CASE STUDY: Increasing Equitable Food Access through the Healthy Neighborhood Market Network

Corner stores are a staple in many communities of color throughout Los Angeles, where local residents find food and household items only a short walk away. Unfortunately, despite the benefits of convenience, corner stores typically offer an abundance of unhealthy food and drink options. The impacts of these stores being inundated with sugar-sweetened teas and sodas, cheap alcohol, and processed pastries are often compounded with limited options for fresh fruits and vegetables. The Los Angeles Food Policy Council’s Healthy Neighborhood Market Network (HNMN) is at the forefront of improving the healthy food offerings of corner stores in Los Angeles’ communities of color by transforming corner markets into a convenient and healthy food retail option for residents. This case study explores how HNMN’s leadership development, technical assistance, and creative partnerships can result in mutual benefits for corner store owners and the community.

The Problem with Food Deserts
South Los Angeles, McArthur Park, and Boyle Heights—like many other communities of color—have been labeled as “food deserts,” or communities lacking access to healthy, quality, and affordable foods. South Los Angeles and Boyle Heights continue to struggle to increase grocery store access in their respective communities. New supermarket and grocery store development is challenging as it faces a longer timeline for completion due to an extended approval process, high start-up costs, and difficulty locating land that is both legally viable and attractive to developers.

Research shows that improvements in the food resource environment can, in fact, change shopping patterns and health behaviors. Empirical studies have found that individuals living next to newly built supermarkets shop at supermarkets more, consume more fruits and vegetables, and report better physical health. Additional research concludes that increasing corner store conversions, farmers markets and local produce vendors can lead to improved health outcomes as well. The outcomes of these studies suggest that increasing healthy food access through the expansion of both small and large-scale retail in low-access communities could result in positive health improvements for Los Angeles’s historically underserved residents.

Building Store Owner Capacity with Healthy Food Retail
The Healthy Neighborhood Market Network (HNMN) organizes a critical segment of our local food system – neighborhood markets – to successfully expand healthy food options in underserved neighborhoods. Each year, HNMN offers between 10-15 corner store owners intensive business and leadership training, mentorship, and technical assistance to transform their stores into a sustainable healthy food business. The enrolled stores are all family owned and operated, and a majority of store owners are immigrants, people of color, and low-to-moderate income themselves. Store owners participate in one-on-one business development coaching, covering topics ranging from marketing, branding, store design and merchandising, pricing and profitability and sourcing options.

A 2019 survey of twenty business-owners participating in HNMN found that 70% of store owners saw an increase in profit for produce sales after participating in the program. Of these store owners, 85% introduced or expanded healthy grocery items, and 92% introduced new produce or expanded their produce offerings.

The Healthy Neighborhood Market Network also helps store owners create new partnerships in their community. The same study showed that 80% of store owners forged new partnerships with one to three local community institutions, which helps to build and sustain their customer base. Ten of these store owners also forged new partnerships with professionals who contributed to the success of the small market. These professionals included renowned chefs, architects, designers, lawyers, and product suppliers.

Transformation Projects
Of the 10-15 stores enrolled and complete the program, 1-3 small market store owners are selected the following year to continue participating in the program as Transformation Projects. These projects involve a deeper understanding of the financial sustainability of the business, a stronger commitment from the store owner, and ultimately a greater connection within the community. In 2019, the HNMN program worked with Danny Park of Skid Row People’s Market and Luz Arango of Lupita’s Corner Market in Westlake to transform their stores from the outside in.

Skid Row People’s Market is a historic Korean-American-owned neighborhood market that has been owned by the Park family since 1997. Growing up at the market, Danny felt frustrated by the misrepresentations of the Skid Row community. He has since taken steps to best serve this community, which led to him joining the HNMMN program in October of 2018.
Luz’s mother, Guadalupe, opened Lupita’s in 1993 as a way to provide for her two young children. Luz and her twin brother, Raul, now run the market, and wanted to find a way to provide healthy options to the students and the nearby elementary and high schools. After the transformation of their store in 2019, valued at over $150,000, Luz has now become a voice and an advocate for her community. With the guidance and help of the team at the HNMN program, Lupita’s now accepts WIC for the purchase of fresh produce, and the store now includes a deli that serves healthy food. Just 3 months after completing the renovations, the store saw a revenue increase of about 40%.