

## INTERVENTION

Healthy Cornerstore Initiative Produce Distribution System  
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (MN)



## DISSEMINATION CATEGORY

The Healthy Cornerstore Initiative Produce Distribution System is an **emerging** intervention based on its use of evidence-based strategies. Developed in practice, it shows promise but evidence in support of effectiveness is not yet available.

## OVERVIEW

**Intent of the intervention:** The Healthy Cornerstore Initiative increases access to fresh fruits and vegetables in cornerstores by linking small stores with produce distributors on a year-round basis. The program was developed by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. While addressing multiple levels of the socio-ecologic model, the program's primary focus is to modify the food environment to increase access, availability, purchases, and use of healthy fruits and vegetables by WIC recipients.

**Intended population:** WIC-authorized small and cornerstore owners and WIC recipients

**Setting(s):** WIC-authorized small and cornerstores

**Background:** In 2008, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service published an interim rule, which significantly revised the WIC "food package" across the United States. In response, the Minnesota Department of Health WIC Program revised its administrative rules and established new minimum stock requirements for retail stores authorized for the WIC Program. These new requirements included minimum stock requirements for fresh produce, including 5-7 varieties and 24-30 pounds of fresh produce per store, depending on store location.

In anticipation of these new requirements and challenges they would create for small stores, IATP conducted an initial scan of healthy cornerstore initiatives across the United States and made in-person visits to small WIC-authorized stores to assess their current produce offerings and distribution channels. In partnership with the Minnesota Department of Health WIC Program, IATP also interviewed the owners of a sample of small WIC-authorized stores to better understand their business models and their hopes and concerns about the new requirements for fresh produce.

**Length of time in the field:** The system was implemented August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009.

## HEALTH EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS

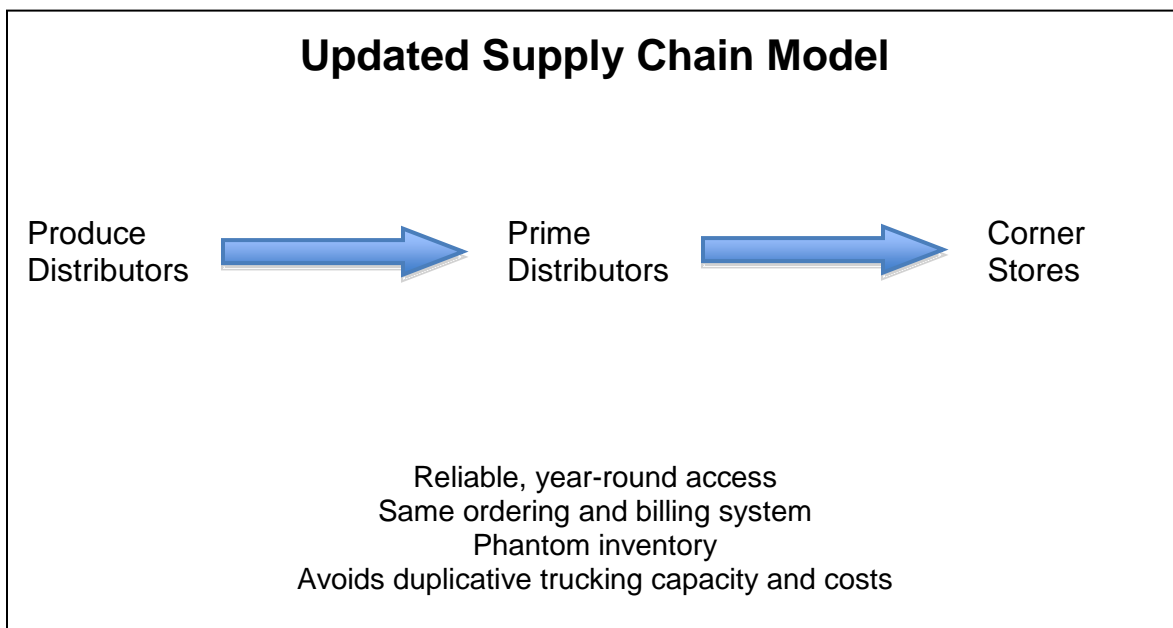
The Healthy Cornerstore Initiative intends to increase availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in cornerstores, particularly small WIC-authorized stores. Currently, produce distributors are making fresh fruits and vegetables available to approximately 500 small stores in Minnesota, including approximately 200 WIC-authorized stores with one or two cash registers. Because this program aims to increase availability of fresh fruits and vegetables for WIC recipients, the

program has the potential to reach low-income populations in Minnesota. In addition, the Healthy Cornerstore Initiative has the potential to reach populations living in areas where small cornerstores may be the only and primary food shopping location available.

## IMPLEMENTATION

### Main Components

- **Identify and establish relationships with produce distributors and prime/broadline distributors** (distributors who provide a wide variety of food and non-food products) **servicing small stores in the area**– IATP approached a produce distribution partner that served the retail sector in Minnesota to identify strategies worth exploring that would result in small stores receiving an ongoing supply of fresh produce. The produce distributor had relationships with two prime/broadline distributors (one regional and one national) who served small stores in Minnesota (and beyond).
  - Build on existing relationships if produce or prime/broadline distributors are already known.
- **Develop a distribution system that “connects the dots” in the supply chain**



IATP, with the distributors, created a system that moved fresh produce from the produce distributor through the prime/broadline distributors’ existing distribution system to participating stores around the state.

- Fruit and vegetable products were incorporated into the prime distributors’ usual ordering system. This allowed small stores that are supplied by the two participating prime/broadline distributors to order the fresh produce through the same ordering and billing system that they were already using.

*How it works:*

- Small stores place their produce orders with the prime distributor (instead of a separate produce distributor), who supplies the majority of each store’s products.

The prime distributor then consolidates all small store produce orders and places a master order with the produce distributor. The produce distributor handles all of procurement and inventorying of the produce ordered by the small stores. The produce distributor packages each store's order and delivers all orders to the prime distributors' main distribution centers on a regularly scheduled basis (typically three to five days per week).

- Using the same refrigerated trucks and routing system they use for other products, the prime distributors deliver fresh produce, packaged per order, to the individual stores, typically on a weekly basis. The Supply Chain Model shown above is also included in the Intervention Materials section.
- **Explore a “right-sized” program with the produce distributor** – Recognizing the smaller footprint and lower product turn-over among small stores, the produce distributor developed a “right-sized” program that allows small stores to purchase small quantities (e.g. six oranges or avocados) that better meet their needs and avoid waste. Ultimately, more than 50 different “right-sized” products have been made available, including many culturally appropriate fruits and vegetables. A “right-sized” list of products and amounts is included in the Intervention Materials section.
- **Develop and disseminate a retail promotion program** – IATP partnered with the Minnesota Department of Health WIC Program to develop and disseminate a retail promotion program to advertise the availability of fresh produce and to promote an increase in sales. The retail promotion program included point-of-sale materials in four languages (English, Spanish, Somali and Hmong).
  - In late 2009 and again in 2010, the promotional materials were mailed to all WIC-authorized stores with one or two cash registers. The Minnesota Department of Health WIC Program also made the materials available for free through their website and handled subsequent printing and fulfillment. The link to the promotional materials is included in the Intervention Materials section.
- **Provide a user-friendly produce handling guide to small store owners** – IATP also partnered with its produce distribution partner, H. Brooks & Company, to provide a user-friendly produce handling guide that was mailed to small WIC-authorized stores. The handling guide is included in the Intervention Materials section.

### Keys to Success

- Create a system that “connects the dots” in the supply chain that is financially sustainable for all partners.
- Produce should be affordable, of high quality, and culturally appropriate.
- Produce suppliers have to be able to meet the WIC minimum stock requirements for year round fresh produce.
- Identify a produce distributor that is interested in exploring a new market and willing to develop a “right-sized” product line that is appropriate for smaller stores.

### Barriers to Implementation:

- **Distributors** – It may take a significant investment of time to identify produce and prime/broadline distributors who are interested in collaborating and revising the supply chain.

- **Pricing** – While this model leverages existing distribution infrastructure and thereby avoids the cost of duplicative trucking systems, for instance, the need to engage both a produce and a prime distributor will add cost to the product. Where big box retailers are within a reasonable driving distance, store owners may find that purchasing and re-selling highly discounted produce meets their needs.

## RESOURCES REQUIRED

Information regarding the costs, staff and materials needed to implement the food distribution system is not available.

## UNDERLYING THEORY/ EVIDENCE

**Strategies Used:** The Healthy Cornerstore Initiative is based on the following evidence-based strategies related to healthy eating:

- **Changing access and availability to favor healthy foods and beverages.** The Healthy Cornerstore Initiative is designed to improve access and availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in WIC-authorized small stores. By establishing a supply chain system that allows cornerstores to order produce through their prime distributors and in smaller quantities, the Healthy Cornerstore Initiative made it easy for cornerstores to offer their customers a variety of fresh produce.
- **Food and beverage marketing to favor healthy foods and beverages.** One part of the Healthy Cornerstore Initiative is marketing the fresh produce being sold in cornerstores. IATP and the MN Department of Health WIC Program developed and disseminated a retail promotion program to advertise the availability of, and increase the sale of, fresh produce. The retail program includes point-of-sale purchase materials in four languages (English, Spanish, Somali, and Hmong). While this marketing is designed to specifically encourage the purchase of fresh produce, exposure to the images and messages is likely to also increase positive attitudes toward these products.
- **Point-of-purchase and point-of-decision labeling to favor healthy foods and beverages.** In the case of the Healthy Cornerstore Initiative, stores were encouraged to use signage to draw attention to their produce and make sure that WIC participants know they can use their WIC benefits to purchase WIC-approved produce. The signage provided included “shelf talkers” specifically designed for coolers, shelves, or produce baskets. The majority of those interviewed (74%) reported using the signage, and among those, about three-fourths reported that they felt the signs helped to attract attention and increase awareness.

## POTENTIAL PUBLIC HEALTH IMPACT

**Reach:** IATP reported that the produce distributors currently make the “right-sized” fresh produce items available to roughly 500 small stores, including 200 small stores that are WIC-authorized. Data are not currently available regarding the number and characteristics of shoppers in participating stores making it difficult to conclude much about whether the stores are reaching the full range of customers. Potentially, this intervention could have significant

reach if replicated across the country. It is likely that small stores in other regions are struggling with the challenge of selling produce.

**Effectiveness:** The primary outcome for this intervention was at the store level: to help small WIC stores succeed in implementing the produce component of the new WIC package. The evaluation presented suggests that this intervention was effective in promoting the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables and making a reliable source of year-round, right-sized, culturally appropriate produce items available to roughly 500 stores. The in-store observations suggested that about two-thirds of participating stores had the required number of produce items available. As an emerging intervention, data are not currently available regarding adoption levels among the stores or the impact on produce access relative to stores not receiving the intervention. We also don't know, at this point, how effective this intervention was at the individual level; in other words, if the diets of the WIC participants who frequent the intervention stores include more fruits and vegetables than WIC participants who frequent non-intervention stores. However, it is likely that produce availability is a necessary first step in achieving dietary change among WIC participants.

**Adoption:** The information available did not provide detail about the proportion or characteristics of participating stores among those that were eligible. Thus it is difficult to predict whether stores in other regions would be willing to make these changes. Qualitative data suggested that small stores located close to a large grocery store were less positive about carrying produce because they felt that people preferred to buy produce at the large stores. This is helpful information for those considering this intervention in other regions..

**Implementation:** The information provided suggests that the intervention was implemented effectively. The intervention developers suggested several key factors that were important to successful implementation, such as essential characteristics of their produce distributor: ability to meet the WIC minimum requirements for year round fresh produce, interest in exploring new markets and willingness to develop a "right-sized" product line appropriate for smaller stores.

**Maintenance:** IATP reported that the program and relationships between allied businesses have been sustained with minimal facilitation by IATP and without the infusion of additional outside funding.

## INTERVENTION MATERIALS

### **Food for All: An initial scan of healthy corner store strategies from across the US**

[http://www.iatp.org/files/258\\_2\\_106578.pdf](http://www.iatp.org/files/258_2_106578.pdf)

**Example Right Size Product List** – list of fresh produce available for cornerstores to order

**Retail promotion program materials** – Included are point-of-sale materials in four languages (English, Spanish, Somali, and Hmong).

<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/fh/wic/vendor/fpchnng/posters.html>

## EVALUATION MATERIALS

Center TRT developed an evaluation logic model for the Healthy Cornerstore Distribution systems developed by Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in Minnesota. The Healthy Cornerstore Initiative is focused on increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables in cornerstores by linking small stores with produce distributors on a year-round basis. The logic

model is intended to guide the evaluation process and provides a roadmap for developing an evaluation plan with specific evaluation questions, indicators and data sources.

The developed logic model can be found on the [Center TRT website](#).

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

**Web links:** <http://www.iatp.org/>

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