

Fresh Produce Access through Corner Store Transformation in Oakland: Lessons from Saba Grocers Initiative

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Introduction and Background

Oakland, California is impacted by socioeconomic and racially motivated policies¹ that have led to inequities in health, pollutant exposure, and food access. Much of West and East Oakland have been identified in Oakland's 2045 General Plan as potential environmental justice communities², defined as "low-income areas disproportionately impacted by pollution, socioeconomic vulnerability, and adverse health impacts". Several full-service grocery stores have closed in West and East Oakland in recent years, creating areas with limited access to fresh produce. This forces many residents to travel long distances or rely on processed foods from nearby convenience stores.

Saba Grocers Initiative is an Oakland-based nonprofit working to transform corner stores into sources of fresh, healthy food. The organization helps neighborhood stores stock fresh produce by installing refrigeration equipment and providing ongoing support. Through collective purchasing and distribution, Saba Grocers enables partner stores to order smaller quantities than typical wholesale minimums, which makes fresh food economically viable for both store owners and their communities. To incentivize the purchase of fresh produce in participating stores, Saba Grocers added a program called "Fresh5x", which matches participants' Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

produce purchases at five times the value. With this multi-pronged approach, Saba aims to impact environmental, behavioral, and economic aspects of healthy food access in the neighborhoods surrounding their partner stores.

This case study will examine the three core activities of Saba Grocers: healthy corner store infrastructure, collective purchasing and distribution, and the Fresh5x program, and situate the activities among the existing literature.

Healthy Corner Store Infrastructure

In Oakland neighborhoods lacking access to full service grocery stores, Saba Grocers invests in the existing infrastructure of corner stores by providing energy efficient commercial refrigerators. Participating store owners then agree to stock these units with fresh fruits and vegetables, thereby increasing food access for nearby residents.

Founded in 2020 with \$200,000 secured from Oakland's soda tax revenue, the organization started with supplying refrigeration units to three pilot corner stores. The nonprofit expanded to provide refrigeration to seven stores in 2021 and 14 stores as of July 2025.

Saba Grocers also helps corner stores shift toward healthier retail environments beyond simply adding fresh produce, working closely with store

owners to facilitate changes. Stores are categorized by tiers that reflect their transition from liquor stores to neighborhood food markets. Bronze Tier stores participate in collective produce purchasing, install a 3-5 foot produce refrigerator, advertise healthy foods, remove sugar and alcohol advertising, and accept SNAP benefits. Silver Tier stores meet all Bronze requirements plus downsize alcohol and tobacco sales and displays, accept WIC in addition to SNAP, and upgrade to a 6-foot refrigerator. Gold Tier stores fulfill all Silver requirements plus discontinue alcohol and tobacco sales entirely, display produce outside the store, hire locally, and install a 9-10 foot refrigerator.

Number of stores served and supported: 15

Energy efficient produce refrigerators added: 14

Number of Bronze Tier stores: 10

Number of Silver Tier stores: 4

Number of Gold Tier stores: 1

Research Context

Corner stores have long been investigated as potential sites for increasing food access in underserved neighborhoods. However, research has identified infrastructure barriers that prevent stores from realizing this potential. Infrastructure support can include equipment such as refrigeration, healthy food marketing signage, and displays. A 2013 feasibility study found that while residents expressed willingness to buy fresh produce from corner stores, store owners cited lack of infrastructure as a primary obstacle to stocking it³. Similarly, a case study of four corner store interventions found that engaging store owners required providing structural

improvements—including refrigeration and healthy food displays—that owners typically could not afford on their own⁴. Several studies have emphasized that supporting store owners in marketing healthy foods is an essential infrastructure component of successful healthy corner store initiatives^{3,5,6}.

Saba Grocers' tier system, which combines infrastructure improvements with stocking requirements, aligns with research supporting certification systems as a way to encourage and sustain healthy corner store changes⁴.

Collective Purchasing and Distribution

In addition to providing refrigeration units, Saba Grocers addresses the financial challenge small stores face in stocking produce. Since corner stores cannot access wholesale prices due to low-volume purchases, Saba Grocers leverages collective purchasing and distribution to make fresh produce more affordable for participating stores.

Collective purchasing and distribution work began with storing produce in a borrowed space in a San Francisco corner store and expanded when Saba Grocers acquired warehouse space in 2023. Furthering their positive economic and social impact, Saba Grocers purchases from California farms and prioritizes BIPOC-ownership.

Over \$700,000 of produce distributed to Saba corner stores as of August 2025

Produce distributed to Saba stores in 2020: \$16,440

Produce distributed to Saba stores in 2024: \$200,000

"I am a small business owner, and the business has been difficult, especially under the pandemic. As we are recovering, Saba has brought accessible fresh fruits and vegetables to my stores at affordable prices and good quality..." - Essai Tlaib

Research Context

A feasibility study regarding healthy corner store initiatives found that a common barrier to stocking produce was the difficulty of purchasing wholesale produce on a small scale, a barrier that Saba Grocers addresses through collective purchasing and distribution³. A healthy corner store intervention pilot program in Washington DC similarly provided distribution of produce at wholesale prices to participating stores⁵. However, this distribution service was only available during the pilot period, leading the authors to suggest the creation of "Corner Store Networks" to sustain collective purchasing at wholesale prices.

Fresh 5x Program

Beginning in October 2022, Saba added a program that provides \$5 of produce for every \$1 of SNAP benefits spent on fruits and vegetables at Saba Grocers' corner stores. Any SNAP recipient is eligible to enroll in Fresh5x at a participating corner store. When a Fresh5x participant purchases produce with their SNAP benefits, the sale amount is multiplied by five and deposited into the participant's account. Fresh5x incentives can be redeemed to purchase produce at any time at a participating store.

"The Fresh5x program has helped my business. It helps grow the fruits and vegetables section. Our sales tripled since joining the program, and it's still growing. And it's definitely beneficial for our customers by letting them try something new they've never had before. I recommend all the stores do it." -Ammar Tlaib, store owner, Jalisco Market

Over \$570,000 worth of fresh produce provided to participants since 2022

94% redemption rate

900 residents enrolled in the program

81% of participants rated their experience with Fresh5x as positive or very positive

Average produce purchase grew from \$18.00 in 2022 to \$40.00 in 2025

In a small-sample GusNIP evaluation (2023-2024), participants who used the program for six months or more reported greater food security compared to those who participated for less than six months.

Research Context

Investigation of programs that incentivize the purchase of produce for SNAP recipients has shown promise for great impact, both in terms of increased produce purchasing and consumption as well as wider economic benefits. In one study, fruit and vegetable vouchers distributed to SNAP recipients

increased sales at fresh markets in New Orleans and 89% of participants reported an increased consumption of fruits and vegetables⁷. Another SNAP incentive program that offered an additional \$40 per month of fruit and vegetable purchases resulted in a more than \$24 per month per participant increase in fresh produce purchases compared to baseline⁸.

A 2021 economic analysis quantified the impact of healthy food incentives on local economies. One intervention investigated was the San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) Double Up Food Bucks program, which provides funds to match SNAP purchases of California grown produce. The analysis found that SPUR's program, implemented at small community retailers in Santa Clara County, provided 1.6x economic benefit, or \$1.60 benefit to the local economy with each dollar invested⁹. As Saba's Fresh5x program similarly focuses on small community retailers and offers a 500% match in produce purchases, there is the possibility for an even greater economic benefit of the program.

Discussion and Future Directions

Program impact and alignment with literature

A 2012 review of healthy corner store interventions found that most trials that showed positive impact used a multipronged approach, including fresh food infrastructure, stocking, and behavioral interventions such as marketing and consumer education¹⁰.

Research documents many examples of Healthy Corner Store Initiatives as well as various interventions that use SNAP benefits to incentivize fresh produce purchasing. However, few interventions have taken Saba Grocers' approach of pairing healthy corner store infrastructure, produce distribution, and incentivized produce purchases for SNAP participants. One notable example was a Washington DC pilot program that worked with

corner stores to provide produce and healthy foods while offering a 100% match for fresh produce SNAP purchases and acting as a distributor. Evaluation revealed that 77% of surveyed participating shoppers reported increased consumption of fruits and vegetables⁵.

Situating Saba Grocers' work among the literature, several factors stand out as likely strengthening the organization's longevity and impact. The nonprofit has a strong history of community organizing and advocacy, with relationships with store owners present since before the official creation of Saba Grocers. Strong relationships with store owners and sensitivity to community needs have been found to be important factors in predicting success of a healthy corner store intervention.

Beyond food access improvements, Saba Grocers has generated significant local economic impact. According to the USDA Local Impact Food Calculator¹¹, the program has contributed approximately \$5.6 million to the local economy since its 2020 inception.

"this program allows me to get a more vitamin rich diet. I can now because of this program have fresh fruit and vegetables with every meal and it is making such an improvement in my overall health, that it is amazing. This program has done something more than feed us, it has changed our environment, where the program resides...that store went from selling tobacco products, t-shirts and everything unhealthy to now it has become our crown jewel of the neighborhood... We love it, now we get to eat blueberries, papayas, strawberries and mangos instead of smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, swishers, beer and chips" -Tyra Richburg, Fresh5x recipient testimony in the City of Oakland legislation hearing

Sustainability and future directions

Saba Grocers has outlined plans for both operational sustainability and program expansion. To ensure long-term viability, the organization plans to transition its distribution service to a community-owned cooperative owned by resident shoppers, store clerks, and farmers—a model that could strengthen community investment while reducing nonprofit operational burden.

The program's growth potential is significant—Oakland alone has 128 SNAP-accepting convenience stores, suggesting substantial room for expansion beyond the current 14 participating stores. Saba Grocers plans to reach 50 East Bay stores within five years.

Several contextual factors have supported the program's development and could create positive conditions for expansion. The availability of soda tax revenue prompted the founders to organize and advocate for its allocation to food access initiatives, securing startup funding for the nonprofit.

Additionally, Saba's approach aligns well with Oakland's policy priorities. The Environmental Justice element of the City's General Plan 2045² acknowledges that "existing convenience stores, dollar stores, corner stores, or gas station markets often provide the only retail food options in some areas of the city". The plan specifically endorses initiatives that include "financial incentives, promotion and marketing, infrastructure investment (e.g., purchasing new refrigeration units or display stands), and produce supply chain development"—precisely the elements of Saba's model.

Future research

While substantial program data has been collected through point-of-sale systems and funder evaluations, further analysis could illuminate usage patterns and long-term impacts. More broadly, the field would benefit from research examining the scalability of comprehensive models of healthy corner store modifications and studies comparing which combinations of interventions work best.

Saba's interest in expanding to other cities also presents additional research opportunities to study which components transfer successfully across different contexts and what local conditions are necessary for replication.

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