



Building Resilient and Inclusive Communities (BRIC) Success Story

A Collective Impact Approach to Improving Access to Healthy Foods

The procurement of cold storage units to improve access to healthy foods stemmed from a need that was made apparent at the heart of the community. Local food pantry directors, churches, and their community volunteers worked together with BRIC partners in St. Clair County to address this need. Their collective efforts could stretch further, allowing them to reach those within the community who were most in need of healthy food options. Community-based coalitions such as Make Health Happen and MTC Community Outreach worked to recruit new partners while also coordinating and aligning food security activities across multiple communities. To further support these efforts, organizations such as the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension, East Side Health District, and Healthier Together were able to participate by providing essential resources and advisory support. Because of this successful collective impact approach, these communities now have access to healthy and nutritious foods within their own communities.

Public Health Challenge

The ability to eat healthy is largely determined by one's access to affordable, healthy foods - a consequence of the conditions and environment in which one lives, which escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our strategy supported the efforts to improve equitable access to healthy foods through a twofold process that included:

1. Identifying and prioritizing food pantry services in greatest need of support; and,
2. Implementing nutrition standards at food banks, pantries, and other essential food distribution anchor institutions, including new efforts, partnerships, and/or adaptations to implementation as a result of COVID-19.

Approach

The Cahokia Heights, East St. Louis, Fairmont City and Washington Park communities have historically low access to healthy food. To improve food access and increase the number of individuals who receive more nutritious foods without needing additional transportation, this project focused its efforts on:

1. Revitalizing abandoned community gardens and developing a sustainable community gardening plan to help get food from gardens to nearby residents through pantries and other feeding sites serving the community.
2. Distributing cold storage units to food pantries and other feeding sites that serve residents but are limited to cold storage units. Efforts also focused on providing technical assistance to create a healthy environment with more nutrient-dense foods to make healthy choices, the easy choices.



Feeding Sites Selected

- Jeremiah's Food Pantry (serves 500 families)
- Catholic Urban Programs Food Pantry (serves 240 individuals)
- Fairmont City's Christian Activity Center Food Pantry (serves 200 families)
- Mind of Christ Food Pantry (serves 1,800 – 2,500 individuals)
- Mt. Zion's Food Pantry (serves 400 - 500 individuals)
- Bond Avenue Fish & Poultry (serves 2,530 monthly average guests)
- House of Prayer to all Nations (serves 200 individuals)
- Mason Clark School Food Mart (serves 230- 260 individuals)

Numbers reflect the guests served per month.

"With the new cold storage unit, Pastor Bowden and Mrs. Bowden hope to make more frozen and fresh produce available to clients to promote healthy eating within their community. We serve a large audience, but sometimes we cannot accept certain donations because of our cold storage limitation. Thank you for providing us with this opportunity and your continuous support."

- Pastor Bowden and Mrs. Bowden, Mt. Zion's Food pantry managers



Staff from U of I Cooperative Extension, Healthier Together and Mt. Zion Food Pantry pitch in to install a new freezer.

Results

All feeding sites that received cold storage units also adopted a Nutrition Policy. These Nutrition Policies highlighted their commitment to encouraging healthy food options to their clients by accepting more nutrient-dense donations and installing healthy messages throughout their sites to educate local residents. The team conducted nutritional environment assessments at each site. The goal of the tool was to help food distribution sites learn more about health and nutrition practices and identify ways they can promote health. Site managers could also use the tool to track their progress over time. The environmental assessment was conducted before the site received technical assistance. Additional assessments and technical assistance were provided after each site installed their cold storage unit. All feeding sites scored higher on their post-assessment.

What's Next

The St. Clair County BRIC partnership is planning to feature the success of this initiative as part of a Fall 2022 Community Celebration event on October 22nd. In subsequent years, they also hope to supplement food pantries with produce grown from local gardens and expand this collective impact approach further into other communities of need through resources provided by local partners after the BRIC funding cycle is complete.

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