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Cooking in WHA's healthy kitchen *Westside Health Authority offers free culinary classes*

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For Austin resident Velma Williams, preparing a salad doesn't mean lettuce, tomatoes and cucumber-it means a car, a bus or a train.

"I am absolutely appalled that when I go into a store here there still aren't fresh fruits and vegetables routinely being offered in this community," she said. "It's very frustrating that I have to travel to get such basic things. We have to make these things available closer to us."

Williams is one of nearly 400,000 Chicagoans who live in food deserts- neighborhoods with few or distant grocery stores but an abundance of fast food restaurants. In the last year the number of people living in food deserts decreased by 40 percent, according to a study released on Monday by the Mari Gallagher Research Consulting Group. But the study confirmed that many food deserts still exist in the city's west and south sides.

Despite recent efforts to bring more healthy food options onto the West Side, Williams, a 30-year Austin resident, says her community's food desert status is still very real.

"About six months ago I was so angry that I said 'you know what, I'm just going to start making healthy meals in my own kitchen and start offering them out.' There is such a dire need for that here," Williams said.

But the Westside Health Authority beat her to the punch.

The organization has opened its own community kitchen in Austin, where residents can come to learn how to prepare healthy meals on a low-income budget. In the upcoming months, the kitchen will offer free cooking classes to area residents using ingredients purchased from stores in Austin and surrounding communities.

"We're using chefs that are more community-oriented," said Cody McSellers-McCray, director of health promotions for the Westside Health Authority. "They go out and buy the ingredients in Austin on a confined budget and then let residents know about more resources available to them out in the community."

Jonathan Currie, who lives in Humboldt Park and works in Austin, has been hard-pressed to find healthy options close by that fit his budget. He's hopeful the community kitchen in Austin will educate residents and local officials alike.

"It's more than just the presence of the community kitchen here," Currie said. "It's a way for us to create advocacy around these issues that we think about but don't really know how to address. It's a good launching point."

Organizers at the community kitchen are also telling participants to put their money where their mouths are-quite literally. They are encouraging residents to purchase goods only at local stores that offer healthy options.

"There's this misconception in urban communities that people only want unhealthy foods," McSellers-McCray said. "Storeowners think this is what they like because this is what they buy. No, this is what they buy because this is what's available."

Residents say that demanding more of storeowners is the path to improvement.

"If enough people come through the stores, ask for these things and actually purchase them, that's where we're going to see the change happen," Williams said. "It's going to take some time before we start to see a difference. We have a long way to go, but these efforts are so encouraging."

To learn more

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