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Farmers Feeding Utah: Increasing Healthy Food Access and Supporting Local Agriculture

Heidi LeBlanc & Casey Coombs

Abstract

The need for food assistance increased by 300% among Utah families as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Farmers and ranchers were also adversely impacted by market losses and processing shortages. In response, Farmers Feeding Utah was developed to facilitate access to fresh agricultural produce for families in need.

Introduction

Utah has seen a 300% increase in the need for food assistance since the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 (Utahns Against Hunger [UAH], 2020). The spike in food insecurity led many Utahns to turn to emergency food sources (e.g., food pantries). Initially, food pantries reported not having enough food to support the demand for food assistance (UAH, 2020). While the need for food assistance increased, the agricultural market was experiencing significant losses due to global trade disturbances and economic shrinkages in the travel, hospitality, and restaurant sectors (Aday & Aday, 2020; Poudel et al., 2020). Risk mitigation efforts, such as social distancing, limited movement across borders, and high rates of COVID-19 among employees also led to significant interruptions in the labor supply. These factors resulted in food processing shortages (Poudel et al., 2020).

Supply chain disruptions left many Utah farmers and ranchers without a market for their products. Farmers and ranchers reported having to cull animals they could not process or sell due to supply chain issues (Marchant-Forde & Boyle, 2020). Nationwide, dairy farmers were dumping up to four million gallons of milk daily (Poudel et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the need for food assistance was growing due to the pandemic. Therefore, the Farmers Feeding Utah (FFU) Campaign was created to connect food-insecure residents to farmers and ranchers for locally produced food. As an innovative approach, the FFU facilitated increased food assistance to Utahns while supporting local farmers and ranchers.

Response and Target Audience

In response to the needs of both Utah farmers and families, USU Extension's Create Better Health (CBH/SNAP-Ed) program and the Hunger Solutions Institute partnered with the Utah Farm Bureau and Miracle of Agriculture Foundation to develop FFU. The goal of FFU is two-fold; (a) to provide Utah farmers and ranchers an outlet for their products, and (b) to provide nutritious food to families in need. FFU enables a food system change that connects families in need directly with locally produced fresh foods. To meet both goals, FFU relies on a combination of key individuals and corporate monetary and in-kind donations that are collected through social media campaigns and in-person solicitation. Donations are then used to purchase food directly from farmers to distribute to those in need. In addition, many Utah farmers and

ranchers have donated or discounted food items for distribution at events. Purchased or donated foods are then distributed through pop-up food pantry events or given to local food pantries.

Special care was taken to ensure pop-up events and pantries received food that was culturally appropriate for their clients. For example, live sheep were distributed in the Navajo Nation in May 2020. Additionally, pantries that serve refugee communities in Salt Lake county received commonly consumed items including goat meat, potatoes, and mushrooms. Recipients also received nutrition education on how to store and prepare the produce. The events were supported by volunteers from a multitude of partnering businesses, local organizations, and USU Extension's CBH faculty and staff, as well as local Extension county faculty.



The target populations for FFU are food insecure families in Utah, and farmers and ranchers who are struggling to sell food items. Families experiencing intergenerational poverty are given priority at the food distribution events. Locations for FFU events are identified based on county unemployment rates and SNAP enrollment.

Outcomes and Impact

Since inception in April 2020, FFU has provided twelve miracle distribution projects across ten counties in Utah and the Navajo Nation. Each event served an area at risk for food insecurity, which was defined as areas affected by economic challenges such as industry shutdowns and rising unemployment. Over the past year, FFU served over 23,000 Utah families directly through food distribution, with each family receiving approximately \$80 worth of locally grown Utah food. Food pantries ($n = 31$) were provided with a variety of local fresh foods to stock their shelves. The retail value of food that has been distributed to families and pantries through FFU totaled over \$3.1 million dollars. FFU has also supported 32 Utah farmers and ranchers,

including those that raise livestock, vegetables, fruits, and grain. Each distribution event offers products from at least one farmer or rancher local to the area.

In addition to providing food to families in need of assistance, the CBH program developed healthy recipes and other nutritional education materials and information that was distributed at each event. Based on survey results, the average household served by FFU consisted of five individuals. Accordingly, food received by participants at the events served a family of five for approximately two weeks. Respondents reported learning about the distributions through targeted mailings from CBH listservs, social media, and word of mouth from neighbors and friends. To date, FFU has been featured in over 100 news articles throughout the year. It was also recognized by the state of Utah in the concurrent resolution HCR019 which celebrated the work that Farmers Feeding Utah has accomplished during COVID-19. Families who participated in the events had the following to say about FFU:

“For the Navajo people, sheep is life. People tell me it has given them hope and helps them know someone cares about them. You will see people here very happy to get sheep, and they will utilize every bit.”

“This was wonderful! We got extra [food]and took [it] around to families we knew who were in need. Thank you!”

“Thank you so much! I know me and my husband we[re] worried we wouldn’t have food the next few days. This helped us so much!”

“I was a bit emotional seeing all this! [FFU event] came at a perfect time for our family! Thank you!”



Public Value

While FFU was developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an ongoing need for food system changes that can facilitate access to locally produced foods by food insecure individuals and families in Utah. FFU is dedicated to finding innovative and sustainable solutions towards a more equitable regional food system. We anticipate an expansion of FFU services in 2021. CBH (previously known as SNAP-Ed) plans to create farm-to-fork educational videos for events to further connect FFU food recipients to the local farmers and ranchers. This

can lead to increased awareness and knowledge of the local food system among residents. CBH will conduct an outcome evaluation to understand the impact of FFU services on food recipients, farmers, and ranchers. Evaluation data will also be used to inform program improvement and expansion. For more information on Farmers Feeding Utah, visit <https://farmersfeedingutah.org/>

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