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## **Overcoming the ‘food desert’: Newtown grocers open to offering residents more access to healthier, fresh foods**

Navigating through the maze of food choices is never easy, and in some Sarasota County communities – including Newtown – access to affordable healthy foods is nearly non-existent. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a ‘food desert’ exists when there is a lack of affordable healthy foods and mainstream grocery stores.

Public health officials say that when people rely on processed and convenience foods because they cannot access healthy foods, this can lead to chronic health issues including obesity, which, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is now the leading preventable cause of death. Other health-related problems that can arise from obesity include high blood pressure, diabetes, strokes and heart disease.

The Newtown Community Health Action Team (CHAT), a group of residents working on a grass-roots level to promote a healthier community, recently participated with students from State College of Florida in a healthy food audit of food retailers in the Newtown area.

“While the recent news about the Walmart Neighborhood Market coming to the North Trail area is very exciting, the Newtown CHAT felt an imperative to survey existing food retailers,” says Community Health Improvement Partnership director Kari Ellingstad.

“Currently, unless residents have transportation to go to Publix, there are few options for purchasing healthy foods,” says April Glasco, Second Chance Last Opportunity executive director and chair of the Newtown CHAT.

The healthy food audit was completed using a standardized instrument to assess availability and price for key items, with additional information gathered by talking to convenience, grocery, dollar/discount and pharmacy store owners or managers. Many of these owners or managers were open to the idea of selling healthier food options.

The students conducted the audit in a total of 18 stores in Newtown/North Sarasota. They found that about half (nine) had fresh fruit and vegetables available; however, they tended to be more costly than in a mainstream grocery store. Nearly all (17) offered whole milk, but only four stores had low-fat milk available. In discussion with store owners or managers, many noted that low-fat milk and diet soda doesn't sell. Four of the 18 offered consumers fresh meat or fish, while 13 had eggs. Only four stores in the area had 100 percent whole wheat bread and baby cereal available

Several store owners expressed an interest in selling healthier options. Two venues already provide fresh prepared foods such as salads and subs. One grocer even expressed interest in providing a healthier store model in Janie's Garden, whose lease was signed last week.

The survey also found that 13 stores offered electronic bank transfer (EBT) as payment and only one accepted the federally funded nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), which provides food vouchers to eligible pregnant women and children up to age 5. However, three stores did indicate some interest in becoming certified to accept WIC.

At the June meeting of the Newtown CHAT, those attending offered a number of suggestions to increase access to healthy foods, including helping stores market healthy food options and drawing from the experiences of cities like New Orleans, Louisiana, and Brooklyn, New York, by securing subsidies for "Healthy Store Makeovers." These discussions will continue to expand in CHAT meetings over the next few months.

The Newtown CHAT is part of the Community Health Improvement Partnership (CHIP), which has been a catalyst for engaging communities throughout Sarasota County in collaborative grass-roots efforts to promote a healthier community. The Newtown CHAT meets at 6 p.m. at the North Sarasota Library on the fourth Tuesday of every month.

For more information, visit [www.CHIP4health.org](http://www.CHIP4health.org).

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