

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Effort Aims To Fight Obesity by Bringing More Grocery Stores to California's 'Food Deserts'

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TEXT:

A \$200 million effort to change eating habits by bringing more grocery stores into underserved communities is underway in California, even as a recent study suggests that more stores won't necessarily promote healthier diets. This is a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Mina Kim.

As part of her effort to stem obesity, first lady Michelle Obama announced the launch of the California FreshWorks Fund during a Healthy Food summit at the White House last month. The FreshWorks Fund will loan \$200 million to increase access to healthy food in so-called "food desert" areas in the state. The California Endowment, a private health foundation, came up with the idea a year-and-a-half ago, and pulled together a team of grocery industry groups, health care organizations and Wall Street banks. Marion Standish is the California Endowment's director of community health. She says the fund is open for business.

(Standish): "We have retailers and community groups and others that are already in the pipeline, so we are hopeful that within six months we will see -- not necessarily a store built although I could be wrong -- but we certainly would see the beginnings of a store."

Standish says the plan is for the stores to become community economic anchors that will spur further development. She predicts the effort will yield about 6,000 jobs in California. Standish says loans will be available to big retailers as well as to mom-and-pop outfits that want to provide more fresh produce and other healthy food options. She says the FreshWorks Fund will be on the lookout for innovation in increasing access to healthy food and promoting diet changes.

(Standish): "It doesn't really take a scientific study to say that if the only place you have to buy food is the corner liquor store which has such limited if any availability of healthy products -- what they may have is canned food, they might have a couple pieces of wilted lettuce -- then it is a challenge for people to make good choices."

Yet, a recent study by the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's Gillings School of Global Public Health found that grocery store availability was no

magic bullet to getting people to eat more healthfully. The study's co-author Janne Boone-Heinonen, an assistant professor at Oregon Health and Science University, conducted research for the study as a postdoctoral fellow at UNC's Interdisciplinary Obesity Center.

(Boone-Heinonen): "What our food store findings suggest is that we may need multiple types of strategies to accompany environmental changes. It's not enough to simply introduce a grocery store."

Boone-Heinonen helped track the diets of more than 5,000 people over a 15-year period in four U.S. cities with high obesity rates, including Oakland, California. The study found that income and a close proximity to fast food restaurants influenced food choice.

(Boone-Heinonen): "When we look at the relationship between fast food availability, it's a much more direct kind of relationship. While in a supermarket, they provide a wide variety of both unhealthy and healthy food. So it's a very complex process of first having access to a supermarket, and then choosing and being able to afford healthy food within that store. Leaving the store, and preparing it, consuming it. There's more steps involved, more barriers associated with each step."

The California Endowment's Marion Standish says she's undaunted by the study's findings. She says the study began collecting data in 1985, when there was far less public awareness of the obesity epidemic and its relationship to chronic illness.

(Standish): "We all agree that we're dealing with a very complex problem. But having a store in close proximity has actually been demonstrated in at least ten different studies across the country to improve produce consumption and improve choices."

It is being demonstrated in the northern California city of Richmond, says Margaret Gee, deputy director of the Bay Area Local Initiatives Support Corporation, or LISC. Gee says the city's adult obesity rate is 60%, significantly higher than the national average. Five years ago, with help from Kaiser Permanente, LISC and other community organizations began working with local retailers to offer healthier food options. As an incentive, they offered to help store owners qualify as WIC vendors, the federal food assistance program for women, infants and children. Gee says the project has been a win-win.

(Gee): "One, it's driving those who have WIC to their store. And they're finding that people who also have been going to their store and did not have these healthy food options are now buying them."

Gee says it has not been enough to simply make the food accessible. Gee's group has had to promote the food and its benefits. Store owners have changed their store layouts, installed shelving, and learned to showcase the food as well as price it competitively. Gee says patrons have needed some coaching, too.

(Gee): "Some of these families have never seen an artichoke or an asparagus or these kinds of vegetables. They don't know how to use them, and they don't know how to use it in a way that may be culturally appropriate, you know, things that they're used to eating, how you incorporate that into your existing diet."

Gee says this fall, LISC and other Richmond community groups will begin offering cooking classes. They will teach community members to shop smart by taking them to supermarkets and showing them how to make the most of limited dollars. Gee says the project is entering its new phase thanks to a three-year, \$1 million grant that Kaiser Permanente awarded last month. Kaiser Permanente also has announced it will provide \$1 million to the California FreshWorks Fund.

This has been a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Mina Kim, thanks for listening.