



Kids First Wellness Advocates Series
Healthy Corner Stores
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Communications

Providence - Corner stores are places for quick purchases - a snack, some coffee, maybe a newspaper. Often, the shelves are stocked mainly with items of little nutritional value. But that might all change, thanks to the collaborative efforts of several Rhode Island organizations concerned with the lack of access to healthy and affordable foods in Providence neighborhoods. As part of the Providence Healthy Corner Store Initiative (PHCSI), some very creative and enterprising high school students are working with these community organizations to help transform



corner stores in their neighborhoods into “Healthy Corner Stores”.

To qualify as a “Healthy Corner Store”, participating businesses must commit to increasing the amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain breads and pastas, low salt and low sugar canned goods and healthier snacks stocked on their shelves. In return, students working on the project will provide assistance in promoting the healthier items to customers using resources provided by “Healthy Corner Store” partnering organizations - Farm Fresh RI, Kids First, the RI Department of Health and the Environmental Justice League of RI. The stores will receive assistance in sourcing more locally grown produce, improving store layout and display and help with overcoming some of the barriers store owners face when trying to stock and sell healthier food items, including building a customer demand. PHCSI partners and students have already conducted several rounds of customer surveys at participating stores and will widely publicize the stores and the healthy changes they make through their networks and within the surrounding neighborhoods.

Eventually, participating stores will qualify for specific Healthy Corner Store designations and will be awarded a display sandwich board promoting their healthy efforts to their customers. A “Healthy Corner Store” will stock at least 5 varieties of fruits and vegetables, stock low fat and fat free milk, stock canned fruit in its own juice or with no added sugar and stock low salt or no-salt added canned veggies, beans or soup. To achieve Healthy Corner Store Silver status, stores must meet all the baseline criteria plus increase fruits and veggie inventory to 10 varieties, work with the coalition to stock and sell at least 3 healthy snacks and stock whole grain breads. Shelf space in Silver stores must reduce the space devoted to candy, soda and fried items by at least 5%. To achieve coveted Gold Status, Healthy Corner Stores must meet all the requirements of Silver stores, plus stock at least 1 variety of local produce, stock and sell green leafy veggies, expand healthy snack item selection to at least 5 items and reduce junk food shelf space by 10%. All Healthy Corner Stores will clearly display WIC eligible items, produce or other healthy items at register counter or other “point of sale” locations.

Two Providence neighborhood corner stores are participating in the initial pilot this summer - New Battambang at 366 Elmwood Avenue and Mi Quisqueya at 933 Broad Street. High school students have assessed the stores to identify and price the types of foods currently available on the shelves and have also conducted customer surveys to determine the types of healthier items the specific customer base would be interested in buying.

To kick off the Healthy Corner Store project, eight students from three Providence high schools - Feinstein, Alvarez and The Met School - competed in a very unique Iron Chef event where they had to prepare a healthy meal for 4, in forty-five minutes, on a budget of \$10. The students also had to shop for their ingredients in corner stores within walking distance of their high schools.



The finished meals were judged by a panel of distinguished guests including Dr. David Gifford, Director of the RI Dept. of Health, Chef Walter Potenza, chef and owner of Walter's on Atwells Avenue and Culinary Instructor at Providence Career & Technical Academy, Steve Carey, Nutrition Program Specialist at RI Dept. of Education, Elise Swearingen, Policy Associate for City of Providence and Sister Ann Keefe, on the Parish Ministry Team at St. Michael's Church.

The Met School team was judged best in show, based on the nutritional quality, number of food groups used and the taste and presentation of their meal. The winning recipe - Whole Wheat Tortillas with Black beans, Corn, Peppers and a Homemade Tomato-Cilantro Salsa will appear on school lunch lines in all Providence school cafeterias in June. The meals prepared by the other two student teams - Vegetable Tofu Stir Fry by Team Alvarez and Pasta with Homemade Tomato Sauce and Fresh Fruit dessert by Team Feinstein - looked (and smelled) equally delicious and were well received by the judging panel.

Besides learning how to plan a healthy recipe, shop on a budget and cook under timed pressure, the students involved in the Healthy Corner Store project are also learning a great deal about community service and teamwork.

"We really learned a lot about how to work together to make a good meal", said one of the students during the Iron Chef competition. "But we also learned how to shop for real food in a place we all used to just go for chips." If these students are successful in their quest to make corner stores healthier shopping venues for their neighborhoods, residents in Providence might start to see corner stores as a bit more than places to buy a quick snack. They will be able to find all the makings for a delicious, healthy dinner too.