

Name:

Solution: Mobile Produce Markets

Food deserts are residential areas that lack healthy, nutritious food options. People that live within a food desert must find ways to travel in order to access good food. This can be challenging as many food deserts are associated with low income areas, where residents often lack a personal vehicle or other resources to travel long distances. Attracting grocery stores to these areas can be difficult, so in the meantime there is a need for some creative alternative solutions.

One such solution, the Fresh Express bus, was launched in Phoenix, Arizona in 2014. The bus has been refurbished and is stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables that it sells at a discounted price. It travels to low income areas that are in desperate need of healthy food options. The program is part of a non-profit business advocacy group focused on improving specific Phoenix areas. The group raises money to fund the program and aids customers that rely on food stamps by matching up to their first \$10, so they can purchase twice as much food. The alternative to the bus for many residents would be to buy food from their local convenience store, but these shops typically offer a very limited selection of healthy options and an abundance of processed and packaged foods.

The Fresh Express was inspired by a similar program in Chicago, and more food bus initiatives like these are popping up in cities across the country. Unfortunately, the program is not intended to be a long term solution but to offer residents options while efforts are made to develop permanent solutions such as drawing in grocery stores.

Name:

Solution: Food Waste Donations

While many communities lack access to good food, food waste is a major problem throughout the United States.. On average, our country throws away 40% of its food, which is about 20lbs of food per person a month. Could a solution to the problem of food deserts also help alleviate the epidemic of food waste we are currently dealing with? Some people think so.

Many grocery stores overstock their shelves for appearances, and food sellers like restaurants, college cafeterias, and hospitals, purchase and prepare more food than they will sell so they don't run out during business hours. A group called Food Donation Connection is working to connect food businesses to local nonprofits that can help get their uneaten food to people in need. They have convinced thousand of businesses to donate rather than throw away uneaten food, and rescued hundreds of millions of pounds of food from the landfill. Many companies may be eligible to receive tax breaks from participating in a food donation program, potentially saving millions of dollars a year by donating food.

The problems with this solution are that many business owners (67%) worry that they could be sued if someone happens to get sick from eating their donated food. However a law passed in 1996 protects food sellers from liability if they chose to donate food. Owners also face challenges with storing and transportation of donated food to the organizations that will use it.

Name:

Solution: Fresh Produce in Convenience Stores

Although food deserts lack grocery stores or supermarkets, they often have other sources of food in the form of fast food restaurants, gas stations, and convenience stores. The problem is that the food options in these shops are rarely fresh or nutritious.

In the city of Minneapolis one survey discovered that 94% of residents would purchase fresh produce if it was available at a convenience store. In response, the city developed the Minneapolis Healthy Corner Store Program to help support local store owners in making fresh produce and healthy food options more visible, affordable and attractive to residents. The program has also helped store owners be compliant to state food ordinances that require store owners to carry a minimum of five varieties of perishable produce.

A similar program in New York's South Bronx called City Harvest, a nonprofit agency, works with local bodegas and markets in an effort to educate store owners and employees on how to buy, store and market healthier options.

In both cases the programs seem to have met some success and are now working towards expansion. However, many store owners may be apprehensive to take part in these programs for fear of losing profits to perishable items that may not sell before they go bad. In Minneapolis, the profits stores make selling produce are modest (\$10 a week). Any hope of encouraging stores to offer more produce varieties will depend on developing more successful marketing of fresh food options to the community.

Name:

Solution: Community Gardens

Residents living within a food desert are often frustrated by the lack of readily available, healthy food. In some places, these residents have decided to take action on their own by starting community gardens. Community gardens are common in many cities and can be a good option for low income areas because they require relatively low start up money and they are typically maintained by community volunteers. Often times communities can find nonprofit agencies or governmental agencies willing to help fund and/or educate them on best practices in urban gardening. Community gardens can also be a way of beautifying an abandoned lot or run down warehouse, which are often commonly seen in low income areas.

One example of a successful community garden is in Houston, Texas. Middle schoolers at Charles R. Drew Academy transformed an abandoned lot into a garden lined with fruit trees, herbs, and vegetables. The garden was funded by the US Department of Agriculture and is aimed at educating youth on healthy food options, while also serving the broader community through a neighborhood farmers market.

The kinds of food produced by community gardens can be limited by weather, climate, and seasons, which means they may not be able to offer the community healthy produce year round. And depending on the size of the garden as well as the amount of volunteers they are able to recruit to help grow and maintain the garden, the produce may not be enough meet the needs of the entire community.

Name:

Solution: Funding for Local Grocery Stores

Residents of food deserts suffer greatly from limited access to healthy foods. Grocery stores that offer healthy options are often located far away, requiring a car or public transportation to get to. It seems an easy solution to simply add more grocery stores to food deserts, however most businesses fear the risk involved with opening a store in a low income area.

One solution, California's FreshWorks, is a private-public partnership loan fund developed to raise money in order to help bring grocery stores and other healthy food retailers to food desert areas. Private investors like banks and insurance companies, as well as non profit and government agencies have contributed to the fund that is currently at \$272 million. This fund provides both loans and grants to healthy food stores willing to expand to underserved areas.

One example of this program in action is the Northgate Gonzalez market in South Los Angeles. The FreshWorks fund made it possible for the Gonzalez family to open a grocery store with an abundance of healthy options. The store not only offers the community healthy food, but it also employs 130 people, more than 70% of which are local residents.

There are programs like these in other states, as well as a national Healthy Food Financing Initiative led by the Obama administration. These programs are relatively new and getting the information out there as well as strengthening these programs through continued funding and successful implementation is needed.