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Libraries help fill city nutrition gaps

Virtual Supermarket serves residents of areas without grocery stores

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Residents of two Baltimore neighborhoods that lack supermarkets will soon be able to order their groceries through a free delivery system that operates with the click of a mouse from the library.

The new Virtual Supermarket Project, city officials' latest attempt to solve Baltimore's long-standing history of neighborhoods with little access to healthful foods, offers laptops where residents can order groceries online from Santoni's Super Market in Highlandtown and pick them up the next day at the Orleans Street or Washington Village library branches of the Enoch Pratt Free Library. The libraries are in East and West Baltimore's biggest "food deserts," areas targeted by the Health Department for their scarcity of grocery stores and nutritious food options.

"We know in communities around this library and in Washington Village, residents must choose between shopping at corner stores that lack fresh produce or pay a premium for a ride outside their neighborhood, and we know this is not a fair choice," said Olivia D. Farrow, Baltimore's interim health commissioner, during an announcement Wednesday at the Orleans Street library. "Most city residents enjoy access to full-service, competitively priced grocery stores. The residents of East Baltimore and Washington Village deserve no less."

In the neighborhood surrounding the Orleans Street library, healthful food is a luxury. There's a Burger King, a cluster of corner stores and carryouts, but not a single supermarket within walking distance. It's no wonder, say health officials, that the neighborhood has one of the highest mortality rates in the city, with alarmingly high rates of heart disease, stroke and diabetes.

But making that change requires incentives to corner-store owners and programs like the virtual grocery store initiative to transform the nutrition landscape in the city's poor neighborhoods, Farrow said.

With \$60,000 in federal stimulus money to fund the program for the next six months, the Virtual Supermarket Project is the first of 10 recommendations expected to roll out next month from the Food Policy Task Force, a city committee that Farrow helped oversee last year to tackle the problem.

The city Health Department is hoping to capitalize on a new national emphasis on nutrition. This week, first lady Michelle Obama implored grocery store manufacturers to speed up their efforts to cut salt, sugar and fat from food, be clearer about labeling and increase marketing of healthful products. Obama has also said she hopes to eliminate the nation's food deserts within seven years. It's part of her national campaign to combat childhood obesity and a White House push to improve the nation's health.

"As a country, we are seeing such a dramatic increase in diet-related diseases," said Anne Palmer, program director for the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future and a member of the food policy task force. "It's

not something that happened overnight, but now there's a recognition that we can't expect people to have a healthy lifestyle in an area that is completely unhealthy."

While the obvious choice - and the biggest hope of neighborhood residents - would be luring full-service grocery stores to poor communities, doing so isn't financially feasible since it's unlikely that neighborhoods can support them, Palmer said.

Years ago as Baltimore mayor, Martin O'Malley lobbied supermarket executives to bring grocery stores to all parts of the city. But in some neighborhoods, stores haven't been profitable. The recent closure of a 60,000-square-foot Mount Clare Safeway left a void in that Southwest Baltimore community that the virtual grocery store at the Washington Village library branch hopes to fill.

Instead of focusing on attracting more grocery stores to such areas, the task force hunted for new solutions to increase nutritious food in neighborhoods deprived of fresh fruits and vegetables, Palmer said.

Starting this growing season, for instance, Maryland Hunger Solutions, a project of the nonprofit Food Research and Action Center, is planning a pilot program that will allow food stamp users to use their EBT cards at farmers' markets with the aid of wireless technology, she said.

The virtual grocery store project is still very much a work in progress, its organizers say. The Health Department started testing it this fall in the basements of neighborhood churches. But residents complained that churches weren't always accessible to the public, and organizers sought alternatives.

In contrast, the library provides a free, public space with Internet access in virtually every Baltimore neighborhood, said Pooja Aggarwal, special assistant to the health commissioner and the program's coordinator.

Home delivery would be too expensive a cost for the Health Department to cover, said Aggarwal. Meanwhile, many residents in the neighborhoods that need groceries most lack Internet access to set up the deliveries, she said.

While the typical delivery fee for Santoni's online orders is \$11.95, the expense to library patrons who pick up their groceries is nothing beyond the cost of their food. And Health Department staffers are on hand at the libraries to help residents navigate the store's Web site.

People can place orders at the Orleans Street branch on Wednesdays between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. for pickup on Thursdays between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. At Washington Village, orders are taken Mondays between noon and 3 p.m. and are picked up the next day between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. The program accepts cash, credit cards, food stamps and PayPal.

"Our goal is to get quality food to people at an affordable price," said Rob Santoni, general manager of the grocery store, a Highlandtown institution since 1930, which has been doing online home delivery for nine years.

On Wednesday, Terri Summerhill, 74, ordered apples, grapes, peaches and pork chops with Aggarwal's help at a laptop. She typically shops at Santoni's in person, but because she uses a walker to get around, she must rely on friends or family to give her a ride. She avoids corner stores at all costs.

The food is expensive, said Summerhill, who lives in the nearby Latrobe Homes. "And the food is just not fresh - they'll put out vegetables that have already gone bad."

While she liked the idea of virtual ordering and plans to use it often, Summerhill said the program has drawbacks: no home delivery and limited hours. Health Department officials said they hope to get more funding to expand availability and include locations such as community centers and senior centers.

"This is like the tip of the iceberg of food access issues," Aggarwal said. "We are not only trying to engage the community in this project, but trying to engage them in a discussion on food access and how we can fix these issues. ... There's no way the virtual supermarket is going to solve all these problems, but this is one little piece of the solution."



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