

Case Study: Universal EBT Access at Los Angeles Farmers' Markets

The Farmers' Markets for All Working Group of the Los Angeles Food Policy Council strives to improve access to affordable, fresh food for residents of all income levels in Los Angeles through farmers' markets. The Working Group's priorities are to increase EBT and WIC acceptance at LA County farmers' markets through policy change and peer-to-peer mentoring. Beginning in 2013, the Farmers' Markets for All Working Group started a campaign to achieve universal EBT access at all farmers' markets in the City of Los Angeles. As a result of the campaign, the percent of farmers' markets accepting EBT increased from 58% in 2013 to 96% in 2017. This brief case study highlights the motivations for the campaign, strategies and tactics used by the Working Group to achieve success, and next steps to promote greater healthy food access for LA's food insecure households and increased economic opportunities for local farmers.



Photo Source: Daniel Rizik—Baer, Los Angeles Food Policy Council

Rising Food Insecurity in Los Angeles

According to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, food insecurity-- or "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 2011ⁱⁱⁱ. Food insecurity can lead to hunger and malnutrition, and has been associated with poorer health outcomes, increased odds of hospitalization especially for children, increased prevalence of chronic disease, and greater risk of depression and other mental health conditions among adultsⁱⁱⁱ.

The Farmers' Markets for All Working Group recognizes 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 stressors 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), supplements low-income grocery budgets by providing cash benefits to purchase foods from authorized retailers. SNAP-authorized retailers include grocery stores and supermarkets, small neighborhood markets, and an increasing number of farmer's markets.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Los Angeles County has a EBT participation rate of 63%. This means that nearly four out of every ten low-income Angelenos who are eligible for the EBT benefit do not participate in the program. As a result, Los Angeles County ranks 34th out of the state's 58 counties in EBT participation. The missed opportunity for Los Angeles to leverage federal dollars to improve quality of life for residents results in an estimated loss of over \$2 billion dollars in additional state and local economic activity^{iv}.

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^v. 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 \$3.5 million in EBT redemptions at farmers markets in 2010 ^{vi}. 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. Through a policy that requires EBT acceptance at farmers' markets, vendors and markets can experience the economic benefits of EBT acceptance for themselves, and EBT participants can have more equitable access to healthy food options.



Photo Source: Flickr

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 a 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.

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Outcomes and Next Steps

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, 96% of farmers' markets in the City of Los Angeles now accept EBT—a substantial increase from 58% when the campaign first began. The campaign has also resulted in catalytic impacts on LA County as a whole, with new cities in the County considering a Universal EBT at Farmers' Markets policy, and more farmers' markets voluntarily accepting EBT throughout the region.

ⁱ United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service [USDA, ERS], 2015

ⁱⁱ Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Rising Food Insecurity in Los Angeles, 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Rising Food Insecurity in Los Angeles, 2015

^{iv} California Food Policy Advocates Lost Dollars, Empty Plates, 2015

^v McFadden, D. T. (2015). What Do We Mean by "Local Foods"? *Choices*, 30(1), 1-6.

^{vi} California Department of Social Services, 2011