

## From the Corner Store to Citywide Policy

### The Food Guardians Advocate for a Healthy San Francisco

If you can understand a person's perspective, you can work with them to create change.

It's this philosophy that motivates the work of the Food Guardians – Kenneth Hill, Jazz Vassar and Antonia Williams – a trio of Bayview Hunters Point residents with a mission to bring healthy food to their community. And it's a philosophy that has led to unprecedented change in the food environment in this historically underserved San Francisco neighborhood – change that has rippled outward to make a difference in citywide policy.

The Food Guardians came about through the Southeast Food Access (SEFA) working group, a collaborative with partners from the city's public health department and community-based organizations. "We wanted to bring the voice of the community to the table in a meaningful way, to impact policy," says California Convergence member Christina Goette of the San Francisco Department of Public Health. "We also knew that neighborhood residents could bring the message of healthy food to the community better than we could." Initially, the Food Guardians worked only two hours a week; it was when a Kaiser Permanente HEAL Zone grant enabled SEFA to create full-time, benefited jobs that the program really took off.

Among the perspectives the Food Guardians have worked to understand is that of corner store owners in Bayview Hunters Point, who used to stock mostly alcohol, soda and candy. What little fresh produce they did offer was often hidden in the back of the store, neglected until it was

thrown out. But as some of the most accessible retail outlets in the neighborhood, these corner stores presented an opportunity.

The Food Guardians set about conducting research to assess what was sold in each neighborhood store. Then they offered feedback to store owners, and learned what barriers the owners faced in selling healthy food – from inadequate refrigeration and difficulty accessing wholesale produce, to a belief that healthy food wouldn't sell. Next, they worked to overcome these barriers, one-by-one – offering technical assistance from a grocery consulting firm and connections to produce markets. Equally important, the Food Guardians encouraged the community to come out and support the changing stores by buying their fruits and vegetables, and asking their friends and neighbors to do the same.

The end result: two renovated grocery stores that now stock affordable fresh produce, and a third in the works. The stores will soon be hosting cooking demonstrations and nutrition education classes to engage the community in healthy purchasing and cooking.

"It was really powerful to see store owners willing to change their business model to bring in the good stuff," says Food Guardian Kenneth. "It was powerful to see they want to help the community."

This commitment to understanding others' perspectives has helped the Food Guardians have an impact citywide as well. As part of a campaign to pass a citywide ordinance limiting

corporate marketing of unhealthy food, the Food Guardians worked to educate parents about how the fast food industry targets children. For Food Guardian Antonia, her proudest moment during this campaign was finding herself on stage at a San Francisco high school, debating a representative from McDonald's.

Among the audience members at the debate were teens who were either already parents, or were pregnant. Antonia understood the perspective of many of these students going into the debate: "They're young parents, they're exhausted and they don't have much money, and at the end of the day they just want to do something to make their kid happy," Antonia says. "So they go to McDonald's for a Happy Meal." Antonia helped the students to understand how major corporations intentionally market to children, and explained the negative health impacts of fast food. At the end of the debate, she says, it was very clear the students had come around to her point of view.

Thanks to outreach efforts such as these, the ordinance passed. The Food Guardians' efforts to link local work to policy change continue. They're currently supporting the citywide Healthy Retail Incentive ordinance, which would offer incentives for store owners to stock healthy food.

It's been a long path, says Christina, and at every step the Southeast Food Access working group is refining the way they work to link community voices with policy change. At a recent California Convergence meeting, Christina says, "I was happy to see other city and county collaborations going down the same path. Through California Convergence, I know we can all learn from each other and have a greater impact across the state."

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