

Fighting Obesity by Increasing Access to Local Farmers' Markets

Michelle Martinez

At A Glance

Residents in approximately 17% of Kauai County Zip codes do not have access to grocery stores or farmers' markets to purchase healthy food. The Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) Farmers' Market Program on the island expanded community access to affordable, fresh fruits and vegetables and promoted healthier diets. During the first 9 months of the program, approximately 471 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) beneficiaries used their EBT benefits at a participating farmers' market.

"This is an opportunity to expand access to farm fresh fruits and vegetables and value added items that may not otherwise be available through EBT."—Helen Cox, chancellor of Kauai Community College

- Helen Cox

Public Health Challenge

Obesity is a significant and growing health risk for the population of Kauai. Twenty-three percent of the adults living on the Island of Kauai are obese, and data shows that Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders have an even higher adult obesity rate of 43.5%. Obesity also disproportionately affects Kauai's young people. Data from a 2010 study estimates that 28.5% of Hawaii's children aged 10-17 years are overweight or obese. In the fight against obesity, individuals and families have been encouraged to practice healthy eating habits. But for families living in rural and isolated counties such as Kauai, there can be limited availability of fresh foods. To encourage the consumption of locally grown fruits and vegetables, community leaders developed a strategy that would increase low-income families' access to farmers' markets and support economic growth in the local food system.

Approach

In September 2011, EBT technology was installed at four farmers' markets across the Island of Kauai. This provided SNAP beneficiaries the opportunity to shop at farmers' markets and buy locally grown produce. The Kauai Independent Food Bank, Get Fit Kauai, and the County of Kauai shared resources and contributed funds for initial costs such as staffing, wireless EBT equipment, a "2 for 1" matching incentive program offering users a coupon doubling their EBT transaction, and media promotion. Market locations for this program were selected by reviewing the demographic profile of the SNAP population, the accessibility of each market via public transportation, and the popularity of each farmers' market.

Find Out More

Providing all members of a community access to healthy, affordable produce is key to reducing the prevalence of obesity. Community leaders can help improve the health of their community members by developing partnerships and strategies that enhance local food systems and facilitate the consumption of locally grown food.

Results

During the first 9 months, approximately 471 SNAP beneficiaries used their EBT benefits at a participating farmers' market. Almost 32% of these SNAP customers were first time users of a farmers' market. Total EBT sales increased steadily the first year, and EBT transactions from September 2011 to May 2012 across the four markets totaled \$28,489. An additional \$5,072 in "2 for 1" matching dollars were also issued during that time. Fifty-four percent of the SNAP users attended a farmers' market more than once. The four farmers' markets that participated in the first year of the program occur on a weekly basis and operate year-round.

What's Next

Partners and stakeholders are committed to sustaining and improving the EBT Farmers' Market Program on the Island of Kauai. Future goals include—

- Increasing the number of SNAP customers at farmers' markets.
- Increasing the number of farmers' markets participating in the program.
- Continuing to review user satisfaction, vendor participation, and EBT sales.

Contact

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