

Best Practices for Accepting EBT at the Farmers Market

Government benefits received through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are referred to by different names in different states (food stamps, FNS benefits, etc.). Throughout this document, these benefits will be referred to as *EBT*.

Outreach

Below are some suggested steps to outreach to EBT recipients. The amount of funding and staff time that can be contributed to this project as well as the type of community you live in (rural, urban, suburban) and the demographical makeup of the EBT population (age, race, etc.) will influence what outreach activities you should undertake. If you plan to apply for grant funding, keep in mind that it takes time to apply and receive funding. It is also suggested that you begin implementing your outreach plan at least three months before the farmers market opens.

1. Do your research.

- Find out how many people in your region receive EBT and the demographical make up of the group (age, race, primary languages, where they live, etc.).
- Learn about SNAP and what steps people have to take to apply for government assistance. The better you understand the program the more effectively you will be able to outreach to this constituency. To learn more, go to <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/Default.htm>.

2. Schedule a meeting with the Food and Nutrition Services Director at the Department of Social Services (DSS).

- This person should be able to answer any question you have about the local EBT population and SNAP, help you identify other organizations that provide services to low income people, and can provide information directly to EBT recipients.
- If you know what products are going to be available each week at the market, ask DSS to post a weekly updated list of products where EBT recipients will see it.
- If your local DSS allows it, mailing information about the farmers market to everyone in your region who receives EBT would be a great way to get the word out.

3. Contact other organizations/governmental agencies in your region that work directly with low income populations. Set up a meeting with the person that deals directly with the public to talk about ways you can work together to serve this population. Below is a list of examples and ways you can partner with other groups to encourage EBT users to shop at the farmers market.

- *Food banks*-post information about the farmers market in food distribution sites; put flyer in food boxes; and provide information about the market in their newsletter.
- *Housing authority*-do a mailing to residents in public housing; organize a local food cooking demo or a taste testing with the community service coordinator of individual public housing complexes.
- *YMCA, Head Start centers, and other organizations that provide subsidized childcare services*-send home a flyer with children; take the children on a farmers market field trip and provided them with a coupon to purchase food items; do a local food cooking demo with parents.

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- *Health centers and free clinics*-some offer nutrition education classes for low income people. Attend a class and encourage participants to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables at the farmers market.
- *Other good organizations to contact*- Americorp; organizations that provide free legal assistance; domestic violence shelters; and United Way (which can then connect you with more nonprofits).
Many of the suggestions listed above can be applied to other groups as well.

4. Advertise.

- Use media outlets such as the radio, local tv, and newspapers (including smaller community papers) to advertise market promotions and your ability to accept EBT. Send a press release to your newspaper, encourage the local news station to come to the market, or put a public service announcement (PSA) on the radio.
- Create promotional materials such as a flyer, poster, and/or rack card that uses images and language that are appropriate for the EBT recipients in your community.
 - You can assess the appropriateness of your materials by creating a focus group or by sharing them with partner organizations before you distribute them to the public.
 - Promotional materials can be distributed to partner organizations and also to retail businesses such as thrift stores and grocery stores, and public spaces like libraries and bus stations/terminals.

5. Provide additional incentives to encourage people to come to the market.

- Weekly kids' activities such as a market scavenger hunt, small craft projects, or cooking demonstrations.
- Matching coupons. You could give matching coupons to a certain group (members of a nutrition education class, for example) or provide them to any EBT customers who come to the market during a certain time period.
- Invite organizations to the market that provide services that low income people need. These organizations could help implement the kids' activities or set up a separate booth.

Farmers Market Preparation

Once you have gotten EBT recipients to come to the market, it is important to make them feel comfortable shopping there. Offering EBT with debit and credit can provide a stronger boost to farmer income and keeps EBT customers from being singled out.

Although the suggestions below are particularly helpful when serving a low income population, they can also provide a better shopping experience to all of your customers.

- 1. If the market is using the token system, establish a table/booth where EBT customers can obtain tokens.** The booth should be clearly marked, easily accessible, and have signs that explain the token process. So as not to stigmatize EBT customers, this area can be labeled as the "Information Table" where people can also find out more information about the market.
- 2. Train the farmer vendors so that they understand how the token system works and are prepared to serve a new customer base.**

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- The better the vendors understand the system, the more likely they will support it and work to make the program a success.
 - It is important that the farmers are sensitive to their changing customer base and make people of all socio-economic backgrounds feel welcomed. If your organization or another group in the community can provide training to ensure cultural and class sensitivity, this would be ideal.
- 3. Clearly label the vendor booths that accept EBT.**
 - 4. Vendors should provide information about their products geared toward new customers.**
 - Farmers markets expose people to a large variety of fruit and vegetables and a way of shopping that is very different from going to the grocery store, therefore it is important that the price and name of the product are clearly labeled to make shopping easier for customers.
 - It is especially helpful if the vendor sells some products that have been pre-weighed and priced, or are sold by the bag/box.
 - Providing samples of products and/or recipes will further entice customers to buy foods they are unfamiliar with.
 - 5. Offer a market tour where people can meet the vendors and learn more about their products.**
 - 6. If you provide entertainment at the market, make sure that it is culturally appropriate.**
 - By opening up the market to a larger range of socio-economic groups, your market may become more culturally diverse. Be aware of this and vary the types of entertainment so that it appeals to different cultures.

Other Considerations

- Remember that for the people who are accustomed to purchasing prepackaged food items, shopping at the farmers market and purchasing fresh vegetables is a foreign concept. In order for these people to make shopping at the market a part of their lifestyle, they would also have to make cooking a part of their lifestyle. Cooking classes/demonstrations are a great way to get people excited about fresh, local food and teach them that cooking with fresh produce is a healthy and affordable alternative to buying prepackaged food items.
- In order to identify which outreach efforts work best for your community and how EBT customers rate their farmers market experience, it is a good idea to evaluate the success of your program by surveying EBT recipients. Their input can help you improve upon your work and better reach more people the following year. When surveying EBT recipients, it is important to be respectful of people's time, keep the survey short, and do not survey customers too often.
- Fruit and vegetables at farmers markets can sometimes be more expensive than those found at typical grocery stores. Do a price comparison with your local grocery store. If there is a huge price difference between certain products, then focus on the products that are most comparable in price when doing cooking demonstrations or giving out recipes.