

THE WIC FARMERS' MARKET NUTRITION PROGRAM IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY:

Barriers to Participation and
Recommendations for a Stronger Future

By

Roxanne Caines, Emerson National Hunger Fellow

The Farmers' Market Alliance

Just Harvest: A Center for Action Against Hunger

16 Terminal Way

Pittsburgh, PA 15219

(412) 431-8960

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INTRODUCTION

Pennsylvania has one of the largest Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs (FMNP) in the country. Allegheny County, in the Pittsburgh region, distributes the second highest number of FMNP checks in the state after Philadelphia County. The Pennsylvania FMNP has operated statewide since 2002, giving a greater number of low-income people have access to farmers' markets. WIC FMNP redemption rates in Pennsylvania remain lower than program advocates and WIC administration hope.

The FMNP provides an excellent opportunity to address issues of both hunger and community food security. Just Harvest initiated this research out of concern that the FMNP is underutilized by the low-income mothers and children it is designed to serve. This research is designed to identify barriers that prevent WIC clients from redeeming all of their FMNP checks and to explore ways to improve the Program and boost participation in Allegheny County.

Just Harvest: A Center for Action Against Hunger is a non-profit, anti-hunger, anti-poverty organization dedicated to promoting economic justice to eliminate hunger in Allegheny County. Since 1986, Just Harvest has worked with organizations through advocacy to influence public policy and to educate, empower and mobilize individuals and groups in the community.

The Farmers' Market Alliance (FMA) is a partnership of farmers, local governments and community groups working together to promote and develop long-term sustainability of farmers' markets in southwestern Pennsylvania. Just Harvest supports the FMA by providing signage and information to participating farmers, researching strategies to improve markets and linking consumers with local farmers' markets.

The Congressional Hunger Center (CHC) is a non-profit, bi-partisan, anti-hunger training organization established to ensure issues of domestic and global hunger remain at the forefront of national and international debate. One way CHC fulfills its mission of "fighting hunger by developing leaders" is through the Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program. This year long, leadership development program trains leaders to address issues of hunger and poverty in the U.S.

BACKGROUND

NATIONAL

Congress established the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) in 1992 as part of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). WIC provides supplemental foods, health care referrals and nutrition education free of charge to low-income pregnant, breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding post-partum women, infants and children up to 5 years of age, who are nutritionally at-risk.

The FMNP offers two main benefits. First, it provides WIC recipients access to fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables. Second, it strengthens local farmers by increasing customer demand at farmers markets. In 2003, 44 states as well as five Indian Tribal Organizations administered the Program across the country.

Women, infants 4 months of age and children who are certified to receive WIC program benefits or who are on a waiting list for WIC certification are eligible to participate in the FMNP. State agencies determine which of these populations they will serve.

In 2001, the Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) was introduced as a pilot program. This program provides similar benefits as the WIC FMNP, but for a different population. Eligibility for the SFMNP is limited to individuals who are at least 60 years old and have household incomes up to 185% of the federal poverty income guidelines. In 2003, the SFMNP operated in 35 states, 3 Indian Tribal Organizations, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.

The FMNP and SFMNP are funded through federal and state monies. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of USDA provides cash grants for 70 percent of total Program costs to state agencies such as agriculture departments, health departments or Indian Tribal Organizations. States operating the FMNP must contribute at least 30 percent of Program costs and Indian state agencies must contribute between 10 and 30 percent of total Program costs. In 2003, Congress provided \$25 million to fund the FMNP and \$16.7 million to fund the SFMNP.

Dates of operation for farmers' markets vary according to each state's growing season. Eligible WIC recipients or seniors receive coupons to use specifically at farmers' markets or farm stands. Federal regulations require the total amount of checks per person per year distributed is no less than \$10 and no more than \$20. If desired, state agencies can supplement this benefit level with its matching funds. Once the coupons are spent, farmers are responsible for submitting them for reimbursement.

All WIC FMNP coupon recipients also receive some form of nutrition education through the state agency, Cooperative Extension programs, local chefs, farmers or farmers' market associations. The nutrition education sessions provide information on various topics including selecting, storing, and preparing fresh produce as well as the importance of eating raw fruits and vegetables.

PENNSYLVANIA

The FMNP began in Pennsylvania as a pilot program in 1989. Pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women, and children between the ages of two and five are eligible for participation. WIC staff provides nutrition education sessions at local offices. FMNP recipients receive four checks of \$5 each to use during the farmers' market season from the beginning of June to the end of November. In 2003, Pennsylvania WIC recipients received 167,191 FMNP checks and seniors got 167,087 SFMNP checks. Allegheny County distributed 48,264 WIC FMNP checks and 23,500 SFMNP checks to use at thirty-seven farms, farm stands and farmers' markets served FMNP recipients in Allegheny County.

SENIORS FARMERS' MARKET NUTRITION PROGRAM (SFMNP)

The SFMNP provides similar benefits as the WIC FMNP in Pennsylvania, but it is administered quite differently. First, checks are distributed through the Department of Aging. In 2003, approximately 20 senior centers distributed approximately \$470,000 in checks to roughly 2400 seniors at senior centers. Seniors in a homebound program can also receive SFMNP checks, but a representative from this program must go through a senior center. Distribution of checks is advertised in the community, but a lot of promotion is unnecessary and is discouraged to prevent upsetting people since only a limited number of checks are available for eligible seniors. All SFMNP checks are distributed within one week to prevent seniors from receiving checks from multiple locations.

The success and the demand of the SFMNP are due to a few factors. One of the main factors is the limited availability of SFMNP checks. Since there are not enough checks for all eligible seniors, there is automatically a great demand for the SFMNP. Another major reason why the SFMNP is successful is that the older community is more accustomed and willing to prepare fresh foods. Transportation is an additional factor thought to influence the high rates of SFMNP participation. Some senior centers are able to coordinate transportation through services such as Older Person Transportation or Access. Most seniors, however, do not rely on these services and go to farmers' markets on their own by driving or riding with a family member. Two additional factors are an opportunity for socialization and a chance to be part of a community. Farmers' markets provide an opportunity for seniors to not only purchase fresh produce, but also to meet with friends that they usually do not see. According to the Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging, this contributes somewhat, but the sense of community that allows seniors to have a feeling of belonging may be a greater factor.

METHODOLOGY

In October 2003, Just Harvest and the Farmers' Market Alliance conducted a survey to identify barriers WIC FMNP recipients encounter when redeeming their WIC FMNP checks. Questions were selected to learn current limitations, as well as preferences and suggestions to improve the Program. Survey questions included four sections:

1) **Market Access** -

Personal preferences and limitations to shopping at farmers' markets

2) **Market Visits** –

Frequency of visits and spending patterns at farmers' markets

3) **Market Transportation** –

Length of commute and mode of transportation used to access farmers' markets

4) **Market Satisfaction** –

Personal opinions about quality, prices and overall experience at farmers' markets

The Market Access section was the only section ALL 100 interviewees completed. People who visited a market during 2003 as well as a few people who received FMNP checks previously, but are no longer eligible completed the remaining three sections of the survey.

Researchers conducted surveys in the waiting rooms of five WIC offices – Downtown, McKeesport, Wilksburg, Mt. Oliver and Lawrenceville. Office locations were selected based on the number of clients served and the diversity of neighborhoods the clients represent. Researchers completed surveys at each office in one day with the exception of the Downtown office, which was visited twice because of its central location and high volume of clients.

Researchers designed the survey as a self-survey; however, some recipients were asked questions in an interview style. This usually occurred with recipients who could not read English very well, or were unable to write due to caring for their child. Although surveys were checked upon completion to make sure all questions were answered, time constraints resulted in respondents skipping some questions.

After completing the survey, respondents were given a booklet listing seasonal produce available at farmers' markets as well as recipes using the ingredients. The information served as a reminder for WIC FMNP recipients to use their checks before the end of the farmers' market season.

FINDINGS/RESULTS

Interviewees lived in 39 different neighborhoods, cities or municipalities. In addition, ten people did not specify where they live. Sixty-seven people had shopped at a farmers' market with FMNP checks before. Thirty-three people had not shopped at a farmers' market with FMNP checks before even though they received them.

Market Access

Barriers identified

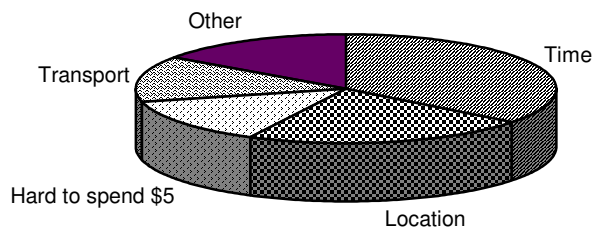
NOTE: *Survey respondents could choose more than one barrier, so totals equal more than 100.*

The primary barrier preventing FMNP recipients from shopping at farmers' markets is time. Forty-two people found market hours inconvenient or were unable to fit visiting a farmers' market into their busy schedule filled with doctor appointments, extra-curricular activities and other engagements for themselves and their children.

Location was the second most common barrier identified by 26 respondents. While there are at least 37 farmers markets, farm stands, or farms in the Allegheny County area that accept FMNP checks, for some, the locations are distant or difficult to reach.

Lack of transportation and difficulty spending \$5 at one vendor were each reported by 16 people. Other reported barriers included weather conditions, the absence of certain produce that is not growable in Pennsylvania (such as bananas), and expensive prices. Some also stated that they simply did not "get around to it yet." Surprisingly, no one indicated that they did not shop at a farmers market because they don't know how to prepare fresh produce or that they just don't like fresh produce.

Barriers Identified



Proposed Improvements

Survey respondents were asked if certain services were available, would they be more likely to shop at farmers' markets. They could choose an answer of yes, no or maybe. Forty-nine people indicated they would shop at farmers' markets more often if a shuttle service were available. Twenty-two people would not, twenty-eight respondents might shop at a farmers' market more often with a shuttle service and one person did not respond.

Forty-five FMNP recipients would shop at farmers' markets more often if someone were available to help them select items and give guidance on preparing them. Twenty-nine people would not shop more often, and twenty-six might shop more often with this assistance. Interest in a shuttle service or having someone help with produce selection and cooking suggestions indicates that FMNP recipients want to use their checks and value the FMNP.

Farmers' market preferences

Thirty-five FMNP recipients are satisfied with the current method of receiving checks. Fifty-five would prefer to have a choice of accepting FMNP checks each year. These respondents said if people know they aren't going to use the FMNP checks, their checks should be distributed to others who are interested in shopping at farmers' markets. Nine people *might* want to have a choice of accepting checks and one percent did not respond.

If the total value of FMNP checks received could change, 43 people would prefer more than the current federal amount of \$20 per season. The most common amount identified was \$30. Many recipients were interested in greater FMNP benefits for people with larger families even though FMNP benefits are distributed based on WIC-eligibility, not family size. Thirty-five people felt the current amount is sufficient. Twenty-one people did not indicate a preferred amount and one person did not answer this question. No one prefers less than \$20.

Survey respondents were asked which days of the week and hours they prefer to shop, checking all that apply. The most popular preferred shopping days were Saturdays (54 people) and Sundays (23 people). In addition, 9 people indicated that they would shop any day the farmers' market was open.

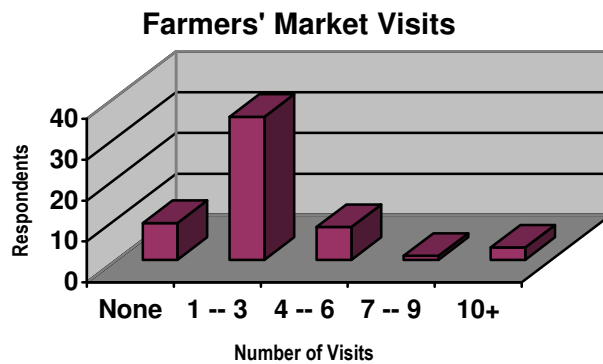
The most preferred shopping hours were 12 – 4PM (58 people) followed by 4 - 8PM (37 people) and 8AM – 12 PM (20 people). Two people would shop during any hour and no one wanted to shop between 5 and 8 AM. Most farmers' markets in Allegheny County are open

during the evenings on weekdays or Saturday mornings. Hours and days of operation for farmers' markets could prevent interested WIC recipients from using their FMNP checks.

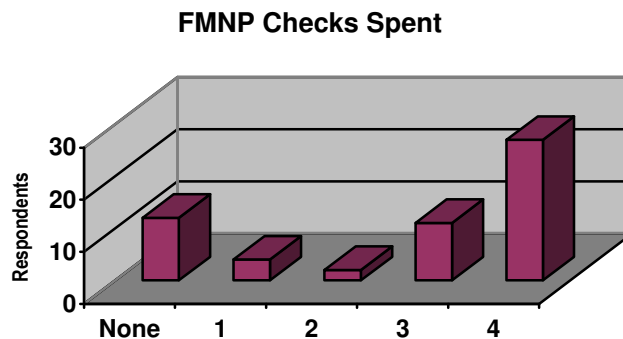
Market Visits

Of the 100 interviewees, 47 people visited a farmers' market by October 2003 and nine people shopped with FMNP checks in previous years. Only these 56 people were asked to respond to the rest of the survey. Nearly half of these respondents (27) shopped at farmers' markets before receiving FMNP checks. The number of years people visited farmers' markets before receiving FMNP checks varied from one to ten with two years being the most common.

At the time of the survey, nine people had not visited a farmers' market at all, 35 people had visited a farmers' market 1-3 times, eight people visited 4-6 times, one person 7-9 times and three people visited farmers' markets ten or more times.

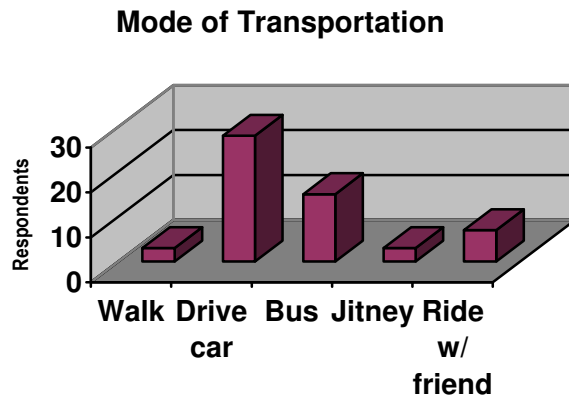


Nearly half (27 people) spent all 4 of their checks, eleven people spent 3 of their checks, two people spent two checks, four people spent one check and 12 people had not spent any. More than two-thirds of surveyed FMNP recipients (40 people) spent their own money at a farmers' market in addition to FMNP checks.

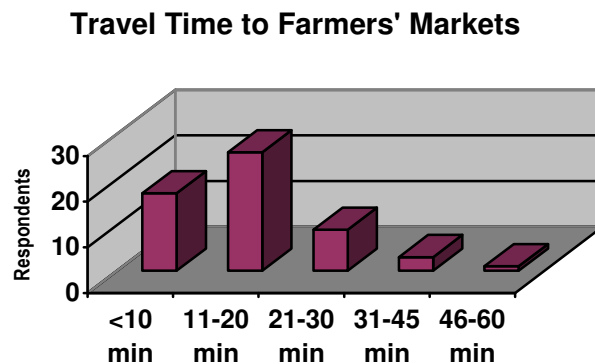


Market Transportation

FMNP check recipients visited twenty-two different farmers' markets in Allegheny County. The most common modes of transportation to farmers' markets were by car (28 people) and by bus (15 people). In addition, three people walked, seven rode with a friend and three people took a jitney (unlicensed taxicab) to access farmers' markets.

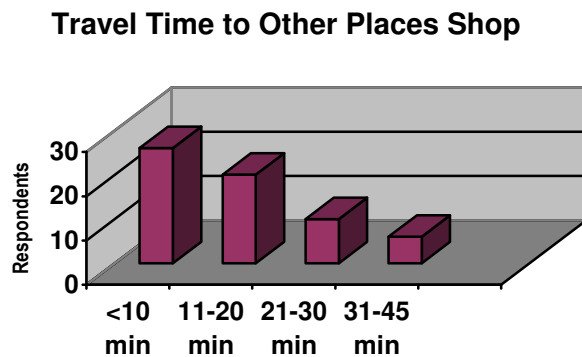


One-way travel to markets cost most people \$2.25, the standard fare to ride the bus. People taking jitneys paid as much as \$20 one-way to reach a farmers' market. This high cost of transportation for people lacking access to a car or bus could discourage FMNP recipients from using their checks. One-way travel took 11-20 minutes for nearly half of respondents (26 people), 10 minutes or less for 17 people, 21-30 minutes for 9 people, 31-45 minutes for 3 people and 46 minutes-1hour for one person. No one traveled more than an hour one-way to reach a farmers' market.



The most popular places WIC FMNP recipients shop for fresh produce are: Giant Eagle (43 people), Food Land (13), Shop ‘N’ Save (11), Wal-mart (13) and other (7). One-way travel to these places takes most recipients 10 minutes or less (26 people) or 11- 20 minutes (20 people). Sixteen people travel between 21 and 45 minutes, but no one travels more than 45 minutes one-way to purchase fresh produce outside of farmers’ markets.

NOTE: Survey respondents could choose more than one place shopped for fresh produce, so totals equal more than 56.



Market Satisfaction

All survey respondents think the FMNP is a great program and want to see it continue. People like the freshness, variety and the fruit most at farmers’ markets. Market hours, locations, and lack of variety, are things shoppers like least about farmers’ markets.

Children

Thirty-three FMNP recipients took their kids to the farmers’ market and all reported a wonderful experience. Children enjoyed sampling different produce and helping to pick out produce.

Produce

Twenty-seven people thought the quality of the fruits and vegetables at farmers’ markets was better than the produce at other places they shop. Twenty-seven people rated the produce quality the same as elsewhere. Only two people thought the produce quality at farmers’ markets was worse.

Prices

Thirty-one people reported farmers' market prices lower than other places shopped for produce. Fifteen people thought they were the same and ten people rated farmers' market prices higher than other places where they shopped for fresh produce.

Overall Satisfaction

Overall, 35 people were satisfied with their farmers' market experience and would continue shopping even if they did not receive FMNP checks. Seventeen would not continue shopping without FMNP checks and four people were undecided.

People who would continue shopping at farmers' markets without checks liked the freshness, quality of produce and prices best. Those who would not continue shopping at farmers' markets preferred to save a trip by shopping at the grocery store. Undecided FMNP recipients said it would depend on if they had the money and if farmers' accepted Food Stamps.

DISCUSSION

Barriers Explored

Many people identifying location or transportation as primary barriers to shopping at farmers' markets lived in Duquesne, McKeesport and White Oak. McKeesport currently has a farm stand so expansion of this site at the McKeesport WIC office might be particularly useful.

The "other" reasons people cited for not shopping at farmers' markets demonstrate a possible opportunity to provide more education about the growing seasons of different produce. Finally, since many clients "forgot" or "didn't get around" to using their FMNP checks, the challenge is, how do we make shopping at farmers' markets a priority in the lives of WIC FMNP recipients?

Travel Time

The relationship between travel time to farmers' markets and to other places people shop to buy fresh produce reveals a possible factor in underutilization of farmers' markets. One-way travel to farmers' markets for most FMNP recipients takes 11-20 minutes, but one-way travel to the grocery store (where people can purchase other needed items such as diapers or toothpaste) takes most people only 10 minutes. This could be a very important decision-making factor for clients who don't have a lot of time. Even if they want to use their FMNP checks, they may continue to shop at the grocery store to save time.

Farmers' Market Locations

Specific conclusions about areas underserved by farmers' markets were not made. McKeesport and Northside are two locations where people did not shop with FMNP checks the most. These places both have a farmers' market or farm stand present, but at the McKeesport farm stand, produce sells out extremely fast. McKeesport also has many seniors, who are able to get to the market when it first opens at 10 AM. By the time WIC clients arrive, the selection is very limited. This could discourage shoppers from using their checks even though they have a farmers' market nearby.

Children and Markets

Highlighting children's positive experience at farmers' markets could be another way to encourage shopping at markets. Promoting farmers' markets as an outing/event that provides an enjoyable experience for kids inaccessible at a grocery store could be a new field of marketing for farmers' markets. Encouraging farmers' markets to host events utilizing community residents to provide face-painting, story time, live entertainment and other activities could be a way to draw in first time shoppers. This approach would be especially useful to target WIC clients with children who prefer one-stop shopping.

Strategic Appointment Scheduling

One WIC client at the McKeesport office tries to schedule her appointments on the day that the farmers' market is open so that she can use her FMNP checks. This is especially helpful for her since there is not a farmers' market where she lives. Although everyone cannot schedule their WIC appointments on the days that farmers' markets are open, if there is a market near a WIC office, this is a useful strategy for clients who find the locations of markets inconvenient.

Redemption Rates

Solely looking at redemption rates as a measure of program success can be misleading. Redemption rate data varies widely across the country because all states do not distribute FMNP checks to the entire eligible population. One of the purposes of the FMNP is to provide low-income communities access to farmers' markets. Since 56 percent of respondents shopped at a farmers' market at least once in 2003 or in previous years, the FMNP is meeting one of its goals to expose people to shopping at farmers' markets. This number would probably be higher if the survey was conducted after the farmers' market season in November.

GREATER PITTSBURGH COMMUNITY FOOD BANK FARM STANDS

The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank farm stands provide fresh produce to low-income neighborhoods that have limited access to farmers' markets and grocery stores. Farm stands are often located in public housing communities and are sponsored by community organizations.

In 2003, 11 farm stands served 7,413 customers in Allegheny County. Total sales for the season were \$44,200. WIC FMNP sales represented 19 percent of total sales with an average of \$366 per week. This demonstrates the importance of farm stands in providing access to fresh produce. Countywide, an estimated 1400 FMNP recipients might not be able to use their checks if these farm stands were not operating.

PA NUTRITION EDUCATION NETWORK'S FMNP SOCIAL MARKETING CAMPAIGN

In 2003, The Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Network (PA NEN) conducted a social marketing campaign encouraging FMNP check recipients to visit farmers' markets and use ALL of their checks. The statewide campaign used radio and television advertisements as well as on-site distribution of nutrition education materials, food demonstrations and food tastings.

The radio campaign targeted the low-income community using two different messages throughout the season. At the beginning of the season, a child's voice said "Hey Gram, give me five." An adult voice continued to talk about the FMNP and using the checks. The other, also a female voice, spoke the general message to use FMNP checks at the local farmers' market. In October, two different messages, one in a female voice and one in a male voice talked about using FMNP checks before the end of the season, and added encouragement to continue to get your "five a day" by purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables from the local grocery store after the farmers' season was over. The TV campaign targeted the low-income community and provided messages during children's programming such as *Clifford* on public television in the state of Pennsylvania in the morning and after school.

In addition, live, radio and TV broadcasting events at twenty-two farmers' markets allowed this campaign to reach 3.9 million people statewide. Approximately 47 percent of the 239 people surveyed at various markets received FMNP checks and heard the radio messages. Of that group, 42 percent were influenced. This indicates that this campaign was successful and had an impact on FMNP participants.

STATE STRATEGIES

Although Pennsylvania's WIC FMNP redemption rate is higher than the national average according to IMPACT reports published by the National Association of Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs (NAFMNP), it is still lower than it could be. Some states engage in special activities that may contribute to their high redemption rates. Although these strategies may or may not be successful in Pennsylvania, it is worthwhile to consider various efforts to promote the FMNP. The following are a few approaches from seven different WIC Programs.

Alabama

Alabama receives enough USDA funding to provide WIC FMNP checks for everyone who is eligible, however, the program is not available in every county. Local clinics have a strong relationship with the Alabama Cooperative Extension Program, which conducts nutrition education classes on-site at farmers' markets. Class topics range from selecting fruits and vegetables to canning produce. The classes are optional, but if women attend, it counts as a secondary nutrition education visit. Participants receive a card as proof of their attendance, which is also redeemable for a prize (if available) at their local WIC clinic. The WIC FMNP supplies prizes such as a cookbook or a plush toy in the shape of a fruit or a vegetable.

Chickasaw Tribe, Oklahoma

One of the most effective strategies of the Chickasaw Tribe is to provide a verbal reminder when women are in the office. Simple statements such as: "you know the market is open today and Saturday, right?" or "You still have time to use your FMNP checks. Now, _____ are in season," are useful.

Special display boards are created in WIC offices three times throughout the farmers' market season. One is set up during National Farmers' Market week, during five a day month and at the end of the farmers' market season.

A final strategy is to conduct food demonstrations once a month at each farmers' market. Interns or WIC staff with a degree in Family and Consumer sciences conducts the food demonstrations. Food demonstrations at farmers' markets are especially useful for WIC clients because demonstrators find out what is available at the market in advance and create recipes using those ingredients.

District of Columbia

The District of Columbia engages in several outreach and marketing activities to increase WIC participation in the FMNP. Advertising on the radio as well as on buses is conducted throughout the farmers' market season. Flyers reminding FMNP recipients to use their checks are sent to local agencies, schools, day care centers and other locations targeting WIC recipients. In addition, postcard reminders are mailed three times throughout the season.

The DC WIC FMNP participates in health fairs and cooking demonstrations along with other Department of Health agencies. Once a year, DC WIC organizes a Get Fresh Festival and advertises this event on the radio and in WIC clinics.

Iowa

In 2002, Iowa hosted a special advertising campaign titled "Shop Your Local Farmers' Market." This radio and bus advertisement campaign was made possible through a special grant. Although a specific tracking system was not developed as part of this campaign, there was an increase in shoppers turned vendors at farmers' markets. Farmers' market growth was also evident by an increase in media coverage. The news announced opening dates of farmers' markets and sometimes broadcasted the weather forecast live from a farmers' market. The investment in this campaign proved to be worth it as well because the Iowa bus company asked the Iowa Department of Agriculture if they could put the advertisements on the buses the following year to utilize the free space. Since the advertisement did not contain specific dates, but provided a consistent phone number, this was an added bonus.

Michigan

Michigan does not receive USDA funding to provide all participants with FMNP benefits. Many Michigan WIC agencies partner with the Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) to provide mandatory nutrition education classes. After attending a 20 – 45 minute session at a WIC agency or farmers' market, women can receive the FMNP benefits.

Michigan WIC has also worked with Detroit local agencies to organize "Project FRESH Days" for two years. These events provide nutrition education classes at an agency as or a farmers' market, so after the class, recipients can immediately use their coupons if they desire. Collaborative efforts provided an educational corner for children to have story time while their

mothers attended the nutrition education class. A special grant also allowed each child to take a book home.

Osage Tribe, Oklahoma

The Osage Tribe receives USDA funding to provide FMNP checks for all eligible WIC recipients. Their smaller population allows them to target the WIC community in a more comprehensive way. First, WIC participants are asked if they want to participate in the FMNP. If people are interested, but cannot get to the farmers' market locations, farmers are asked to travel to areas where WIC recipients reside. This system is effective because the WIC offices have formed a partnership with farmers, so they are willing to go to different locations where WIC recipients live. Some places do not have WIC clinics either so, two or three farmers travel every time there is a clinic in that area and continue traveling until they feel all the vouchers in that area are redeemed. This partnership allows about an 85 percent distribution rate of FMNP checks.

Vermont

Since Vermont cannot provide enough FMNP benefits for all eligible WIC recipients, requiring attendance at nutrition activities is an un-biased way to determine who will get the coupons. Around April, a schedule of about 12 sessions at various times and dates – morning, afternoon, evening and weekends – is sent to all WIC households. WIC staff members hold 15 – 20 minute nutrition activities at various locations including Health Department offices and farmers' markets. Vermont WIC also developed a video about the FMNP that is sometimes used as well.

FMNP benefits are not actually distributed until mid-June when produce is ripe and a wide selection is available. To maximize the number of people utilizing the FMNP, Vermont uses its' state matching funds to distribute checks to non-WIC, non-senior eligible residents. FMNP benefits are redistributed among local agencies late in the season.

In addition, Vermont WIC FMNP schedules activities at farmers' markets called "WICtivities." A dated schedule of WICtivities is mailed to WIC participants and posted in WIC offices. Examples of WICtivities conducted by WIC staff include: a demonstration on ten ways to use kale, puppet shows, or dressing up like vegetables or fruits. WIC staff is highly motivated

to conduct these special events even if they occur on the weekends or in the evenings, but an additional incentive is that they are paid time and a half.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Since the sample size for this research reflects less than one percent of the WIC population in Allegheny County, comprehensive conclusions about barriers preventing FMNP check redemption and ways to improve the program cannot be made. This research can however, serve as the basis for future study. The following are two specific relationships to possibly explore.

WIC-Senior Partnership

The success of the SFMNP could possibly extend to the WIC FMNP if shoppers from both communities paired up. A senior could help a WIC recipient select produce and provide cooking suggestions. The partnership would not have to be on going, but if both members wanted to continue, dialogue could go beyond farmers' markets and members could exchange experiences about parenting for example. This partnership could help strengthen relationships between different generations as well as provide a rewarding experience for both involved that would not be possible at the grocery store or other places people buy fresh produce.

Cooperative Extension Partnership

The Cooperative Extension office in many states collaborates with WIC offices to provide nutrition education. Burke County in North Carolina used this relationship to increase participation in the FMNP. Since the WIC office and Cooperative Extension Service both had a space in the local Human Resources Building, they developed "Special Farmers' Market Days" once a month from June to September. Local farmers setup their trucks in the parking lot on the scheduled day from 4 – 6 PM. The FMNP check redemption rate increased from 29 percent in 1998 to 36 percent in 2000.

Although WIC offices in Allegheny County do not share office space with the local Cooperative Extension, creating a partnership between the two could still have a positive impact on farmers' market support. One possible collaborative project is to establish a "Market Master" at farmers' markets. Rotating farmers' markets monthly, the Market Master could offer information and tips about selecting, storing and cooking produce in addition to sharing

information about nutrition content and health benefits. Having a WIC presence at farmers' markets could help WIC clients make the connection between receiving checks (in an office) and spending checks (at a farmers' market).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA) heads one of the largest FMNPs in the country. It is one of a few states whose FMNP is available statewide in every county. The PDA has made many efforts to organize this Program in an extremely efficient manner; however, there are some improvements at the State and local levels that can help Pennsylvania serve as an even better example for other state FMNPs. The following recommendations result from conversations with WIC staff, PDA, and members of anti-hunger groups.

STATE

Promotional Materials

In 2003, The PA Department of Agriculture provided a brochure to distribute with FMNP checks. In previous years additional materials such as magnets and coloring books were also distributed. WIC clients were very excited to receive these items. In addition, the materials provided FMNP visibility that indirectly encouraged WIC clients to use their FMNP checks more often.

Currently, Governor Rendell prohibits PDA from spending FMNP money on promotional materials. The PDA should be allowed to annually allocate money for FMNP promotional materials. At least one item such as magnets, pens, stadium cups, vegetable seeds or magnetic erasable boards for the refrigerator should be available for FMNP recipients every year.

Data Collection/ Reconciliation System

Previously, the Department of Health printed FMNP checks with each WIC clients' name on each check. Although this was time-consuming, it allowed clinics to easily identify who did not redeem all of their FMNP checks. WIC offices could also easily develop strategies to target clinics experiencing more problems than others.

Now, a private printing company produces identical checks for the WIC FMNP and the SFMNP. This was most likely a financial change, but it has impacted the FMNP tracking process so that now it is difficult to determine Program success and needed improvements.

The current reconciliation system allows offices to record how many checks they receive, how many checks they issue, and how many checks are not issued. PDA provides redemption rates for each county, which is useful, but PDA should also provide redemption rates per agency to afford even more help. If this is not possible, the necessary information to calculate agency redemption rates or FMNP spending per farmers' market or farm stand should be made available so that individual agencies can do their part to improve WIC FMNP participation.

LOCAL

Agency Recognition

In several states and even within Allegheny County, areas that have higher redemption rates tend to have enthusiastic and motivated staff members who work extremely hard to encourage and remind clients to use all of their checks each season. In Connecticut, local WIC directors "award" a fruit basket and certificate of achievement to the clinics with the highest redemption rates. Although staff members cannot force clients to redeem checks, a recognition system could help staff members feel more appreciated, thus motivating them to motivate others to use this program. If the Allegheny County Health Department WIC Program provides agency recognition in the form of certificates, prizes or even simple announcements in a newsletter, enthusiasm about farmers' markets could carry over to the clients.

Individual Office Efforts

Improvement of any kind must respond directly to the targeted audience. Uniform efforts to strengthen the FMNP across the country would fail because the needs of each state vary greatly. Likewise, each WIC office should identify approaches that will reflect the needs of their clients. Nutritionists spend a lot of time with WIC clients and are aware of their concerns and potentially unsuccessful outreach efforts.

To follow up on the results from this study, researchers spoke with the nutritionists at each Allegheny County WIC office to identify short-term recommendations that can be implemented in each office. Nutritionists should continue to be actively involved in efforts to improve the FMNP.

CONCLUSION

This research has attempted to identify barriers preventing WIC clients from redeeming all of their FMNP checks. Results from the survey suggest that WIC clients are satisfied with the FMNP, but do not view it as a priority in their lives. Since lack of time is a common barrier for many WIC clients, innovative marketing, educational and outreach strategies are necessary to present shopping at farmers' markets as a worthwhile investment and not a waste of time.

Considering ways to improve WIC FMNP participation is important because FMNP recipients contribute to farmers' sustainability. More than half of survey respondents shopped at farmers' markets with FMNP checks. Although this study used a relatively small sample size, if these shopping patterns reflect the habits of the more than 15,600 WIC clients in Allegheny County, over 8,500 people gain access to fresh, locally grown produce each year. This translates into tens of thousands of dollars for local farmers. This support and revenue is key to ensuring the vitality of farmers.

In addition, expansion of farmers' markets and farm stands to provide better access in certain communities is needed. Improvements for farmers' markets that are part of long-term community development plans (such as involvement of community members and artists) will contribute to the goal of providing access to fresh, locally grown produce for residents of all income levels.

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