

# Residents of Grand Rapids, Michigan, Get More Access to Fresh Produce

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## At A Glance

In 2011, the YMCA of Greater Grand Rapids (GRYMCA) launched a mobile farmers' market known as the Veggie Van to sell fresh fruits and vegetables to Grand Rapids residents and local store owners. In 2014, the GRYMCA expanded the effort with a Healthy Corner Stores initiative. Local stores received upgrades such as coolers, shelving, signage, and marketing materials to promote sales of fresh produce. These efforts resulted in increased access to locally grown produce for 42,000 residents of urban areas with limited access to healthy foods.



## Public Health Challenge

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost 1 in 3 Grand Rapids adults (32%) had obesity in 2015. Grand Rapids residents are mainly Hispanic/Latino (37%) and African American (36%), and have higher rates of obesity and some chronic diseases than the general population (2017 Grand Rapids African American Health Institute report). Healthy eating can help prevent and control many chronic diseases, but urban residents of Grand Rapids often lack access to

affordable fresh produce, since they live in low-income areas more than a half mile from a supermarket, according to the USDA Food Atlas. A 2016 YMCA Community Voice survey of over 2,000 urban residents showed that lack of access to both grocery chains and personal transportation were factors. Community members also felt that unhealthy food is cheaper, easier to get, and more appetizing than healthy food.

## Find Out More

Our goal is to make the healthy choice the easy choice for ALL. Structural and institutional barriers, such as a lack of access to a quality education, adequate housing, or sufficient income to meet basic needs, keep individuals from accessing healthy produce. Our goal is to eliminate those barriers and help foster an environment that promotes healthy behavior changes, and we need your help to make this shift! Please visit <https://www.grymca.org/activate/overview/>

*Frank Otto, the owner of Oxford Food Center, says, 'Thanks to the Y, we sell more fruits and vegetables now.' He has become passionate about empowering the residents in his neighborhood to live better.*

- Julie Sielawa,  
YMCA of Greater  
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The GRYMCA worked with over 40 partners, including local growers, community members, and store owners, to increase access to healthy food. First, they launched a mobile farmers' market known as the Veggie Van to deliver affordable produce to community members. In 2014, they began a Healthy Corner Stores initiative to provide five stores with refrigeration, shelving, signage, and point-of-sale technology to help sell fresh produce. Educators provided recipes and taste tests for store customers. The initiative also was promoted by billboards in target neighborhoods and direct mailers to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients in English and Spanish.

## Results

Selling produce directly to local store owners and providing point-of-sale technology allows owners to accept SNAP and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits. The Veggie Van and Corner Stores programs increased access to locally grown produce for 42,000 urban residents of neighborhoods with low access to healthy foods and provided new opportunities for local growers to sell their produce. According to GRYMCA purchase data, the Veggie Van directly served 1,000 residents and completed 14,000 transactions in 2017. In surveys of Veggie Van customers, 93% reported eating more fruits and vegetables. Five corner stores in the neighborhoods are also now selling fresh produce supplied by the Veggie Van.

## What's Next

The GRYMCA works to influence and educate Michigan residents who live in low-income areas to buy and eat more fruits and vegetables. The organization will continue to work with small store owners to make fruits and vegetables accessible in the community. It plans to serve nine stores by the end of 2018. GRYMCA will also continue to make corner store infrastructure improvements—such as point-of-sale technology and improvements to the exterior appearance of stores—to increase the appeal of the stores to neighborhood residents.

**Success Stories** <http://nccd.cdc.gov/nccdsuccessstories/>