

2016

Innovations in Food Equity: Business and Community Together

New York Law School

INNOVATIONS IN FOOD EQUITY:

BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY TOGETHER



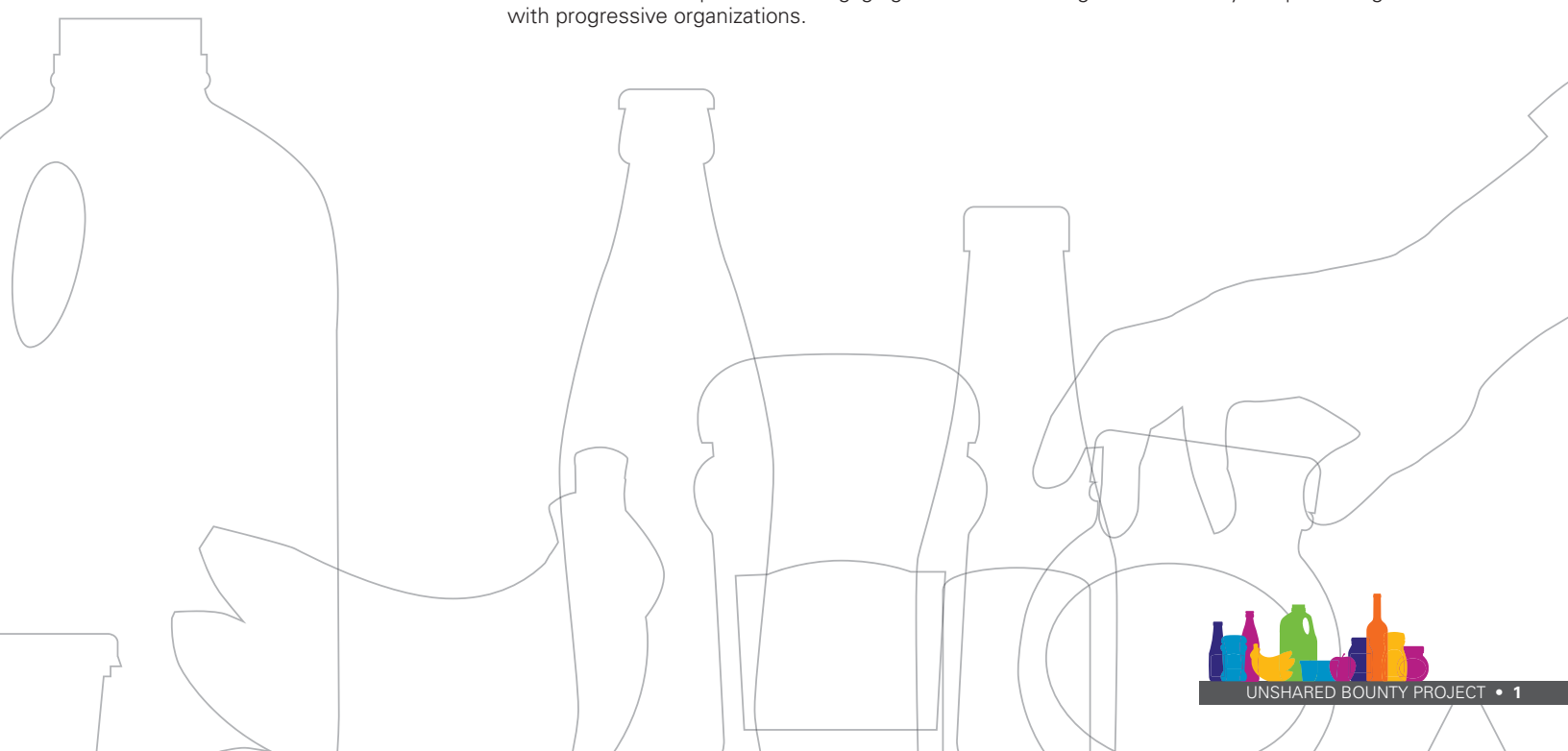
THE PROBLEM

Food deserts are urban and rural communities with no or severely limited access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food.¹ In the United States, approximately 23.5 million people live in food deserts.² Studies have found a link between poverty, access to fresh, nutritious foods, and diet-related health problems. For many, living in a food desert leads to food insecurity, where people are unable to secure a nutritionally adequate diet. The lack of access to fresh, affordable food for people living in low-income, isolated neighborhoods severely impacts the physical health and well being of those individuals and their families. To solve the problem of food inequity, many believe that “encouraging supermarkets and grocery stores to open in underserved neighborhoods will translate into improvements in individuals’ diets and lead to a reduction in diet-related health problems.”³ This is simply not true. Meaningful access means much more than physical proximity to a grocery store. Access means the food is proximate and affordable, and that efforts have been taken to overcome any other barriers inhibiting residents from enjoying a healthy diet. Indeed, our research shows that opening a grocery store in a food desert does not necessarily solve the community food issues or mean that the business will thrive.⁴ Rather, social barriers such as, “preference for existing food stores, worries about how increased choice might affect household food budgets, community resistance to new supermarket property development, and access to informal store credit, impede the success of new establishments.”⁵

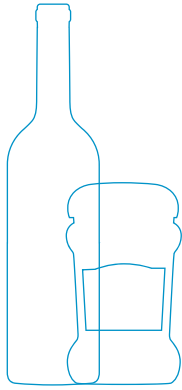
Another misperception is that personal preference drives residents to continue to purchase unhealthy, processed foods when healthier options are available. The faulty logic is that individuals who live in food deserts are raised eating meals from fast food restaurants and convenience stores, so it becomes all they know.⁶ Studies, however, have shown that low-income communities have nearly twice as many fast food restaurants than wealthier areas making low-nutrient, high-caloric foods more financially accessible.⁷ In many cases, healthier food is harder to get to and more expensive, while unhealthy foods fit more easily into a tight budget.⁸ In short, the reason is often lack of money, not a lack of desire.

This Report focuses on five for-profit grocery stores and food establishments that have implemented promising business initiatives to combat food deserts: (i) **Brown Super Stores**; (ii) **Whole Foods Market**; (iii) **Wegmans**; (iv) **Juices For Life**; and (v) **Walmart**. It dissects the initiatives that these establishments have used to provide fresh food to their communities and, as a result, how they have helped combat food deserts. By doing this, we hope to foster dialogue about how to bring positive change to food desert communities.

Our analysis of the initiatives leads us to conclude that the success of these establishments in food deserts is dependent on engaging with and educating the community and partnering with progressive organizations.



More recently, Brown Super Stores have introduced a free, private, and quick mental health-screening kiosk in a North Philadelphia store.¹⁸ In commenting on this initiative, Commissioner of Philadelphia’s Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services, Arthur Evans, said that he is excited to take away the stigma of mental health, and that “we know we [are] going to reach many more people” with this program.¹⁹



Brown Super Stores also foster community involvement in a host of other ways. Some of the stores have community rooms where various community-run organizations can hold meetings, providing the organizations a space of their own.²⁰ The store helps formerly incarcerated individuals to re-enter the job market.²¹ There is a risk that members of the community who are not able to secure adequate employment after they are released from prison may turn to illegal activity in order to provide for themselves.²² With this initiative, Brown Super Stores not only helps the individual secure employment, but also supports the community as a whole.²³ Finally, Brown also created a nonprofit organization called Uplift Solutions to assist grocery stores and other nutritional institutions with moving into food deserts.²⁴ Uplift Solutions works with dozens of companies to come up with specialized plans for success and sustainability and uses many of the aforementioned steps to walk a company through a successful launch and day-to-day business transactions.²⁵

These opportunities coupled with affordable, fresh groceries help make the supermarket an integral staple in the community. The services and items that the store provides further entrench its presence and makes the risk of failure very low.

WHOLE FOODS MARKET

Whole Foods Market, a mission driven company with a focus on sustainable agriculture and providing the healthiest food options, has been making strides towards eliminating food deserts.²⁶ Whole Foods was founded in 1980 in Austin, Texas by four local businesspeople who decided they wanted to open a supermarket that provided wholesome and healthy food options.²⁷

As a commitment to improving the lives and opportunities of individuals who are living within the communities they serve, Whole Foods has set up three foundations, all with different objectives.²⁸ The Whole Planet Foundation is focused on the relationships with poor people in developing nations where they source their food.²⁹ The Whole Kids Foundation focuses on supporting families and children by improving children’s nutrition.³⁰ Lastly, launched in 2014, the Whole Foods’ Whole Cities Foundation (“Whole Cities”), is dedicated to bringing fresh, nutritious food and easier access to healthy food education into food deserts.³¹ This foundation supports the company’s core value to “serve and support local and global communities and promote the health of stakeholders through healthy eating education.”³²

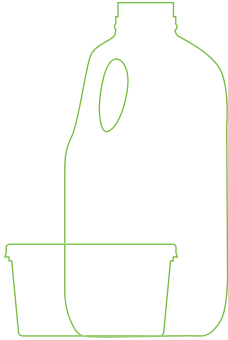
Whole Cities was born out of Whole Foods’ business model when they opened a store in Detroit in 2011.³³ Whole Foods chose to expand to Detroit because, at the time, the city had been without a grocery store for more than seven years and many community members were struggling with poverty.³⁴ Opening in Detroit gave Whole Foods the opportunity to be a game changer on many levels.³⁵ The store would be an option for employment, would bring revenue to the city, and be a healthy food option.³⁶ Whole Foods aimed to help close the gap between the rich and the poor.³⁷

Whole Foods, typically frequented by white, middle- and upper-income customers, knew that it was targeting a new demographic. To successfully reach its intended market, the company had to “persuade [this] new kind of customer that what it sold—local, organic, and sustainable products—were worth seeking out and paying higher prices for.”³⁸ In order to do so, and before opening the Detroit location, Whole Foods committed to identifying how their store could meet the needs and desires of the people within the community.³⁹ They engaged deep community discussion and were responsive to local cultures, focusing on the increasing access to fresh foods for all income levels.⁴⁰ For example, classes were provided to educate lower-income customers on how to shop on a budget and what healthier food options there were.⁴¹

Out of the model implemented in Detroit, Whole Cities was launched, which now partners with community-based organizations that create food access solutions, builds collaborative partnerships where nutritious food access and healthy eating education come together, and



broadens access to healthy eating information by starting conversations about wellness and fresh food.⁴² The initial scope of work for Whole Cities is focused on New Orleans, Louisiana; Englewood, Illinois; and Jackson, Mississippi.⁴³



In New Orleans, Whole Foods collaborated with the Refresh Project to restore an abandoned 60,000 square foot building into a Whole Foods market with free nutrition education that will also host a non-profit café that provides job skills training for youth, a medical teaching kitchen, a teaching garden, and a revitalization organization.⁴⁴ In Jackson, Whole Foods is collaborating with organizations that are working to increase access to fresh, healthy food by inviting grant applications from non-profit organizations that run community gardens, urban farms, mobile groceries, and other innovative projects to bring fresh, healthy, and affordable food to the area.⁴⁵ Still in development is the Englewood location where Whole Foods will stock the store with more affordable 365 Brand products, price produce individually instead of by the pound, and sell more bulk foods.⁴⁶

By focusing on community engagement, food education, and the needs of the local community, Whole Foods has created a lasting business model that is improving the health and wellness of underserved communities.

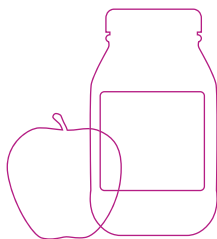
WEGMANS

Originating in Rochester, New York, Wegmans is a family-owned grocery store that has implemented many successful initiatives that foster and support community development.⁴⁷ Each store supports local community initiatives, food banks, and also accepts suggestions from community members on where donations and sponsorships should be allocated.⁴⁸

The company's initiatives include Feeding the Hungry, a campaign that donated 16.5 million pounds of food to local food banks and food pantries in 2013 alone.⁴⁹ Wegmans's Check Out Hunger program, a yearly campaign that asks customers to add a small donation to their order to support a local food bank, has raised approximately \$29 million since 1993.⁵⁰ The funds raised for Check Out Hunger directly support the initiatives of the food banks by, for example, providing food to emergency food organizations such as food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters;⁵¹ increasing access to fresh produce through community markets;⁵² increasing awareness of the issues surrounding hunger;⁵³ and, workforce and skills development.⁵⁴

Since the 1990s, Wegmans has supported Kids Café, one of the nation's largest child-feeding programs, that provides free, nutritious meals and snacks to low-income children in community locations (including Boys & Girls Clubs, churches, public schools, and community centers).⁵⁵ Last year, the Rochester, New York program provided over 300,000 meals at 60 different sites.⁵⁶ The program also offers other services like after-school assistance with homework, nutrition education, and meals that emphasize fresh fruits and vegetables.⁵⁷ Kids Café has had a significant impact. The Center on Hunger and Poverty reported that children who participated in Kid's Cafes earned better grades in school.⁵⁸ Additionally, "KidzPack"s are offered on the weekends when free or reduced price lunch programs that are provided during the week are not usually available.⁵⁹

Recognizing that hunger and poverty issues are interconnected and often food deserts are also "job deserts" with high unemployment rates,⁶⁰ Wegmans is committed to hiring the majority of its employees from the local community and offers opportunities for career growth and development. Further, they have extensive employment training programs for each location before opening. For example, the newest store location planned for Brooklyn will bring 1,200 jobs to the Brooklyn Navy Yard.⁶¹ Partnering with the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation to recruit area residents for jobs, developers and resident leaders will set up New York City Housing Authority employment centers in nearby developments.⁶² In the first two weeks of hiring, the store will interview exclusively from the three housing projects that border the Navy Yard.⁶³



Wegmans's initiatives empower the communities they support. Hiring locally and offering support in the form of training and scholarship programs creates a collaborative environment between employees, owners, and customers. Job creation also alleviates economic hardships, which in turn, provides greater financial access to healthy food.



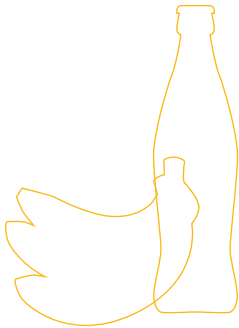
JUICES FOR LIFE

In 2014, with the help of Uplift Solutions and other partners, rappers Styles P and Jadakiss, opened Juices For Life, a juice bar in Yonkers, New York, close to where they were both raised.⁶⁴ A second Juices For Life opened in the Bronx, New York just one year later. The goal of Juices For Life is to help people in poor communities who have little access to fresh food maintain a healthy lifestyle and, in turn, reduce the amount of trips to the emergency room for illnesses preventable by a healthy diet and exercise.⁶⁵

Young women and men of color, living in low-income neighborhoods are not the advertising industry's initial market when thinking about whom to target as health conscious individuals. By having a juice bar co-owned by some of hip hop's most respected rappers, Juices For Life has been able to target the demographic that the juicing industry has yet to reach, showing that healthy food is not only for affluent people.

In a video interview with FeelrichTV in 2011, Styles P championed "juicing" by saying, "the keys to life and the keys to energy [...] are fruits, veggies, and working out."⁶⁶ The rappers want to bring this lifestyle and way of thinking into food deserts with consequential community health issues.⁶⁷

Juices For Life took substantial steps in order to be successful in food deserts, including:



- Working with Uplift Solutions to ensure they were taking the necessary steps to meet the community needs.
- Ensuring that each location has a list of health benefits and various ailments that eating healthy can help fix.
- Juices For Life also sells bags of steel cut oats, bundles of bananas, and pre-made healthy snacks to expose community members to additional healthy eating options.

Juices For Life understands that simply opening a juice bar in a food desert does not mean members of the community will come. The company, in tandem with Uplift Solutions, has implemented a model for success and sustainability.

WALMART

To fight food deserts, Walmart committed to opening 275-300 stores in food deserts by 2016.⁶⁸ By 2014, Walmart had opened 224 stores in food deserts across the country, including in states with a high concentration of food deserts, such as Texas, California, and Colorado.⁶⁹ Almost a year before their self-imposed deadline, Walmart has now met their goal of opening 275 stores.⁷⁰ The company also joined First Lady Michele Obama and her *Let's Move* initiative, a program designed to help fight childhood obesity and help Americans get healthy.⁷¹



One of the stores that Walmart opened in Washington, D.C. served two USDA registered food deserts and brought a wide assortment of fresh produce and meats at affordable prices to the communities.⁷² They have also partnered with Feed the Children, a non-profit that works to end childhood hunger, to feed several hundred families.⁷³ For example, in 2013, Walmart, PepsiCo, and Feed the Children together donated two tractor trailers of food and essentials to 800 children and their families in Washington, D.C.⁷⁴

Walmart also works with Central Kitchen, an organization that seeks to end hunger and rebuild urban food systems with recycled food, culinary lessons, and healthy school meals.⁷⁵ The company worked with Central Kitchen to promote healthy living and eating and has invested time into educating families about healthier food choices.⁷⁶ Walmart encourages preparing meals at home and using more fruits and vegetables.⁷⁷ To support this belief, the company offers cooking classes such as Taste of African Heritage and works with families to help them make the most out of their resources.⁷⁸



THE PATH FORWARD

Commonalities exist between these five for-profit grocery stores and food establishments that could be the roots for future success in achieving greater food equity. The first, community engagement, is one of the most critical factors. When stores engage the community, discover their needs, and then create a business model that supports and responds to those needs, it provides meaningful access for the members of that community. Through community engagement, these establishments are also educated about the types of foods and services local residents need.

Second, partnerships are key. Collaborating with community organizations and agencies increased community engagement. Non-profit and government organizations lend support to and strengthen the success of many of these business initiatives, and are important agents in the fight against food insecurity.

Finally, the companies that hired local employees were able to help incrementally improve the overall economic stability of food deserts. Of course, there is more to be done. Fortunately, companies around the country are working with communities and thinking creatively about how to bring healthy, affordable, and accessible food to food deserts.



WWW.UNSHAREDBOUNTY.ORG



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ABOUT THE UNSHARED BOUNTY PROJECT

The Unshared Bounty Project at New York Law School is a policy and advocacy initiative focused on issues of food equity. Unshared Bounty promotes the basic human right to healthy affordable food, and is a resource for the local and national community. Through education, research, and advocacy, the project collaborates with local and national stakeholders to build a sustainable and equitable food system that addresses and challenges the underlying causes of food disparity.



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