



## Policy Brief

### EBT, WIC and Senior Coupons: Underutilized at Local Farmer's Markets



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### The Issue

Fruits and vegetables decrease risk for cancers and chronic diseases(1). Less than half of elderly men and women and WIC Children get their recommended intake of fruits and vegetables per day(1). Studies show that recipients of WIC and senior food vouchers who participate in the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) experience an increase in their fruit and vegetable consumption(1). An intervention study compared WIC recipient participation at farmers' markets to supermarkets. Researchers found that participants at farmers' markets increased their fruit and vegetable consumption by 1.5 servings, while participants at supermarkets increased by only 0.8 servings(1).

Despite research supporting the benefits of vouchers being used at farmers' markets, the reality is that revenue from EBT, WIC and senior vouchers redemption is still relatively low. State and countywide data shows that participants are receiving their benefits, so the problem seems to be that participants are not using their benefits at farmers' markets.

### Barriers to Use

Farmers' markets locations are not always convenient to low-income nutritionally at-risk individuals receiving benefits. Many markets are located far from their neighborhoods and require vehicles that they do not have. Vehicles are the most common mode of transport used to get to markets. Even if markets are located on bus lines, it takes too much time to travel to these locations. It is difficult for many recipients to visit markets during normal hours of operation. Transportation is especially difficult for seniors during the winter months and a large proportion are homebound or have limited mobility. Program visibility is also an issue. Recipients' awareness of markets accepting EBT, WIC and senior coupons is limited. Farmers' markets themselves may not appeal to this low-income at-risk target audience. Perceptions of

#### WIC FMNP:

- In 2008, Ohio received \$504,646 for the WIC FMNP(1).
- 32,083 Ohio WIC participants received FMNP benefits(1).
- The WIC FMNP coupon redemption rate was 85%(1).

#### Senior FMNP:

- In 2009, Cuyahoga County received \$256,000 for SFMNP(1).
- There were 3,844 SFMNP benefit recipients(1).
- According to the WRAAA, the coupon redemption rate was 85%(1).

#### EBT:

- 19% or 3 out of Cuyahoga County's 16 farmers' markets accept EBT, WIC and senior coupons.

farmers' markets as expensive, green or organic may deter potential participants. Markets have also identified lack of communication and cooperation between market managers and the government agencies responsible for distribution of vouchers as a major issue. Partnerships, communication, and collaboration with other local government and non government organizations that serve the same target population is also limited.

## Current Climate

Those involved with EBT, WIC and senior coupons take steps to promote the FMNP and usage of coupons and benefits at local farmers' markets, but efforts do not seem to be achieving the desired results. WIC offices in Cuyahoga County explain the WIC FMNP program to each recipient and provide a list of the local farmers' markets locations and hours of operation. Similarly, the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging (WRAAA) provides a list of markets and locations, but they rely on their website and provider network to promote the program. They also depend on word of mouth from past participants. Farmers' markets participating in the program that do not rely on the promotion efforts of the agencies that distribute vouchers advertise with signage in their own market and by word of mouth.

The City Fresh Program, an example of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), attempts to alleviate transportation issues and provide healthy local produce to inner-city populations. Consumers buy shares and are provided with produce distributed at strategically-located sites called Fresh Stops. Transportation and price continues to be an issue, however, in Cuyahoga County.

## Solving the Problem

To reach the goal of increasing the utilization of EBT, WIC and senior vouchers at farmers' markets depends largely on changes made to fix issues of transportation, program visibility, market environment, perceptions of farmers' markets, policy and increasing partnerships and collaboration among government and community organizations. The following are recommendations to reach this goal:

### Transportation

- Collaborate with the local public or subsidized transportation systems to arrange transportation directly to the markets for scheduled "market days".
- Provide services to deliver fresh fruits and vegetables to homebound seniors.
- Create smaller "seasonal parking lot" farmers' market sites in areas that traditional farmers' markets do not reach.

### Visibility

- Promotion and advertising
  - Incentive programs: coupons for free produce.
    - NYC Greenmarket program: for every \$5 of EBT spent, participants receive \$2.
    - Washington, DC FMNP: attached \$1 coupons to advertisement flyers.
    - Coit Farmers' Market (East Cleveland): \$5 in tokens to EBT users.
  - Multilingual and culturally appropriate promotion campaigns, including market signage, flyers, etc.
  - Involve local government agencies

such as Job and Family Services and non government agencies with a similar mission in the distribution of flyers and promotion of program.

- Research, identify, and implement the most effective ways to advertise to local neighborhoods, including non- traditional sites for promotion. Ex: bus stop shelters, senior housing units, church bulletins etc.
- Outreach
  - Create community investment in the market by involving members of the community in the market.
    - Volunteers from the local communities at the farmers' markets.
    - Host community events at the markets.
  - Presentations to local facilities to encourage EBT use, WIC and senior voucher redemption.
  - Research the neighborhood demographic and identify who is not shopping at the farmers' markets.
    - Interview recipients who do not participate

- Get involved in community organizations—community boards, schools, churches, senior centers, Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority, WIC, WRAAA –where clients are enrolled or are eligible for EBT, WIC and senior coupons.

### Market Environment

- EBT transaction should be convenient and simple, and EBT equipment should be highly visible.
- Increase hours and days of operation.
- Market atmosphere welcoming to various cultures and income levels.
- EBT /FMNP coordinator or information booth.

### Client Perception

- Education—possibly through OSU Extension– for low-income, nutritionally at-risk participants who receive benefits. Relevant topics include:
  - Nutrition
  - Benefits of farmers' markets
  - Cooking (cooking demonstrations and tips)

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