

Farmers' Markets Pilot Digital Incentive Program in Boston, Massachusetts

by: Mary Bovenzi

SUMMARY

As of November 2015, 36,000 residents of Boston, MA, have better access to healthy, local food through an updated nutrition incentive program. Six farmers' markets in low-income areas changed from a paper to a digital Boston Bounty Bucks (BBB) system. The new technology integrates BBB distribution and accounting. Now, customers who receive BBB to match their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits can have a faster, easier shopping experience. Market managers and vendors also report fewer administrative and financial burdens.



CHALLENGE

More than two-thirds of Boston residents live within two miles of one of the city's 28 seasonal markets. However, buying healthy food remains a challenge for many families. According to the Food Research and Action Center, about 78% of low-income Boston residents receive SNAP benefits. Since 2008, the BBB program has helped local farmers' markets acquire Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) terminals that accept SNAP benefits. At participating sites,

the City of Boston gives SNAP customers up to \$10 in matched savings through paper BBB coupons. By 2013, 21 markets had \$166,000 in combined SNAP/BBB sales. Yet BBB needed a better distribution and accounting system to sustain its growth. Let's Get Healthy, Boston!—a partnership between the Boston Public Health Commission and community organizations—collaborated with the Mayor's Office of Food Initiatives (OFI) to address the challenge.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

Incentive programs such as BBB improve access to fresh produce among low-income residents and help encourage healthier purchasing and eating. Additionally, the dollars spent through SNAP and nutrition incentive programs can help sustain neighborhood farmers' markets that might not otherwise have sufficient demand to continue. To learn more about the BBB program, visit <http://www.cityofboston.gov/food/bountybucks.asp>.

"The digital system made accounting and reimbursements easier. It reduced paperwork and improved accuracy. Most importantly, the digital system frees the market manager to spend time interacting with customers."

- Vickey Siggers, Market Manager, Mattapan Farmers Market

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SOLUTION

With support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the partners launched a BBB Digital Pilot program during the 2015 market season. Six farmers' markets in low-income neighborhoods throughout Boston replaced their paper-based BBB coupon and accounting system with a digital system. Market managers received training on how to use the new technology. Prior to the new system, SNAP customers had to wait in a separate line to obtain BBB coupons and managers had to keep detailed paper records of every transaction. Now, SNAP customers electronically receive up to \$10 in BBB on their EBT cards and BBB invoices are automated with a shorter reimbursement period.

RESULTS

In the pilot year of the BBB Digital program, 598 SNAP customers spent more than \$18,000 in SNAP benefits and an additional \$9,800 in BBB at six farmers' markets. Preliminary customer surveys showed that 81% of SNAP customers preferred the new digital system over receiving paper BBB coupons. Customers favored the new system because it was less time-consuming, improved the privacy of their transactions, and made tracking BBB benefits more manageable. Farmers' market managers and vendors reported high satisfaction with the system's speed and usability as well as reduced administrative and financial burdens. All six sites plan to continue using the new digital system. The upgrade has also helped the OFI to estimate BBB expenses more accurately, which will improve program management.

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Contact CDC

<http://www.cdc.gov/cdc-info/requestform.html>

Web site

<http://nccd.cdc.gov/nccdsuccessstories/>

The findings and conclusions in this success story are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the funding agencies or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

SUSTAINING SUCCESS

Let's Get Healthy, Boston! and the OFI plan to bring the new technology to eight additional farmers' markets for the 2016 market season, which runs from May through November. The partners are also looking to include other local food outlets in the digital system's expansion, such as winter markets. These efforts will provide an opportunity to test and commit to the technology before Massachusetts launches the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives (FINI) project in 2017. FINI is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture and will provide sustainable funding for BBB and similar programs in communities in Boston and across the country.

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