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Food Justice in San Francisco

Bringing healthy produce to poor neighborhoods

Food activists, small farmers lead project

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At a stand decorated with colorful cloth and hanging fruit baskets, Will Scott Jr. sells his just-picked, pesticide-free sweet potatoes, broccoli, greens, okra and purple hull peas.

The produce rivals what's sold at the trendy Ferry Plaza Farmers' Market, but this stand isn't along the Embarcadero pier. It's the Mandela Farmers' Market in West Oakland, one of several innovative programs designed to bring more fresh food to poor, predominantly African American neighborhoods. From a few isolated initiatives, Bay Area community organizations have banded together to lead the nation in making quality fresh food affordable and available to poor communities.

"(The Bay Area) is definitely one of the hotbeds nationwide," said Kai Siedenbueg of the Community Food Security Coalition, which helps connect local organizations.

The programs vary from the Mobile Market in West Oakland, where high school students drive the red and purple truck through neighborhoods to sell farm-fresh produce to residents and learn about running a business, to farm stands in schools and hospitals in Richmond and Berkeley, designed to serve people who don't live near a farmers' market or affordable store. In San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters Point, organizers have brought a healthy produce section back to a grocery store that used to focus more on alcohol and Fritos.

These programs, many funded by government agencies, often bypass traditional distribution channels to work directly with farmers in ways that haven't been seen before.

"Instead of just giving out food, we are looking into creating a local food system and a local economy, so that people are able to use their own efforts instead of just getting handouts," said Malaika Edwards, cofounder of the People's Grocery in West

Oakland.

These organizations rally around a concept termed "food security," the subject of a conference last month in Los Angeles.

"Basically, (food security is) the idea that people should have the resources and the access to provide food for themselves," said Andy Fisher, executive director of the Community Food Security Coalition, which organized the conference. "If you tell people to eat a healthy diet, but they don't have a grocery store and don't have a car, there's no way to access it."

Because fewer residents own cars in poor neighborhoods, many rely on the area's ill-equipped corner stores and fast food restaurants. In Bayview- Hunters Point, where there is no supermarket for 33,000 residents, shoppers can travel up to an hour each way on the bus just to buy a decent apple.

"We had the youths go around and look at the stores (in Bayview-Hunters Point)," said Dana Lanza, executive director of Literacy for Environmental Justice, an advocacy organization that deals with neighborhood environmental issues. "People were buying juice sodas for their kids because they don't have juice, and cheese-covered chips because they don't have cheese in the stores. People have just grown up eating junk food, which contributes to obesity and diabetes. It's a real systemic issue."

Jasmine and Jessica Marshall, 17- and 16-year-old sisters in the LEJ program, say that once a week, their mother takes several buses from their home in Bayview-Hunters Point to shop at Potrero Hill Safeway.

A survey by LEJ interns showed that neighborhood corner stores -- the main place to shop on the Third Street corridor -- devoted an average of only 2 percent of shelf space to fresh food. In partnership with the Department of Public Health, the organization created the Good Neighbor project, where stores devote at least 10 percent of their inventory to fresh produce and an additional 10 to 20 percent to other healthy foods. In return, stores receive incentives like energy-efficient refrigeration units and marketing assistance.

One of participants in the program is Super Save Market, a midsize grocery on Third Street. When Sam Aloudi and his family took over the 40-year- old market five years ago, the produce area mostly stood empty.

Now, after several months participating in the Good Neighbor project, it's filled with

bright red strawberries, vibrant greens and vitamin-packed broccoli. Sales of produce have almost doubled to 15 percent since he joined the program earlier this year.

"There is some hope, which is making me feel good. There is change in the neighborhood," says Aloudi.

Mobile Market, a different sort of venture, serves West Oakland. To reach customers who can't get to the store or farmers' market easily, the Mobile Market makes nine stops once or twice a week throughout the neighborhood. The youthful drivers get produce from farmers' markets, and blast music from a solar-powered sound system to attract shoppers.

People's Grocery, which runs the Mobile Market, also organizes urban gardens and is part of a plan to establish a cooperative grocery, similar to San Francisco's Rainbow Grocery, near the West Oakland BART station.

"We're working with young people and empowering them by teaching them the difference between these foods and fast foods," says Edwards of People's Grocery. "They'll have had classes and had experience running an enterprise. Hopefully, they'll start their own businesses in the community."

Organizers of the Mandela Farmers' Market, where Will Scott Jr. sells his produce, estimate that 90 percent of the money spent in West Oakland leaves the neighborhood through chain stores.

"Corporations do all the marketing, trucking and distribution," said market organizer David Roach. "These jobs could be part of the inner city. There's a high unemployment rate. ...There's a whole economy that relates to the health of the inner cities."

Roach and other organizers created a food distribution system that connects the farmers at the market -- many of them members of the African American Farmers of California -- directly to local merchants. Stores carrying the farmers' produce include Neighbor's market, a West Oakland corner store that before had very little in the way of produce, and Gazzali's, a family-owned supermarket that opened last month in East Oakland's Eastmont Town Center, another neighborhood that went years without a market.

There are many reasons why chain supermarkets are reluctant to open in the inner

city, said Andy Fisher of the Community Food Security Coalition.

Land and transportation costs are higher in the city than in the suburbs. Poor residents tend to get paid less frequently, which creates an uneven cash flow, making labor projections difficult. Security in neighborhoods with frequent violence is another concern. And the greater ethnic mix found in poor neighborhoods is a challenge for grocers.

"You can't just put the standard white bread stuff. You have to tailor to specific communities," says Fisher. "It's not a cookie-cutter model. A lot of stores just don't want to deal with that."

These programs also benefit small family farms that can't compete on the wholesale market.

"What we send to these organizations isn't subject to all the ridiculous vagaries of the wholesale market," says Judith Redmond of Full Belly Farm in Yolo County.

The farm delivers fresh produce weekly to a cancer center and senior centers in Alameda County that serve poor residents. "What we have in abundance at any given time is what we send. We can sell a larger portion of what we grow, so it's tremendously beneficial for us."

In addition to providing access to fresh produce, food security groups stress the importance of teaching people how to integrate healthy food choices into their diets. Last month, youth interns with San Francisco's LEJ attended a three-week cooking course with restaurant chefs so that they can turn around and give cooking demonstrations to the community.

Organizers are waiting to hear the results of a grant proposal to open a farmers' market in Bayview-Hunters Point next spring, a plan spearheaded in part by the city's Department of the Environment. Paula Jones, who coordinates the city's food security efforts as director of San Francisco Food Systems, says farmers' markets are vital, because prices can be lower than supermarkets and they introduce people to healthy foods.

Once, at a produce stand in Bayview, Jones offered samples of farm-fresh nectarines to children who had never tasted the fruit before.

"I told them, 'Just try it,' " she said. "Then they came back with money for more. If it

had been from a supermarket, would they have done that? Maybe not."

Healthy food sources

The following merchants and organizations supply fresh, healthy food to underserved communities, or educate people about the importance of nutritious food:

MARKETS AND FARM STANDS

Farm Fresh Choice farm stands in Berkeley: Tuesdays 3:30-6 p.m. at three locations: Bahia Child Care Center, 1718 Eighth St. (at Virginia); Berkeley Youth Alternatives, 1255 Allston Way (at Bonar); Young Adult Project, 1730 Oregon St. (at Martin Luther King Jr.). Also, Wednesdays 3-6:30 p.m. at Frances Albrier Community Center in San Pablo Park, 2800 Park St. (at Oregon). For more information, call (510) 848-1704 or visit ecologycenter.org/ffc/index.html.

Farm Fresh Produce farm stands in Richmond: Tuesdays 11 a.m.-2 p.m. at Kaiser Permanente Richmond Medical Center, 901 Nevin Ave. (at Harbor Way). Tuesday 3 to 5:30 p.m. at Missionary Baptist Church parking lot, 1427 Filbert St. (at Gertrude).

Gateway Foods, 900 Market St. (at Seventh Street), West Oakland; (510) 208-3260.

Gazzali's, 7000 Bancroft Ave. (at 73rd Avenue), Oakland; (510) 569-2920.

Mandela Farmers' Market, Seventh and Mandela streets, West Oakland. Saturdays, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

Mobile Market, call (510) 763-0328 or visit peoplesgrocery.org/mm.html for a list of stops on Tuesdays and Saturdays in West Oakland.

Neighbors Market, 1523 Ninth St. (at Chester Street), West Oakland; (510) 763-7278.

Super Save Market, 4517 Third St. (at McKinnon), San Francisco; (415) 282- 3722.

ORGANIZATIONS

Literacy for Environmental Justice, 6220 Third St. (at Hall St.), San Francisco; (415)

508-0575.

Mo' Better Food (runs Mandela Farmers' Market), P.O. Box 10677, Oakland, CA 94610; (510) 645-5818 or visit mobetterfood.com.

People's Grocery (runs the Mobile Market), 820 Wood St., Oakland. Call (510) 763-0328 or visit localharvest.org/food-coops/M4644.

San Francisco Food Systems, 1390 Market St., Ste. 910 (at Polk St.), San Francisco; (415) 252-3937.

Community Food Security Coalition, 620 Venice Blvd., Venice, CA 90291; (310) 822-5410.

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Page B - 1

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