



Supporting Equitable Food Systems Through Food Assistance at Farmers' Markets

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The failure to consider access to food resources in an integrated way may lead to inequalities in nutritional opportunities among populations. Working with community groups and other public agencies, the San Francisco Department of Public Health has led interagency food system planning in San Francisco, California, since 2002. We report on one of the interventions within that initiative—a partnership between a public health agency, a local nonprofit organization, and the local food stamp program to institutionalize improved access to farmers' markets for federal food assistance beneficiaries. We further report on monitoring data collected at farmers' markets that documents significant and sustained increases of utilization by food stamp recipients since the initial intervention. (*Am J Public Health*. 2011;101:781-783. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2010.300021)

KEY FINDINGS

- Despite the growing popularity of farmers' markets nationally, limited market accessibility for recipients of federal food assistance program might increase disparities in nutritional opportunities for low-income Americans.
- Providing payment systems that accept federal food assistance benefits at markets can increase their utilization by food benefits recipients and increase revenues for farmers.
- Local governments—and especially health departments—may have significant opportunities to improve health equity by coordinating food system policy among diverse public agencies, nonprofit service providers, and low-income residents.

THE LACK OF ACCESS

to fresh produce is a common nutrition challenge for many low-income urban neighborhoods in which fast-food outlets and convenience stores dominate the food landscape, and poverty and lack of transportation limit access to more nutritious food resources.¹ In this context, neighborhood-based farmers' markets can provide substantial benefits to improve the economic and physical well-being of residents. Consumption of fruits and vegetables is sensitive to price,^{2,3} and farmers' markets may provide fresh produce that is tastier, less costly, and fresher than is the produce found in supermarkets and corner stores. Additionally, by bringing consumers to central market places in neighborhoods, farmers markets may encourage social interaction and support

greater social cohesion, and can also provide an important venue for preventive health services. Unfortunately, the recent increase in the number of farmers' markets has tended to disproportionately serve wealthier neighborhoods. Maximizing the potential of farmers' markets as a resource for health equity requires integrated planning between the public and private sector to promote market opportunities for farmers and remove the barriers to utilization among low income households.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO FARMERS' MARKETS

Proponents of food resource equity should be able to leverage federal food assistance programs to create viable economic conditions for nutritious food resources like farmers' markets; however, this means government food assistance programs must be designed with these multiple objectives in mind. In 1996, to save money and reduce fraud, as part of welfare reform the US Congress mandated that beneficiaries of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly the food stamp program) must receive their benefits via an electronic benefits transaction (EBT) system. Although nationally the shift to EBT has been

popular with program administrators and participants, the transition did not anticipate the needs of farmers' markets. For example, while there was a 200% increase in the number of farmers' markets in the United States between 1994 and 2009,⁴ by 2009 less than 18% of farmers' markets in the United States accepted EBT.^{5,6} In California, the nation's largest producer of fruits and vegetables, research found that only 14% of markets were located in low-income neighborhoods, and only 22% accepted EBT.⁷

Since 2002, the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) has led urban food policy and planning, including a number of structural interventions to advance and integrate the priorities of health, equity, and resource conservation.⁸ During the summer of 2002, staff from SFDPH and its community partner, San Francisco Food Systems, conducted in-depth interviews with city employees responsible for food assistance programs along with farmers' market operators and residents in several low-income communities. SFDPH found that the lack of EBT acceptance at farmers' markets was a substantial barrier to farmers' market utilization by low-income residents eligible for food assistance. Additionally, we found that



Heart of City Farmers' Market near San Francisco City Hall. Photograph by Paula Jones.

while market operators generally supported providing access to EBT systems, it was beyond their technical and financial capacity to implement the changes necessary to use such systems. Our local observations echoed those of others who found a strong commitment among California farmers' market operators to improving food security.⁷

INSTITUTIONALIZING EBT ACCESS FARMERS' MARKETS

In 2004, with funding from a local private foundation, SFDPH began directly providing technical assistance to market operators to implement systems and process EBT transactions. Initially, SFDPH demonstrated feasibility at 1 large market located in a

low-income neighborhood, finding that food stamp recipients were eager to utilize their EBT cards. Farmers were supportive of the new program, and the market operator agreed to manage the program after our initial support. We implemented EBT systems at additional farmers' markets in the same way. We promoted the new access by mailing brochures to all food stamp households and distributing brochures and posters through case workers, community-based organizations, and health centers working with low-income San Franciscans.

Based on the feasibility of the pilot work, in 2007 SFDPH worked with a local legislator to legally mandate EBT and SNAP access at all farmers' markets in San Francisco.⁹ These new

requirements were packaged within a legislative initiative to facilitate the use of city property (e.g., parks) by farmers' markets. There was no opposition to these requirements. Today, all 20 farmers' markets in San Francisco must accept all forms of federal nutrition benefits.

SFDPH monitored sales at farmers' markets over the course of this intervention by obtaining monthly EBT sales and transaction data from the local food stamp office. Since 2006, the amount of annual sales has grown by an average of 57% each year. Specifically, between 2008 and 2009 SNAP sales grew 85%, and since the beginning of 2010, monthly SNAP sales grew an average of 91% over 2009 sales. The California Department of Food

and Agriculture and the Roots of Change Fund have recently funded an initiative to further expand SNAP participation at 3 farmers' markets by offering food assistance beneficiaries additional market tokens for fresh produce.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL FOOD POLICY

This intervention illustrates the potential for leveraging existing federal nutrition benefits to increase access to nutritious food resources as well as opportunities for food equity partnerships across institutional boundaries. While ensuring EBT access at farmers markets is 1 concrete and widely replicable action, local governments—and especially health departments—may have additional, significant opportunities to improve health equity by coordinating food system policy among diverse public agencies, nonprofit service providers, and low-income residents. ■

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Contributors

P. Jones managed the project, conducted interviews and analyses, and co-wrote the article. R. Bhatia supervised the project and co-wrote the article.

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Human Participant Protection

Institutional review board approval was not needed.

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