Local teens are working to make healthy food more obtainable for everyone.
The goal is to make nutritious foods available no farther than a half of a mile from all residents in Gaston County.

"Their goal is to just increase access to healthy foods in all communities," said Leigh Yount with the Gaston County Department of Health and Human Services.

Yount works with the group of motivated students who make up the Gaston County Teen Action Council.

Made up of 18 young people from around the county, the teen council chose the nutrition program as their project this year.

The students recognized childhood obesity as a local and national problem. If they can persuade local stores to offer healthier options, they'll help their fellow students make better choices, Yount said.

Twenty-six problem areas known as "food deserts" have been identified in Gaston County. Those are areas where healthy food options are more than a half of a mile away.

Students thought that radius was appropriate for their age group, Yount said.

"A lot of teens aren't walking more than a half mile to get food," she added.

The team will encourage store owners to offer fresh produce, foods with whole grains, healthy proteins and dairy products.

The teens will provide displays and signs to alert customers of nutritious foods. They will also encourage providing baked options rather than fried.

Soo's Market, also known as the Blue Store in the Highland Community, started working with the health department about a year ago - adding in fresh fruit, low-fat milk and yogurt.

The owner, Eddie Hagos, is now working with students to continue the progress.

"Most of the customers are walking and this is the closest store," he said. "We're trying to get as much as we can for them."

Hagos took the advice of health officials and moved produce to the front of the store. He's seen a difference in his customers' purchases.

"Instead of going for the candy, they're going to the apples," he said. "It's been a good response."