

CASE STUDY

MOBILE GROCERY UNITS



Mobile grocery units are gaining momentum as a way of combatting food deserts. The USDA defines food deserts as “a census tract with a substantial share of residents who live in a low income area that have low access to a grocery store or healthy affordable retail outlet.” In the more technical sense, a food desert is a community with more than 20% of residents living below the poverty threshold and at least 33% of the population living more than a mile from a supermarket. Mobile grocery units are a way of getting fresh and affordable food into neighborhoods without bringing in a physical brick and mortar business. Mobile grocery units have taken on many forms including retrofitted buses, shipping containers, 18-wheeler trucks and pushcarts. All operate on the same premise of bringing affordable and healthy foods into neighborhoods. Their mobility allows for outreach to multiple neighborhoods at a time. Mobile grocery units are more effective to deploy than storefronts, especially in vulnerable neighborhoods, thanks to lower barriers to entry and lower costs to maintain, retrofit and operate.

BENEFITS

EQUITY

- Food deserts are more often than not located in low-income neighborhoods. By operating mobile grocery units in these neighborhoods, this disparity in fresh, healthy foods can be reduced.
- Access to healthy food has been linked to lower rates of obesity and diabetes and greater achievements in educational settings.

ECONOMIC

- When healthy food is directly provided in a neighborhood, families can cut down on the time and money spent traveling to a grocery store to purchase food.
- Mobile grocery units are often run by local organizations or community members, circulating revenue within the local economy.
- Providing healthy food in a low-income neighborhood can be correlated with lower spending on health-related expenses.

SOCIAL

- Mobile grocery units can be a catalyst for other businesses and investment in the neighborhood.

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

INSTITUTIONAL

Traditional zoning ordinances may not allow for the operation of mobile stores. To roll out programs like these, the ordinances will need to be changed and that can be a lengthy and complicated process.

Sometimes, access to healthy food is not enough to be effective. Food must also be affordable and culturally appropriate for a neighborhood. Having the community involved in food selection, as well as the pairing of recipes and food preparation can go a long way in ensuring success.

FINANCIAL

While less expensive than opening an actual supermarket, mobile grocery units still require significant investment to start and operate. Grants and other funding are integral, but the financial model should be sustainable if this funding diminishes. There is also very little room to pass additional costs off to buyers.

POLITICAL

There could be pressure from retail chains to keep mobile units out of neighborhoods because they could be seen as additional competition.



CASE STUDY: TWIN CITIES MOBILE MARKET, MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

The Twin Cities Mobile Market is a project of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. One of the foundation's priorities focuses on increasing community health, and a mobile grocery unit is an innovative way to achieve that priority. The Mobile Market launched in 2014, and is operated out of a bus retrofitted to carry groceries, including fresh fruit, vegetables and dairy products. The market now operates in various low-income neighborhoods underserved by current grocery stores 5 days a week at 19 different locations. Food is available at prices lower than retail stores thanks to partnerships with bulk wholesalers. The Mobile Market recently raised more than \$20,000 to retrofit a second bus for the initiative.

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

Twin Cities Mobile Market partners include the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, various community organizations, sponsors of the IndieGoGo Campaign, The Minneapolis-St. Paul chapter of Architecture for Humanity and Shinebox of Minneapolis.



FINANCING

Funding for this program came from a number of different sources. The Wilder Foundation supports program staffing as well as procuring and retrofitting the bus. The out of service bus was bought for \$6,200 from a local transportation agency. The design work to retrofit the bus was provided pro bono by the Minneapolis-St. Paul chapter of Architecture for Humanity. The branding and bus wrapping was completed pro bono by Shinebox of Minneapolis. The program launched an IndieGoGo campaign to raise

over \$12,000 in funds to stock the bus the first time. Money from the food sales will provide the necessary funding to stock the Mobile Market. The program's goal is to break even within five years.

IMPLEMENTATION

The program was conceptualized in 2013. Since then, the Wilder Foundation has been retrofitting the bus and establishing the necessary partnerships to ensure the program's success. There has also been extensive community outreach run by volunteers and work to set the routes the bus will operate on, as well as the food it will stock. The Twin Cities Mobile Market also provides cooking demonstrations, food sampling and recipes/tips to residents purchasing groceries from the bus.

OTHER EXAMPLES

- Fresh Moves, Chicago, IL
- Stock Box, Seattle, WA
- Green Carts, New York City, New York

LESSONS LEARNED

- A sustainable funding model is necessary. Fresh Moves, a similar project in Chicago, has been stalled due to lack of funds. Fresh Moves also was selling food at a very minimal profit margin and operating on a federal grant that ran out. They are now looking for other funding sources to restart the program.
- Public Engagement from the beginning can lead to higher success. If the community helps decide where the bus will go and the types of food residents want and need, they will be more likely to feel vested in the project and frequent it.
- Sometimes, access and affordability aren't the only issues. People purchasing new types of fresh foods may not know how to prepare them. Partnering food sales with demonstrations and recipes can help bridge this knowledge divide.

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