

**REAL FOOD, REAL CHOICE:
CONNECTING SNAP RECIPIENTS WITH FARMERS MARKETS**

**A REPORT AUTHORED BY
THE COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY COALITION AND
THE FARMERS MARKET COALITION**

INTRODUCTION

In the last 15 years, the number of farmers markets in the United States increased from 1,755 to 5,274. Low-income communities have not fully participated in this upward trend. This is especially problematic in light of health disparities faced by impoverished communities and communities of color, which are in part aggravated by a lack of access to fresh fruits and vegetables. While farmers markets can play an important role in improving such access, low-resource communities are faced with many barriers to the successful operation of farmers markets. One such barrier has been the transfer of food stamps (now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) from a paper coupon to a debit card format. Between 1994, when this change occurred, and 2008, the value of SNAP benefits redeemed at farmers markets dropped by 71% in constant 1994 dollars. In 2009, SNAP transactions at farmers markets accounted for a mere 0.008% of total SNAP transactions nationwide. By way of comparison, the USDA estimates that American consumers spend roughly 0.2% of their annual food dollars at farmers markets. Prioritizing this disparity would advance both Goals I and IV as stated in the USDA's newly released Strategic Plan.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE REPORT

- **Farmers markets have modest and uneven staffing and financial capacity** to handle the requirements of being SNAP vendors. EBT terminals can be expensive, and managing alternative currency programs can be labor intensive.
- **Successful EBT models have been developed** that can overcome these challenges if the shoppers, farmers, and market managers can accommodate some measure of inconvenience and be willing to initiate community partnerships.
- **Many SNAP shoppers are not aware of the existence of farmers markets in their communities** or that they accept EBT cards. When they are aware, numerous other barriers still exist for SNAP participants to shop at farmers markets.
- **Incentive programs such as the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and the Senior FMNP have been critical to the success of operating markets in low-income communities.** More recently, bonus programs, such as those funded by Wholesome Wave Foundation, have shown great promise in effectively drawing SNAP shoppers to farmers markets.
- Nationally, **there is an historic opportunity to connect nutrition policy and agriculture policy**, especially with regards to farmers markets and local food systems, through legislative and program changes in Congress and the USDA.
- **Farmers markets can improve access to healthy food** in communities that are underserved by retail grocers. Seen in this light, the ability of SNAP recipients to use their benefits at farmers markets is a fundamental public health issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONGRESS

- **Appropriate the proposed \$4 million provision in the President's FY 2011 budget for equipping farmers markets with wireless point-of-sale devices.** These allocated dollars could allow state SNAP administrators to provide free wireless machines and pay for EBT transaction and monthly fees. At least 15% of this amount should be allocated to technical assistance.
- **Amend the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP) legislation to require program staff or qualified partners to provide technical assistance** and to use 10% of the total funding to cover associated administrative costs. Providing training and technical assistance allows for grantees to develop the skills necessary for operating EBT programs, and to share best practices. A formalized program with investments from USDA and the private sector could help build the capacity of markets at a faster rate, and speed up the technology transfer.
- **Increase mandatory spending on the FMPP to \$20 million per year, with 10% of this funding designated for providing technical assistance to program grantees.** Providing technical assistance ensures that awardees have the capacity to implement successful programs that bring long-term benefits to their communities and local economies.
- **Coordinate federal nutrition programs that allow purchases at farmers markets with the goal of developing unified farmer-friendly regulations.** Congress and USDA should strive to develop a single EBT card for WIC, SNAP, and FMNP, as well as equip markets with the necessary machines, software, and tech support to adopt this simplified system.
- **Implement a public health approach to the SNAP-Education program.** In 2008 Farm Bill Report Language, Congress directed USDA to support public health approaches to promote healthy eating and physical activity behavior change in the SNAP-Education program, yet, to date, USDA has not implemented these recommendations.
- **Propose legislative initiatives for the 2012 Farm Bill that incentivizes federal nutrition program participants (especially SNAP) to redeem their benefits at farmers markets.** While evaluation data from the Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP), as passed in the 2008 Farm Bill, may not be available in time for 2012 Farm Bill discussions, Congress and USDA should work with privately-collected data, such as through the Wholesome Wave Foundation, to assess the impacts of incentive programs on individuals' consumption of fruits and vegetables.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE USDA

- **Coordinate federal nutrition programs that allow purchases at farmers markets with the goal of developing unified farmer-friendly regulations.** FNS should strive to develop a single EBT card for WIC, SNAP, and FMNP, as well as equip markets with the necessary machines, software, and tech support to adopt this simplified system.
- **Propose legislative initiatives for the 2012 Farm Bill that incentivizes federal nutrition program participants (especially SNAP) to redeem their benefits at farmers markets.** While evaluation data from the Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP) may not be available in time for 2012 Farm Bill discussions, USDA should work with privately-collected data, such as through the Wholesome Wave Foundation, to assess the impacts of incentive programs on individuals' consumption of fruits and vegetables.
- **Implement a public health approach to the SNAP-Education program** as Congress directed in report language in the 2008 Farm Bill. SNAP-Ed funding can provide much needed funds to support community-based efforts to attract SNAP participants to farmers markets.
- **Create a National Farmers Market Federal Nutrition Program Advisory Council,** comprised of stakeholders connected to the farmers market, public health, banking, and anti-hunger communities. Among other things, this Council would provide guidance to the USDA on avenues for increasing the redemption of federal nutrition program dollars at farmers markets.
- **Dedicate a minimum of 15% of the \$4 million requested in the President's FY 2011 budget for EBT to technical assistance and information sharing.** This support is essential to ensuring successful programs across the nation.
- **Prioritize Healthy Incentive Pilot Program proposals that demonstrate strong collaborations with farmers' market organizations.**
- **Establish a robust goal of 300 new markets per year and an increase of \$1.5 million in sales annually for SNAP redemption at farmers markets**
- **Continue to improve the accuracy of data collection** with regards to SNAP redemption at farmers markets, and make data readily available to the farmers' market community.