

Farmers Market Incentive Programs: Vehicles for Increasing Local Food Access Among Nutrition Assistance Beneficiaries

Policy Recommendations for Austin, Texas

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Executive Summary

This report examines farmers market incentive programs (FMIPs) as mechanisms for increasing access to healthy food for low-income consumers while also channeling dollars into the local food economy. The report investigates 10 FMIPs in cities across the United States – including Austin, Texas – in order to evaluate their scope and growth, delineate best practices, and explore how current programming in Austin could best be “scaled up” by the City of Austin to reach more people.

Chapter 1 begins with a brief overview of terms and background, and introduces concepts such as food security, food access, local food, and their relationship to one another.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the food security and food access landscape in Austin, with special attention paid to the spatial distribution of local food retailers. A geospatial analysis of food access and food retail distribution reveals the following:

- Significant portions of east Austin and east Travis County are designated as “food deserts” by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).
- Convenience stores are disproportionately located in communities with low or very low social opportunity.
- Local food retailers are disproportionately located in communities with high social opportunity.
- Patterns of socioeconomic stratification overlap with spatial patterns in social opportunity and food access.

Chapter 3 discusses nutrition assistance in Austin and Travis County, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) enrollment and eligibility. Findings indicate the following:

- SNAP participation in Travis County nearly doubled from 2006 – 2011.
- Only 62% of SNAP-eligible individuals in Travis County were enrolled in 2010.
- A variety of barriers prevent eligible individuals from enrolling.
- Household participation in SNAP is concentrated in east Austin and east Travis County where many census tracts lack adequate access to grocery stores.
- Three of the farmers markets and farm stands not equipped with Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) are located in or near areas where 25-40% of households receive SNAP benefits.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of Austin’s existing FMIP, the Double Dollar Incentive Program (DDIP), administered by the Austin-based Sustainable Food Center (SFC). SFC operates four farmers markets in Austin, two of which accept DDIP. An evaluation of SFC’s DDIP program reveals the following:

- DDIP has helped to increase local participation in WIC FMNP (Women, Infants, and Children Farmers' Market Nutrition Program).
- It is imperative that farmers markets be sited in areas easily accessible by public transportation, and that a robust outreach campaign accompanies program implementation.
- Logistical issues surrounding EBT capacity and funding continuity act as barriers to expansion.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of nine additional FMIPs from across the United States: Los Angeles Market Match, New York City Health Bucks, DC Columbia Heights Festibucks, Chicago LINK Up, Boston Bounty Bucks, Michigan Double Up Food Bucks, Portland Fresh Exchange, Seattle Fresh Bucks, and East Palo Alto Fresh Checks. The chapter presents survey findings regarding common challenges and best practices for FMIPs, including the following:

- FMIPs are helping to increase the frequency with which low-income customers shop at farmers markets.
- FMIPs are enhancing economic stability for markets and vendors that accept the incentive.
- Critical components of programmatic success often include continuity in funding, strategic evaluation practices, tailored and robust outreach efforts, and the availability of ample administrative and technical support through a central umbrella organization.

Chapter 6 details policy recommendations for Austin, Texas, which include the following:

1. Increase EBT availability at local food retail locations, especially at farmers markets and farm stands. Consider making EBT mandatory for all farmers markets and farm stands.
2. Expand farmers market incentive programming to *all* Austin farmers markets and farm stands within the next two years.
3. Administer Austin's FMIP through a single nonprofit umbrella organization.
4. Establish a single point of contact at the City of Austin or Travis County to provide SNAP assistance to farmers markets.
5. Provide funding for Austin's FMIP on a multi-year basis from diverse sources, including the City of Austin.
6. Provide funding for both FMIP administrative costs as well as the cost of the financial incentive to be provided to nutrition assistance customers.
7. Provide EBT training and technical support to farmers markets.
8. Advertise FMIP through other public and private programs that reach SNAP participants.

Chapter 7 outlines several examples of alternative venues for nutrition assistance incentive programs not discussed in detail in this report, including brick-and-mortar retail venues, mobile farm stands, and farm-to-community programs.

The report concludes with a summary of findings, and by posing several additional questions and topics for future research on farmers market incentive programming.

