corner stores is an important public health and economic initiative. LTE’s in magazines and blogs are also good avenues for outreach. LTE’s are published at the discretion of the paper’s editors, so here are some suggestions to consider:

- **Make it Personal:** Personalized letters have the best chance of being published and also have the greatest impact. The message in your letter is more meaningful to the reader when you explain why the issues matters to you and your community.

- **Timing:** You will increase the chances of being published by coordinating your letter in conjunction with an event or relevant news.

- **Outlet Policies:** Papers have rules that are important to consider when writing a letter to the editor. Common length restrictions are 250 to 300 words. Most require you to provide your name, address, and telephone number, so that you may be contacted to verify that you wrote the letter before it is printed. Check for each news outlet’s rules on their websites.

Sample Letter to the Editor

Sample LTE #1
For many of us, picking up low fat milk, or fruits and vegetables is just a hop, skip and a jump in the car to the local grocery store. However that’s not the case for nearly one million New Jersey families. Convenient, healthy food options simply don’t exist. The nearest grocery store is miles away and nearby corner stores do not carry healthy staples such as low-fat milk, whole grain bread or produce. Often store owners face challenges in offering these healthier foods such as knowing how to handle, display and market the products and many lack the proper equipment to store fresh produce and other perishable items.

The New Jersey Healthy Corner Store Initiative is working to change this by linking community partners with small retailers to help corner stores stock, market and sell affordable, healthy food. The program is already yielding impressive results on the local level. It has not only increased healthy food options have been increased, jobs have been created in some communities and tax revenue has increased. It is my hope that the State will now step in and make a public investment that will enable the New Jersey Healthy Corner Store initiative to be expanded statewide and bring greater healthy food options and economic benefits to every community in New Jersey.

Sample LTE #2
It’s hard to believe that in one of the nation’s wealthiest states, thousands of New Jersey families are unable to make healthy food choices because there are no well-stocked grocery or convenience stores in their neighborhoods. This is the reality for many NJ families who are limited to buying and eating what’s available in
their nearby corner stores and bodegas that commonly stock foods that are low in nutrients, highly processed and high in fat.

New Jersey’s Healthy Corner Store Initiative is working to provide these families with more healthy choices by partnering with small retailers to help them stock, promote and sell affordable, fresh food to their customers. The program is already yielding impressive results on the local level. Not only has it increased healthy food options, jobs have been created in some areas and tax revenue has increased. It’s time for New Jersey policymakers to step in and make a public investment that will enable the program to be expanded statewide and bring healthy food and economic benefits to every underserved community in New Jersey.

Commentary Pieces / Op-ed Pieces ("opposite" the editorial page)

Commentary / op-ed pieces are excellent opportunities to raise awareness and convey your key message to legislators, journalists and the broader community. Timing is essential here. Editors publish op-eds that are relevant to the news and written by influential voices. Here are a few suggestions to consider when writing your op-ed to make it resonate with readers:

- **Keep it short:** Limit the article to 750 words or less (500 words is optimal). Editors won’t take the time to cut a long article down to size, so keep it short, simple and on-message. Use short sentences and paragraphs to make it easy for readers to follow.

- **Choose your signer carefully:** To ensure the best chance of earning placement on a news platform or gaining people’s attention, enlist a high-profile influencer to sign and submit your op-ed. Ideally, this influencer should be well-known within your community and the audience of the publication, such as a parent, food access advocate, doctor, researcher, teacher, store owner, or policymaker.

- **Put main points on top:** You have no more than 10 seconds to hook a busy reader, so hit to your three main message points right at the start (NJ Healthy Corner Store Initiative increases food access; it’s an important strategy to combat obesity and diet-related disease; and it supports local retailers/economy).

- **Tell readers why they should care about increasing healthy food access:** Put yourself in the place of the busy person looking at your article. At the end of every few paragraphs, ask out loud: “So what? Who cares?” You need to answer these questions to ensure your article is relevant and interesting.

- **There are two kinds of Op-eds—Emotional & Rational:** An emotional op-ed appeals to the heart while a rational appeals to reason.

**Sample Emotional Op-Ed**

Far too many New Jersey families live in communities like mine where there are no well-stocked grocery stores nearby and are limited to buying and eating what’s available in our neighborhood corner stores. The problem is much of the foods available in our local stores are highly-processed, laden with salt, sugar and fat, giving us few, if any, healthy choices to feed our families.

What’s most troubling is these small food stores tend to be located near our kids’ schools, driving up the consumption of unhealthy foods among our children and teens. A recent study showed that more than 40% of
elementary school students shopped at corner stores twice a day, most often buying chips, candy and soda. Other research has revealed that teenagers living near convenience stores are more likely to have higher BMI’s and consume more sugary beverages than peers living farther away. With statistics like these, it’s no wonder the rate of childhood obesity in the U.S. has tripled over the last 50 years, with nearly one in three children now classified as either overweight or obese.

New Jersey is not immune to this health crisis. Our state is one of six that saw a slight increase in adult obesity in 2013, and the state’s rate of obesity in toddlers who live in low-income communities is the second highest in the nation. While multiple strategies are needed to address this serious health epidemic, one effective way to reduce diet-related disease is to increase access to affordable, healthy foods in communities like mine that are underserved by supermarkets.

New Jersey has an estimated 5,600 corner stores and bodegas around the state, making small retailers an efficient and cost-effective infrastructure to increase, fresh, nutritious food options. The New Jersey Corner Store Initiative is beginning to make headway utilizing these existing stores to improve food access by working with corner store owners to help them profitably stock, market, and sell, healthy affordable food items to their customers. Through the initiative, community partners provide retailers the tools they need to dedicate more shelf space to nutritious, fresh foods and place signs and labels around the store that help their customers recognize healthier choices.

While the efforts in New Jersey thus far have been small and localized, New Jersey’s Healthy Corner Store Initiative is already yielding impressive results. Not only has the program increased healthy food options, it has also led to job creation in in some areas and increased tax revenue. It’s now time for the State to step in and make a public investment to expand the program statewide. Residents in communities like mine deserve to reap the same economic and health benefits of having healthy food options just around the corner!

**Sample Rational Op-Ed**

Obesity in New Jersey is a very real and growing problem that affects both children and adults. In 2013, New Jersey was one in six states that saw a slight increase in adult obesity, and the state’s rate of obesity in toddlers residing in low-income communities is the second highest in the nation. While multiple strategies are needed to address this serious health epidemic, one effective way to reduce diet-related disease is to increase access to affordable, healthy foods for all New Jerseyans.

Far too many New Jerseyans live in communities where they are unable to make healthy food choices because there are no well-stocked grocery or convenience stores in their neighborhoods. The USDA estimates that 340,000 NJ residents are living in these “food deserts” across the state, while the Reinvestment Fund suggests even more alarming numbers with as much as 10% of the state’s population lacking access to healthy food options.

While more supermarkets are certainly needed in underserved communities in New Jersey, many of the neighborhoods that currently lack access to nutritious foods have an abundance of corner stores, bodegas and other small food retailers. Oftentimes they are the only sources of food in low-income neighborhoods that are accessible by foot or public transportation.

The problem is the majority of these corner stores offer a variety of chips, candy, soda and cakes, but very few healthy, fresh items. This is particularly troublesome when considering the fact that corner stores are
frequent destinations for children, many of whom stop daily on the way to and from school for snacks—purchasing, on average, 360 calories per visit, often on junk food.

New Jersey’s Healthy Corner Store Initiative is working to turn this around by making these small, neighborhood retailers part of the solution to obesity and diet-related disease. The program links community partners with corner store owners to help stores stock, market and sell healthy, affordable food to their customers. In many cases, stores are now using signage and labels to help residents choose more nutritious options for their families.

Small food store interventions are showing promise in improving store offerings, increasing sales and consumption of healthier food. Now is the time for the New Jersey to step up and provide state funding to expand New Jersey’s Healthy Corner Store initiative statewide so more underserved communities can reap the economic and health benefits.

Harness the Power of Social Media (#njcornerstores)
Across all ages and demographic groups, people are increasingly connecting with the issues and information they care about online. According to the McKinsey Global Institute, more than 1.5 billion social media users globally, and 80% of online users interact with social networks regularly. This means with just a few clicks, social media enables you to share your message about the importance and need for New Jersey’s Healthy Corner Store Initiative with a much wider audience than traditional door-to-door grassroots work can. It also gives you the ability to connect with the right people at the right moment, making them aware of the issue and garnering their support.

The following are some tips to build your community of advocates online to enhance support for New Jersey’s Healthy Corner Store initiative.

- **Use #njcornerstores:** Be sure to include #njcornerstores on all social media postings to generate greater interest in NJ Healthy Corner Store initiative and make it searchable.
- **Use Images & Videos:** Posts with multimedia drive higher engagement rates and increased reach—people like looking and clicking on images and videos.
- **Be Social:** Social media is about being social and joining the conversation! Be sure to share and comment on others’ posts, tweets, etc. When you re-post others’ content, they may notice you share similar interests, and follow back. It helps to add commentary, i.e., great article, I attended this, in addition, I’ve found... The more you engage with your followers, the more they will understand that your priorities are their priorities too.
- **Follow Thought Leaders & Partners in the Field:** Follow the main partners and thought leaders in the effort including The Food Trust, American Heart Association—New Jersey, New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids, Voices for Healthy Kids, The Food Access Portal, PreventObesity.Net, etc.).
- **Be Reliable:** Share quality content on a consistent basis. Frequently sharing reliable, meaningful content establishes you as an important source on the issue of food access.
- **Repurpose Print Materials Online:** Save a PDF of the two-page backgrounder and/or issue overview and link to it from a post encouraging followers to read and share with friends & family; share press releases, LTE’s, etc.
- **Focus on Facts:** Stick to facts, avoid entering into editorial disagreements or arguments.
- **Engage Followers:** Ask questions, encourage story-sharing, and get creative in pulling them in!
**Additional Resources**

**NJ Healthy Corner Store Initiative:** [http://www.njhealthiercornerstores.org/AHA](http://www.njhealthiercornerstores.org/AHA)
Provides background information on the focus and impact of New Jersey’s Healthy Corner Store Initiative.

**American Heart Association—New Jersey:**
[http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Affiliate/Welcome-to-the-New-Jersey-Home-Page_UCM_FDA001_AffiliatePage.jsp](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Affiliate/Welcome-to-the-New-Jersey-Home-Page_UCM_FDA001_AffiliatePage.jsp)

**New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids:**

**The Food Trust**

**Healthy Food Access Portal website:** [http://www.healthyfoodaccess.org](http://www.healthyfoodaccess.org)
The Healthy Food Access Portal website is a collaboration of The Food Trust, PolicyLink and The Reinvestment Fund that provides more information on food access issues and retail strategies that are connecting consumers to healthier food.

**Research Your Community Interactive Map website:**
[http://www.healthyfoodaccess.org/get-started/research-your-community](http://www.healthyfoodaccess.org/get-started/research-your-community)
This interactive map developed by TRF PolicyMap provides searchable neighborhood-level data for New Jersey on food access, health, demographics, federal program investments, employment and other related statistics. Users can print reports directly from the mapping tool.

**Healthy Corner Stores Network website:** [http://www.healthycornerstores.org/](http://www.healthycornerstores.org/)
Anyone interested in food access issues can become a member of The Healthy Corner Stores Network and connect with other advocates across the country. Members can research specific topics, join the ListServ, share information, provide blog comments, etc.

**The Food Trust Healthier Corner Stores Report: Positive Impacts & Profitable Changes**
An evaluation from The Food Trust and Econsult Corporation that details how the corner stores in Philadelphia that have introduced healthier produce to store shelves have resulted in healthier choices, healthier businesses and healthier communities.

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