



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

2011 EBT Incentive Program



Background Information

At both the local and national level, dialogue concerning local food has shifted from a mere economic driver to a matter of concern for public health and equity. Rates of chronic (and preventable) disease and conditions among Cuyahoga County residents, such as diabetes, hypertension and obesity, are disproportionately high in many limited resource neighborhoods. Compounding their designation as limited resource communities, many Cuyahoga County zip codes have very limited access to the fresh foods needed to maintain a healthy diet. The Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition understands that these two points of disconnect in the food system are not independent of each other. There are challenges for food retailers operating in limited resource communities that make it difficult to attract grocery stores outside of more affluent suburbs. A study released in December 2011 by the County Planning Commission and Cuyahoga County Board of Health found that 323,850 or 25% of Cuyahoga County residents live in low access areas (LAA's) with limited access to fresh, healthy food. Over 22% of residents living in LAA's in Cuyahoga County did not own a car. ^ While fresh, healthy food has become less available, it has also become more expensive. The Journal of the American Medical Association reported that the inflation-adjusted cost of highly processed foods made from high calorie commodities dropped 10% from 1982-2008. During the same period, the price of fruits and vegetables increased by 50%. Increasing prices coupled with rising unemployment and an economic recession has made it even more challenging to secure healthy food. According to a recent report released by Case Western Reserve University's Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development, the number of Food Assistance (formerly known as Food Stamps) recipients in Cuyahoga County increased 67.1% from 1999-2009. In the suburbs the increase was even more pronounced where the number of individuals receiving Food Assistance rose 154.7%.*

The Pilot Phase

To address the healthy food gap in urban settings, farmers' markets have proliferated throughout Cuyahoga County with a more focused intent to be points of access to fresh, locally-produced food for lower-income consumers. Building on this focus, the Health and Nutrition Working Group of The Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition has developed resources and programming to promote and streamline the ability of farmers' markets to accept food assistance benefits.

In 2010, Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) technology was implemented at nine farmers' markets in Cuyahoga County. Of those nine, four were selected to participate in a pilot incentive program that provided an additional five dollars in tokens each time a customer using Food Assistance spent at least five dollars with their Ohio Direction Card. EBT transactions were administered by market staff in conjunction with a brief verbal survey. Sales data was collected monthly and consequent reporting had shown that EBT sales for the participating markets surpassed total sales in 2009 within the first month of the program.

Building from the successes and lessons learned in 2010 and through funding from generous philanthropic partners, fourteen farmers' markets adopted the ability to accept EBT in 2011 and a total of 17 county farmers' markets and farm stands participated in the EBT Incentive Program. Funding covered costs of the wireless machines to process the EBT transactions, tokens used at vendor booths and marketing materials

^County Planning Commission (2011) Cuyahoga County Assessment: Access to Supermarkets

http://cccfoodpolicy.org/sites/default/files/resources/cuyahoga_county_assessment_access_to_supermarkets_-_2011.pdf

*Case Western Reserve University Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development (2010) Cuyahoga County Data Brief; Safety Net Supports.

promoting the acceptance of the Ohio Direction Card. Some markets employed creative marketing tactics such as chalk signage for heavily foot-trafficked locations, while most markets utilized banners, buttons, and t-shirts to showcase their participation in the incentive program.

The Findings

Sales and customer survey data were collected to track EBT use by Food Assistance Program customers and inform the program's effectiveness. Data was captured in the form of monthly sales logs provided by the farmers' markets for each month they were in operation.¹ These logs contained de-identifying information on the customer, including amount of sale, frequency of market(s) visits, how one learned about the market, and mode of transportation to the market. The response rate of this survey by Food Assistance customers was 99% - with a slight margin of error for incomplete surveying (approximately 40% of surveys were incomplete).



Market Volunteer at the Tremont Farmers Market
Customer Service Table, September 2011

Analysis of the combined data revealed:

- EBT sales from all 18 participating farmers' markets amounted to \$20,499.50 - with the highest EBT sales at Tremont Farmer's Market and Coit Road Farmer's Market.
- EBT sales in Tremont increased 98%, going from an estimated \$2,000 in 2010 to \$3,962 in 2011.
- Coit Road Farmer's Market, which operates every month out of the year, had sales reaching \$4,041 in 2011.
- 16 of the 18 markets saw increases in their EBT sales in 2011. The most significant increase occurred at the Broadway Farmer's Market where sales jumped 191% from 2010 to 2011.
- A total of 1,072 EBT transactions were made at the participating markets.
- Of the 655 Food Assistance customers who completed the survey, 183 were returning shoppers that already knew about the program. Others learned of the program while they were walking by, at the market, and by speaking to vendors.
- The vast majority (33.7%) of Food Assistance customers used a car to get to the market. 15.7% walked to the market, and 5.7% came by bus.²
- Tremont and Lakewood Farmers' Markets had a disproportionate amount of returning customers compared to new customers using EBT.

Upon initializing the research, neighborhoods with high concentrations of low income residents served as potential indicators of markets with the highest rates of EBT transactions and sales. Coit Road Farmer's Market, the market with the most transactions, remains fairly consistent with this expectation as 51% of residents in the area receive Food Assistance benefits. However, the two markets that follow in the number of transactions, Tremont and Lakewood, are in neighborhoods where income levels are more diverse. From this finding, it is necessary to consider every market's potential to be an accessible fresh food destination for Food Assistance

¹ Many farmers' markets do not operate from January until December. Operations usually resume in May/June and stop in October/November. A comparison of sales data across farmers' markets is not consistent due to extended months of operations for some markets over others.

² Nearly 40% of survey responses did not include information on their mode of transportation due to surveyor error.

customers, whether or not there are high concentrations of low income residents in the neighborhood hosting the market.

Through an integrated analysis of all data, the 2011 EBT Incentive Program achieved three key outcomes:

- Improved awareness of fresh food availability by Food Assistance customers;
- Increased EBT sales in many of the markets, with continued utilization of the program by returning customers; and
- Increased effectiveness of farmers' markets in promoting health and the importance of fresh food.

Recommendations for Enhancing the Program

Effective communication both through community agencies and farmers' markets is necessary to make EBT purchases at farmers' markets and farm stands more prevalent. Staff and vendor interaction may be the most effective for customers already at the market. But of the respondents who identified themselves as first-time customers, mailings and flyers were the most effective in promoting the program, justifying an expanded need to use these types of marketing materials in the future. A look into promotion and visibility of EBT programs at the markets may provide insight into the gaps in transaction numbers between markets.

In addition, surveying and research needs to be executed in order to ascertain why Food Assistance customers, even with their knowledge of EBT acceptance at farmers' markets in their neighborhoods, are not utilizing the programs. The survey, as formatted for 2010 and 2011 data tracking, does not address this issue. Enticing families using Food Assistance to shop at area farmers' markets will rely on the development of strategies that inform residents of how and why to do so. It is a goal of the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition and the Prevention Research Center for Healthy Neighborhoods to identify and address the causes keeping Food Assistance customers from using their benefits at Cleveland area farmers' markets.

Looking Ahead to 2012

Given the generosity of the local philanthropic community supporting this EBT Incentive Program and a funding opportunity through the Wholesome Wave Foundation, funds are available to sustain and expand the program in 2012. The Food Policy Coalition will be working collaboratively with farmers' market managers and other stakeholders in early 2012 to explore and address findings and lessons learned from 2011. Special focus will be placed on additional and enhanced strategies to reach those who can benefit most from access to fresh, healthful food options. This will include those residing in communities with significant food gaps, low-income seniors, and participants of the Women, Infant and Children Program (WIC). An emphasis will also be placed on providing for the infrastructure needs (i.e. wireless EBT machines, tokens, etc.) for additional farmers' markets throughout Cuyahoga County that serve higher proportions of Food Assistance customers. The Food Policy Coalition will also work with partners to collect additional data that can be used to determine the scope, reach and effectiveness of the program. Preliminary findings of this information will be shared with all funders by the end of the 2012 calendar year.

Acknowledgements

The Ohio State University Extension of Cuyahoga County and The Health and Nutrition Working Group of the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition would like to communicate our sincere gratitude for the generous support of the following foundations: Charter One Foundation, Cleveland Foundation, Columbus Foundation, Doll Family Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Saint Luke's Foundation, Sisters of Charity Foundation, and The Thatcher Family Fund.