

Big Cities Chronic Disease Community of Practice

June 2017

Boston Makes Healthy Food the Easy Choice for SNAP Recipients

The Role of Local Health Departments in Chronic Disease Prevention

Local health departments (LHDs) play an important role in developing healthy communities. LHDs serve as the authorities on public health, providing decision-makers from all sectors with strategic guidance on local health data and science-proven interventions.

The Big Cities Chronic Disease Community of Practice

Formed in 2007, the Big Cities Chronic Disease Community of Practice (BC-COP) comprises local health officials or senior-level chronic disease programmatic staff from LHDs representing the largest cities and metropolitan areas in the United States. The goals of the BC-COP are to identify common priorities related to healthy eating and active living, discuss evidence-based policy, system, and environment strategies, and share lessons learned during implementation. Peer sharing and support takes place through in-person meetings, webinars, phone calls, and resource sharing. The BC-COP guides the production of resources that are helpful to members and other communities seeking similar change. For example, *Sustaining Healthy Food Retail Initiatives*, a NACCHO fact sheet published in July 2016, documented one big city's model healthy food access ordinance.

Overview

Recently, an increasing number of farmers markets have begun accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. SNAP is a governmental program that provides nutrition assistance and education to low-income families.¹ Incentivizing farmers markets to accept SNAP benefits is an excellent way to provide access to healthy food to those most vulnerable to chronic disease. The Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) understood the need for low-income individuals and families to have access to healthy food options and worked with local organizations to increase the availability of farmers markets in low-income neighborhoods.

INFLUENCE OF BIG CITIES CHRONIC DISEASE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

BPHC has gained very useful knowledge from its peer LHDs by participating in the Big Cities Chronic Disease Community of Practice. The community's webinars and discussions have allowed BPHC to build relationships and gain awareness of LHD activities across the country related to healthy food access.

Challenge

In Boston, farmers markets have become very popular, which has increased demand for locally farmed food. The popularity of farmers markets had also created competition among local farmers, which has reduced the number of sellers in low-income neighborhoods. Additionally, farmers markets were accustomed to taking paper tender food stamps and when the SNAP program transitioned to Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards, farmers markets could no longer accept the SNAP benefits.

Solution

BPHC collaborated with several local organizations, including the Food Project and the Mayor's Office of Food Initiatives to increase the accessibility of farmers markets for low-income city residents. The Food Project, a small nonprofit organization in Boston, and the Mayor's Office of Food Initiatives started Boston Bounty Food Bucks in 2008. The Food Project provides funding to local communities to pilot programs called Doubling SNAP,² which allow SNAP recipients to double the value of their assistance by receiving nutrition incentives when purchasing fruits and vegetables at eligible farmers markets or grocery stores. The Boston Bounty Food Bucks program funding was used to repay farmers markets for the amount of the nutrition incentives used by SNAP recipients. As part of this collaboration, BPHC was able to purchase EBT machines for 23 participating farmers markets.

Results

The project has successfully incentivized SNAP recipients and encouraged healthy eating practices. When SNAP recipients buy their groceries at a farmers market, each day they can receive a match of up to \$10 of Boston Bounty Food Bucks for every \$10 that they spend. This gives SNAP recipients additional buying power to purchase healthy food options for their families. The program also supports the Massachusetts farming economy. The farmers markets benefit because there is guaranteed spending, which eliminates any financial risk of providing their services in low-income neighborhoods.

In 2016, \$80,000–\$90,000 Boston Bounty Food Bucks were spent at farmers markets. This roughly equates to \$100,000 SNAP benefits spent. Funds to repay farmers markets are currently raised through an annual fundraiser, Can Share, which is led by the Mayor's Office of Food Initiatives. Last year, Can Share raised more than \$100,000 for Boston Bounty Food Bucks.

Cross-Sectoral Awareness

Policies, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes played a major role in creating access to farmers markets for SNAP recipients. PSE changes are changes that address the social determinants of health and influence how laws and regulations, social and institutional norms, and physical, social and economic factors affect behaviors.³ LHDs and their cross-sectoral collaborations with various community partners can make PSE changes to improve the health of communities and achieve reductions in obesity and chronic disease.⁴

Several partners have been involved in making Boston Bounty Food Bucks a success. The Mayor's Office of Food Initiatives and the Food Project worked with hospitals to educate them about how their community benefits programs can fund Boston Bounty Food Bucks. In addition to funding the EBT machines at the farmers markets, BPHC has been heavily involved in community outreach efforts. BPHC also worked with staff at the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, which runs the SNAP program, and conducted a mass media campaign, Farm Fresh, that spread awareness about the location of farmers markets and educated SNAP benefit recipients.

Boston farmers markets in low-income neighborhoods are run by a local community agency, which funds part-time market managers. BPHC worked closely with the community agencies and market managers and has provided funding to streamline the Boston Bounty Food Bucks program. BPHC also placed nutrition advertisements and conducted food demonstration with a registered dietitian at farmers market locations.

Recommendations

Working with farmers markets is a strategy that a number of LHDs across the country and their stakeholders have engaged in to enact PSE changes within their communities. LHDs are often able to view such opportunities through a lens that other stakeholders may not, making it essential that they be a voice at the table to sustain local initiatives. LHDs should be flexible and proactive in how they engage stakeholders and community members.

References

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