

Filling Boston's Food Deserts With Healthier Options

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You've probably heard a lot recently about "food deserts" – neighborhoods with plenty of fast food, but not a decent grocery store in sight. Public health advocates say the lack of healthy food options in some neighborhoods is partly fueling the increase in chronic diseases such as diabetes and childhood obesity. But in two Boston neighborhoods, local groups are working to provide healthier options. Here's a closer look at some of the fresh alternatives in Roxbury's Dudley Square and Dorchester's Bowdoin-Geneva.

Roxbury resident Phyllis Janey comes to the Dudley Town Common farmers market almost every week – largely because there are few options here.

"Except for Stop & Shop supermarket and a few small stores, it's hard to get anything fresh."

Janey says finding good fruits and vegetables in her neighborhood is a challenge. That's why the non-profit Food Project launched the Dudley farmers market years ago.

"This is convenient; I can walk to my house from here."

While fresh produce is hard to come by, the USDA does not consider Roxbury's Dudley neighborhood a so-called food desert – areas that lack healthy and affordable food options. But that misses an important point, says Harry Smith of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

"If you overlaid the lack of car ownership onto the data that they use for Census and tracking grocery stores, I think you would say this is not a very accessible place to get food."

Smith adds that proximity to fresh produce is only one side of the food desert problem.

"Fifty percent of the families in the Dudley neighborhood make \$25,000 a year or less, so you try to put together a food budget for your family on \$25,000 a year or less and you cover rent and everything else, that's a real challenge. So you can see why families might just grab something cheaper."

And statistics bear that out -- compared to Boston as a whole, Dudley residents suffer higher rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. A survey by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative found that over a third of neighborhood children were getting barely two vegetables servings a week. But Smith says local residents want to do better.

"Second to grocery stores, most people were getting their food from convenience or fast food stores, but at the same time when they were asked what kinds of stores do they wanna see, only three percent said fast food stores, so there's kind of this disconnect."

"That's a need that farmers markets can help fill – at least for part of the year -- says Grantley Payne. He manages a weekly market in Dorchester's Bowdoin Geneva neighborhood."

"Today, we had somebody come by and he was pointing out how, in his home country, everyday you would go to the market, so that basically that's what they do. We're just trying to go back to what traditionally people used to do."

The Bowdoin Geneva market has been around for five years. Like the market in Dudley, the food for sale here comes from nearby farms – and a focus on affordability is a big part of its success.

"This market here wouldn't do half as well without the benefits I described, like the EBT, the WIC coupons, senior coupons."

By using public benefits, Phyllis Janey says she can buy twice as much as food at the Dudley market – and local food marts and convenience stores can't match the quality.

"Unless they can count on a quick turnover, the food's not gonna stay fresh long. This, I can count on coming right from a farm and I know it's gonna be here."