

Policy Recommendation- Support Healthy Vendors

Food carts selling a variety of healthy, ready-to-eat foods can be a key player in Chicago's plans to promote healthy lifestyles, combat obesity, and eliminate food deserts. Food carts are a visible, vibrant part of their communities, they are eco-friendly, and their low start-up costs allow them to sell food affordably. Chicago needs to legalize these vendors as a first step. But how can it promote healthy food vending? By providing healthy food vendors with resources, information, and incentives, the City can encourage vendors to choose healthy menus, strengthen healthy vending businesses so they succeed, and trigger more healthy purchases from food carts. Good for business and good for health!

Current situation:

- Healthy sidewalk vending is essentially banned. Carts are allowed to sell only whole, uncooked produce or frozen desserts.
- Some vendors sell inexpensive, familiar foods illegally (some healthy like sliced mango, some unhealthy like Flamin' Hot Cheetos).
- Other potential vendors are discouraged from starting the businesses of their dreams. Examples include Bridgeport Pasty, which bought a trike to sell savory pies, The Yogurt Pedaler, who wished to sell hand-made yogurt from a bicycle, and a mobile salad bar entrepreneur.

Proposal:

- Chicago could develop an innovative approach to supporting healthy vending that builds on successful corner store initiatives nationwide.
- The City could partner with community organizations like CLOCC and the IJ Clinic to provide resources to healthy vendors so they could successfully market healthy foods.
- Healthy vendors could be eligible for exclusive business coaching, marketing materials, attractive carts, or appealing umbrellas, for example. This assistance would make it easier for healthy vendors to draw customers.
- The City could target its investments strategically if, when, and where healthy vendors needed a boost.

Why not legalize only healthy vendors?

- It is extremely difficult to define healthy foods in a way that is simple for vendors and city employees (including police) to apply, but is also inclusive and culturally sensitive. A simple rule may ban the most innovative or unusual vendors even though they are healthy. An inclusive rule could be so complicated that people need to be nutritionists to apply it.
- Vendors need flexibility to meet customer demands and succeed. If they cannot design viable businesses, they will not sell any foods, including healthy foods.
- The city would be placing a limitation on low-income business owners that it does not place on wealthier business owners who can afford trucks or brick-and-mortar businesses.
- The legal healthy vendors might face competition from illegal unhealthy vendors who do not have the compliance costs and can actually serve customers at a lower cost.

Impact:

- Vendors would have incentives to design healthy menus, healthy vendors would be more likely to succeed and grow, and customers would be more likely to purchase healthy foods.