

INTRODUCTION

The Detroit store is one of approximately 70 independent grocery stores in the City of Detroit and is located on the city’s eastside, an area that has historically had limited healthy food access.

- The store has been a family-owned business for over 40 years and grew from a small store (11,000 sq. ft.), to a large supermarket (65,000 sq. ft.).
- The store is the lead developer for a commercial hub shopping center (**Figure 1**).
- Store mission: *“We pride ourselves in offering the best service, quality, and selection of products.”*

the Gleaners Community Food Bank and NFL Fuel Up to Play 60 to host community health programming such as healthy cooking classes and shopping on a budget for healthy foods.

Detroit’s eastside has a lower median income and higher poverty rates than the city overall, and households on the eastside have incomes \$20,000 less than the state average.¹ Detroit’s eastside also has high vacancy rates and the commercial corridor where the store is located includes numerous vacant lots and vacant buildings.

There are no other grocery stores on Detroit’s lower eastside except near the Downtown area. A handful of neighborhood blocks on Detroit’s eastside have seen a revival with new restaurants and significant residential and commercial development, but those are still quite a distance away from the store to have any impact.

The Detroit Store Timeline

DATE	DETAIL
1984	Opened in 11,000 sq. ft. store adjacent to a health clinic (Location #1)
1993	Moved into a 22,000 sq. ft. anchor spot of the newly built Riverbend Plaza (Location #2)
2011	Supported SNAP/EBT legislation for improved distribution of benefits
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purchased former food retail location (Location #3, current location) - Store offered Double Up Food Bucks as part of program pilot in grocery
2020	Coronavirus pandemic begins



Figure 1: The Detroit store from the outside.

Store Setting

The Detroit store was one of the first grocery stores in Michigan, to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/EBT) benefits. In Michigan, this program is called Double Up Food Bucks (DUFEB). The store also regularly works with

Methods	
Data Collection Tool	Number of Data Points
NEMS-S Short Form	4
Sales Recall	3
Staff In-Depth Interviews	9
News Articles	9
Other	Reports, photos, maps, peer debriefing

STORE OPERATIONS

Organizational Structure

The Detroit store is a for-profit, independently owned grocery store. The store was originally opened by the father of the current store owner, in a small building. The current store is the family’s third grocery store location and sits at over 65,000 sq. ft. The owners partnered with a developer to secure and develop a series of storefront businesses with the grocery store as the anchor business. The owner of the Detroit store also manages another store in a western suburb of Detroit while his father runs another grocer in a northern suburb of the city.²

There are currently 40 employees at the store with about 50% being residents of Detroit and 50% of the staff working part-time. Most part-time employees work 20-30 hours per week. Of the store staff interviewed for this case study (n=5) 80% were male, identified as Middle Eastern/Chaldean and were not residents of the surrounding community. The community surrounding the store are made up of residents who identify as African American/Black (78%), 15% have a bachelor’s degree and 35% identify as low income.¹

Store Features

The Detroit store has had a commitment to healthy food access since getting involved in the 2008 “Buy Local, East Fresh” campaign to encourage increased procurement and supply of fresh produce in local stores.³ The third and most recent store location has doubled the size of the fresh produce section in the store. When the store reopened at its third location it immediately became a Double Up Food Bucks partner store in just the second year of the grocery store pilot program.

Along with DUFEB, government food assistance program benefits are accepted including SNAP and WIC. The Detroit store also runs its own in-store loyalty card program to encourage repeat customers. has made healthy food retail a focus of their work, culminating in participating in legislative efforts to change the release of SNAP benefits to ease the burden on stores and customers in 2011. The store was also a featured store for the launch of the Detroit Great Grocer Project in March 2021.

Most recently, the store developed partnerships with the Michigan Secretary of State and City of Detroit to offer driver’s license and license plate services, as well as water and tax bill payment options within their store. They also added a kiosk for Boost Mobile to have an option to purchase cell phones and cellular service for their customers.

Food Stocking and Sales

The NEMS scores at the Detroit store remained high across all time points with very little fluctuation. The stability of scoring could reflect the level of commitment to the store mission of providing the “best service” and a “selection of products” (Table 2). The Healthy Food Index average also was high at 25.

TABLE 2: NEMS Scoring for Study Period

Category	Max Points	Avg. Score
TOTAL	47	28.5
Availability	25	23.5
Price	16	-2
Quality	6	6

*Based on default NEMS scoring minus the “frozen dinners” category

Store sales of healthy foods at the store remained the same at each time point assessed (Figure 2). Several customers reported an accessible, clean and welcoming produce section at the store.

The ability for the store to remain well stocked may also be related to the family's groups of food retail businesses that can work together to buy in bulk and shift product depending on demand. The only spikes in demand noted by the store manager were related to holidays and large sporting events, but unrelated to the pandemic or panic buying, although the store manager did mention having issues with keeping shelves stocked during the early parts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 2).

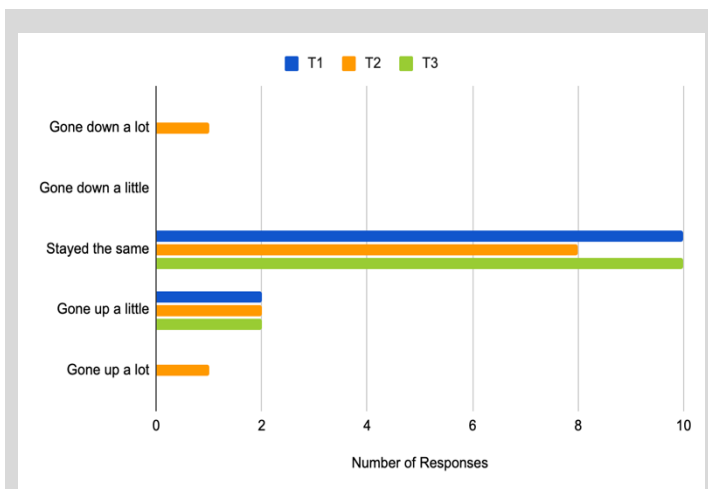


Figure 2: Change in Detroit Store sales since the pandemic

Vendor Relationships

The Detroit Store appears to have many vendors (>5) to service the various departments within the store. The staff that were interviewed all mentioned a variety of vendors, such as large distributors like SpartanNash and other smaller distributors like the local farmers market and farmers. Given the positive descriptions of the quality and variety of food items in the store as illustrated by the customers, the various types of vendors utilized by the store appears to align with their mission to provide the best quality products at the lowest price.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The community values the store and appreciates their focus on healthy food sales. They also described the store as facilitating convenience in grocery shopping by having a well-stocked and clean grocer within their neighborhood. The store also served as a COVID-19 vaccination site in collaboration with the Detroit Health Department. Customers reported satisfaction with being able to bring their families to the store to get their vaccination.

Customers also reported enjoying certain engaging aspects of the store such as a welcoming produce section, convenient location, and a clean environment. Great customer service was also key in community relations, and kept customers coming back to the store.

Other customers discussed a need for more community involvement from the store, especially in terms of lowering prices on their products and offering more WIC approved items for low-income customers. Some of the community residents had additional suggestions for increasing community engagement, such as implementing a member discount program for return customers, attending community events, and supporting youth activities.

STORE OPERATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The Detroit store was impacted by the drastic changes in the food supply chain after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the following operational changes were observed:

- The price of some food items had to be increased.
- Staff shortages which caused many of the staff to work overtime. The store had to shorten their hours and close on Sundays to give employees a break.
- The pandemic also caused some customers not to visit the store as often due cancellation of programming and nutrition education lessons.

Despite the staffing shortages, the store continued to offer a variety of quality healthy foods. Some store staff even mentioned gaining additional customers from the surrounding suburban communities right after the pandemic began as Detroit grocers were the only stores with stocked shelves at the time. They also had in demand items like toilet paper.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Generational ownership coupled with generational shoppers can make grocery stores a place where people who are not related feel like family; this influences the perspective of the owner/customer relationship
- Convenience, customer service, and cleanliness impact customer retention; this influences the perspective of the owner/customer relationship
- COVID-19 influenced the capacity of staff on a spectrum. Staff were both tired by the increased physical and emotional tax and also energized by the comradery and desire to serve community; this resulted in the store remaining closed on Sunday for a period of time

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Detroit store moved into its current location in 2014 – a 65,000 sq ft. space – in which the store is the primary vendor. The store is also located in an area of Detroit that is experiencing increased community development and population growth.

Conversations with store staff indicated a desire to remain in their current location and to connect more with the neighborhood residents and community organizations. The store is also a highlighted grocer for the Detroit Great Grocer Project, which will include promotion of the store by the Detroit Grocery Coalition and the GGP community-based partner organization for eastside Detroit, Eastside Community Network.

The store's participation in GGP will continuously improve their connections and collaborations with Eastside Community Network and resident customers within the community, which will only improve upon their success.

IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

The Detroit store is a key resource for the lower eastside community of Detroit. Many community residents commented on their convenience, consistent customer service and an abundance of high-quality healthy foods. Some customers did mention that pricing was a bit higher at the store when compared to large format supermarkets in the suburbs. When asked about this issue, store staff stated that they strive to provide the highest quality food products at the best prices they can. The store staff also consistently mentioned matching prices of items or selling items at a sale price if the customer requested it. This illustrates the store mission to offer quality products at a good price with the best customer service. The store can serve as a model for independent grocers to adequately serve low-income, limited food access communities successfully for a number of years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This case study is part of a seven-city series looking at how healthy food retail has been impacted by COVID-19 with funding support from RWJF Healthy Eating Research.

We thank partners from the Detroit Grocery Coalition, in particular the Detroit Food Policy Council, Fair Food Network and the Eastside Community Network. We also thank the staff and customers of the Detroit store and Wayne State University staff members, Alex B. Hill and Bree Bode for food retail assessment and data collection guidance, coordination, and analysis.

REFERENCES

1. United States Census. 2019. Michigan Quick Facts. Retrieved from:
https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?q=michigan+&page=1&stateGeo=none&searchtype=web&cssp=SERP&_charset_=UTF-8 on September 1, 2021.
2. “It Takes a Village.” Chaldean News. 2008.
https://issuu.com/chaldeannews/docs/cn0308_0172
3. “Buy Local, East Fresh” Campaign Targets Detroit Area Residents. Farm Progress. 2008.
<https://www.farmprogress.com/story-buy-local-eat-fresh-campaign-targets-detroit-area-residents-9-18706>