

# HEALTHY CONVENIENCE STORE PROJECT



## Organizer Toolkit

PROVIDED BY:



Healthy  
Southern Illinois  
Delta Network

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### **What is a Southern Illinois Healthy Convenience Store?**

A Southern Illinois Healthy Convenience Store (SIHCS ) is a convenience or small grocery store that promotes the sale of healthy foods such as fresh produce, low-fat dairy, and whole grains through stocking and marketing. The project's aim is to improve health and prevent obesity and chronic disease in rural communities through culturally appropriate, store-based interventions.

### **What is the Southern Illinois Healthy Convenience Store Designation?**

Convenience stores can earn the SIHCS designation after meeting the following program criteria.

1. A commitment to sell healthier foods at an affordable price at their convenience store.
2. A commitment to accept assistance from local health department staff or other organizers to market healthy food items to customers.
3. Improving the convenience store's healthy food offerings according the plan and goals established by the local health department or organizer.

### **What is the organizer's role?**

The organizer is a staff person or volunteer of a local health department or community-based organization, who works directly with the selected convenience store owner to assist them in earning the SIHCS designation. The organizer and store owner work together to assist the store to sell healthier food items. To facilitate this process, the local health department or community organization can provide educational, marketing, and technical assistance and resources such as:

- Identifying participating stores
- Implementing a plan for store owners to achieve SIHCS designation
- Assistance in improving store layout for storage and display of healthy foods.
- Advertising template and starting kit with promotional materials (shelf signs, posters, flyers, etc.).
- Consultation about social marketing to current and *new* customers living and working near store through Facebook, Twitter, etc.
- Information and training on how to purchase, price, stock and market healthy foods.
- Assistance in filling out an application and other paperwork for SNAP (food stamps) and WIC.

## Overview of the Process

The following is a description of the four project phases. Text in bold and in brackets (i.e. **[Welcome Letter]**) identifies templates of materials found in the Appendix.

### Phase One: Store Outreach

1. The organizer approaches convenience stores in their area about the project and begins building a relationship with store owners. As the organizer begins to identify which stores are interested, they should regularly visit the store.
2. **For Independent Stores (not managed by a central corporate office)**  
Visit the store and introduce the project to the store owner or manager. Provide an information packet and do a follow-up phone call several days later. **[Invitation Letter and Fact Sheet]** If a verbal commitment from the store owner is obtained, draft a **[Welcome Letter]** outlining program expectations.

**For Corporate Stores (managed by a corporate office)** contact the store's corporate office to submit **[Invitation Letter and Fact Sheet]** If a verbal commitment from the corporate office is obtained, draft a **[Welcome Letter]** outlining program expectations.

### Phase Two: Project Development

The organizer works with each selected store to develop a store project plan. The project plan will identify the store owner's goals and the actions required to become a Healthy Convenience Store. This process includes four steps:

1. The organizer conducts an inventory to become familiar with store items, layout, and infrastructure. The inventory is designed to be completed without store owner/staff assistance. This step requires taking photographs inside and outside of the store. This data also provides a baseline to measure the store's progress during the evaluation period. **[Store Inventory]**.
2. The organizer, possibly with community assistance (residents, students, local university/college, etc.), conducts market research. Market research will help the store owner identify what products or services customers would like to see offered—or discontinued—at the store **[Customer Survey]**.

3. The organizer interviews the store owner to become familiar with the business model, sales, customers, and types of changes the store owner would like to make as part of the project. *Business information is to remain confidential.* **[Store Interview].<sup>1</sup>**
4. The organizer develops a draft store plan based on data collected and meets with the storeowner to discuss the plan. At this meeting, the organizer helps the store owner develop business goals, identify opportunities for business improvement consistent with the project, and revise the plan accordingly. Each enhancement in the project plan should include a date to be completed by and the particular assistance required by the partner community organization for implementation. **[Store Project Plan].**

### **Phase Three: Project Implementation**

The organizer works with stores to implement their strategies while providing social marketing and technical assistance.

1. The organizer provides technical assistance (i.e. volunteers work parties, seeking funds for new equipment, etc.) as agreed upon in the project plan. The *Marketing Tools* and *Technical Assistance* sections in this manual provide further details.
2. Marketing materials (posters, shelf signs, etc.) are designed and provided for the store by the community organization. The organizer can help identify where to place the signs. Materials should be provided in the first month of store's participation.

### **Phase Four: Project Evaluation**

The evaluation of the project is an ongoing process. The organizer coordinates with the storeowners to assess the project's progress and potential need to revise goals. This process includes two steps:

1. The organizer should regularly visit the store and check-in with the store owner. These informal visits not only help assess the project's progress but also continue to strengthen the relationship with the store owner.
2. After completion of the first year and the formal evaluation, the organizer, and the store owner update the store project plan.

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<sup>1</sup> The inventory and interview templates were adapted from the D.C. Hunger Solutions' *Creating Healthy Corner Stores in District of Columbia* report. ([www.dchunger.org](http://www.dchunger.org))

The organizer (with assistance if needed) chooses a convenience store(s) based on the storeowner's interest in the program and other criteria and the organizer's personal observations. The selection for participation in gaining an SIHCS designation is based on these two general considerations:

1. The convenience store is one, which does not offer adequate healthy foods.
2. The store owner is willing to participate. It is important to explain to the store owner what the project involves including meeting m expectations and paperwork.

The organizer is responsible for selecting the participating store/s and evaluating their progress.

Marketing is critical for letting customers know healthy food options are available in selected stores. The techniques described here are split into two categories: *On-site Marketing* and *Social Marketing*. On-site marketing focuses on the changes the community organizer can assist to promote the sale of healthy foods. For example, techniques include placing the healthy food in high traffic areas, providing clear and colorful signs, setting up attractive displays and improving the overall stores appearance. Social marketing is mostly using community outreach and organizing tools to encourage community members to shop at the Southern Illinois Healthy Convenience Store. Community support of stores in the project is a vital role. Here are some helpful tips and ideas collected from other projects across the country.

Note: the *Marketing Healthy Foods* section in the storeowner's toolkit is a useful tool for working with the store owner as they decide what changes they would like to make.

### **On-site Marketing Techniques**

#### *Technique #1: Display produce at register*

Fruit makes a great healthy snack. Displaying fruit next to the register makes it easier for customers to grab a piece when making their purchase.

Tips:

- Display fresh looking fruit—remove the bruised and moldy fruit. Rotten fruit will make the other fruit turn bad.
- Put out fruits, such as apples and bananas, that are easy on-the-go snacks and do not need to be refrigerated.
- Use inexpensive displays such as a wicker or wire basket.
- Price the fruit to be sold as individual pieces rather than by weight. Set a comparable price to other snack items (i.e. 50 cents to \$1).
- Have a *Southern Illinois Healthy Convenience Store* sign displayed.

#### *Technique #2: Set up a special display area or “healthy zone.”*

Creating a unique retail display will draw attention from the customers to the healthy items. This technique may require reorganizing the store layout to allow for more open and welcoming sales area.

Tips:

- Set the display up at the end of the aisle where it is more visible, and more customers pass by it. If possible, the display should also be seen when customers first enter the store.
- Arrange the display by having each produce item in its basket or box. Regularly remove bruised and moldy items.
- Have clear signage with each item's name and price.
- Include educational information such as the USDA's "My Pyramid" program or "Veggies and Fruit Matter." To find materials such as posters and recipe cards, and brochures see the educational material in the Resources section of this manual.
- This is a good place to hand out giveaways such as recipe cards.

*Technique #3: Taking a fresh approach*

Changing the exterior to your store can make the storefront more attractive and bring in new customers. This is also an excellent opportunity to raise the community's awareness of SIHCS through signage.

Tips:

- Consolidate posters covering windows so customers can see into the store. Create a community board for flyers and other postings.
- Replace alcohol and cigarette posters with SIHCS marketing materials.
- Display "We Accept WIC" and "We Accept SNAP" on outside wall. (Signs are available once store has been accepted into the program.)
- Have signage in languages the customers speak.
- Regularly pick-up garbage and sweep sidewalks around store. Create an "adopt-a-Convenience-store" program in which community members/residents have monthly volunteer clean-up parties.
- Remove graffiti tagging on exterior walls.
- Install outdoor lighting at the store's entrance and in the parking lot
- Create a friendly and welcoming community space (i.e. place tables and chairs, potted plants, water bowl for dogs, a trashcan, or a bike rack in front of the store). Help storeowner find funding for such items or provide them as an incentive.
- Have a fruit and vegetable display in front of store or parking lot. If the store owner cannot set up one, work with a local farmer to have a farm stand in front of the store or the store parking lot. The store owner can receive a percentage of the sales and draw in new customers.
- Engage neighborhood youth to paint a mural on exterior walls with images that are neighborhood-based and consistent with the SIHCS mission.



## **Social Marketing Techniques**

### *Technique #1: Engage community members*

Healthy convenience store projects around the country have used a variety of ways to create a sense of community ownership of their projects. Creating opportunities for community members to work with stores and to get to know the store owners increased their support and commitment to the overall success of the project.

Ideas:

- Involve grassroots leaders from the start in building the partnership with the store owner/operator.
- Have a volunteer party to help a store rearrange the displays and storage to accommodate the sale of healthy products better.
- Develop an “Adopt-a-Convenience-store” program where community members/residents sign-up for monthly clean-up parties.
- Work with a youth group to create a video documentary on a store’s transition to a healthy Convenience store.
- Host a project launch at each store by working with community members to organize special activities such as a ribbon-cutting ceremony, live music, interviews with local media and cooking demonstrations.
- Share information about the program with other coalitions in the community.

### *Technique #2: Advertise Locally*

It is important to raise awareness of the project through local media outlets. Make sure to announce who the participating stores are and their locations on all marketing materials (posters, flyers, etc.). This is an ongoing effort.

Ideas:

- Create and distribute flyers at churches, social services, and other community meetings and events.
- Display posters at local community gathering places and businesses (i.e. libraries, food banks, community centers, parks, bus stops, etc.).
- Announce the project and post updates on local blogs, websites, and newspapers.
- Send out press releases to the local media and other public officials.

### *Technique #3: Promote the sale of healthy foods through incentives*

Use similar marketing techniques as supermarkets and restaurants such as food sampling, coupons, and reward cards. These types of promotional activities provide an opportunity to increase the store’s sales while also providing nutritional education.

Ideas:

- Create a “Healthy Reward Card.” A reward card encourages customers to purchase healthy products by “rewarding” them with a free healthy item after a number of purchases.
- Provide other giveaways such as recipe cards, magnets, coupons for a price reduction on healthy foods.

*Technique #4: Encourage partnerships between convenience stores and local food producers.*

- Encourage store owners to buy healthy foods locally and use this as a marketing tool.

The following includes various tools and techniques the community organization can use to assist the store as they transition into an SIHCS.

### **Building a Relationship with the Storeowner**

Similar to other community-based projects, it is important to build a trusting relationship with the store owner. Consider the following:

- Keep in mind the organization's commitments to the project (see *Project Expectations* section).
- Review all project materials with them and ask if they have any questions or concerns.
- Visit the store on a regularly to check in and see if they need anything. Go at a time that is convenient for them (often mid-morning).
- Purchase a healthy snack or drink while at the store.
- Learn the store owner and employees' names.
- Bring project materials in person and customer survey results.

### **Improving Store Design and Layout**

To improve the store's efficiency in stocking healthy foods and setting up displays, the organizer should consider the following tools while implementing the store project plan. The tools vary in time and funds available.

- Review the *Marketing Tools* section, which provides ideas and tips on how to display and market healthy products.
- Assist the owner in finding appropriate and affordable display cases and shelving for healthy foods. Displays can include baskets, wire racks, barrels filled with ice, and basic shelving.
- Fresh produce is likely to sell more quickly and have a longer shelf-life if properly handled. Coordinate donating the less attractive but still edible produce as well as other perishable items to a local food bank, which may also provide a tax deduction for the participating store.
- Identify places to put signage such as:
  - Window decal at eye-level on the main door (preferably right door if a double-door)
  - *Healthy Convenience Store* poster or flyer near register, at "Healthy Food Zone" display and other places of high traffic
  - "WIC and SNAP Accepted Here" sign outside and near the register
  - Shelf signs placed on healthy food items such as "This Item is Low in Fat" by skim or 1% milk

- Recruit a volunteer who has experience working in a grocery store to assist in working with the store owner. The volunteer could help identify how to make changes in the store such as rearranging the shelving and setting up a “Healthy Food Zone” display.
- Ask a local grocery store if you (or a volunteer) may attend any trainings for produce clerks or apprentice for a week to learn more about produce handling, promotions, and merchandising.
- Seek funding to hire a consultant to work with the store owners. The consultant could work with each store owner individually or provide group trainings on best practices for stocking and selling healthy products, pricing, and inventory tracking systems. A list of funding sources and low cost or free technical assistance is included in the *Resources* section of this manual.
- Seek funding for replacing old refrigeration with newer, energy efficient cooling systems. Refrigeration is often a costly expense for store owners who are unable to afford the upfront costs of new refrigeration. Though older refrigeration units are less expensive to purchase, newer units will save stores money, as they are less costly to operate and need fewer repairs.

## Identifying Healthy Foods to Stock

Store owners may be unfamiliar with what foods are considered healthy. The project coordinator can assist them in identifying what foods healthy items to stock as well as which items to reduce inventory in by evaluating their low nutritional value. The following resources can help you become familiar with healthy foods:

- Refer to “*What are Healthy Foods?*” section to learn the basic health benefits of different food types found in the *Resource* section.
- Learn to read the nutrition facts label (also found in *What are Healthy Foods?* section). Understanding nutrition labels will help you more quickly identify healthy foods to make suggestions to store owners. Nutrition labels provide information such as how much nutrients are in each product and the number of servings it contains.
  - FDA’s *How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Fact Label*, <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html>
- The WIC approved list is designed to promote healthy eating.
- Work with a nutritionist.

## Increasing Food Affordability through Food Stamps and WIC

The public health and nutrition programs SNAP (food stamps) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) put healthy food within reach for low-income families and their children who have substantial buying power. Food Stamps and WIC dollars provide an additional source of revenue to retail food stores. Store owners may need assistance in the application process and in implementing a system to track sales and inventory once authorized. The following will help the project coordinator work with the store owners to begin applying for each program.

## Applying for WIC

To improve the store's affordability and customer base, the project coordinator can work with the storeowner to apply for WIC authorization that is state managed. Here are some general things to know about the program and links to their resources:

- Each store is required to meet a certain set of criteria to be WIC authorized.
- Stores must stock a minimum quantity of WIC approved foods at all times.
- The WIC approved list will include fresh produce and other healthy items beginning.
- WIC provides a retailer handbook to assist each store in pricing, bookkeeping, and other services.
- Contact information to begin applying:

If you are interested in accepting the special checks (WIC Food Instruments) at your store, information is available by calling the State WIC Office at 217-782-2166.

If you would like a toll-free option, you can call the DHS Helpline at 1-800-843-6154.

## Applying for Food Stamps (SNAP)

To improve the store's affordability and customer base, the project coordinator can work with the store owner to apply for foods stamp authorization that is managed by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP (formerly Food Stamp Program). Here are some general things to know about the program and links to their resources:

- To be eligible to accept SNAP benefits, a store must sell food for home preparation and consumption and meet at least one of the criteria below:

(A) Offer for sale, on a continuous basis, at least three varieties of qualifying foods in each of the following four staple food groups, with perishable foods in at least two of the categories:

- meat, poultry or fish
- bread or cereal
- vegetables or fruits
- dairy products

OR

(B) More than one-half (50%) of the total dollar amount of all retail sales (food, nonfood, gas and services) sold in the store must be from the sale of eligible staple foods.

Stores can apply online at:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers-0>

For information concerning rules and procedures for the SNAP program, see:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers-store-training-information>

For additional information contact, the FNS Retailer Operations staff who can answer your questions and advise you on Program rules and procedures at the SNAP Retailer Service Center at 1-877-823-4369.

## **Public Health Permitting**

It is important to ensure stores comply with local public health codes. The types of food sold and the food processing, and preparation steps (cutting, heating, cooling, etc.) performed determines the types of public health license a store is required to have. If a store owner is considering expanding their operations (such as cutting and packaging fresh fruits or making a deli sandwich), they should contact their local health department to determine if they will require a new permit classification.

## **Food Safety**

It is important for store owners and their employees understand food safety practices. Foodborne illness can happen when food is handled in the store and is mostly caused by germs. The following are three key ways to prevent almost all foodborne illness:

- Food workers with good personal hygiene (i.e. hand washing),
- Food cooked to or held at correct temperatures, and
- Prevention of cross-contamination (i.e. preventing bacteria from raw foods, particularly raw meats from getting onto other foods). The store owner is likely to be aware of these standards through the food permit required. The organizer can seek the appropriate resources for food safety concerns by contacting the local health department for more information and tools.

## **Purchasing Produce**

There is a variety of options for selecting a produce vendor. It is important that the vendor meet a storeowner's financial means (i.e. affordable wholesale prices) and business needs (i.e. ability to deliver small quantities).

- Wholesale Distributors carry a wide variety of produce at a low price. Distributors typically deliver and may require a certain amount of produce to be ordered.
- Local farmers are a potential source of fresh and in-season produce. Store owners may be able to buy produce at lower cost through buying directly from the farmer. Produce could be purchased through farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, and farm stands.

Local produce providers can be found at: <http://www.agr.state.il.us/wherefreshis/>