

Community Success Story: Filling Up On Local Produce

Health Department of Northwest Michigan

Summary

The Health Department of Northwest Michigan recognized the need to create better access to healthy fruits and vegetables in low-income communities it serves. Many of the low-income residents living in the area are also overweight or obese. The Health Department of Northwest Michigan partnered with farmers markets in the area to allow electronic benefit transfer (EBT) technology to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, so that its low-income residents that qualified for SNAP would be able to use it to purchase fresh foods. The SNAP benefits are distributed and used by patrons with Bridge Cards.

Contact Information:

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Large sandwich boards were purchased in partnership with the WISEWOMAN Systems & Environmental Change grant for each market that accepts the Bridge card. 2-3 boards were given to each market to use in subsequent years. Many patrons commented that they found out the Bridge card was accepted from “driving by” the Farmers Market, which points to the necessity of having the sandwich boards!

Challenges

The challenge to setting up the EBT and SNAP acceptance systems is that in most of our communities it requires the approval from councils, committees, or commissioners before the policy changes could be made. Another challenge was educating communities on the benefits of using EBT machines at the farmers markets and how best to implement the technology. And lastly, in Northern Michigan the growing season is short and the time allotted to work with the farmers markets while they are open is limited.



Solutions

The more time spent one-on-one with the farmers market managers helped their understanding of the technology requirements and what needed to be accomplished in order to set up the EBT and SNAP acceptance system.

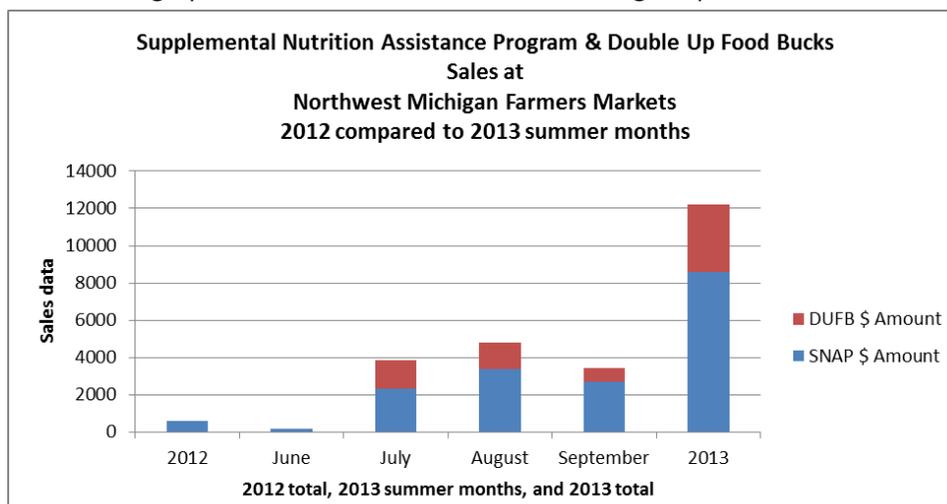
The funding was able to compliment other funding we received to work with farmers markets. This meant we were able to: provide technical assistance regarding EBT technology and benefit acceptance, conduct widespread outreach for the program, provide financial support stipends to farmers markets for staffing and maintenance for the EBT machine, and provide nutrition education at four of the farmers markets in our region.

The Double Up Food Bucks program, operated by the Fair Food Network provides incentives to encourage healthier choices for SNAP recipients by matching up to \$20 of the SNAP funds used on fruits or vegetables per visit. We also worked to increase the number of farmers markets in our region that participate in the Double Up Food Bucks program.

Results

The Health Department of Northwest Michigan is very proud of the work that was accomplished to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers markets for our low-income residents. The following are the results we saw after one year:

- All of the efforts resulted in an overall increase in awareness of SNAP and other nutrition benefit programs.
- Six farmers markets were approved to accept the Michigan Bridge Card so that residents could use their SNAP benefits.
- Three farmers markets received Double Up Food Buck funding.
- Four farmers markets were operating the EBT machines by the end of the market season, and three were using Double Up Food Bucks.
- Estimated sales data collected so far for the 2013 season is around \$13,000, almost a 2,000% increase from 2012 sales! See the graph for sales data collected June through September 2013.



The Health Department of Northwest Michigan is now seen as a leader and partner in increasing the health of our communities through increased access to healthy food.

2012-2013