

Mobile Produce Delivers Health in Food Deserts

by: Maggie Hall

SUMMARY

If brick-and-mortar stores won't come to food deserts, bring fruits and vegetables to food deserts in a colorful delivery van that makes regular stops in areas where there's low access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Pinellas County's Partnerships to Improve Community Health (PICH) collaborated with a passionate young entrepreneur whose mission is "to end food deserts in Pinellas." Built on the food-truck model, Next Stop Produce sets up in neighborhoods without markets to provide an alternative to packaged foods at convenience stores.



CHALLENGE

Pinellas County, Florida, is the state's most densely populated county, with 938,098 residents in 274 sq. miles of land. Despite its size, the county has food deserts where there are no supermarkets within a mile of underserved neighborhoods. Although the county has a bus system, there is no widespread mass transportation. Residents without access to private transportation find it difficult to shop for fresh items they must transport on foot, on buses that run once an hour

or via taxi. South St. Petersburg and Lealman are two high-poverty, low-access areas where there are transportation challenges and little-to-no access to fresh produce.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

Next Stop Produce has a Facebook page where it posts its schedule while engaging supporters and potential customers. It recently had a recipe contest asking fans to create dishes with its products; the winner received a gift certificate for produce. The Facebook page asks community members to get involved by spreading the word about mobile produce as a way to grow the concept. The project is replicable in other areas of the nation where food deserts are also a food-access issue.

"Thank you for the delicious fruit yesterday! My toddler finished his plums and asked for 'more, please!' We will be back soon!"

- Julie Santelices

Contact

Maggie Hall

Florida Department of Health in Pinellas County

Florida Department of Health in Pinellas County

205 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. St. N.

St. Petersburg, FL 33701

727-824-6908 phone

<http://www.PinellasHealth.com>

SOLUTION

The Florida Department of Health in Pinellas County (DOH-Pinellas) is a Partnerships to Improve Community Health (PICH) recipient that saw a need to improve access to fresh foods in South St. Petersburg and Lealman. The time was right to partner with community activist and budding entrepreneur Caitlyn Peacock, whose mission was "ending food deserts in Pinellas." A former community partnerships coordinator and member of the Tampa Bay Network to End Hunger, Peacock created Next Stop Produce, a cargo van set up to do mobile produce sales in underserved areas. By purchasing fresh produce in wholesale markets and then reselling them from the van, she created a solution to the problem.

RESULTS

DOH-Pinellas' PICH grant partnered with Next Stop Produce to help market her routes and to advertise healthy eating initiatives on her van. The grant is assisted Peacock in setting up to accept EBT so that SNAP and WIC recipients can purchase fruits and vegetables. Next Stop Produce's routes include areas in South St. Petersburg and Lealman and other stops in Clearwater and Largo have been added. (Next Stop also has routes in neighboring Hillsborough County.) There are now six stops in Pinellas County to fill in the gaps in good nutrition. Next Stop also partnered with DOH-Pinellas' obesity clinic for low-income clients on a separate project called Veggie Rx that was funded by a private organization. Obesity clients pick up fruits and vegetables at no cost with their "prescription" at Next Stop Produce's Largo stop.

SUSTAINING SUCCESS

Next Stop Produce's business plan includes adding more stops and a second van to serve more areas. With the addition of EBT, it will serve even more residents who receive assistance. DOH-Pinellas' PICH staff continues to provide marketing and public relations assistance. PICH partners in St. Petersburg are working with Next Stop Produce to identify areas in its underserved area for additional stops. At the present time, Next Stop Produce is the only mobile vendor in the county that carries fruits and vegetables but, as its business grows, it may operate other vans to cover target areas in Pinellas from Tarpon Springs on its north end to Gulfport on its south end.