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New program to bring healthy food to city's corner stores

City uses grant to bolster fruit, vegetables in low-income area in West Baltimore

By [Meredith Cohn](#), The Baltimore Sun

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Baltimore City plans to help corner stores in West Baltimore stock healthier fare, and get kids and advertisement their parents interested in buying it, as part of an effort to reduce childhood obesity.

Though on the decline among young children nationally, obesity remains a major problem in U.S. cities such as Baltimore, where about a quarter of students are excessively overweight and potentially at risk for lifelong health problems.

Officials at the Baltimore City Health Department have identified limited access to low-cost and appealing healthy food as a barrier to reducing obesity and have worked to reduce the number of "food deserts" in low-income neighborhoods through programs such as a virtual supermarket that allows participants in public housing and elsewhere to order healthy food online for delivery.

The latest move to bolster healthy offerings in 18 corner stores was made possible by a \$750,000 three-year grant awarded this month by the Maryland Community Health Resources Commission. City officials plan to announce the funding this week for the Baltimarket Healthy Stores program.

"This is a very community-centered approach," said Dr. Oxiris Barbot, city health commissioner. "This grant allows us to allocate resources for business owners to transform their stores to offer healthier food items. It will take the risk out of stocking perishable food items."

Barbot said some of the money will go to initially offset the cost of adding items, such as fruit and vegetables and healthy snacks, which merchants may fear will spoil on their shelves. The money could also be used for displays or refrigeration.

But a big component will fund education, officials said. National studies recently failed to find a link between the mere availability of healthy foods and healthy weights.

That effort will involve engaging 75 youths during after-school programs as neighborhood food advocates who will assist in reaching some 12,000 people over three years, said Laura Flamm, a food access coordinator for the city who is also in charge of the virtual supermarket program.

All of the stores will be in the West Baltimore Health Enterprise Zone, an area the state is targeting with resources because of acute health needs. City officials and community members say they have relationships in the

area to build on.

"This is a wonderful opportunity to educate our children and hopefully change some poor eating habits," said Dr. Samuel Ross, chief executive officer of Bon Secours Baltimore Health System, the lead agency for the West Baltimore zone. "The key is to change the behaviors now before they become lifelong problems of unhealthy choices."

One in five Baltimoreans and one in four school-age children live in a food desert, city research shows. Three-quarters of smaller corner stores in the city sell no fruits and two-thirds sell no vegetables, according to a 2009 survey by the Center for a Livable Future at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Officials believe this contributes to the city's obesity rate, which was twice as high as the national average of 13 percent, according to a 2011 survey of students. The average across Maryland was 12 percent.

However, new surveys from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show a significant drop nationally among young children ages 2 to 5.

The rate dropped to 8 percent in 2011-2012 from 14 percent in 2003-2004 among those age groups, although there was no change in the obesity rate among older children. The CDC has also recently found a drop in obesity among young low-income children participating in federal nutrition programs.

The CDC said that may be due to child care centers stressing nutrition and physical activity, a decline in consumption of sugary drinks and an increase in breastfeeding.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake said changing people's entrenched lifestyles is a tough job, but city officials will continue to "layer" their efforts.

"You can know what you're supposed to eat," she said. "But you get out of the habit because of poor decisions or poor access. You have to create new habits. This grant will help us create those new habits, so the community knows what healthy looks like."

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