

Be a City with Healthy Food Choices

People living in neighborhoods crowded with fast-food and convenience stores but relatively few grocery or produce outlets are at significantly higher risk of...obesity and diabetes.¹

You are what you eat turns out to be true when it comes to health. The food that city residents and workers can buy near work or home does make a difference to their well-being.



People who live near grocery stores and produce vendors are less likely to be obese or have diabetes. Photo by John MacKenzie.

Proximity and Balanced Choices Matter

The typical California community has four times as many retail outlets offering unhealthy food as outlets with healthy choices. In other words, most Californians are four times as likely to encounter fast food or a snack shop when looking for something to eat as they are to come across fresh fruits and vegetables.²

Moreover, people who live in neighborhoods where fast-food restaurants and convenience stores are more numerous than grocery stores and produce vendors are more likely to have diabetes and be obese.³

Regardless of individual or community income, proximity and balanced choices matter.

City Policies Can Encourage Healthy Eating

Cities have powerful planning, economic development and public relations tools that can be used to attract healthy food retail. This fact sheet details ways cities can create a healthier food environment. The HEAL Cities Campaign website (www.HealCitiesCampaign.org) offers resources for each of the following policies:

1. Create a vision and challenge for health with a HEAL City Resolution or Mayor's Challenge
2. Attract healthy food retail options
3. Let residents know which local businesses promote healthy choices



The Healthy Eating Active Living Cities Campaign provides training and technical assistance to help city officials adopt policies that improve their communities' physical activity and retail food environments. Supporting healthy choices is essential to address the obesity epidemic among California's children and adults, currently costing the state more than \$41 billion annually in healthcare and lost productivity.

The Campaign, funded by Kaiser Permanente and the Vitamin Cases Consumer Settlement Fund, is a partnership of the League of California Cities, the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, and the Cities Counties and Schools Partnership.

This fact sheet is one in a series providing background and policy ideas for healthy cities.

www.HealCitiesCampaign.org

1 Pass a Resolution to Be a Healthy Eating Active Living City

The first step for many cities is to acknowledge the obesity epidemic along with its human and economic costs and to set a vision and directive to commit the city to healthier eating and more active living. This commitment can take the form of a city resolution or mayor's initiative.

In **San Francisco**, for example, the "Shape Up San Francisco" mayor's initiative seeks "to increase the awareness of and opportunities for increased physical activity and improved nutrition where people live, play, work and learn."⁴

2 Attract Healthy Food Options

There are a number of ways that cities can support and attract more retailers of healthy foods:

▪ Promote Farmers' Markets

These lively retail options create a destination, promote social interaction, support local agriculture and bring healthy food to residents. Cities can support and promote local farmers' markets by defining them in the general plan and zoning code and encouraging them to accept the electronic benefit transfer card (EBT—formerly food stamps) and WIC coupons. Cities typically seek locations with adequate parking and attractive adjacent property uses, such as parks and retail. With many shopping centers closing and school wellness policies in force, some cities are passing ordinances to allow farmers' markets in previously off-bounds places,

Developing new grocery stores and cooperatives, creating farmers' markets, and improving the quality of food sold at convenience stores are all ways to increase a community's access to healthy foods.⁵

such as schools and parks. **Fresno**, **Ceres** and **La Jolla** have thriving farmers' markets at schools, and **Petaluma** has at least one in a neighborhood park. The county agriculture commissioner can provide guidance on the formation and certification of farmers' markets.

▪ Promote Community Gardens

Community gardens can provide affordable produce to residents as well as neighborhood green space and places for community-building and physical activity. Many families who farmed or gardened in their countries of origin are eager to get involved in community gardening in their neighborhoods and schools. Cities can support and promote community gardens by defining them in the general plan and zoning code and outlining a process for creating an inventory of appropriate sites, such as parks or vacant land. A community garden ordinance can also address such issues as access to water, liability insurance, contracts with private landowners and other maintenance needs. See the HEAL Cities Campaign land use fact sheet for related information.

SHAPE UP SAN FRANCISCO

The "Shape Up San Francisco" mayor's initiative seeks "to increase the awareness of and opportunities for increased physical activity and improved nutrition where people live, play, work and learn."⁴ A multi-disciplinary Shape Up Coalition includes representation from city government, community-based organizations, businesses, schools, healthcare providers and others. The coalition is working in four strategic locations: worksites; neighborhoods; schools, after school programs and childcare programs; and healthcare providers.



Farmers' markets in low-income neighborhoods can be encouraged to accept EBT and WIC coupons. Photo by Rhonda Winter.

In one activity, staff from the city's Office of Economic Development and Workforce participate in a coalition working to bring healthy and affordable produce to residents of some of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Through this city-community collaboration, city staff have attracted an expert grocery consultant to help a failing small grocer redesign his store to provide the healthier food options residents are asking for.



Community gardens provide affordable food and physical activity while building community among residents. Photo by richreidphotography.com.

▪ **Promote Healthy Food Retail**

Attracting retailers who stock healthy food—including grocery stores, produce markets, and corner stores with fruits and vegetables—is a complex endeavor that requires collaboration with community partners.

The city’s role in this partnership is to coordinate and focus its economic development, planning, financing, permitting and, if applicable, redevelopment tools and assets to attract and support healthy food retail. For example, a city can direct tax breaks, grants and loans, land assembly, conditional use zoning, dedicated assistance for infrastructure such as refrigeration and signage, technical assistance with business planning and marketing, and fast track and/or streamlined permitting for grocery stores in underserved areas.

In 2006 the Los Angeles City Council created a working group led by the Redevelopment Agency and including the Departments of Planning, Water and Power along with the Mayor’s Office to develop a package of incentives for full-service grocery stores and healthy sit-down restaurants. None of the incentives were new—they had all been offered previously—but they were presented in a more attractive and actionable way. Several healthy food retail projects are now in the pipeline.

▪ **Prioritize Health Goals in Redevelopment Areas**

Redevelopment agencies can include health goals—including access to healthy foods and physical activity—as a matter of general agency policy or on a project-by-project basis. The Project Area Committee or Community Advisory Committee can include access to healthy food in the community benefits agreement for each proposed development project.⁶



As part of a community project, a high school student in Southern California works with corner store owners to improve signage pointing to healthier options. Photo by Tim Wagner.

- **Increase Access for Low-Income Populations.** Federal food assistance programs are vital to increasing low-income residents' access to healthy food. Increasing the number of locations that accept EBT can provide more access to fruits and vegetables. For example, using the zoning code to encourage or require farmers' markets to accept EBT and the WIC and Senior Farmers' Market Program vouchers benefits both customers and farmers.

3 Recognize Businesses That Offer Healthy Choices

The HEAL campaign has public awareness materials—including sample city resolutions and press packets—that cities can use to recognize businesses that offer and promote healthy eating. Signage is also available for stores and restaurants that institute “healthy check-out lanes” or post calories on menus and menu boards prior to the January 1, 2011 implementation date for the state’s menu-labeling law.

Join the Healthy Eating Active Living Cities Campaign

Go to www.HealCitiesCampaign.org and let us know what you are doing, or contact the campaign:

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References

1. California Center for Public Health Advocacy, UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, Policy Link. 2008. *Designed for Disease: The Link Between Local Food Environments and Obesity and Diabetes*.
2. California Center for Public Health Advocacy. 2007. *Searching for Healthy Food: The Food Landscape in California Cities and Counties*.
3. California Center for Public Health Advocacy, UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, Policy Link. 2008. *Designed for Disease: The Link Between Local Food Environments and Obesity and Diabetes*.
4. Shape Up San Francisco Policy Platform, retrieved April 2009 from www.sfgov.org/site/shapeupsf_index.asp?id=58059.
5. Planning for Healthy Places. *Funding Sources for Healthy Food Retail: A Guide to Federal and California State Economic Development Resources*. April 2008. <http://www.healthypolicy.org/FoodRetailPrograms.pdf>.
6. Public Health Law & Policy. *How to Use Redevelopment to Create Healthier Communities*.



La Loma Mercado y Carniceria on 23rd Street in San Pablo prominently features fresh produce that is culturally familiar.

Resources

American Community Gardening Association offers tips on elements to include in a community garden ordinance. www.communitygarden.org.

Local Government Commission has an excellent fact sheet on community gardens, with specific recommendations for city policy makers. www.lgc.org.

Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency's Market Opportunities document describes LA's coordinated approach to attract healthy food retail to South LA. www.crala.org/internet-site/Development/upload/Market_Opportunities_08.pdf.

Planning for Healthy Places, a program of Public Health Law and Policy, offers multiple resources on healthy retail. www.healthypolicy.org.

- *How to Use Economic Development Resources to Improve Access to Healthy Food*
www.healthypolicy.org/factsheets/PHLP_EconDev_factsheet.pdf.
- *How to Use Redevelopment to Create Healthier Communities*
www.healthypolicy.org/factsheets/PHLP_ReDev_factsheet.pdf.
- *Funding Sources for Healthy Food Retail: A Guide to Federal and California Economic Development Resources*.
www.healthypolicy.org/FoodRetailPrograms.pdf.
- *Healthy Planning Redevelopment Agency Resolution*: sample language that prioritizes obesity prevention as the redevelopment agency strategy. www.healthypolicy.org/ecdev_toolkit/ed_appendix2.pdf.

Policy Link highlights promising strategies to develop grocery stores, improve the selection and quality of food in existing smaller stores, and start and sustain farmers' markets in the report, *Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: Improving Access and Opportunities Through Food Retailing*. A second helpful report is *Grocery Store Attraction Strategies: A Resource Guide for Community Activists and Local Governments*. www.policylink.org.