

AGENDA PRIORITIES

3. Maximize use of current public benefit programs for vulnerable populations, especially children and seniors, and link them with strategies for healthy food access.

GET MORE GOOD FOOD, SUPPORT FARMS WITH PUBLIC ASSISTANCE DOLLARS

A little boy, seven or eight years old, walks up to the farmers' market stall in Grand Rapids and asks for some "bubblegum plums and blackberries." Full of confidence, he hands over tokens that double the value of his family's food stamp benefits and tells the farmer: "The plums are for me, and the blackberries are for my Mom."

This is the moment when Christine Helms-Maletic, development project manager for Grand Rapids' Fulton Street Farmers Market, says she knew that the Double Up Food Bucks program the market participates in really makes a difference.



Photo courtesy of Fulton Street Farmers Market

She'd already watched long lines of people wrap around the corner at the market; mothers, fathers, and grandparents waiting their turn for tokens that double (up to \$20 per day) their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for purchases of Michigan-grown produce at participating farmers' markets.

"On Saturdays, we were processing one transaction every 67 seconds," Maletic said. She'd also seen tears in the eyes of SNAP beneficiaries when they learned of the opportunity, and she watched many make special trips to stock up on tomatoes and other fruits and vegetables for canning and freezing.

But that little boy, eager and proud to buy plums and blackberries, crystallizes the dietary and socioeconomic change that the Double Up Food Bucks program can accomplish by making it easier for people with limited resources to buy fresh, healthy, local produce. "He was so excited to be at the market," Maletic said. "He was in charge of his tokens, and he knew what he wanted."

Fifth-generation farmer Case Visser, 24, says the program has also had a profound effect on growers who sell at the market. "We ended up getting a lot of business from it, and we saw a lot of people we don't normally see. It's a great thing to be involved in. Our farm is proud to support it."

The Fulton Street Farmers' Market is one of 55 in Michigan that participated in the 2011 round of the three-year Double Up Food Bucks program, a project of the nonprofit Fair Food Network and funded by charitable donations. More than 70 Michigan farmers markets are on board for 2012.

Need

The phrase "double up" in the Double Up Food Bucks name refers to the extra money beneficiaries can spend. But it could also refer to the double-duty nature of the program,

which simultaneously addresses food security and farm security. In 2011, the first statewide year, the program resulted in more than \$1.3 million of sales (\$687,000 in SNAP dollars spent and \$620,000 in DUFB dollars distributed) for Michigan farm vendors.¹ The program has helped drive increases in SNAP sales across Michigan, which is already a leader: in 2011 SNAP sales at Michigan farmers markets were more than ten times average SNAP sales at farmers markets in other Midwest states.¹

The program demonstrates how Michigan can get more public health and local economy mileage out of taxpayer dollars going into public food assistance programs, such as SNAP. Other programs include Women Infants and Children (WIC) benefits and the national Farmers Market Nutrition Program, known as Project FRESH/Market FRESH in Michigan.

Opportunity

Steering more food assistance dollars to fresh, healthy, local fruits and vegetables could encourage healthier eating patterns and grow Michigan's diverse farm economy at the same time. Jobs will also result. If people increased their consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables by just 20-25%, and the additional produce came from Michigan, it would result in a net increase of 1,780 off-farm jobs and a total net increase of \$211 million in income.²

Action

Local and state leaders need to both increase use of available food assistance programs and link them with strategies to improve access to healthy food, including strengthening beneficiaries' connections with farms, both urban and rural.

- *Make it simpler to apply for benefits by supporting efforts to place online SNAP application kiosks in non-profit offices and community centers.*
- *Increase the number of farmers' markets, farm stands, and the like that have the ability and technology to accept electronic benefit transfer (EBT) payments, including SNAP, WIC and electronic DUFB.*
- *Support efforts to streamline payment at farmers' markets among different programs. WIC is currently not available at farmers' markets outside of limited Project FRESH coupons.*
- *Join the Fair Food Network and others calling for federal funding of incentives, such as Double Up Food Bucks, to promote both public health and farm business development.*

1-2-3 Go!

Every five years or so, Congress updates Farm Bill legislation, which governs taxpayer spending on food and nutrition assistance programs as well as investments in agriculture and related community development. The 2012 Farm Bill process is the opportunity for voters and local and state policy makers to press the case for the "double up" value of steering more food assistance dollars to healthy food access and local food purchasing. At the state level, you can work with your community farmers market to continue to secure funding for the Double Up Food Bucks program and to devise a long-term strategy for statewide funding and implementation.

¹Hesterman, O. (2012) SNAP to Health with Double Up Food Bucks. <http://fairfoodnetwork.org/connect/blog/snap-health-double-food-bucks>

²Conner, D., Knudson, W., Hamm, M. & Peterson, HC. (2008) The Food System as an Economic Driver: Strategies and Applications for Michigan. *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition*, 3(4), 371-383.