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Free Farmers' Markets at Salt Lake County Senior Centers during COVID 19

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Major program theme: Horticulture

Abstract

Approximately 5.3 million seniors, or 7.3% of the national senior population, were food insecure in 2018 (Feeding America, 2020). Seniors comprise approximately 10% of Salt Lake County's population. In response, Salt Lake County Master Gardeners grew and disseminated garden produce to seniors at risk of food insecurity during free farmers' markets at senior centers.

Introduction

Covid-19 has adversely impacted Utah seniors in many ways including food access, social isolation, loneliness, depression, and fear of death. Seniors 65 and older have constituted 77.5% of deaths from Covid-19 in Utah (Health Department of Utah, 2021), making this group the most at risk of dying. As a result, many seniors have severely limited their contact with others outside



their homes, including family members. Social isolation poses a significant risk to the health of vulnerable seniors (New York Times, 2016). While senior centers provide a setting that enables social interaction, these facilities also offer free meals to anyone over the age of 60; senior centers are a gathering place to converse, eat, and exercise. For some seniors, the provided lunch is their only meal for the day (Salt Lake Tribune, 2020), and their access to fresh produce is limited to that meal. Due to these concerns, free farmers' markets were adapted in 2020 to safely supply needy seniors with fresh produce and positive interaction via outdoor produce markets.

Response

The farmers' market at senior centers program is a partnership between USU Extension Master Gardeners, Wheeler Historic Farm, and Salt Lake County Adult and Aging Services. An array of produce is grown at Wheeler Historic Farm, and by volunteers with backyard gardens. Traditionally, volunteers grow and harvest produce, then disseminate it to seniors during free farmers' markets held inside



senior centers. For safety precautions during COVID-19, the program was adapted in 2020 to provide outdoor/drive-through produce stands. Seniors were asked to remain in their cars or maintain social distancing while masked volunteers packaged their desired choice of produce. While access to nutrient-rich food is important, so is positive social interaction. Therefore, our program was focused on social exchange with seniors, and as a result, many seniors enjoyed interacting with the volunteers. Center coordinators commented on seniors' excitement about their engagements with the markets and the positive changes on their day-to-day routines.

Participants

The primary audience of this program was low-income and food-insecure seniors. With assistance from SLC Aging and Adult Services, senior centers were selected based on the level of risk for food insecurity. For example, some senior centers are located next to low-income housing units. The units often have kitchens, but rarely have garden spaces and may be located quite far from grocery stores. Some seniors are also unable to drive, making it difficult to shop for healthy foods. This is especially true for low-income seniors who are less likely to be able to afford personal vehicles, public transportation and/or grocery delivery services. By targeting high-risk senior centers, the program was able to routinely restock the pantries of these seniors with fresh and nutritious produce.

Outcomes and Impact

In 2020, 2,500 seniors collected fresh produce during 40 free farmers' markets held outside seven (7) senior centers. Nearly 10,000 pounds of garden produce was disseminated to food-insecure seniors, with an estimated market value of \$23,000. The Liberty Senior Center manager

stated, “Our seniors already fall into a low-income bracket but, some are also homeless. Your farmer’s market helped supplement many seniors healthy produce at home, which also during this pandemic helped them not have to go into a grocery store, as you probably noticed most of our participants don’t drive, so you can imagine what this meant to them. Not only did it give them something to look forward too, it provided a service that was able to fulfill a need that a lot of our seniors deal with at the Liberty Senior Center.”

One senior said, “I am so grateful for the opportunity I have had this summer being able to obtain real, fresh garden fruits and vegetables. This has allowed me the opportunity to eat in a healthy, nourishing manner in which I have been struggling with for some time due to financial challenges. The ability to do this is so beneficial to me because of the importance of me maintaining a healthier mind, body and soul. Yes, when I consume nourishing foods in the end, my soul is affected in a positive manner.” Going on to say, “I am so fortunate for the opportunity your program is providing me. I am so grateful!”



Public Value

This program benefited from existing partnerships that were active prior to the emergence of the pandemic. Therefore, the program team was able to rapidly adapt the farmers’ markets for seniors with COVID-19 safety precautions. Many seniors were surprised to know the farmers’ markets were open in 2020, even though senior center buildings were closed during COVID-19. Seniors collected hot lunches via drive-through services, and we were able to coordinate outdoor produce markets at the same time. The farmers’ markets enabled volunteers to contribute to an impactful program during the pandemic. Many volunteers opted to ‘grow-a-row for a senior’ in backyard gardens and donate the produce for volunteer service time. For seniors, several volunteers informed us that they were themselves high risk or interacted with high-risk individuals. Many expressed gratitude for being able to participate in the program in a safe way.

As a result of lessons learned during 2020, the ‘grow-a-row for a senior’ portion of the broader senior center farmers’ market program will be expanded in the future. Furthermore, we feel like we were able to model an approach that many gardeners can adopt to positively impact food security in their communities. We encourage gardeners who grow an edible garden to donate extra produce to a family in need. This “neighbors feeding neighbors” approach can be effective

to disseminate fresh produce when traditional food distribution channels are stressed during high demand and/or uncertain times. Furthermore, seniors are an important target population, and programs centered on healthy food and positive interaction can improve the lives of these individuals.

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