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DASH-NYC Featured Program: Communities for Healthy Food

Local Initiatives Support Corporation
of New York City

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ABOUT THIS FEATURED PROGRAM

This featured program report is part of a series related to *Interventions for Healthy Eating and Active Urban Living: A Guide for Community Health*. The featured program reports provide information on community partnerships and interventions that support healthy eating and active living in NYC. Program leaders and implementers provide detail on the background, impact and sustainability of each effort, along with advice to others looking to develop similar interventions in NYC and beyond.

These featured program reports and the guide were developed in partnership with the Designing a Strong and Healthy New York City (DASH-NYC) Workgroup, which aims to improve health and promote health equity for all New Yorkers using a multisector approach to advancing chronic disease prevention in NYC.

DASH-NYC was launched in January 2015 by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the New York Academy of Medicine as part of the New York City Population Health Improvement Program (NYC PHIP). The NYC PHIP, with support from the New York State Department of Health, promotes health equity and the “Triple Aim” of improved health care, reduced health care costs, and better health across the City.

For more information on the NYC PHIP: [Link to website](#)

PROJECT BACKGROUND AND GOALS

For over 30 years, Local Initiatives Support Corporation in New York City (LISC NYC) has been supporting low-income New York City neighborhoods by helping to build the capacity of community organizations and local institutions to respond to community needs. In 2013, LISC NYC and the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund developed Communities for Healthy Foods (CfHF), an initiative that aims to leverage and build upon community organizations' existing resources to increase access to healthy, affordable foods in four low income neighborhoods in NYC. This new initiative addresses the interrelated issues of diet-related diseases, poverty and unemployment to help residents live healthier.

Communities for Healthy Food was born out of LISC NYC's ongoing work with community development corporations (CDCs). CDCs not only own and manage affordable housing and other commercial and community spaces, they also deliver an array of social and economic development programs and services and have close relationships with the residents of the neighborhoods where they work. In light of increasing awareness of the burden of health disparities in low income communities and the enormous role of nutrition in residents' wellbeing, LISC NYC began exploring opportunities to improve healthy food access and education in the communities where they worked. During this process, LISC NYC recognized that many of their partners already possessed resources that, with some technical assistance, partnership development and additional staff and funding, could be employed to improve food access and nutrition in their communities. LISC NYC began working with partners to build their capacity to integrate healthy food programming and services into their ongoing community development work. Partners include:

- New Settlement Apartments,
Mt. Eden, Bronx
- Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation,
Cypress Hills, Brooklyn
- Northeast Brooklyn Housing Development Corporation,
Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn
- West Harlem Group Assistance,
West Harlem, Manhattan

Collectively, these four CDCs have developed more than 5,300 affordable housing units, 70 commercial spaces, and 44 community spaces.

To advance the goal of increasing healthy food access and consumption in these neighborhoods, LISC NYC developed the Communities for Healthy Food program framework, provided training and information on best practices, facilitated partnerships with other community and city wide organizations, and developed neighborhood outreach strategies for the CDCs. Specifically, the goals of the program include:

- Increasing the availability of high-quality, affordable, and nutritious foods;
- Creating new or improved healthy food outlets and venues;
- Educating residents, staff, and community service providers on nutrition and healthy food preparation;
- Connecting unemployed or underemployed individuals to job trainings and employment that will make healthy food more affordable and available;
- Providing support services to residents such as health screenings, enrollment nutrition assistance programs, and food budgeting help; and
- Implementing a comprehensive neighborhood outreach and awareness campaign.

GETTING STARTED

The collaborative partnership between LISC NYC and the Illumination Fund began when the Illumination Fund approached LISC NYC to learn more about their community development work in an effort to advance their Healthy Food and Community Change Initiative, which supports novel strategies to expand availability of healthy foods and promote healthy choices in underserved communities. Before developing the program, LISC NYC and the Illumination Fund convened a roundtable with community development partners to gather information on CDCs' current programming and existing resources related to healthy food access and nutrition and to better understand the challenges that might arise in trying to incorporate healthy food programming in their work. LISC NYC then created the CfHF program model and framework.

LISC NYC identified four communities and community development corporation partners based on 1) neighborhood need, 2) organizational interest in addressing food access and nutrition and 3) partner organizations' existing assets. All partner organizations reported that additional staff members would be an essential component of implementing additional healthy food programming. Thus, the Illumination Fund and LISC NYC provided funding for each CDC partner to hire a full-time community healthy food advocate and a LISC NYC AmeriCorps member for each site to build and manage CfHF at each site and began the planning phase of the project. With the help of on-the-ground staff, LISC NYC and their CDC partners conducted community needs assessments in all locations, which included an inventory of existing community assets, surveys and focus groups with community residents, and large scale mapping of existing food and nutrition programs and services. Additionally, each CDC partner met with potential partners in each neighborhood to encourage communication and reduce duplication of efforts, and LISC NYC initiated an evaluation to ensure that progress would be tracked and documented, and implemented a marketing campaign to increase community awareness of the new program. Based on this preliminary work, LISC NYC worked with CfHF partners and other experts in the field to identify evidence-based strategies and interventions that could be carried out in each neighborhood, including resident outreach, nutrition education and cooking classes, creation of new or improved healthy food outlets, and generation of food sector jobs.

SUSTAINABILITY

The goal of CfHF is to build the capacity of existing community-based organizations that own and manage assets and offer an array of social and economic development services to integrate healthy food programming and services. As such, LISC NYC's role will decrease with time, and partner organizations will seek new funding sources to support their work. Outside funding has already been secured from sources including the New York City Council's discretionary funding, the US Department of Agriculture, and private foundations.

IMPACT

CfHF has been well-received by community members, in part because the effort has been implemented through established local organizations that already have earned the community's trust. In the first year of implementation, over 250,000 pounds of emergency food were distributed to approximately 20,000 pantry clients, and 23 new activities or venues related to healthy food were created in the four communities. New programs—ranging from healthier bodegas to farm shares to farmers markets—reached over 3,000 neighborhood residents. Forty-five unemployed or underemployed community residents were trained as community chefs, many of whom teach cooking classes hosted by CDCs.

BEFORE GETTING INVOLVED, YOU SHOULD KNOW:

Projects like CfHF involve working with a large and diverse set of partners that include not only the implementing community development corporations (CDC), but also community-based and city-wide organizations that can partner with the CDC to offer programs. Intensive coordination between sites is essential to success.

Also, projects like CfHF take time. Not only do they require a great deal of planning, asset mapping and coordination before implementation, but challenges and obstacles that arise during implementation are inevitable and take time to overcome. Time is also required to transition from an initiative managed by an outside organization to a program that is community-led and self-sustaining.

ADVICE:

Avoid re-inventing the wheel.

Before getting started, explore all of the existing resources in the community and the city at large, both in terms of community needs and asset assessments, and in terms of existing healthy food programming. In a place like NYC, there is a great deal of work being done around healthy food access. Your impact will be greater and more sustainable if you are part of a larger and more coordinated effort.

Start small.

It is better to focus about how to have meaningful impact and start small then to overcommit and take on too much.

Co-location and co-programming:

Partner with organizations to provide a wide range of services related to health and wellbeing in one location. For instance, the Community Healthy Food Hub in West Harlem offers clients a one-stop shop for health and nutrition related services. At the Hub, clients can not only choose groceries for their family from a “client-choice” style food pantry and purchase a farm share (using cash or food stamps), they can also enroll in SNAP (food stamp) benefits, income tax assistance, healthy cooking classes, and nutritional counseling. Co-location enables community members to access services more easily and reduces barriers to healthy living, while also facilitating relationships between program partners.

For more information, contact Colleen Flynn, Director of Programs at LISC New York City, cflynn@lisc.org.

This program feature was written by Elisa Fisher, Senior Policy Associate at The New York Academy of Medicine, who gratefully acknowledges the significant input from the highlighted program, especially Colleen Flynn, Director of Programs at the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of New York City. Any errors are the authors' own.

The opinions and advice represented herein do not necessarily reflect that of the DASH-NYC workgroup members, their respective organizations, The New York Academy of Medicine, its trustees, officers or staff.

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Established in 1847, The New York Academy of Medicine continues to address the health challenges facing New York City and the world's rapidly growing urban populations. We accomplish this through our Institute for Urban Health, home of interdisciplinary research, evaluation, policy and program initiatives; our world class historical medical library and its public programming in history, the humanities and the arts; and our Fellows program, a network of more than 2,000 experts elected by their peers from across the professions affecting health. Our current priorities are healthy aging, disease prevention, and eliminating health disparities.

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