Global Food Institute
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

d.c. Central kitchen HEALTHY CORNERS

HEALTHY CORNER STORES, HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES

Expanding Food Access Through Neighborhood Retail

THE OPPORTUNITY

DEMAND FOR HEALTHY, AFFORDABLE FOOD IS REAL

Communities want healthy, affordable food – and the evidence confirms it. Demand is real, local, and unmet in neighborhoods across the country.

A REPLICABLE MODEL TO INCREASE ACCESS EXISTS

DC Central Kitchen's Healthy Corners model reveals and grows that demand. By strengthening the corner stores that communities already rely on, it creates a sustainable, community-rooted path to better food access – without building new infrastructure from scratch.

IT'S DESIGNED TO SCALE

Healthy Corners' fifteen years of implementation in Washington, DC offers a replicable, evidence-based model for cities, funders, and partners ready to invest in equitable food access.

This brief from DC Central Kitchen and the Global Food Institute introduces the Healthy Corners model for policymakers, funders, and city leaders looking to expand healthy food access - and points toward the tools to make it happen.

Where Food Access Really Happens

For many families, the closest place to buy food is not a supermarket. It's the corner store down the street. These small retailers are trusted, constant fixtures in their neighborhoods. But without the necessary infrastructure or supply chains to stock fresh foods, they can only rely on shelf-stable, highly processed items. This critical gap, between where people shop and where healthy food is available, remains a persistent barrier to equitable food access.

DC Central Kitchen's Healthy Corners program starts from a simple premise: one powerful way to expand healthy food access is by strengthening the stores communities already rely on.

A Model Built Around Real Life

Launched in 2011, Healthy Corners is a public-private healthy corner store initiative led by DC Central Kitchen that helps small neighborhood retailers stock, sell, and sustain fresh, affordable food through a combination of distribution, infrastructure, and ongoing support.

Central to the model are foods that are often unavailable or unaffordable through conventional retail channels: fresh produce, locally grown fresh and frozen foods, and fresh-cut grab-and-go options that reflect the cultural preferences of each community.

Research from American University's Healthy Schools, Healthy Communities Lab confirms this approach works, finding that it effectively balances store performance with customer needs to promote fresh produce access and consumption.

It is not a single intervention, but rather a coordinated model supported by a blend of earned revenue, public support and philanthropy that makes fresh food viable for both storeowners and customers. By combining sourcing, distribution, infrastructure, and demand-building, the program transforms corner stores into reliable neighborhood sources of fresh food.

Healthy corner stores meet people where they are. By strengthening neighborhood retailers and investing in the systems behind food access, this model makes healthy food a realistic, everyday option – not a distant ideal.

The Evidence: Demand Is There

People want healthy food, and the numbers show it. Participation in and sales through Healthy Corners stores reflect a sustained community appetite for fresh, affordable options when they are made accessible. Independent evaluation highlights the importance of balancing store performance with customer demand, and the research shows small-store programs are strongest when they combine stocking, retailer support, marketing, and long-term investment.

50+
stores participating in DC

450,000
healthy items sold annually

15 Years
of DC implementation

1 Guide
replicable model for cities & funders

Why This Approach Works

Healthy Corners succeeds because it reflects how people actually shop, and it invests in the systems that make change sustainable. This involves:

- Treating small retailers as essential food access partners
- Aligning supply and demand so healthy food is stocked and sold
- Building trust with customers and businesses through consistent presence, quality, and community relationships
- Growing long-term business capacity, while addressing day to day needs and challenges
- Connecting food access with economic opportunity and community trust

After more than a decade of implementation in Washington, DC, the model demonstrates that small stores can play a meaningful role in improving healthy food access when they are properly supported.

What This Model Unlocks

- Expands healthy food access at scale without building new stores
- Strengthens neighborhood-based small businesses
- Aligns with public health and economic development goals
- Offers a practical, replicable model for cities

What Makes This Model Scalable

- Uses existing neighborhood assets and leverages DCCK's strength as a food supplier and distributor
- Works across diverse retail environments
- Aligns with public health and economic development goals
- Builds a system – not a one-time intervention

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR FUNDERS AND LOCAL LEADERS

Investing in a model like Healthy Corners means investing in a system where supply reflects real community demand. For funders and local governments, this looks like:

- Investing in neighborhood food infrastructure, including distribution systems, refrigeration, and logistics
- Funding demand-building strategies like produce incentives, outreach, marketing and coordination with complementary food access programs
- Supporting small retailers as key partners by integrating them into food policy, health initiatives, and economic development
- Scaling proven models that combine supply, training, and long-term support and peer networks

Strategic funding supports:

Infrastructure
(refrigeration, equipment)

Distribution and logistics systems

Retailer training and technical assistance

Produce incentives and community outreach

HOW THE HEALTHY CORNERS MODEL WORKS

A practical framework for cities and partners

Healthy Corners transforms existing stores into fresh food access points by aligning:

1. Source & Aggregate

Fresh produce and healthy staples are purchased by Healthy Corners at scale.

- Lowers costs through bulk purchasing
- Ensures consistent quality and supply
- Enables regional or local sourcing

2. Deliver to Small Retailers

Healthy products are delivered directly to corner stores.

- Flexible delivery schedules
- Low minimum orders
- Designed for small-business realities

3. Equip Stores

Stores receive the infrastructure needed to carry fresh food.

- Refrigeration and shelving
- Merchandising and signage
- Basic inventory systems

4. Support Retailers

Storeowners are partners in the model.

- Pricing and product mix guidance
- Food handling and storage training
- Strategies to reduce spoilage and increase sales

5. Build Demand

Healthy food must be affordable, visible, and reliable.

- SNAP/WIC-compatible purchasing
- Produce incentives
- Marketing and community engagement

6. Sell

Provide fresh food in the community.

IMPLEMENTATION INSIGHT

Healthy corner store programs are most effective when all components operate together. Investing in only one piece – such as stocking produce without retailer support or incentives – limits impact.

Want to Learn More?

To go deeper on implementation, visit the Building Healthy Corners: A Best Practice Guide, developed by DC Central Kitchen as part of the year-long project funded by the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation with the Global Food Institute at the George Washington University and Partnership for a Healthier America. For a rich history of the founding of Healthy Corners and the integration of DC Central Kitchen's nutrition incentive model, pick up a copy of The Food Fighters, written by DCCK's Alexander Justice Moore.

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