



Healthy Food Sold Here 

A Guide to Providing Healthy Foods in Small Food Stores



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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
Why Increasing Access to Healthy Food in Small Stores Matters	1
Approach: The North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation Program	1
About the Guide	2
Getting Started	2
FOUNDATION PHASE	3
1. Identify Your Capacity	3
2. Define Your Indicators	4
3. Identify Partners	4
4. Identify Stores	6
5. Identify a Point Person	7
6. Complete a Store Agreement	7
7. Gather Baseline Data	7
CONVERSION PHASE	8
1. Develop a Conversion Plan	8
2. Select and Introduce New Products	8
3. Order Signs and Place Promotional Materials	9
4. Maximize Product Appeal	9
5. Fine-Tune Your Plan	9
6. Provide Education	10
7. Advertise	10
8. Provide Incentives	11
9. Evaluate your progress	11
10. Celebrate!	11
11. Stay in Contact	11
REFERENCES	12
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	13

Introduction

Why Increasing Access to Healthy Food in Small Stores Matters

Balanced nutrition is vital to good health and disease prevention across the lifespan. Evidence suggests that a diet of nutritious foods and regular physical activity could help reduce the incidence of heart disease, cancer and diabetes—the leading causes of death and disability in the United States.^{1,2} For some people, eating a nutritious diet may be difficult because healthy foods may not be available in their communities. In fact, studies have found that low-income communities often have limited or no access to grocery stores that sell healthy foods and beverages, especially fruits and vegetables. These areas are often referred to as food deserts. Small food stores can be a convenient shopping option for people living in food deserts. If more small food stores begin to offer healthy options, people who shop there will have the opportunity to purchase and eat healthier foods.

Partners across North Carolina are working with small food store owners to make healthy food more accessible to all residents and to recognize small stores that provide a variety of healthy options.

Approach: The North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation Program

The North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation recognizes small food stores that meet product criteria from the following categories:

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Whole grains
- Protein
- Dairy/Dairy substitutes
- Water

A store that meets the criteria receives a certificate of designation and a door cling. The application for the North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation is available at eatSMARTmoveMoreNC.com/HealthyFoodRetail.



ABOUT THE GUIDE

This guide is for anyone who wants to assist small food stores with making more healthy options available. It provides a general process and tools to be used when working with owners of small food stores to increase their selection of healthy foods and progress towards meeting the criteria for the North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation. In this guide a **small food store** is defined as a corner store, convenience store, country store, dollar store, bodega or mini-mart. A **healthy small food store** is defined as a small food store that meets the North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation criteria. Every small food store is unique; stores located in different communities or neighborhoods may require different approaches. The tools in this guide can be tailored to fit your needs and used to create healthy small food stores that work for your community.

The process outlined in the guide focuses on learning about communities, identifying where healthy food access is limited (food deserts), making new connections, discovering unexpected assets, building relationships around common values and being flexible. An emphasis on this process gives healthy small food store initiatives lasting impact through the creation of strong social networks and business success.

The process consists of two phases, the Foundation Phase and the Conversion Phase, that describe activities to be completed when creating healthy small food stores. During the Foundation Phase, key partners, potential stores, and assets and gaps are identified. Throughout the Conversion Phase, a detailed plan for making successful store changes is developed and implemented. These activities will help develop skills that honor the priorities of different stakeholders (e.g., store owner, customers, other community partners) and offer creativity in building local connections that can move the healthy small food store initiative forward.

Getting Started

The activities in each of the two phases of this guide are written to support flexibility, new local partnerships and an approach built on your assets and expertise. This is not a linear process. You do not have to follow the exact order of activities in this guide, but all activities have merit and should be considered.



TOOLS

This symbol indicates tools that support a particular activity.



PROCESS

This symbol identifies opportunities to build good communication and strong relationships, and points out ways to focus on the process of building healthy small food stores.

Foundation Phase

The Foundation Phase is the first phase of the process used to increase healthy food in small food stores. In this phase you'll identify the store(s) and key partners you'll be working with and determine what resources you have.

1. Identify your capacity.

Your capacity is determined by the amount of time and the budget you have to support the project. Before reaching out to stores, it is imperative to know if you can support a sustainable program with staff and budget. Be realistic with your budget, but also be creative with your resources.



TIME

Time commitments will come from you or your partners with the understanding that many store owners will have limited time to invest in the process. Partner capacity, store baseline and target outcomes will determine the amount of time you need to invest. The following estimates can help you start planning:

Foundation Phase:

6 to 10 hours per store per week for 1 to 2 months

Conversion Phase:

4 to 6 hours per store per week for 6 to 8 months

Follow-Up after Store Conversion:

2 to 4 hours per store per week for three months

BUDGET

Budget should include, at minimum, store promotional materials such as signs and banners. Line items for purchasing new shelf fixtures and cold storage displays may be useful for many stores. Consultation needs (e.g., financial, marketing, local media advertising) should also be considered. There are no fixed requirements for the contributions you should make. Every store and every program is different. Be flexible with your budget, and let the store experience guide decisions.

2. Define your indicators.



TOOLS

- Examples of Healthy Small Food Store Indicators
- Data Collection Worksheet

There are many ways to measure the success of healthy small food stores. Choose indicators that align with your strategic goals and can be easily measured (e.g., the number of healthy foods offered, average daily sales of healthy foods).

3. Identify partners.

Your goal is to include at least one partner organization at each store of your healthy small food stores initiative. Partners can bring resources, contribute labor, help to identify stores and connect with potential store customers.

Think creatively about organizations that align with your goals, and engage them in dialogue about healthy small food stores. Begin by learning about the mission of different organizations in your community that may have an interest in healthy food access. There are a variety of potential partners that you can include to improve small stores. Consider reaching out to representatives of:

Agriculture or Local Food Representatives

- Farms, food hubs or local food distributors
- Farmers' markets or community gardens
- Local Extension offices
- USDA's Office of Rural Development state offices

Community Groups

- Schools or youth organizations
- Other community-based and community-driven organizations, including neighborhood associations, community centers and faith-based organizations

Health Groups

- Hospitals, health management organizations or clinics
- Local health departments

Nutrition and Food Access Groups

- Local Division of Social Services offices
- Local food councils
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed)
- USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) regional offices

Planning and Development Groups

- Community planning and development departments
- Planning groups that are involved in new urbanism and that have an interest in sustainable development in urban areas
- Urban and rural cultural organizations committed to preserving retail characteristics in certain geographic areas, such as the rural country store or the urban bodega

Small Stores and Their Representatives

- Chambers of Commerce
- Corporate offices of convenience or other small store chains
- Small grocers, corner stores, bodegas and ethnic markets
- State or local small grocer, corner store and bodega associations

PARTNER FOR SUCCESS

Networks have been formed between small food store owners, local food producers and distributors to supply healthy food in stores. While the major goal of healthy small food stores is to provide healthy food access where little exists, other benefits come from linking local farmers or small food producers to small food stores. Locally grown food tends to be fresher and more nutritious than food sourced by large-scale distributors, and small farmers may be more willing to deliver small amounts of produce. Local connections can help build a sense of community, and in some cases the local food community can become an important project partner for a healthy small food store. The inclusion of local food is a bonus to any healthy small food store initiative, and ideas that include local food are encouraged.

Youth organizations can be important partners. Youth bring energy, community connections and often a new perspective to healthy small food store work. When youth are involved in the planning or implementation stages, there is the potential for impactful projects that bring about positive educational outcomes. Organizations like YMCAs, Youth Empowered Solutions, 4H, Boys and Girls Clubs, high school clubs and youth groups at faith-based organizations are good places to start when looking for community partners.

You can start partner conversations with the information on the **Healthy Small Food Stores Flier** and steer the conversation to their mission areas, asking lots of questions to find out where your goals and their goals overlap. This is how partnerships start—by identifying shared goals. Once partnerships are established, work creatively with your partners to find ways for them to contribute to the overall effort (e.g., assistance in recruiting stores, helping to measure indicators, providing nutrition education or outreach, contributing to printing costs, etc.).



TOOLS

Sample Healthy Small Food Stores Flier





4. Identify stores.

Start by identifying communities with a high need, using maps or prior assessments (e.g., Community Health Assessments) to focus in on food deserts or areas of health and income disparities. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can be a big help in finding a local store. You might start with **Community Commons**, a free, online mapping resource. Also, Google map searches and windshield tours (driving through communities with partners) can work well to identify where food access is limited.

Working with independently owned small food stores may be your focus, but a chain store is another option to consider. In rural areas where food stores of any size may be few and far between, a chain store such as a dollar store can be an important place to combat food deserts by increasing healthy food access.

Try to start this stage at the same time that you identify partners. Local partners can direct you to good candidate stores.

Once you've identified potential stores, contact them to gauge the owner's willingness to participate and to give you a sense of the store's recruitment potential. To introduce yourself to a potential store owner, first consider who should make initial contact. If possible, have a partner from the community that also shops at the store be a part of this introduction. Visit the store to start a conversation and share your introduction letter and some of your promotional materials. Ask them when would be a good time for you to stop by and chat further.

Use the talking points on the **Sample Healthy Small Food Stores Flier** as a start, but be sure to include your own expertise and goals when introducing your healthy small food store initiative.

Owner willingness to participate and enthusiasm are the greatest determinants of success. There are enthusiastic store owners who would love to improve their stores, but not every owner will be interested. Do not spend time trying to persuade uninterested owners to join your initiative. If you encounter clear resistance to making changes, try another store.



TOOLS

- Sample Healthy Small Food Stores Flier
- Sample Store Owner Letter
- Store Potential Worksheet



PROCESS

With the owner's permission, talk with people at the store—listen and learn about the store and its community. Think about store identification as the first step in a lasting relationship.

5. Identify a point person.

A single primary point of contact ensures clear communication, less chance for missed signals and more accountability. Confirm who your point person is before starting the Conversion Phase.



PROCESS

Make it easy for the store owner and your partners to be part of a winning team! Build consistency and transparency into the communications in your healthy small food store initiative by planning regular communication between all partners and the point person. Consistency and transparency are essential for creating trust, establishing expectations and enlisting everyone's best efforts.

6. Complete a store agreement.



TOOLS

Sample Store Owner Participation Agreement

Once you've identified a store owner, get an agreement in place. The agreement outlines the shared goals, outcomes and responsibilities. It helps to build and maintain trust in the partnership by verifying contributing partners' expectations and obligations. The degree of complexity and time it takes to complete the agreement will depend on partners involved.

7. Gather baseline data.

Complete the **North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Assessment**. Make sure you measure your target indicators, but be open to adjusting what you will measure at this stage as well. Gather as much data as you reasonably can—photos, store owner and customer surveys, store sales records from previous months and any other information related to conditions you are working to change. This data collection includes mapping out areas of food display and local room temperature shelving and cold storage. This initial assessment can take several store visits to complete.

- Are the shelves and cases full, or is there room to add new products?
- Where could healthy small food store promotional materials be placed?
- Are healthy products currently offered?
- Where are the healthy products located, and how are they identified or promoted?
- Are there unused display fixtures?
- What is the lighting like, and are there windows? (Natural lighting is great for merchandise display.)
- Is there space near the cash register for healthy product display?
- What are outdoor spaces like—are there opportunities for marketing material, seasonal produce displays or even small gardens?



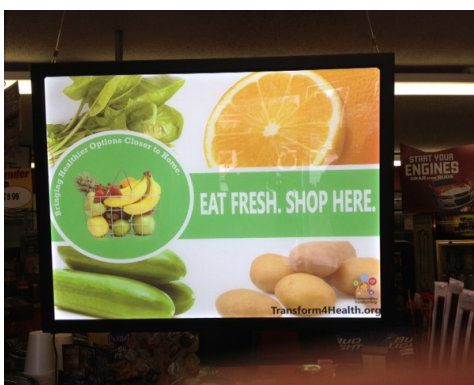
TOOLS

- North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation Criteria
- North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation FAQs
- North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Assessment
- Sample Store Owner Interview
- Sample Customer Survey



Conversion Phase

The Conversion Phase is the second phase of this process-based approach to providing healthy food in small food stores. This phase includes activities to help you develop a plan and implement it.



1. Develop a conversion plan.

Review the Healthy Food Retail Assessment that was completed when obtaining baseline data during the Foundation Phase. Create a list of promotional and merchandizing opportunities as a starting point for discussing store changes with the owner. Together, develop a plan for store changes. This includes identifying goals and activities that support increasing healthy product offerings and a timeframe for their completion.



TOOLS

- North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation Criteria
- North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation FAQs
- North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Assessment
- Store Conversion Plan Template



PROCESS

Incorporate store walk-throughs (informal observations of what you see throughout the store) as part of your visits. These are great ways to allow an owner to share his/her ideas and vision for what the store could be.

2. Select and introduce new products.

Discuss healthy product categories and customer survey results with the owner to help select new healthy products that will work for the store and its customer base. As new products are introduced and successfully incorporated, work with the store owner to add more categories and varieties of healthy products.



TOOLS

- North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation Criteria
- North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation FAQs

3. Order signs and place promotional materials.

Promotional materials, such as signage placed outside (e.g., banners) and within stores (e.g., shelf tags, cooler door stickers, floor decals, posters), can help draw people to healthy items. Buy Healthy Here promotional materials can be downloaded from eatsmartmovemorenc.com/HealthyFoodRetail/HealthyFoodRetail.html. Order signs with plenty of lead time, usually at least a week. As new items are stocked, deliver and help install promotional signage inside the store and a banner on the outside. Think specifically about small product signs that attach to shelves and other display items to showcase healthy options.



TOOLS

Promotional
Materials—
COMING SOON



4. Maximize product appeal.



TOOLS

The Food Trust—Sell Healthy Guide



PROCESS

Use weekly visits to build rapport and trust. Owners need to know they can depend on you if they have questions or concerns. Ask the owner about sales and his/her observations to identify areas of concern. Let the owner know that the store's success is important to you.

Work with the store owner on multiple visits to form a merchandizing strategy. The Sell Healthy Guide developed by The Food Trust is an excellent resource to orient you to merchandizing.

- Are fresh products being stored for maximum shelf life?
- Are healthy products easy to see?
- Are displays attractive?
- Can products for a recipe be displayed together for customer convenience (e.g., low sodium canned black beans and 100 percent whole wheat tortillas near lettuce and tomatoes)?

5. Fine-tune your plan.

Review your conversion plan with the store owner and make adjustments to maximize success.

- Has the owner reordered healthy products?
- Are the signs in effective places?
- How are customers responding?
- Does the owner need help finding sources of healthy products?
- Do customers need nutrition education (e.g., food demonstration, recipe cards)?





PROCESS

Don't forget that each store will be different, and in the end some stores won't be successful. Be persistent but also realistic. If you discover clues at this stage that suggest a poor fit, discuss them with the owner and work together to figure out potential solutions.

Pay attention, and remember that this activity is about finding a model that works for the store. If things aren't working as well as expected, think creatively about ways to shift gears or bring more energy and attention to the effort.

6. Provide education.

Store Owner

Use resources in this guide to facilitate discussions with store owners on healthy food retail topics. Informal two-way conversations allow for sharing of useful information that can really make a difference in the program's success. Bring a handout to guide your discussion (e.g., one topic/page printed from the Sell Healthy Guide). Consider the store owner's schedule, and limit your discussion to one topic per visit.

Customers

Provide nutrition education to customers. Customers appreciate quick and healthy meal ideas. With the help of partners, offer food demos, healthy recipes and other tips on how to prepare meals at home using new healthy products from the store.



TOOLS

- The Food Trust—Sell Healthy Guide
- Network for a Healthy California—Food Demonstration Training Kit
- Additional Resources



PROCESS

Use topic discussions to make visits with the store owner productive. Examples of topic discussions include displaying produce, advertising and maximizing space. Weekly visits are important to keep the momentum going, but it can be hard to keep dropping by with nothing to talk about or report. These topic discussions will allow you to offer constructive tips to owners based on their needs.



7. Advertise.

Work with your partners and available resources to spread the word once new products are displayed and promotional materials are in place. Send out press releases and purchase local radio and newspaper ads promoting the healthy small food store and new products. Use social media and seek out free advertising as well.

8. Provide incentives.

You can connect a store owner to valuable resources. If you have access to funding, set up individual or group trainings with expert consultants on topics such as small business finances and lending, marketing and merchandizing.

Consultations are a great way to get high-level information to stores, building the success of these businesses and their long-term community impact. Other incentives you can offer include facilitation and assistance in seeking local appearance or facade grants, connection with service organizations to renovate parts of the store, or any other resource needs.



9. Evaluate your progress.



TOOLS

Data Collection Worksheet

Make sure that you take the time to collect data on the indicators that you originally set out to measure, and evaluate your progress.

10. Celebrate!

Now is the time for you and your partners to throw a party! Invite local officials, local press and community members. Help bring attention to the store, and celebrate the store owner's commitment to community health. If the store meets the North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation Program requirements, encourage the store to **apply for designation** and be recognized by the state for its accomplishments.

11. Stay in contact.

Healthy small food stores need ongoing support. Continue to visit with the store owner, provide encouragement and ask how things are going. When the store owner demonstrates capacity to sustain the changes, your visit frequency can slow down, but should not stop altogether. Slowly scale back visits to every two weeks, then less.



PROCESS

You have not only helped create a healthy small food store, but also a new part of a community food system. Look for opportunities to cultivate new connections between the store and the community. The more attention you can bring to the healthy small food store, the larger its social network will grow and the more successful it will be.

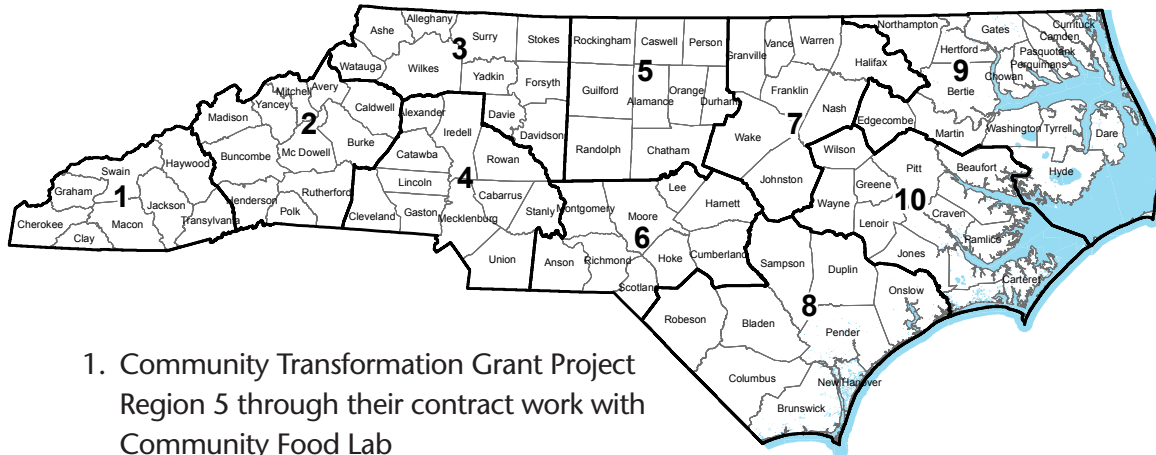
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 - NC Alliance for Health
 - NC Alliance of YMCAs
 - NC Cooperative Extension, NC State University
 - NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
 - NC Department of Commerce
 - NC Division of Public Health
 - Voices into Action

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