



American  
Heart  
Association.

# Innovative Partnership Increases Access to Healthy Food and Supports Regional Food Production

*Heart REACH El Paso – CDC Success Story*

## At a Glance

Texas' El Paso County is underserved by supermarkets, with 27 fewer locations than it needs according to a recent study<sup>1</sup>, resulting in decreased access to healthy food. This issue is exacerbated in lower-income neighborhoods, which are categorically underserved. The American Heart Association (AHA) worked with Desert Spoon Food Hub to expand access to healthy foods by opening a grocery storefront in its new distribution center located in the underserved Rio Grande neighborhood of central El Paso. The AHA, through its Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-funded REACH initiative, assisted Desert Spoon to become a SNAP and WIC retailer by funding Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) equipment compatible with a point-of-sale (POS) system, and supported marketing and education efforts to raise awareness about healthy foods made accessible to local low-income communities.

### Public Health Challenge

About 20% of El Paso County's population – some 160,000 residents, including 52,000 children – are living in areas with limited supermarket access, or food deserts, according to a 2017 report by the Food Trust: Food for Every Child – Access and Demand for Healthy Food in the Paso del Norte Region<sup>1</sup>. As a result, residents in underserved areas must travel long distances to obtain healthy food or rely on mom and-pop shops, convenience stores or other small food retailers with limited healthy options.

Limited access to healthy food has consequences, with studies showing that residents of communities without a local grocery store experience disproportionately high rates of obesity, diabetes and other diet-related health problems.

A lack of nearby grocers is just one challenge. Food insecurity affects a significant portion of this Texas community, with over 26% of children living in food-insecure homes<sup>1</sup>.

While investing in supermarkets selling high quality, healthy and affordable foods in underserved communities may help combat obesity by removing some barriers to maintaining a healthy diet, the report underscores the importance of marketing and education to build demand and awareness, as well as increasing enrollment in SNAP and programs that incentivize purchases healthy foods.

About 21 percent of the population in El Paso county– where 82.4 percent of the population is Hispanic and 3 percent are Black or African American <sup>2</sup> – lives below the poverty line, and about 22 percent of households are SNAP recipients. <sup>3</sup>

### Approach

In March 2019, AHA partnered with Desert Spoon Food Hub, a non-profit working to increase food availability within communities and expand market opportunities for local growers in a project that targeted nutrition systems within a built environment.

“

*Expanding access to healthy food for low-income residents promotes better health outcomes while supporting local growers, nurturing a sense of community where further education about using fresh produce as part of a maintaining a healthy diet is possible.*

”

**-Adriana Clowe, Director of Operations,  
Desert Spoon Food Hub**

Desert Spoon sold farm-to-consumer produce boxes, connecting growers from New Mexico and Texas to customers in an area comprising 10 zip codes in El Paso and Los Cruces, New Mexico, but was unable to reach residents in the immediate community of their operations in the Rio Grand neighborhood of central El Paso, an existing food desert.

Using funding from El Paso County's Health Food Financing Initiative, Desert Spoon added a grocery storefront to its distribution center.

At least 50 percent of the new grocery concept's inventory meets healthy food criteria, including an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables produced by local and regional grocers.

AHA REACH helped Desert Spoon bridge key barriers to serving the low-income residents in the surrounding community by funding Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) equipment compatible with the food hub's point-of-sale (POS) system, enabling it to serve Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program participants. Additionally, the new system enables Desert Spoon to accept EBT transfers through its mobile produce delivery service, further expanding accessibility of healthy food in the community. AHA REACH also supported marketing and education of SNAP and WIC programs within the low-income community, healthy food promotion through events and in-store signage. Increasing access to SNAP and WIC recipients provides low-income families greater access to healthier food options, reduces food insecurity, and improves health.

## Results

Located in an under-resourced area, Desert Spoon Food Hub's grocery storefront will provide access to healthy food within a one-mile radius for more than 14,840 people in the low-income community.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the new EBT

technology connected to Desert Spoon's point-of-sale system will enable mobile payments by SNAP participants, extending access to healthy foods to communities throughout the delivery service footprint

## Sustaining Success

Previously operating online and limited to delivery service, the new retail storefront provides a community touchpoint to educate and raise awareness about the connection between diet and health. Desert Spoon plans to help customers learn how to use local produce as part of a healthy diet through customer interaction and programming such as in-store cooking demonstrations, classes and community dinners.

Desert Spoon Food Hub will continue to increase access to healthy foods by exploring additional programs that help SNAP recipients stretch their dollars further to bring home more locally grown fruits and vegetables.



**Contact information: [ElPasoTX@heart.org](mailto:ElPasoTX@heart.org)  
Learn more at [heart.org/en/affiliates/texas/el-paso](http://heart.org/en/affiliates/texas/el-paso)**

### References:

1. Manon M, Ramos A, Young C, Lang B, Whigham L, Redelfs A, Gallinar J. Food for every child: Access and demand for healthy food in the Paso del Norte region. *The Food Trust*. 2017. [http://thefoodtrust.org/uploads/media\\_items/paso-del-norte-report.original.pdf](http://thefoodtrust.org/uploads/media_items/paso-del-norte-report.original.pdf). Published 2017. Accessed on June 23, 2020.
2. American Community Survey 2014-2018 ACS 5-Year Data Profile. Census.gov. <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/data-profiles/>. Updated 2012. Accessed June 23, 2020.
3. American Community Survey 2013-2017 ACS 5-Year Data Profile. Census.gov. <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/data-profiles/>. Updated 2012. Accessed June 23, 2020
4. Missouri Census Data Center. Circular Area Profiles — ACS [dataset application]. Missouri.edu. <http://mcdc.missouri.edu/applications/capsACS.html>. Updated February 2020. Accessed June 24, 2020.