B. PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project Name:
Around the Corner to Better Health

HWPP Project Number:
2011D-05

*Without exceeding this one (1) page, briefly describe your project and partnership.*

The purpose of Around the Corner to Better Health (ACBH), a partnership between the Milwaukee Health Department (MHD), the Lindsay Heights Neighborhoods Health Alliance (Health Alliance), and MCW’s Center for Healthy Communities and Research (MCW-CHCR), is to increase the availability of healthy foods in an urban community with a high concentration of convenience stores. Nationally, corner store interventions have emerged as a nascent, yet critical, factor in improving the food environment. However, there is a recognized need to identify specific corner store strategies that maximize health and economic benefits. Our action research will pilot business, marketing and distribution strategies in three Lindsay Heights corner stores to increase the number and diversity of options for purchasing healthy foods.

The Lindsay Heights neighborhood is a predominately African American community of 2,700 households in Milwaukee’s central city. Home to the Health Alliance and Walnut Way, a vibrant neighborhood association dedicated to sustaining an economically diverse community through civic engagement, the community is abundant with assets, but also faces numerous challenges. Among the most significant, families face disproportionate rates of obesity, diabetes and hypertension. An over-reliance on high priced, low-nutrition convenience foods contribute to the health risks. In 2008, the Health Alliance conducted a community food assessment that showed that the commercial corridor is disproportionately comprised of fast food and retail outlets that sell highly processed foods. The assessment built a strong foundation for initiating a Healthy Corner Stores Initiative that has brought together diverse community partners, store owners, and academic partners to improve healthy food access.

Preliminary conversations with engaged store owners reveal a need to: 1) help owners connect with distributors who can better meet their needs; 2) engage MHD departments in addressing regulatory concerns and providing small business support; 3) strengthen the store infrastructure to stock and store fresh produce; and 4) provide marketing support to increase the base of customers who purchase healthy food options. The neighborhood’s efforts align with the City of Milwaukee’s growing interest in addressing healthy food access. In December 2009, Milwaukee City Ordinance 68-4-11 was amended to include over-concentration of convenience stores as an additional criterion for license denial. The timing of the new ordinance provides an opportunity for lessons learned to inform the City’s licensing and incentive options to promote increased healthy food options.

Building from the expertise of this unique community-city-academic partnership, the ABCH project will:

1. Strengthen and sustain a partnership between the Lindsay Heights Healthy Corner Stores Initiative, the Milwaukee Health Department, and CHCR that promotes healthy food access.
2. Assess the barriers and incentives for Milwaukee corner store owners to stock healthier food inventory.
3. Conduct and evaluate demonstration projects in three corner stores utilizing distribution, infrastructure, and marketing strategies.
4. Provide systematic evidence of best practices to promote healthy food access that maximizes economic and health benefits.

Lessons learned through these demonstration projects will inform local and national efforts to develop effective strategies that business owners, city officials, and communities can employ to increase healthy food access. Best practices will be disseminated by the MHD through a toolkit of resources that supports corner store owners citywide in improving healthy food inventory. Long-term, the project will advance community efforts to build a neighborhood environment and culture of health; inform MHD’s citywide efforts to promote healthier food options; and influence national approaches to researching and intervening in obesogenic environments.