

Student-led Mobility Initiative Tackles Food Deserts in Southern Dallas

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DALLAS (September 12, 2018) – In some places in southern Dallas, it's still difficult to come by a grocery store with fresh fruits and vegetables. While there has been progress, food insecurity in the area is well above the national average. It's an issue that students from UNT Dallas, in collaboration with Toyota, aim to tackle.

Beginning this school year, students from UNT Dallas will lead a mobility initiative to convert a low-emission bus — provided by DART — into a mobile food market. Supported by a \$268,000 grant from Toyota, the bus will sell fresh fruits and vegetables sourced from local community gardens to residents throughout southern Dallas. Along with funding the retrofit of the bus and scholarships for students, Toyota is also sharing its knowledge and expertise with students to help guide the effort.

“If we can help connect the community to fresh produce and healthy food, we can help fuel a young person's development, learning, and progress toward adult success,” said UNT Dallas biology professor Kelly Varga, whose work in a southern Dallas neighborhood gained the attention of Toyota as it seeks to advance its own mobility strategy. “The project nurtures social mobility through wholesome meaningful education and outreach.”

Currently, Dallas County is 20.6 percent food insecure, well above the national average of 14.9 percent. Moreover, food insecurity in children is a staggering 26.6 percent in Dallas County, above the national average of 22.4 percent.

“By bringing fresh, locally sourced produce directly into neighborhoods in southern Dallas, we can also spur business growth, support local gardens and uplift the community,” said Al Smith, group vice president, Toyota Social Innovation. “Through projects like this we can inspire new solutions and provide hands-on learning opportunities for students.”

DART is providing a compressed natural gas bus that will be converted to a mobile farmer's market to serve food-insecure communities in southern Dallas.

“DART, like UNT-Dallas and Toyota, is always looking for ways to do more to help the communities we serve. In this area, improving access to healthy food is one of those ways,” said Jesse D. Oliver, DART Deputy Executive Director. “We are pleased to work with them to provide a bus that will be converted to a mobile farmer's market filled with healthy food options.”

In addition to selling fresh produce, the program will also provide education on healthy living, professional development workshops among other opportunities.

Students will also get hands-on learning experience.

UNT Dallas Urban SERCH Institute and School of Business students will collaborate with the community and local farms to develop and launch the program – all supported through scholarships from Toyota and UNT Dallas.

Students will conduct a community assessment, create a strategy to source food, plan delivery routes that minimize emissions, and develop a business plan. Students from Cedar Valley Community College's Automotive Program will also participate in the initiative, helping to renovate and maintain the bus.

“Our future teachers, doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs and leaders are growing up in communities where nutritious vegetables and other foods are often out of reach,” UNT Dallas President Bob Mong said. “At UNT Dallas, our mission is to make a college education attainable regardless of economic background, and that starts by ensuring that our future students' pathway to success begins with access to healthy, fresh foods.”

The bus is expected to launch in the spring of 2019.