



1 Grain to 1000 Grains

COMMUNIDAD MERCADO (CoMER)

CASE STUDY | 2015

THE NEED: HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

The community around Siena Youth Center and the St. Francis Center in North Fair Oaks is one of the lowest income areas of Redwood City. Facing financial constraints, many families shop at outlet stores that offer limited selection of healthy food. Families note the fruits and vegetables at many local stores are low quality and expensive. This puts a demand on their household resources and forces many families to purchase inexpensive, unhealthy foods. In initial surveys, conducted by 1 Grain to 1000 Grains, residents reported wanting greater access to a wider variety of healthy food.



After meeting bi-weekly for three months, a detailed plan was in place for bringing healthy and fresh food options at affordable prices to their close-knit North Fair Oaks community.

THE SOLUTION: COMMUNITY-ORGANIZED ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS

In response to this need, 1 Grain to 1000 Grains proposed Comunidad Mercado (CoMer), a community-based buying club that would source fresh fruits and vegetables directly from local and regional CA certified farmers.

1 Grain to 1000 Grains strives to improve the health and economic vitality of families in underserved communities by empowering them with knowledge, tools, resources and confidence for healthful living.

A CoMer Planning Team, comprised of the leadership of 1 Grain to 1000 Grains and parents of youth participating in Siena Youth Center programs, collaborated in designing the buying club, and setting price points and exploring distribution methods.

During 2014/15 winter season, as planning progressed in the community, 1 Grain to 1000 Grains proceeded to establish relationships with farmers that allowed it to purchase farm-fresh produce at wholesale prices, delivered at no cost to local farmer's markets. Where possible, slightly blemished fruit, with first-quality flavor, was purchased in order to support farmers and help reduce food waste, while providing low-cost fresh produce to CoMer members.

With community support and sourcing arrangements in place, the Comunidad Mercado pilot project launched in March, 2015. Fresh vegetables and fruits were delivered to the Siena Youth Center where they were sorted into boxes (one for each member of the buying club) by volunteers from the CoMer membership.

Initially managed by the 1 Grain to 1000 Grains, the long-term goal has been to increasingly engage members in the management of Comunidad Mercado.



THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS: COLLABORATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT!

CoMer launched with 20 families committed to purchasing the biweekly box of produce with membership growing to 33 in just one month. The purchase price for participating families in this pilot phase was set at \$10 a box. CoMer became a social event where families joined cooking demonstrations and enjoyed new recipes, with families sharing their own food preparation ideas.

The success of this project was dependent on the strong collaboration between Siena Youth Center, 1 Grain to 1000 Grains, and community members. Siena Youth Center helped get families involved and offered space for meetings and distribution of boxes. 1 Grain to 1000 Grains launched CoMer by combining its own resources with seed money from the Get Healthy San Mateo County Community Implementation Funding. The CoMer Planning Team collected feedback from various members regarding the project and used the information to help make adjustments to the program as needed. The advisory group model also provided an opportunity for leadership development among participating parents. The project was so well received that families regularly volunteered to help.

CHALLENGES: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

The project quickly became over-subscribed with new membership requests. To promote health education and also maintain a manageable list of participants, new members were asked to complete the 8-week Healthy Lifestyles Program offered by 1 Grain to 1000 Grains at the Siena Youth Center. This program gave families a foundation for sustaining healthy changes once food access was improved through CoMer.

Some participants found it difficult to enjoy vegetables they were not familiar with. But with recipes and cooking demonstrations, people soon became more comfortable preparing these foods.

Participants also had limited storage at home to accommodate produce, so many ended up splitting their bi-weekly box with another family. This sharing option has helped CoMer maintain a core membership, and it has led some early members who were no longer participating to reengage with the buying club.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

All the families participating in the CoMer pilot program indicated increased consumption of produce, with 70% indicating a substantial increase. Participants indicated an interest to continue CoMer well past the pilot period. Based on this early success, 1 Grain to 1000 Grains and the Siena Youth Center were able to secure additional funding for CoMer from Kasier's Healthy Eating and Active Living Initiative to continue the project through mid-2016. Siena Youth Center was also granted funding by the Sequoia Healthcare District to support 1 Grain to 1000 Grains in delivering a series of Healthy Lifestyles community workshops. A small group of volunteers working with 1 Grain to 1000 Grains are exploring future funding and developing a plan to sustain CoMer over the long term.

To learn more about the CoMer project, visit the 1 Grain to 1000 Grains website www.1000grains.org.

