

Food Store Interventions for Chronic Disease Prevention
Experiences of the Healthy Store Programs
Joel Gittelsohn, PhD

As a part of the PRC's Seminar Series, Dr. Joel Gittelsohn from the Johns Hopkins Center for Human Nutrition shared some insight on various healthy store projects he has initiated. Beginning with the Marshall Islands Healthy Stores program in 2000, Dr. Gittelsohn has led the design and implementation of store interventions in Apache reservations, Baltimore, Hawaii, and Northern Ontario.

Dr. Gittelsohn's Healthy Stores strategy focuses on changing the food environment. Programs that aim to change individuals' behavior, Gittelsohn explained, must be coupled with systemic change to make healthy options available, especially in low-income areas where those options are often limited, and diabetes and obesity rates are highest. Each Healthy Stores project was initiated with extensive formative research, such as interviews with store owners and customers, in-store food purchasing observations, and focus groups to test intervention materials. Dr. Gittelsohn stressed the importance of understanding the social and cultural aspects of diet within a target population in order to frame appropriate and effective messages.

Tools used by the Healthy Stores projects to increase exposure to healthy choices included point-of-purchase shelf labeling of recommended items, flyers with nutrition information and product comparisons, recipe cards, cooking demos, taste tests, in-store displays, newspaper cartoons, and radio announcements. Dr. Gittelsohn's team also worked closely with store owners to encourage them to stock healthy foods, providing nutrition training and stressing financial viability.

Project evaluations were conducted as meticulously as the interventions. The Apache Healthy Stores project was the first food store intervention to demonstrate an impact on people's diet: Dr. Gittelsohn's research indicated increases in healthy food purchasing, both in terms of unit sales and daily gram consumption of promoted foods. Based on the success of the model, the Healthy Stores projects will begin new work in other communities, and expand some projects already underway.

For more information, visit the Healthy Stores Project website at www.healthystores.org.