Affordable: EBT at Farmers Markets

CASE STUDY: Universal Farmers Markets for Los Angeles

According to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, food insecurity, defined as “reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, or disrupted eating patterns and reduced intake of food” increased by 40% in LA County from 2001 to 2011. The Farmers Markets for All Working Group at the LA Food Policy Council recognized that the root of hunger and food insecurity, as well as the greatest threat to health in general, is poverty. Ultimately, to end food insecurity and its associated health outcomes, policy and systemic changes that promote economic parity and alleviate the stresses of poverty are critical to ensure the most impacted community members can achieve an improved quality of life.

EBT at Farmers Markets: A Win-Win Solution

EBT, Electronic Benefits Transfer (formerly known as the “food stamps” program), also referred to as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) or CalFresh, supplements low-income grocery budgets to purchase foods from authorized retailers. SNAP-authorized retailers include grocery stores and supermarkets, small neighborhood markets, and an increasing number of farmers markets.

Nationally, government and advocates alike are exploring how to better link SNAP participation to healthy diets. Successfully identified strategies include incentivizing healthy food consumption through vouchers and coupons that offset the cost of food, increasing the amount of quality, nutritious and affordable food available in neighborhoods with high rates of food insecurity, and ensuring SNAP acceptance at these healthy food retail sites. EBT at farmers markets brings together all three of these strategies.

By accepting EBT as a form of payment, farmers can grow their retail earnings at farmers markets. In the state of California, there were over $3.7 million in EBT redemptions at farmers markets in 2017. Thus, increasing EBT acceptance at farmers markets brings benefits for food insecure families, local farmers, and the broader communities that they serve.

The Campaign: Universal EBT Access at LA Farmers Markets

For three years, the Farmers Markets for All Working Group embarked on a campaign to achieve universal EBT acceptance at all Farmers Markets in the City of Los Angeles. This campaign was led by LA Community Action Network (LA CAN), Sustainable Economic Enterprises of Los Angeles (SEE-LA), Hunger Action LA, LAFPC and a host of other partners. The campaign engaged with farmers market managers throughout the City to identify the primary barriers to EBT access. The Working Group found that many of the barriers for market managers were based on lack of awareness that EBT point-of-sale machines are provided free by the California Department of Social Services, and concerns about the demand for farmers markets products amongst EBT participants.

For the Farmers Markets for All Working Group, it became clear that if markets simply accepted EBT, they would realize that their unsubstantiated concerns about demand amongst EBT participants would be quickly absolved. Based on this revelation, the Working Group developed a two-pronged strategy that included (1) aligning relevant stakeholders and leaders through facilitated conversations and interactions to encourage voluntary compliance amongst existing market managers and (2) establishing a policy that would ensure all future farmers markets in the City benefit from EBT acceptance going forward.
The first component of the strategy involved numerous initiatives including: visiting farmers markets to discuss the benefits of EBT acceptance with market managers; bringing over 120 market managers, advocates and stakeholders together at a LAFPC Network event in February 2016 to collectively develop strategies for overcoming barriers to EBT acceptance; and hosting an EBT Sign-Up Day in partnership with the U.S Department of Agriculture where 25 farmers markets in the City and County of Los Angeles were able to sign-up to accept EBT in under two hours – a process that typically takes 30 to 45 days.

The policy strategy involved approaching Los Angeles Councilmember Jose Huizar to sponsor a motion that would help the City maximize the benefits of EBT access at farmers markets. In late December of 2015, Councilmember Huizar introduced a motion to explore requiring new farmers markets in the City to accept EBT/EBT as a payment option and in May of 2016 the policy was finally adopted.

Today, all farmers markets in LA City are required to accept EBT at their markets, and LA County continues to greatly increase their percentage of markets that accept EBT. LAFPC continues to work with the city, farmers markets, and other partners to ensure that farmers markets can be fair for all Angelenos, and that they ultimately serve their original purpose: to provide a more affordable way for low-income communities to access fresh fruits and vegetables.