

Revised Draft Notes from Healthy Corner Stores Network (HCSN) Conference Call

June 7, 2007

Call Agenda:

1. Welcome and introductions from co-conveners
2. Overview of plans for HCSN, and questions/comments from group
3. Brief summary of HCSN survey results
4. Summary of recommendations from people involved in corner store work
5. Brief presentations about corner store projects, and questions/comments
6. Announcements related to corner store work

(The participant list is included at the end of this document.)

1. Introductions from co-conveners

Kai Siedenburg, Community Food Security Coalition

CFSC is a network of over 250 member organizations that support work on food system issues through education, networking, T&TA, and policy advocacy.

This project represents a major expansion of work on food retail issues, wouldn't be possible without generous contributions by our three key partners.

Hannah Laurison, Public Health Law Program

Previously on staff of The Food Trust; took part in an earlier incarnation of the Healthy Corner Stores Network.

Provides legal & policy resources to community, planning departments.

Recently released a toolkit on economic development

James Johnson-Piatt-The Food Trust

The Trust runs over 25 Farmer's Markets & works with lots of schools in the city.

Two pronged approach to corner store development--Healthy Corner Store Initiative which focuses on corner store conversions; and a social marketing campaign to promote healthy snacks and beverages to youth in schools and stores.

2. Overview of plans for HCSN (Hannah Laurison)

- Welcome feedback on our plans
- Received over 135 responses to the survey so far
- Conference calls will be quarterly. September call will focus on key challenges to bringing healthy foods to stores
- Looking for volunteers to present on that call—will ask again by email
- Developing HCSNN listserve and website to share insights, resources, best practices
- The Food Trust is working on a practical guide on converting corner stores to provide healthier food choices, to be released in 2008
- Report on HCSN Best Practices scheduled for release in 2009
- This network is part of a larger food retail project that also includes a track at CFSC's conference in Fall of 2008

Anyone having trouble using the Attender tool can contact Hannah for help (hlaurison@phi.org).

3. Summary of HCSN Survey Results (James Johnson-Piatt and Kai Siedenburg)

This is a quick summary of the 135 responses so far. A more thorough written summary of the results will be sent out soon.

Overview of brief summaries of what people are working on:

- Store owners looking for opportunities to educate constituents and other store owners about healthier eating/food sales
- Government lobbying and working with communities
- General supply/distribution networks to support farm to store/school/institution/table initiatives.
- Connecting farmers with better wholesale markets, produce terminal markets, and corner stores
- Farmer's Market, CSA, or Co-op owners
- Working to improve product mix, trying to deal with poor marketing, and getting organic produce in stores
- Researchers who work on a larger scale, affecting change through policy planning
- Community-based organizations working on community food assessments

Other Information garnered from survey:

- # Of respondents working to make healthier foods more through existing corner or small-scale stores in low-income or underserved areas: 76
- # Of other types of efforts to increase healthy foods in underserved areas by bringing in new food retail outlets or improving existing outlets: 88
- # Of groups that are planning to get involved in this work within the next two years: 49
- Top three choices for possible call topics:
 - Key challenges to bringing in healthier foods and ways to address them (will be focus of September call)
 - Distribution models for getting healthy foods to corner stores (may be focus of December call)
 - Overview of projects underway (will include time on each call for this)
- Top three replies re types of support people want from network:
 - Info on projects, who's doing what
 - Success stories, successful models, best practices
 - Funding ideas
- Other frequent responses: distribution models, evaluating results, working with store owners

4. Summary of recommendations from people involved in corner store work (Penny Leff, California 5-A-Day Retail Program)

Conducted interviews with community organizers to try and learn how we can be useful to corner store conversion projects. They are using two basic approaches:

1. Working to improve the health of food that's already sold in the stores (i.e. healthier snacks, dairy), without changing anything major. This is often complemented with a marketing campaign. This allows people to work with multiple stores, work with a smaller budget, and target the broader community.

2. Working more intensively with individual storeowners to bring more fruits and vegetables into stores. These organizers helped provide stores with refrigerators, technical assistance, and finding funding. Some hired a consultant to help.

Recommendations from organizers:

General:

- Connect with city agencies--helpful because merchants understand the city
- Work with community to develop a strong partnership; make sure the group is aligned with what the community wants.
- Think about long term, beyond grant funding.

Criteria for store selection:

- Interested retailers; people with strong retail experience
- Within walking distance of the neighborhood and at least a half-mile away from the nearest supermarket
- Following the rules and have no criminal activity
- Have a long lease and are not up for sale

Specific suggestions:

- Hire a consultant or train staff to understand the produce business and the challenges the merchants are up against (time, space, distribution system).
- Promotion and nutrition education in the neighborhood are key to support healthy food sales.
- When it helps give things away free, make sure quality is high. Price matters, and building demand is important.
- Make sure everyone involved is in agreement about what is expected of them (i.e. what should or shouldn't the refrigerator be used for).
- Monitor fruits and vegetables for freshness and aesthetic appeal
- Produce is generally not profitable for corner stores, so emphasize other benefits like community involvement and benefits to their customers.

There were several major models for getting stores to sell more produce:

- 1) Teaching the retailers how to shop for produce and do it themselves. This is a major investment for retailer and organizers.
- 2) Hooking the retailer up with a distributor, Co-op, or store that is already buying fruits and vegetables and can give the store owner good prices.
- 3) The organizer providing full service distribution, and giving the retailer credit for unsold produce, which puts all the risk on the organizer and requires more funding, but is much more attractive to the corner store owner.

Q: Was there mention of the implementation of the WIC fruit & veggie vouchers in 2008? This will increase demand for produce.

A: Talked to someone in Calaveras County who did pilot program. They didn't do any incentives, but just brought in more produce, with the knowledge that demand would increase.

5. Presentations about corner store projects

Katie Olender, Northwest Initiative, Lansing, Michigan:

- Work in a “food desert,” with no full service grocery stores-- residents are low income and most shop in convenience stores
- Partnered with one store last June and helped them carry over 25 kinds of fruits and vegetables
- Gathered preliminary research data and found how many people did shop at corner stores, and that many would purchase fruits and vegetables if available
- Approached the owner, said I think this would be good for your business
- Last summer they started carrying fruits and vegetables from a local wholesaler.
- We placed signs all over the store and the streets.
- Sales have gone up every single month since initiative started
- This summer the store owner will be purchasing produce from a local farmer at better prices

Katie Martin, University of Connecticut-Center for Public Health and Health Policy, Hartford: Healthy Food Retailer Program

- The Healthy Food Retailer Program was conceived and developed by the Hartford Food System in 2006 to work with Bodegas & corner stores
- The Hartford Food System has recruited 25 markets to join their program to shift a portion of their inventory--there is interest in selling healthier foods
- The Center for Public Health and Health Policy at UConn is working to evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of this community-based project.

Nicole Bourdon, NYC DOH and Bob Lewis, NYS Dept of Agriculture and Markets: Healthy Bodega Initiative

- Started with a goal of increasing access to 1% milk—seemed like straightforward place to start.
- Provided customers with a 15% discount the first month. However, sales decreased after discount was removed.
- It was very hard to collect inventory data from stores, so we weren’t sure if we changed behavior, but we know we improved access.
- The second stage of the initiative was to distribute small packages of sliced apples and carrots, which involved setting up an entire distribution network.
- Chose these products partly because they were already being offered in schools and the children love them, so we thought we could sell them at bodegas too.
- Piloted this initiative in 60 bodegas and offered a buy 1 get 1 free promotion. Unfortunately this program was not quite as successful: Challenges: some products were not displayed properly or not replaced after the expiration date, also extreme cold weather was a barrier.
- The city has about 8-10,000 bodegas--It’s really a small business city. Huge amount of work to reach these stores.
- A city/state initiative is attempting to develop a modern full-scale distribution facility. Major opportunity to develop the distribution system to reach out to corner stores and have fresh, affordable products that meet cultural needs. Also important for middle-scale growers--gives us the capacity to develop the system at all levels.
- WIC is making major changes by decreasing dairy and increasing fresh fruit & vegetables, and this is a tremendous opportunity for bodegas to provide produce that would otherwise be provided by the major supermarkets.

Grace Huppert, California Department of Health: Healthy Food Purchase Pilot Program:

- Program created due to passage of state law AB 2384 in 2006
- The goal is to increase access and availability of fresh fruits & vegetables to food stamp participants
- No funding available yet, except for some limited funds to lay the groundwork. May be funded in the next year.

- First part is to provide small store conversions, giving store owners the capacity to have refrigeration cases, as well as TA on purchasing and maintaining fresh produce.
- Second, as a bonus the owners get a % back when they purchase fruits and vegetables.
- Very specific criteria for the four counties: one urban, one rural, and one with higher than normal food stamp participation.
- Evaluation: look at whether there is an increase among food stamp participation
- Trying to project amount of funding needed for the incentives. Hope to use different amounts of rebates in different counties to see what level is the most effective.

6. Announcements and discussion

- WIC is reducing dairy and increasing fruits and vegetables. This creates enormous financial opportunity for stores, but if they don't take advantage it will go to supermarkets; farmer's markets will benefit from WIC changes too. Recommendation to work with the National WIC Association and USDA on this.
- Michelle Irving: Has anyone worked on healthier options for high school students near schools? How to give them that passion and the drive.
- Lisandra Lamboy: Worked w/TFT on a elementary school program. Could talk about that.
- Bob Lewis: Has anyone approached this from a minority/immigrant business development angle?
- Deborah Yashar: Work w/ beginning farmers on Central Coast of CA. Will try to link w/corner stores, just starting to do that. Working w/entrepreneurs who want to start food businesses-- would love advice and resources. Want to bring 'buy fresh, buy local' campaign there—it is now available in Spanish.
- Melissa Martinez from CUNY Dominican Studies Institute has been doing a lot of work from research to writing about Latino corner stores.
- James Johnson-Piett is working to with stores on record-keeping, so they know what they're selling and what they're not. Working to reduce technology gap for store owners; just hired business development consultant to provide accounting assistance (Peachtree and QuickBooks). Toolkit will include sales tracking info, probably aggregated.
- Stacey Flanagan: New USDA Guidelines will allow stores to make only 50% of their profits from WIC. Need to understand how they came up with—it's unbelievable at least in NYC that they don't want to see stores have more than 50%.
- Q: Bob Lewis: Has anyone seen farmer's markets play an active role in bringing fresh produce to corner stores? Stores could help address the needs of the community when market isn't there.
 - Anne @ The Fair Food Project is figuring out ways for farmers already making bi-weekly deliveries to hook up to a bodega network to serve a wider of audience.
 - Penny: In CA, Community Alliance for Family Farmers is working with growers collaboratives and ways for small growers to consolidate product and distribute.
- Q: Is anyone familiar with a mandate that has been discussed where agencies could purchase locally?
 - Susanna Hennessey Lavery: with the city of SF. Just developed a sustainable and healthy foods policy for the city. Can share those documents.
 - Others: The USDA prohibits school districts that get federal funding from establishing any geographic preferences for produce. This has to do with the WTO, there are various legal contentions actually the USDA does not permit anything but domestic produce with the exception of Hawaii.

- Kai: CFSC has been doing policy work to address the ban on geographic preferences. There is information on the Community Food Security Coalition website www.foodsecurity.org/procurement.html.
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- Bob Lewis: Small stores have historically been the business bootstrap of many ethnic communities. They are the reason for the survival of social networks, they provide much more than just food. There is a whole fascinating culture behind these stores--they provide a system for urban survival.

Participant List:

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