



## Creating Policy, Systems, Environmental Change: Highlighting Healthy Retail Options in Fresno County

### Intervention Summary

Located in the San Joaquin Valley, Fresno County is the sixth largest county in California and is one of the fastest growing and most diverse populations in the state. Unfortunately, 25% of the County's population lives below the poverty line and 21% of residents overall, and 34% of children in the County are food insecure. Healthy food access specifically is an issue for many Fresno County residents. This is a concern because research suggests that accessibility to healthy food is an important factor to maintaining a healthy diet and preventing chronic conditions such as heart disease, obesity, and some types of cancers.

In order to begin to address issues around access to healthy foods, and to empower communities to make healthy changes, the Fresno County Champions for Change Program, in partnership with the California Health Collaborative, has partnered with local retailers to support environmental improvements in stores in an effort to make healthy changes for the community.

**Healthy Checkout Aisles:** These aisles are implemented to reduce impulse purchasing of unhealthier foods and beverages that are traditionally located near the register, and create a family friendly environment for parents to shop with their children without the temptation of items high in sugar, salt and fat in the checkout area. Healthy Checkout Aisles are placed in stores in an effort to replace the unhealthy items with healthier snacks, making 'the healthy choice the easy choice'.

The Champions for Change program has now fully implemented and evaluated a Healthy Checkout Aisle at Gong's Market located at 1825 Academy Avenue in Sanger (more detail shared in 2014 success story). The aisle was officially unveiled in May 2014 and surveys were conducted before and after the aisle was opened to capture

how it was received and used by customers, as well as one year after to determine sustainability and continued interest.

A second Healthy Checkout Aisle has been incorporated into the newly opened State Foods Supermarket, located at 237 Academy Avenue in Sanger. The Healthy Checkout Aisle has been part of the store since the initial grand opening event in July 2015, where Champions for Change also had a food demonstration and ReThink Your Drink booth. Champions for Change staff are currently collecting surveys from store customers to evaluate the checkout aisle.

Key partnerships for the Healthy Checkout Aisles have been developed with store management, specifically the produce manager. The produce distributors to the stores, FreshKO Produce Services and OK Produce, have also been instrumental in assisting with the implementation of the checkout aisles as well as sharing expertise from other stores that have done similar work.

**Smarter Snacking Station:** These stations were developed because the Champions for Change staff noticed during food demonstrations and visits to small stores that customers were mainly purchasing alcohol, tobacco products, sugary drinks, and chips. The purpose of the Smarter Snacking Stations is to highlight healthier and low cost options and promote healthy snacks including fruits, vegetables, and water.

The first Smarter Snacking Station was implemented at Taha's Food Center, located at 2624 South Elm Avenue in Fresno. The station was unveiled in November 2014 with support from Champions for Change staff who had tables strategically placed within the store to deliver food demonstrations and gave virtual tours of the store to customers, as well as tables outside of the store where partner programs promoted different services in Fresno available to residents. Surveys and product inventory were collected before and after the unveiling to gauge awareness of the station and purchasing preferences.

An additional Smarter Snacking Station has been implemented at Fresno Community Market #2, located at 178 North Blackstone Avenue in Fresno. In May 2015, a ribbon cutting ceremony was held with the support of a representative from Senator Vidak's office and the market's produce manager. The event coincided with Fruit and Veggie Fest, highlighted the addition of the Smarter Snacking Station, and also displayed healthy message decals on the store floor leading to the produce area that promote water, eating fruits and vegetables, and being more physically active. Champions for Change are currently conducting follow-up surveys at this site to gather feedback from customers.

Developing relationships with store management and staff have been key for implementation of the Smarter Snacking Stations. The stores were instrumental in being able to provide the shelving units, and an important aspect to sustainability has been

working with staff to inform and educate them on how to properly restock and maintain their Smarter Snacking Station.

## **Description of Barriers Encountered and Identified or Proposed Solutions**

An early barrier to the Healthy Checkout Aisle at Gong's was the soda company branding of the existing refrigeration unit in the aisle; OK Produce provided a new refrigeration unit, resolving this issue. An additional barrier was low patron awareness of the healthy checkout lane, which has improved over time as indicated by the customer survey results presented below.

There have been issues with store staff incorrectly restocking the Smarter Snacking Station. Champions for Change staff continues to remind store management of which items are appropriate for the Smarter Snacking station, and how to restock.

With both of these methods, the business owner and management need to be fully supportive and on board for sustainability and success, which is why Champions for Change staff have taken their time in identifying the proper businesses to work with on these environmental improvements.

## **Evaluation Findings**

The Champions for Change team in Fresno County is working closely with the Sarah Samuels Center for Public Health Research and Evaluation (Samuels Center) to conduct assessments of the healthier aisles and stations and gather surveys from customers before and after implementation. The evaluation findings that are available to date from Gong's Market and Taha's Food Center are summarized below.

### ***Gong's Healthy Checkout Aisle***

To get an idea of the types and popularity of items sold in the Gong's Healthy Checkout Aisle, sales data from some of the items sold in the aisle were collected from January to August of 2014. The sales data tracked twenty-four items including snacks such as fruit cups and veggie/cheese packages, entrée salads, and one beverage – POM wonderful.

Prices of items in the Healthy Checkout Aisle were reasonable, with snacks having an average cost of \$0.94 and the entrée salads having an average cost of \$2.35. Among the more popular items were the Ready Pac Bistro Chicken Caesar Salad and the True Fruit – Cherry Cup. An evaluation conducted in 2014 before and after implementation of the Healthy Checkout Aisle found that across the items available in that aisle, sugar, fat, and sodium content decreased and fiber content increased after implementation, and the average price of items decrease slightly as well. A full, detailed analysis of items in the aisle before and after the Healthy Checkout was implemented is available in the 2014 success story.

In the summer of 2015, one year after full implementation of the Healthy Checkout Aisle, Champions for Change staff conducted follow-up surveys with store customers to gauge awareness of and gather feedback on the Aisle. A total of 52 surveys were conducted at follow up, and of those respondents, 62% (32) were familiar with the Healthy Checkout Aisle, which is a higher than 38% that reported they were aware of the aisle a year ago shortly after implementation.

Of those that were familiar with the Healthy Checkout Aisle, 64% said that they use the aisle sometimes and 32% said they use the aisle every chance they get. These numbers have shifted slightly from the 53% and 43%, respectively, reported a year ago but still indicate that nearly every respondent aware of the Aisle uses it.

When asked if the Healthy Checkout Aisle affects their choice to shop at Gong's, 50% of respondents at follow-up said it encourages them to shop there more, compared to only 25% that gave that response a year earlier. When asked for reasons why customers use the Healthy Checkout Aisle, responses were similar to those reported a year ago with "shorter lines/convenience" and "to avoid kids asking for sweets/junk food" as the most common reasons. The most common item respondents reported purchased from the Healthy Checkout Aisle was bananas at both points in time. Nearly all of the respondents both at follow up (96%) and a year earlier (97%) reported they are very or somewhat satisfied with the addition of the Healthy Checkout Aisle to Gong's.

The follow up survey findings show that more customers are aware of the Aisle than they were a year ago and it encourages some clients to shop at Gong's. Those that are aware of the aisle use it regularly and are satisfied with its offerings. The efforts of Gong's Market in collaboration with Champions for Change have been sustained and are now a permanent, positive feature in the market.

### ***Taha's Smarter Snacking Station***

Samuels Center conducted an assessment of items available at that specific location in Taha's Food Center before and after the Smarter Snacking Station was implemented. There were 16 items sold at the Smarter Snacking Station, compared to 13 before the change. Chips and cookies were removed and fresh fruit was added, along with packages of unsalted nuts and trail mix. The items offered before and after the implementation are summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1: Items sold before and after implementation of Taha’s Smarter Snacking Station*

	<b>Before SSS</b>	<b>SSS</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Baked chips</b>	1	1	2
<b>Chips (including tortilla chips, pork skins, potato chips)</b>	8	1	9
<b>Cookies</b>	2	0	2
<b>Crackers, pretzels, and popcorn</b>	0	4	4
<b>Fresh fruits and vegetables</b>	0	3	3
<b>Seeds and nuts</b>	1	3	4
<b>Snack mix and other snacks</b>	1	2	3
<b>Trail mix</b>	0	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>29</b>

A nutritional analysis of the items in the Smarter Snacking showed some promising improvements. Although the average amount of calories did not decrease substantially (from 140 to 133), the highest caloric items such as cookies were removed from the snack station, and were replaced by nutrient dense nuts. There were also significant reductions in the sodium content and average fat content in the items in the station. There was an increase in overall fiber, and an increase in sugar, but this came from the availability of more fresh fruits.

Fifteen shoppers were surveyed at Taha’s to gather feedback on the Smarter Snacking Station. For those shoppers, price and taste were the most important factors in choosing a snack; nutrition was a close third. Six of the fifteen (40%) were familiar with the Smarter Snacking Station, and five of those six had purchased an item from the station. Four of the six were very or somewhat satisfied with the station and said the reason they purchased from the station was because of the healthfulness of the products offered.

**Success**

Overall the Healthy Checkout Aisles and Smarter Snacking Stations have been successful. Customer surveys show many customers are aware of the improvements and have high rates of satisfaction with the items offered. Based on observations and feedback from the stores, healthy items are being purchased and restocked regularly. The successful partnership of the Champions for Change program and the retail locations show the potential for public-private collaboration to increase healthy options for County residents and contribute to statewide and national work to move the dial toward making the healthy option the default option.

Another benefit of this work is that it has started a movement of health and wellness throughout the store. For instance, it influenced some storeowners and employees to make strides to improve their own health and to post more health promotional materials throughout the store.

The implementation of the Healthy Checkout Aisle has also generated media coverage. The Sanger Scene (which has a viewership of over 500) and the Sanger Herald both wrote articles about the unveiling of the Healthy Checkout Aisles. Additionally, one of the food distributors, OK Produce, has started implementing healthy checkout aisles in other grocery chains across the state where they provide produce, for example at Grocery Outlet in San Diego.

## **Future Directions/Sustainable Success**

The healthy retail work that began in Fresno County in 2014 has grown over the past year and continues to develop and expand environmental changes including these upcoming plans:

- Champions for Change plan to continue to implement Smarter Snacking Stations in smaller corner stores and is working to also place one in a Boys and Girls Club.
- State Foods in Parlier will be having their grand opening in 2016, which will include a Healthy Checkout Aisle, and Champions for Change will continue to work with State Foods locations countywide to provide food demonstrations, educational tabling, and other technical assistance as needed.
- Gong's Market plans to expand more checkout aisles to have healthier offerings; as they stated, it is not only a benefit to the community, but a profitable business decision.

Working with individuals on the ground with a passion for improving their local community makes a difference in implementing the healthy retail initiatives. It is important to gauge the attitudes of the storeowners and staff towards health and find those wanting to become champions for health. It is also important to make small changes and celebrate successes to build trust with those involved. Strong relationships with storeowners, staff, and produce distributors are critical to success of the healthy retail and environmental changes.

## Contact information about this Narrative

**Local Health Department Grant Name:** Fresno County Champions for Change

**Grant #:** 13-20524

**Author's Name:** Karen Ard & Mariah Lafleur

**Phone:** (559) 244-4544

**Email:** [kard@healthcollaborative.org](mailto:kard@healthcollaborative.org)

This material was produced by the California Department of Public Health's Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Branch with funding from USDA SNAP-Ed, known in California as CalFresh. These institutions are equal opportunity providers and employers. CalFresh provides assistance to low-income

households and can help buy nutritious food for better health. For CalFresh information, call 1-877-847-3663. For important nutrition information, visit [www.CaChampionsForChange.net](http://www.CaChampionsForChange.net).