# Bringing Farmers’ Markets to Underserved Communities

*By Douglas Shinkle*

The growth in backyard and community gardens, farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture reflects an interest in local food and healthy eating in the United States. Farmers’ markets, once rare in many regions, have sprouted from a total of 1,755 in 1994 to 7,175 in 2011, according to The U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Consumer interest is not the only factor driving this trend. Government efforts to increase the production, transportation and marketing abilities of farmers are helping to bring fresh produce to more communities and better economic results for small farmers.

Some state legislators have focused on efforts to allow public assistance recipients—who often have neither the option nor the ability—to buy food at farmers’ markets. Nationally, according to the CDC, only 32 percent of adults consumed fruit two or more times a day and only 26 percent ate vegetables three or more times a day. The number of people receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, formerly known as food stamps, has skyrocketed in the last few years to an all-time high of 45 million people in July 2011. That’s up from about 28 million in 2008. This influx represents a huge potential market for farmers.

SNAP now distributes its food benefits on electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards, which are similar to credit cards. The problem is that farmers’ markets often do not have the machines required to read the cards. These machines typically cost about $1,000, plus transaction costs. Some markets are experimenting with mobile devices to accept payments. Some farmers’ markets provide a central booth where EBT cards can be charged, providing the recipient with a receipt or tokens to purchase food from vendors. And although it is more expensive for the markets to provide terminals at every vendor, this has proved more successful in getting SNAP recipients to buy fresh, locally grown produce. At one market in Pennsylvania, for example, providing each vendor with a card terminal increased some vendors’ sales to SNAP card holders by more than 200 percent.

### State Action

In the past three years, lawmakers in at least six states—California, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, Vermont and Washington—have enacted laws to provide card readers at farmers’ markets to aid public-assistance recipients.

The California Legislature passed legislation to allow an association of produce sellers to operate an EBT machine at a farmers’ market. Illinois legislators created a Farmers’ Market Technology Improvement Fund and directed two state agencies to conduct outreach to SNAP recipients and increase the availability of EBT machines at farmers’ markets. The Nebraska Legislature extended an existing agricultural grant program to assist with card reader purchases and outreach.
The Washington Legislature enacted a number of local food initiatives including the creation of a fund to expand EBT technology; $600,000 was allocated for 2010 and 2011 in part to help farmers obtain terminals to process card transactions at markets.

A number of statewide councils have been established in recent years to study food system issues, including the use of EBT machines at farmers’ markets, and to make recommendations on policy. State food policy councils in Colorado, Louisiana and North Carolina are studying specifically how to increase public-assistance recipients’ access to farmers’ markets.

Bringing more farmers’ markets to more people requires inter-agency cooperation. In Massachusetts, the Department of Agricultural Resources and the Department of Transitional Assistance have worked together to increase the number of terminals, subsidize the fees, and conduct outreach to SNAP recipients. This collaboration has helped increase investments from nonprofit groups and municipalities.

**Federal Action** The federal government has a number of laws and initiatives to increase the availability and use of farmers’ markets. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service encourages the use of farmers’ markets through the Women, Infants and Children Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program and the Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program. Since 1992, these programs have provided grants to state agencies and tribes to supply coupons for low-income seniors and mothers to use when purchasing fresh produce. USDA recently granted $4.5 million in Farmers’ Market Promotion Program funds to local governments, agricultural cooperatives, nonprofit organizations and others, of which at least 10 percent were to be used for new EBT projects. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act requires Women, Infants and Children benefits to be distributed through EBT cards by 2020.

The most recent farm bill funded a Healthy Incentive Pilot program in Hampden County, Mass., to study whether incentives given to SNAP recipients increase their purchase of fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods. Findings are due in 2013. The U.S. Food and Nutrition Service has been rapidly increasing the number of farmers’ markets that are authorized to accept SNAP benefits—a 263 percent increase in the past five fiscal years. In FY 2010, more than $7 million in SNAP benefits were redeemed at farmers’ markets; an increase of 49 percent over the previous five years.

With 17 percent of children and 66 percent of adults overweight, addressing Americans’ poor diet and inactivity is vital. Low-income individuals are particularly at-risk, according to the U.S. Food and Nutrition Service. Efforts to bring the bounty of farmers’ markets to more citizens not only increases the varieties and availability of healthy choices, but creates new market opportunities for local farmers as well.

**Resources and Contacts**

**Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program**
U.S. Food and Nutrition Service: WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program
Farmers’ Market Coalition
U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, Ashlee Johnson, (202) 720-6643

**NCSL Contacts for More Information**

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