Healthy Corner Store initiative provides greater access to fresh produce

By Sharon Myers
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Officials with the Davidson County Health Department are striving to improve the eating habits of county residents through their Healthy Corner Store Initiative.

The program, which is funded through the North Carolina Division of Public Health Community Transformation Grant, was developed to create healthier communities by making healthy living easier, more affordable and more accessible. Jen Hames, health education supervisor for the Davidson County Health Department, said the program partners with farmers' markets, corner stores, local growers and the community to encourage health food choices.

"All of Thomasville is considered a food desert, and so is half of Lexington," Hames said. "Although the southern part of the county is not considered a food desert there is still limited access to food. We brainstormed what we could do to increase access, and we thought about the corner store concept. We approached several convenience stores and gas stations in the area. We approached it from both a community issue as well as a business opportunity."

Hames said the idea was to have local stores, some that are the only access to groceries in their neighborhood, to provide healthier choices while still remaining profitable. The health department initiative provided funding to purchase items to support business owners who want to offer those choices.

"We know that these are businesses, and they are thinking of the bottom line," Hames said. "We used our funding to help provide the opportunity. We cannot buy food with the grant money, but we bought display units, shelving, carts, produce scales and other items such as banners to advertise."

Patriot Market in Silver Valley was one of the first participants in the program. Owner Matthew Schaffer said although the initiative is to support healthy eating, for him it is a good business choice.

"It is a side business for us," Schaffer said. "There are other added benefits, but for us it comes down to the bottom line. The produce itself is very cost-effective. We sell our produce very cheap, cheaper than the grocery store, but when it all falls into place we have doubled our investment. The money filters back into the community in more ways than one. I encourage other stores to be open to the option. There can be a great reward with minimal investments."

He said the reason he is so successful is people want to buy fresh, local produce, and by purchasing items from farmers it also helps the economy.

"We buy from local farmers," Schaffer said. "The thing is that there are a lot of people who want fresh produce, but they don't have the land or the opportunity to grow it themselves. They also want local produce and don't want to buy a grocery store..."
tomato. If we can glean a little extra income and at the same time help local farmers and provide healthy choices, then it is a benefit for everyone."

Other stores in Davidson County that are participating in the Healthy Corner Store Initiative are Hills Farms and Garden at 215 Randolph St., Thomasville; Southmont Grocery at 10411 N.C. Highway 8; Arcadia Exxon and Grocery at 7931 N.C. Highway 150; Mobil Mart at 314 Randolph St. in Thomasville; Kelly's 109 at 6431 N.C. Highway 109 in Thomasville; and High Rock Grocery at 10259 N.C. Highway 8 in Southmont.

Hames said this is the third year the program has been providing funding to stores to provide fresh produce, and organizers are always looking to add more. She said providing healthy food alternatives is one step toward fighting obesity and improving the quality of life for citizens.

"Sixty-nine percent of our population is overweight or obese, and that number is increasing," Hames said. "Adding these initiatives that improve the overall health of the community decreases medical costs, increases lifespan and improves quality of life."

Store owners who are interested in participating in the program can contact Hames at the Davidson County Health Department at 242-2300.

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