

CORNER STORE REPORT 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Background on Previous Work

Access to healthy food is seen as a critical determinant for addressing food access and food insecurity - healthy corner store programs have been shown to be a successful strategy in other locations. A healthy corner store program was developed and implemented by GAVA (informed by the Food Trust model), and evaluated by UTHealth School of Public Health in Austin from 2013-2019. While this program was successful at one store, there was not wide scale success across all participating stores and communities. During the last couple of years, the Office of Economic Development and Austin Public Health at the City of Austin have worked to try to build on what was learned in that program and other successful healthy corner store initiatives to re-vamp and re-launch the Healthy Corner Store Program in Austin.



New Healthy Corner Store Program - Background

Informed by the success of the San Antonio Healthy Corner Store Program and what was appreciated by the GAVA and Food Trust model, the re-vamped program would include the following components:

- Ease in ordering quality, fresh produce in small quantities through a central distributor, including healthy prepared foods
- Provision of a refrigerator and marketing assistance for storing and displaying fresh produce
- Subsidy of produce to reduce risk to the store due to food spoilage during building of customer base.

INTRODUCTION

New Healthy Corner Store Program - Background Continued

This Healthy Corner Store Program would also include the following benefits for participating corner stores:

- Potential for stores to increase profits and differentiate themselves from the competition by selling more and varied items.
- Expanding their customer base through marketing and other efforts.
- Networking with other corner stores and City departments and potential for technical assistance.



New Healthy Corner Store Program Eligibility and Recruitment

Corner stores could be eligible if they were located within the City of Austin and in one of the prioritized zip codes. Prioritized zip codes were located within the Eastern Crescent of Travis County and have been identified as being historically under-served and would benefit most from increased access to fresh foods. All stores in the prioritized zip codes received an invitation to participate. Store's proximity to a supermarket could also affect eligibility. Additionally, restaurants and similar businesses engaged in healthy food retail could potentially be eligible to participate and were told to inquire about the program. In order to recruit and inform potential participating corner stores, two information sessions were held virtually in September/October 2020. Interested corner store owners then had additional conversations with City of Austin program staff to determine which stores would participate in the program. As of December 2020, five to six corner stores (owned by three different individuals) had agreed to participate in the program, and a waitlist of several other stores and owners had demonstrated interest and were eligible to participate in the program.

EVALUATION METHODS

Evaluation Methods

Due to past experience with evaluating the previously implemented healthy corner store initiative, the UTHealth School of Public Health (UTSPH) Evaluation Team performed a small process evaluation of the new Healthy Corner Store Program recruitment and information session practices. In order to effectively evaluate these sessions, UTSPH Evaluation Team members attended both information sessions that were held, and conducted in-depth qualitative phone interviews with participating corner store owners and contacted non-participating but interested corner store owners who registered for the information sessions or were on the waitlist.

Interview Tool

UTSPH Evaluation Team staff (with input from Office of Economic Development and Austin Public Health staff) developed an in-depth qualitative interview guide to better understand corner store owner perceptions of the information session, recruitment process, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Healthy Corner Store Program. This tool was approved by the UTHealth IRB prior to recruitment and data collection.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Contact information of participating and interested corner store owners were provided to the UTSPH Evaluation Team by colleagues at the Office of Economic Development and Austin Public Health. Potential participants were contacted via email and informed of the phone interview process, and that they would receive a \$10 gift card as a "thank you" for their participation. Participating and not-participating but interested corner store owners were contacted via email in November and December 2020. Trained UTSPH Evaluation Team members completed the interviews over the phone to ensure safety of the participants and UTSPH Evaluation Team staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. UTSPH Evaluation team staff completed interviews with those who consented to participate in the evaluation in December 2020. During the interview, UTSPH Evaluation Team members took de-identified notes via a password protected online form.

Data Analysis

As previously stated, all interviews were completed over the phone to ensure safety during the pandemic, and staff took detailed, de-identified notes via a password protected online form. These notes were then analyzed for themes by UTSPH Evaluation Team staff who have been trained in qualitative analysis. These identified themes are presented in the Results section (pg. 4) of this report.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overview of the Sample

All three participating corner store owners consented to participate and completed an interview. Five additional corner store owners who were interested and registered for an information session but were not participating in the program were contacted by e-mail on two to three occasions by UTSPH Evaluation Team staff, however zero of the five owners responded to any e-mail. Thus, they are not included in this report. The owners who completed the surveys had on average two stores participating in the program, had stores residing in East Austin and/or South Austin and in one of the pre-determined eligible zip codes. All interviews were conducted in English. All stores owned by the three owners currently carry an assortment of fresh produce, however identified that they have issues with sourcing, marketing, or spoilage of these items.

Perceptions of the Recruitment Process and Information Session

All participating corner store owners remembered hearing about the program through different channels. One owner mentioned physical recruitment information being dropped off to the store, two owners mentioned hearing about the program via an email from the City of Austin, and one owner heard about the program through a phone call with City of Austin officials. Additionally, while all three owners registered for the information session, two of the three owners remembered attending. The two owners that attended thought that the information presented was helpful and that all of the questions that they had in the moment about the program were answered. They also both mentioned that they appreciated that the session was offered over Zoom given the pandemic, and also gave them additional flexibility and convenience by joining from home/the store. All store owners mentioned that they have had great contact with Office of Economic Development/Austin Public Health Staff. Specifically, owners stated that they have been nice to work with and very responsive to any calls, emails or questions that they have had.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Motivating Factors to Participate and Perceptions of the Program

All participating corner store owners stated that they were very interested and motivated to participate in the program because of various program components. Corner store owners were unanimous in stating that having City support in order to have greater healthy options for their community and customers was a motivating factor for participating in the program. They all discussed their desire to provide healthy foods at affordable prices for customers and their community, however they have experienced issues with sourcing the produce, lack of marketing, and/or spoilage. Therefore, they were motivated to participate in the City's Healthy Corner Store program in order to overcome these obstacles.

The participating corner store owners also mentioned several other program components/benefits that were motivating factors for participating in the program. Specifically, multiple corner store owners discussed the following components as why they decided to participate in the program: support with network building, support with marketing, and support with acquisition of needed equipment. Two corner store owners discussed the support with network building by facilitating relationships with sourcers and enabling the ability to get smaller fresh produce offerings. This was especially compelling since many of these owners were having to source the fresh produce and other healthy items themselves. Additionally, this enables them to offer the fresh produce and other healthy items at affordable prices while not having to experience profit loss.

Another program component that two of the three corner store owners mentioned was City of Austin support with marketing and promotion of the healthy offerings to the community. Both corner store owners who discussed this mentioned that this marketing will be helpful to promote the program among current customers and garnering new customers. They also mentioned that this will help with the sustainability of the program. Finally, the last component that was mentioned by two of the three corner store owners was support with equipment acquisition. Both corner store owners mentioned that having support from the City to obtain more equipment, such as coolers, shelving, etc. was a positive aspect of the program. This would help with carrying more products as well as preventing spoilage.

All three of the corner store owners had minimal concerns about participating in the program. One concern that was mentioned was that the owners are limited by the store itself (availability of space, etc.). Additionally, another concern was how the City will be able to scale up the program, since they believe it will be successful. No other concerns were mentioned.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the interviewed corner store owners demonstrated tremendous program buy-in and enthusiasm over participating in the City of Austin's new Healthy Corner Store Program. The evaluation team noted that this is much more enthusiasm that we experienced from corner store owners/managers in the previous corner store program. The recruitment of corner store owners was successful in that all participating owners were satisfied with the information session and recruitment materials, and were able to discuss various program components. Additionally, they reported high levels of satisfaction with their interactions with City of Austin staff regarding this program. However, the UTSPH Evaluation Team was unable to reach other owners that decided not to participate, so we are unable to comment or speculate on their motivations for not participating in the program.

The newly-developed program components were very appealing and motivating for corner store owners to participate, specifically the ability to provide healthy items for their customers/community, and support with networking for sourcing (and affordable pricing), marketing, and acquisition of equipment. These components also have the potential to mitigate current issues the store owners have with carrying healthy produce by providing equipment (coolers), sourcing issues, and prevent spoilage. Future evaluation of the program once it is implemented would be helpful in determining effectiveness.



**For Questions/More Information, Please Contact:
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