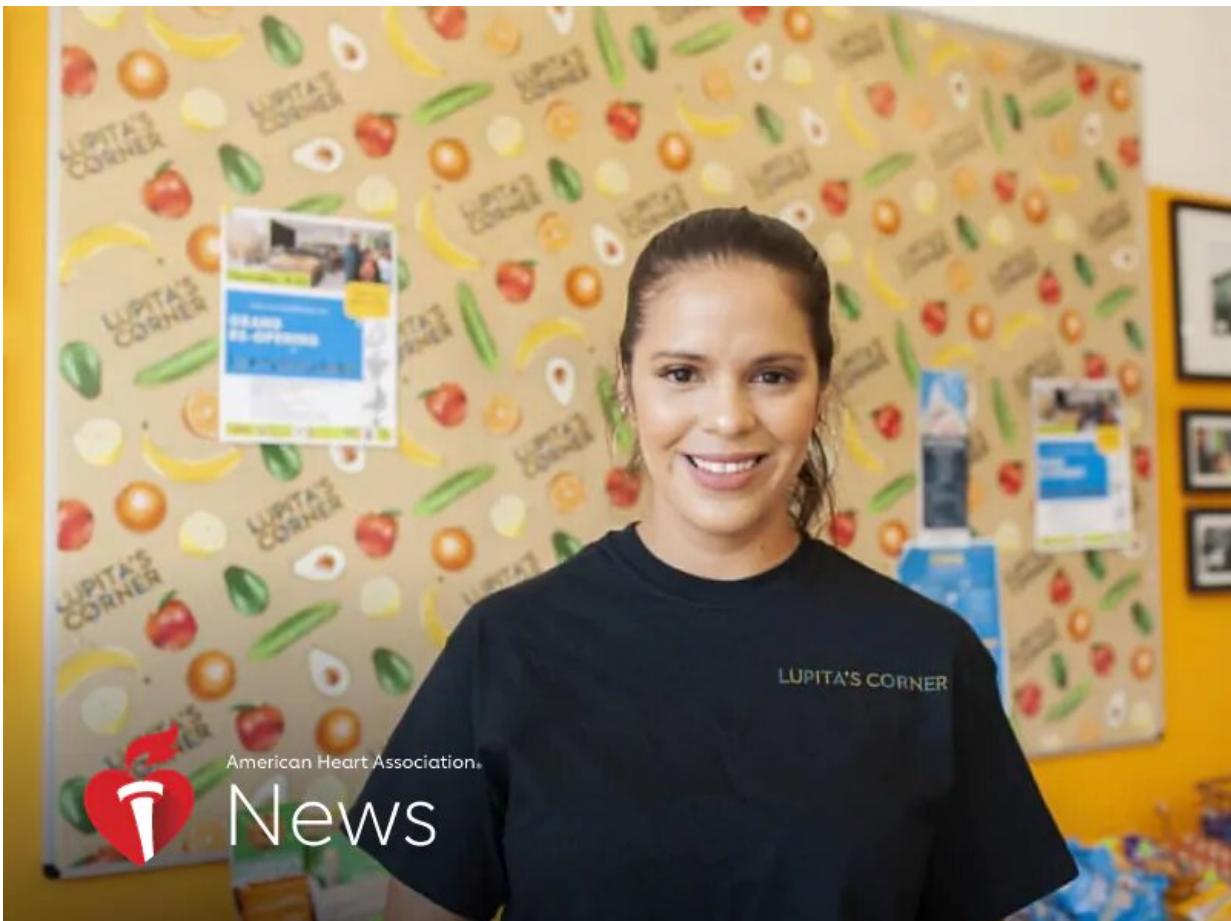


Mom and pop grocery shops get fresh help in the name of nutrition

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Luz Arango at her corner market in Los Angeles. Photo: Marina Quinonez-Reda

When Luz Arango was thinking of ways to refresh Lupita's Corner

Market, the shop her mother opened in 1993, the plans involved mostly painting, tidying up and rearranging.

"Most of our energy had always gone into the everyday basics of earning an income," said Arango, 32, who now co-owns the Los Angeles business with her twin brother, Raul Arango. "My mother was a single mom and an old-school entrepreneur. Small mom and pop shops have always done everything on their own."

That's how Lupita's had always operated – until they were approached by the Healthy Neighborhood Market Network, an innovative program run through the Los Angeles Food Policy Council. Not only does the city-funded nonprofit help small [market store](#) owners, especially minorities, bring in affordable, fresh and healthy food options, it provides economic and business development services to empower them financially and help keep businesses sustainable.

"When they told me they figure out ways for shops to be healthier food vendors and educate them on running their business, I told them, 'I'm in!'" said Arango, who spent much of her childhood at the store, which caters to the Westlake neighborhood's predominately Latino population.

Thanks in large part to Arango's commitment and enthusiasm, Lupita's was chosen to receive a full "transformation," the highest level of assistance the network gives to businesses. In her case, that meant assistance valued at about \$150,000, including free architectural and construction work. Changes included an overhauled storefront and interior, with all new signage, as well as training in healthy food services.

"They brought us our first-ever display case for fruits and vegetables, and helped us organize the shelving so healthier items are in front of customers," Arango said. "We're near a high school and elementary school, and I really want this to be a place where kids can come for

something good for them."

A chef is also helping Arango plan nutritious dishes for her deli.

Only one or two businesses a year get a full makeover, said Alba Velasquez, Healthy Neighborhood Market Network director. The program launched in 2013 with the goal of bringing in produce and healthy food options at small markets in underserved communities.

But program leaders soon realized the missing ingredient was financial stability of the stores. To address that challenge, the focus evolved to include a comprehensive business development program to give owners business and leadership skills.

Training and technical assistance covers such topics as merchandising, customer service, pricing and profitability, store design and training to accept payments through low-income assistance programs.

One of the biggest challenges is produce management, Velasquez said.

"There are a lot of small markets that have some produce, but don't know how to store it to keep it fresh and flavorful," she said. "Also, storeowners need to be able to sell the items at prices that aren't hugely marked up. We've been able to partner with a healthy snack distributor who has been able to help."

Velasquez said the Los Angeles Food Policy Council is reducing the number of stores it partners with each year from about 20 to 12 in order to give more individual assistance.

"Many organizations look primarily at access issues by bringing in fruits and vegetables but almost always ignore the store owner. But our program looks at store owners – supporting them to be community

leaders and engaging the voice of the store," Velasquez said.

She hopes the program can become a model for other cities nationwide.

That has been the case with Lupita's Market, said Arango, who credits the program with helping her keep the store intact and maintain the family legacy begun by her mother, Guadalupe Olague.

"One reason it's so important to support small markets is because the community has a connection with the [business](#)," she said. "We're providing a nicer place for our community. Just because people live in an underserved community doesn't mean they don't deserve quality."

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