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Improving Access to Healthy Food

Cassville, Pennsylvania had no local food options after a gas station market burned down in 2007. The closest grocery store was 15 miles away. In 2009, Betsy and Mark Whitsel built the 3,200 square-foot Cassville Country Store. Using a grant from the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, the Whitsels purchased two coolers for fresh produce and a commercial refrigerated prep table for deli food. Local farmers stocked the produce coolers with tomatoes, peppers, eggs and apples. The sales of local corn grew to justify an additional storage unit.

The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative extended loans and grants to existing and new stores in underserved communities to increase the availability of fresh food. Researchers assessing the initiative's long-term impact in Pennsylvania found that Cassville Country Store added eight jobs to the local economy.¹

The Convergence Partnership, a philanthropic collaborative which Kaiser Permanente co-founded in 2005 to leverage our impact nationally, has done amazing things to promote healthy food access. Through the Convergence Partnership, Kaiser Permanente provided critical support to bring a successful state model, the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, to scale in the new federal Farm Bill.



Policy Context

Obesity is a driving force behind the chronic disease epidemic in the United States. Research shows that in addition to helping control weight, eating a healthier diet—including more fruits and vegetables—may reduce the risk of cancer and other chronic diseases. Underserved rural and urban areas, however, often lack access to grocery stores and farmers markets that sell healthier foods. Community-based initiatives to improve access to healthy food in America's food-insecure communities are included, for the first time, in the federal Agricultural Act of 2014 (also known as the Farm Bill).

The Farm Bill is the primary agricultural and food policy tool of the federal government and addresses issues such as nutrition, food stamps, conservation programs, and agriculture trade. In the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress authorized small but pioneering programs to promote access to healthy food in underserved communities.

The Challenge

Americans in too many low-income, rural communities—like Cassville, Pennsylvania—must travel long distances to access the fresh food they need to live healthy lives. In urban and suburban areas, residents of low-income communities face different but related challenges that make them especially vulnerable to obesity and its related chronic diseases:

- low-income neighborhoods frequently lack full-service grocery stores and farmers' markets;
- healthy food is often more expensive or of poor quality in low-income communities; and
- low-income communities have greater availability of fast food restaurants.²

“Kaiser Permanente is looking for ways to bridge the gap between the nutrition counseling we provide in the clinical setting and the unique challenges many low-income patients face in their communities where access and affordability are barriers to healthy food,” says Raymond J. Baxter, PhD, senior vice president for Community Benefit, Research and Health Policy, Kaiser Permanente.

Kaiser Permanente Solution

Kaiser Permanente is a member of the Convergence Partnership, which has worked with community leaders, advocates, and policy makers over several years to elevate healthy food access initiatives to federal policy. These efforts include:

- assisting federal policymakers in the development of the federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), which provides more than \$500 million in grants and tax credits to grocery stores, farmers markets, food hubs, and urban farms to address food deserts;
- providing a grant to evaluate the impact of HFFI investments. Researchers gathered data on how the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative affected rural Pennsylvanians, including mileage to a store and sales and employment gains;
- convening HFFI grantees in Washington, D.C., to promote peer learning and give grantees the opportunity to share their experiences through more than 120 visits to senators and representatives;
- encouraging the philanthropic community to adopt a cross-sector, cross-policy approach to healthy food access; and,
- launching the Food and Agriculture Policy Fund, a new collaboration of funders, to advance healthy food access and equity.

Outcomes

The Convergence Partnership's multi-year work to promote access to healthy food in underserved communities influenced two important provisions in the 2014 Farm Bill:

- the national Healthy Food Financing Initiative at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive program, a new national program that features matching funds to farmers markets—up to \$20 million annually for five years—to create incentives for food stamp recipients to buy more fresh fruits and vegetables with their benefits.

“I don't think the Healthy Food Financing Initiative would have happened absent the investments of the Convergence Partnership,” said Judith Bell, president, PolicyLink. To date, the HFFI and similar efforts have helped bring hundreds of millions of dollars in public and private sector resources—grants, loans, and tax credits—to healthy food access projects across the country.

Practical Implications and Transferability

The new Farm Bill provisions are a crucial step in helping individuals in low-income, underserved communities reduce their risk of chronic disease and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Health care organizations can make a difference by identifying and engaging with local initiatives to strengthen healthy food access and ensure that this access translates to better health. Learn more about HFFI local initiatives at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/programs/community-economic-development/healthy-food-financing>

For more information, please visit:

Kaiser Permanente Institute for Health Policy at <http://www.kp.org/ihp>

¹ The PA Fresh Food Financing Initiative, “Case Study of Rural Grocery Store Investments,” The Reinvestment Fund, Philadelphia, PA, June, 2012, http://www.trfund.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/FFFI_Impact_RuralPA.pdf, (accessed March 25, 2014).

² Food Research and Access Center, “Why are Low-Income and Food-Insecure People Vulnerable to Obesity?” <http://frac.org/initiatives/hunger-and-obesity/why-are-low-income-and-food-insecure-people-vulnerable-to-obesity/> (accessed March 25, 2014).