

CASE STUDY REPORT

April 2019

Baltimore Ride Share Project to Support Healthy Food Priority Areas

Baltimore City Health Department

INNOVATION CHARACTERISTICS

New or creative | Collaborative | Replicable



The Baltimore Ride Share Project to Support Healthy Food Priority Areas is an innovative project being implemented by the Baltimore City Health Department (BCHD) in Maryland. The project aims to promote access to healthy food and support residents in making healthy decisions by providing transportation to and from supermarkets. While still in the planning phase, the project will provide transportation services to and from supermarkets at discounted prices via a national ride share service. The service will be available to Baltimore City residents who live within neighborhoods classified as Healthy Food Priority Areas, defined as “areas where the average Healthy Food Availability Index score for all food stores is low (0-9.5), the median household income is at or below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, over 30 percent of households have no vehicle available, and the distance to a supermarket is more than 1/4 mile.”¹ BCHD is working with the community to inform this project with funding and support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) through the Public Health National Center for Innovations (PHNCI) Public Health Innovations Implementation Grant Program.

Background

In the City of Baltimore, there are several factors that make it difficult for all residents to have equal access to affordable and nutritious food. According to BCHD staff, one-quarter of Baltimore City is classified as a food desert (i.e., there is no supermarket within a quarter mile), and a large portion of the community lives at or below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. Additional factors that affect food access, according to BCHD staff, include: low vehicle ownership rates among residents; the dominance of corner stores—small stores selling groceries—that do not stock

healthy options; and a limited public transit system within the city. Also according to BCHD staff, residents are sometimes reluctant to travel to other neighborhoods due to crime, which limits the availability of healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity. These factors contribute to documented health inequities within Baltimore.

In 2015, the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Sustainable Future and The Baltimore Food Policy Initiative conducted a study that described the food environment in Baltimore City and overlaid areas with limited access to healthy food options and areas with selected environmental and health conditions, such as higher heart disease rates and lower life expectancy. This study also highlighted food access inequities, noting that approximately one in four residents and one in three African-American residents live in food deserts in Baltimore.ⁱⁱ

Previous efforts by Baltimore City government to address issues related to healthy food access have included:

- Hiring a “Food Czar,” a nutritionist who works within the city’s Department of Planning and addresses food access and food policy;
- Creating the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative, an intergovernmental coalition of agencies that addresses food access issues; and
- Providing technical assistance, via BCHD staff, to corner stores related to healthy food options.

Another important effort that helped set the stage for new initiatives designed to improve food access in the city is Baltimarket—a suite of community based food access and food justice initiatives. Programs include: Healthy Stores, Food Justice Forum, and the “Virtual Supermarket” program in Baltimore for online grocery ordering. The Virtual Supermarket program is designed for seniors in low-income communities that are classified as food deserts, which Baltimore calls Healthy Food Priority Areas. Seniors can place online grocery orders at designated locations, such as senior housing facilities, disabled housing facilities, or other community-based sites, and the groceries are then delivered to the same site at no cost to the resident. The program, created in 2010, was the first of its kind in the U.S. to use online ordering and accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) payments. As of 2019, the Virtual Supermarket was in 12 locations and had delivered more than \$350,000 in groceries to nearly 1,000 Baltimore residents.

The Baltimore Ride Share Project to Support Healthy Food Priority Areas will expand on these prior efforts with the goal of increasing residents’ access to healthy food and supporting changes in residents’ food-related behaviors and decision-making through the provision of transportation to supermarkets. The idea for the ride share project emerged when a national ride share company that operates within the city of Baltimore expressed interest in partnering with BCHD to address food access.

INNOVATION FOCUS

Topic Areas

Health Equity; Food Access

Summary

Baltimore Ride Share will provide Baltimore City residents living in areas with limited food access with discounted transportation to and from supermarkets. The project aims to address food access and health inequity within Baltimore City.

Location Served

Baltimore, Maryland

Partners

- National ride share company
- Baltimore Development Corporation
- Baltimore Department of Planning
- Morgan State University

Target Audience

Baltimore City residents living in areas with limited healthy food options.

Baltimore Ride Share Project to Support Healthy Food Priority Areas

The Baltimore Ride Share Project to Support Healthy Food Priority Areas will connect Baltimore residents, who live within Healthy Food Priority Areas, with transportation services to and from supermarkets. A national ride share company that serves the greater Baltimore area will provide the transportation services. The ride share company will work with drivers who will provide transportation to residents to and from supermarkets. The company will also provide administrative support to the Baltimore Ride Share Project at no cost, coordinating and managing their drivers to provide the necessary services. To obtain transportation services, residents arrange a one-way or roundtrip ride to the supermarket by using the rideshare app or contacting a designated phone number for those who do not have a smartphone. The ride share company provides the transportation service to residents at a discounted rate. Thus far, BCHD has conducted the following activities to plan the project:

Conducted focus groups with stakeholders and residents. BCHD held meetings with stakeholders, such as the Baltimore Development Corporation and the Baltimore City Food Czar, to discuss their plan for the Baltimore Ride Share Project. BCHD also conducted four focus groups with 34 residents from four Healthy Food Priority Areas in Baltimore City. The focus groups were comprised of seniors, younger residents, and families with young children, and included residents from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Discussions focused on topics such as: travel time to and from supermarkets; number of supermarkets used; perceptions of ride share programs; opinions of the Healthy Food Priority Areas; willingness to pay for transportation to and from the supermarket; and the need for and value of such a ride share program. Feedback from the focus groups was largely positive. BCHD summarized the focus groups findings, then convened a series of meetings with the Baltimore Development Corporation, Baltimore City Department of Planning, and the ride share company to plan the outreach approach to supermarket owners to assess their interest and willingness to participate in the program.

Reviewed survey and mapping data to inform the project plan. BCHD leveraged data from a survey of Baltimore City residents conducted by Morgan State University, a local university, which assessed city residents' transportation options and needs. Morgan State University provided BCHD with the survey results that assisted with project decision-making. BCHD then relayed the findings and recommendations to the ride share company, the community, and other community organizations and agencies to inform future implementation. BCHD shared the resident focus group findings with Morgan State University in order to help them contextualize the survey results. In addition, BCHD worked with the Food Policy Action Coalition to review maps developed by the Baltimore City Food Policy Initiative and the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future that characterize the food environment in the city.

Planned a pilot. Following the community engagement activities for the Baltimore Ride Share Project, BCHD will conduct a pilot funded through an external grant. BCHD is planning the launch date for summer 2019 and will provide information on the utility and feasibility of implementing the program in full. BCHD has identified South Baltimore and West Baltimore as the two neighborhoods within the city that will serve as pilot sites. These neighborhoods do not have a supermarket within 30 minutes by car.

Implementation Experiences

BCHD has implemented formative activities to conceptualize and develop the plan for the Baltimore Ride Share Project. Lessons learned from these activities include:

Ensure internal support for innovation. According to BCHD staff, the health department supports innovation by encouraging staff to use data, research, and technology to address public health issues. There are ongoing efforts to engage and motivate staff to be thought leaders in public health, and there is an expectation of organizational excellence. BCHD has staff positions focused on strategic thinking, which naturally aligns with innovation. Further,

they have an internship program—the Baltimore Corps Fellows—that attracts emerging young professionals, who, according to BCHD staff, help to invigorate the agency to innovate and strengthen its commitment to social justice and health equity. Finally, staff note that the fact that the agency is mostly grant funded has obligated BCHD to identify creative solutions to ensure they can achieve the greatest impact for residents. They describe that the state, federal, and private funding opportunities that they typically pursue often support innovative practices that disrupt the status quo.

Ensure external support for innovation. BCHD staff indicated that the city government also supports innovation. The Baltimore Mayor’s Office has a Chief Innovation Officer position as well as an innovation team that supports innovative city government projects, and the Mayor’s Office seeks creative solutions to address community health issues. There is a strong emphasis on collaboration across government agencies in Baltimore, bringing together staff from across agencies and sectors to address community challenges.

Maintain flexibility to overcome challenges. BCHD staff emphasized the importance of maintaining flexibility when seeking to innovate. While this project seeks to address the issue of food security through transportation access, BCHD originally intended to enhance food access through the Virtual Supermarket program via online SNAP payments. However, a change in federal SNAP regulations required them to change their project scope.

Considerations for Replication, Adaption, and Adoption

BCHD did not base the Baltimore Ride Share Program to Support Healthy Food Priority Areas on an existing model. Baltimore’s unique characteristics (e.g., high rates of poverty, restrictive policies regarding the establishment of new supermarkets, low rates of vehicle ownership among seniors and families, and a limited transit system) required the development of new approaches, according to BCHD staff.

To support the formative work for this project, one BCHD staff person served in an administrative and management capacity. BCHD recommends that other agencies seeking to implement a similar project have similar dedicated support. Individual qualities and characteristics that may be important to possess when supporting food access projects, according to BCHD staff, include: being collaborative; having a strong relationship with the community; having business acumen; possessing a background in food access; having the ability to liaise with partners, including other government agencies; and possessing an understanding of the community served. BCHD noted that city residents can be wary of newcomers and are more likely to connect with program staff who are from the area.

BCHD staff also discussed considerations related to identifying a ride share company to partner with on this project. They noted the need to work with the ride share company to address driver safety concerns in target neighborhoods, to ensure that drivers are serving the community. From prior experience, BCHD knew that some ride share companies were not willing to provide service in neighborhoods served by this program.

Through a community needs assessment, BCHD identified and involved a number of other partners in the formative work for the Baltimore Ride Share Project. BCHD suggested that other agencies seeking to implement a similar project should involve government agencies, faith-based organizations, non-profit organizations, and private sector organizations. BCHD staff emphasized the importance of maintaining ongoing communication with partners to ensure program success, as well as the importance of sustainable funding as it demonstrates to partners that the implementing agency is committed to leading and sustaining the effort.

Results

Beyond this formative work for the Baltimore Ride Share Project, there are ongoing efforts in Baltimore to address the issue of food access for its residents. In particular, outside of this project, BCHD has achieved successes with its Virtual

Supermarket, and successfully advocated for federal policy change related to SNAP payments for online grocery orders. While the Baltimore Ride Share Project is still in its early stages, preliminary results reported by BCHD staff include:

Engaging 34 residents by conducting four focus groups with residents living in Healthy Food Priority Areas.

- Planning pilot activities, including identifying two neighborhoods to serve as the pilot sites for the program.
- Working with partners to identify additional funding to support the pilot and future implementation.

BCHD also noted that city residents have expressed gratitude to BCHD for involving them in focus groups to discuss the Baltimore Ride Share Project. Rather than assuming they knew what was best for the community, BCHD engaged residents to discuss their interests and needs, and used that information to inform the development of the project. BCHD also indicated that through this project, they have strengthened relationships with existing partners to address food insecurity.

Next Steps

BCHD has planned several additional activities to move the Baltimore Ride Share Project beyond its formative work, beginning with a pilot of the ride share program launching summer 2019. As part of the pilot, BCHD plans to assess the cost of the Baltimore Ride Share Project by tracking implementation costs. The long-term goal of these efforts is to reduce obesity rates, cancer rates, health inequities, and violence within the city through improved food access among low-income communities.

For More Information about the Baltimore Ride Share Project to Support Healthy Food Priority Areas:

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ⁱ Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. (2018). Report: 'Food Desert' Gets a Name Change in Response to Baltimore Community Feedback. Retrieved from <https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/news-room/News-Releases/2018/food-desert-gets-a-name-change-in-response-to-all-bal-community-feedback.html>.

ⁱⁱ Buczynski, A.B., Freishtat, H., & Buzogany, S. (2015). Mapping Baltimore City's Food Environment: 2015 Report. Retrieved from <http://mdfoodsystemmap.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Baltimore-Food-Environment-Report-2015-1.pdf>.