

# HEALTHY EATING

## WHAT'S TRANSPORTATION GOT TO DO WITH IT?



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What's transportation got to do with healthy eating? Quite a bit. So much so that some say that food access is a transportation issue. If you don't own a car – or one that's reliable – making healthy eating choices can get complicated.

We heard about these issues firsthand when Vitalyst Health Foundation partnered with the City of Phoenix as part of Reinvent PHX. We talked to residents who live in the neighborhoods along the Light Rail. We heard all too frequently that one of the biggest barriers to eating healthfully is access to supermarkets. One issue behind that challenge is transportation. Families, especially those of modest means, may not own a car. Sometimes a family may have a car, but it isn't very reliable. Others depend on families or friends for a ride to the supermarket, and are at the mercy of someone else's schedule.

Areas with few supermarkets that are difficult to get to are known as “food deserts” or low-supermarket-access areas, and they are found throughout the Valley, state and nation. They are most commonly found in low-income neighborhoods and rural areas.

Public transportation as well as walking to the supermarket are both partial solutions, but they aren't yet a panacea in Maricopa County. The City of Phoenix's Proposition 104 promises to expand the Light Rail as well as improve the bus system. Until that measure is fully implemented, some bus routes run only once an hour, making the wait long, especially when you are carrying milk or frozen vegetables (and it's 108 degrees). Walking would be a great choice, but often distances are far and our sidewalk network incomplete or in poor repair – a regular occurrence in older, more affordable neighborhoods. Both options are complicated if you have small children in tow, more than two grocery bags, physical limitations or a long walk home.

Is the answer to healthy food choices a car for every household? Far from it. Innovations and investments are happening here and throughout the country to repair the broken healthy food-transportation link.

### NEIGHBORHOOD CIRCULATORS

Neighborhood circulators are smaller buses or vans that drive a shorter route, connecting residents to destinations within their community. Valley Metro offers several neighborhood circulators, including in Ahwatukee, Avondale, Glendale and Tempe.

### BRINGING FOOD TO NEIGHBORHOODS

What about bringing healthy food to neighborhoods that lack access? This is already being done in the Valley through efforts like Fresh Express, a revamped Valley Metro bus that serves as a mobile farmer's market; and Gregory's Fresh Market, a similar service targeted to facilities serving senior citizens.

### SUPERMARKET-SUPPORTED RIDE

Supermarkets have been known to sponsor their own shuttle service. With the purchase of items from its store, supermarkets can provide a free scheduled shuttle or on-demand shuttle. As with any transportation-based solution to food access, circulators need to be reliable and have a consistent schedule.

### PROVIDE INCENTIVES

Some cities provide incentives for locating supermarkets near public transportation hubs, like Light Rail stops. These incentives could be reduced fees or a loosening of development requirements, such as reducing the number of parking spaces.

### SAFE ROUTES TO HEALTHY FOOD

Modeled after a successful effort to get children to walk to school, we can reassess the existing walking and biking infrastructure that connects where people live to supermarkets. Upgrades such as installing and repairing sidewalks, improve crossing walks, lighting and signage, or improve the cycling environment, will make a walk or bike ride to the supermarket safer and more appealing to everyone – including those who have a transportation choice. ■

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