

Plan4Health: Corner Store Collaboraton in Metro Boston, MA



"For Melrose and Wakefield, Plan4Health has been a perfect way to strengthen our Healthy Corner Store work. Making fruits, vegetables and other healthy items easier for our convenience store owners and managers to stock leads to more consistent availability for kids and families."

*Kara Showers
Coalition Member
Melrose and Wakefield Mass in Motion*

The coalition involved local youth in the project through the development of the Greater Boston Association of Convenience Stores' logo and the healthy checkout lanes logo.

SUMMARY

Plan4Health connects communities across the country, funding work at the intersection of planning and public health. Anchored by the American Planning Association (APA) and the American Public Health Association (APHA), Plan4Health supports creative partnerships to build sustainable, cross-sector coalitions. The Inner Core Community Health Improvement Coalition (ICCHIC) unites seven municipal coalitions to address unhealthy diets within Boston's Inner Core region by improving access to healthy food. ICCHIC seeks to strengthen distribution networks to support healthy food retail initiatives and work with grocery stores to offer and promote healthy foods.

CHALLENGE

Although Cambridge, Everett, Malden, Medford, Melrose, Wakefield, and Somerville in the Inner Core Community Health Improvement Coalition (ICCHIC) are within 20 miles of Boston, they function as regional urban centers in their own right, providing nearly 200,000 jobs and housing 384,000 residents in a set of communities rich with racial and ethnic diversity. Like many urban settings, these seven cities grapple with chronic disease burdens and risk factors disproportionately concentrated in highly segregated low-income, minority, and immigrant areas. With less than 35 percent of the population eating the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, all seven municipalities struggle with chronic diseases related to poor nutrition.

One in 14 adults is diabetic and obesity is highly prevalent across the seven communities. While there are healthy food options available within this region, getting to these food sources can be a major challenge. There are large tracts and neighborhoods that have been classified as food deserts. Though Boston and its inner core tends to be more compact and walkable, a by-product of this type of density is that quite a few residents do not have cars, making it difficult to get to a grocery store a mile or more away. Residents often have to walk or use public transportation to carry groceries while juggling young children or end up paying for taxis whose costs can add up over time causing significant financial hardship. Getting to healthy food sources becomes time intensive and expensive for residents who already tend to have limited time and resources due to working multiple jobs and low income. While there are also a number of other food sources available, they are not always convenient or affordable for many residents and therefore not always a feasible option.

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SOLUTION

ICCHIC is striving to improve healthy food options at neighborhood corner stores and grocery stores. Through coalition building, a literature review, and key informant interviews with distributors and store owners, ICCHIC worked over the course of the Plan4Health project to garner an in-depth understanding of the community and to develop real solutions. By speaking directly with owners, the coalition was able to understand store priorities as well as challenges to providing fresh, healthy food options.

SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS

The work in Metro Boston is an example for other communities of creative approaches to changing systems and environments to make healthy living easier where people live, learn, work, and play.

ICCHIC works with communities across the Boston area. Reach out to the coalition's lead agency, Metropolitan Area Planning Council, visit <http://www.gbacs.mapc.org/> to learn more about the convenience store association – or reach out to your own local planning commission. For more information about Metro Boston and all of the coalitions participating in Plan4Health check out www.plan4health.us and join the conversation on social media with #plan4health.

RESULTS

As part of the literature review and interview process, ICCHIC realized that while distribution was a major barrier for corner stores, stores faced other business challenges and competing priorities that made it difficult for them to focus time and effort to increasing healthy food options in their store. ICCHIC recognized that to support store owners' efforts to add healthy food options, the coalition would need to expand the focus of the strategy to not only address distribution and procurement for healthy foods but also the other issues store owners face. ICCHIC responded by developing the Greater Boston Association of Convenience Stores. Launched in the early spring of 2016, the association allows corner store owners to have a space for conversing, community building, accessing professional development opportunities and technical assistance, and discussing options for joint purchasing of fruits and vegetables. Framed as an economic development opportunity, the association recognizes the financial barriers to providing healthy food options and contributes to the sustainability of healthy food access by offering a flexible structure that will expand as association membership increases.

The Plan4Health project also supported healthy checkout lanes in regional grocery stores. The coalition rose to the challenge of working with grocery stores by identifying the healthy checkout lane concept as an approach to obtaining buy-in from corporate representatives. Piloting the healthy checkout in just one lane of a store provided the stores a low-risk opportunity to see the potential impact of healthy options and provided the region a local example of healthy checkout lanes to share with other communities in Massachusetts.

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Success Stories

<http://nccd.cdc.gov/nccdsuccessstories/>