

Increasing Access to Farmers Markets for Beneficiaries of Nutrition Assistance

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[Bret Atkins] Increased acceptance of nutrition benefits at farmers markets could improve access to nutritious foods for low-income shoppers, suggests a new study out of Washington State. I'm your host, Bret Atkins, and this is an author interview for CDC's journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*. On the phone with me is Kate Cole, a former graduate student at the University of Washington School of Public Health and coauthor of the study we'll discuss. Ms. Cole's study was published in the October 17, 2013 issue of *Preventing Chronic Disease*, and we're asking her questions about a pilot project developed to help low-income families receive access to healthy foods. Thank you for joining us, Ms. Cole.

[Kate Cole] Thanks for having me.

[Bret Atkins] Ms. Cole, describe this project for our listeners.

[Kate Cole] So, the Farmers Market Access Project was a partnership between two King County agencies: Public Health and Natural Resources and Parks, and it was funded by CDC's Communities Putting Prevention to Work initiative. And I coauthored an evaluation of the project while I was a graduate student at the University of Washington School of Public Health. So, the Farmers Market Access Project targeted nine farmers markets in low-income areas of Seattle and surrounding King County. The project aimed to increase the number of markets and individual market vendors who were accepting SNAP, or what some people call food stamps, as well as a new type of WIC check, which was good only for purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables. In exchange for successfully applying to become SNAP retailers, the Farmers Market Access Project provided vendors and market managers with subsidized wireless terminals, sort of like credit card reading machines, and they were able to process SNAP payments, as well as credit/debit cards. In addition, the Farmers Market Access Project gave vendors of these intervention markets the opportunity to apply to accept the WIC fruit and vegetable checks, which previously in Washington State only grocery stores could apply to accept.

[Bret Atkins] What is the benefit of farmers markets to low-income communities like the one in King County?

[Kate Cole] So, many low-income communities lack easy access to full-service grocery stores, and that makes it difficult for people there to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Farmers markets can bring fresh produce directly into these communities without a lot of the logistical barriers that you encounter when you're trying to bring a new supermarket into a community. In addition, the markets offer a wide selection of produce and the opportunity for culturally-appropriate fresh food tailored to the communities that they're serving. And finally, farmers markets are often community events with music and games for kids. So, they can serve as family outings, ways for neighbors to get to know one another, and really foster social capital in these communities.

[Bret Atkins] How successful was the project at garnering participation from farmers market managers and vendors?

[Kate Cole] Six of the nine intervention markets chose to get a subsidized wireless terminal, allowing the entire market to accept SNAP and credit/debit. The project also offered vendors the option of getting their own wireless terminal that they could use at any retail location where they sold. This option was less popular with just 10 of the 125 eligible vendors getting a wireless terminal. For the WIC fruit and vegetable checks, 38 of the approximately 88 eligible produce vendors participated. And as a part of our evaluation we surveyed vendors and market managers about their motivations for participating in this project. We anticipated that, you know, the primary motivator would be the potential of increased profits, and this was a primary reason cited, but we were surprised to see that the most common reason given by vendors for participating was that they wanted to make their products accessible to low-income shoppers.

[Bret Atkins] What was the success of the project, meaning did you find that a lot of community members took advantage of the program and market vouchers?

[Kate Cole] Well, because this was a one-year pilot project, the primary aim was to equip markets to accept nutrition assistance benefits, and we found relatively low rates of participation among the low-income shoppers. But this is to be expected in a first year pilot project. A lot of communities that have instituted similar interventions have documented relatively low redemption rates early on. However, when we look at the data nationally, we see a precipitous rise in shoppers using SNAP and WIC at farmers markets as more and more markets have become capable of accepting these nutrition assistance benefits.

[Bret Atkins] What could partnerships like the ones here mean for the future of public health?

[Kate Cole] So, currently the retailer end of the SNAP and WIC programs are really tailored to meet the needs of traditional retailers, like large grocery stores and corner stores, and not to meet the needs of small farmers or farmers markets. And as a result, the overhead for the equipment and the associated fees, plus the bureaucratic process to become an approved SNAP or WIC retailer, mean a lot of farmers markets and vendors who might want to participate, feel like they're unable to do so. The Farmers Market Access Project saw government agencies partnering to provide subsidies plus technical assistance to these small farmers and markets to begin to overcome these barriers. And this type of intervention can really make environments more conducive to making healthy choices, as well as making communities more equitable for people with low incomes, as well as small farmers. Rather than simply telling the public to make healthy choices, I think we're seeing more and more public health interventions in which agencies and organizations partner to shift the environment to make it one that makes the healthy choice the easy choice.

[Bret Atkins] Thank you for joining us, Ms. Cole. Listeners can read the study we discussed today online at cdc.gov/pcd.

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