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Cover Page Footnote

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Buy Produce for Your Neighbor: Supporting Local Agriculture

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Abstract

For Utahns experiencing food insecurity, eating adequate fruits and vegetables may be difficult due to limited access to fresh produce. Buy Produce for Your Neighbor is a healthy food drive that increases the amount of fresh produce in community food pantries and supports local agriculture.

Introduction

Findings from a recent statewide assessment show addressing hunger and supporting local food systems were critical issues in Utah (Narine, 2019). According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 10% of Utahns experienced food insecurity, meaning they did not have reliable access to the food they need to live a healthy and active life (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). In addition, the Utah Department of Health (2021) reported that many Utahns with lower incomes were not eating sufficient servings of fruits and vegetables. The USDA emphasizes the importance of eating fruits and vegetables; the *MyPlate* model shows most meals should include nutrient-dense foods (USDA, 2021). As Utah's only land-grant university, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Education Program (SNAP-Ed) agency of Utah State University (USU) is well-positioned to support local food systems and facilitate access to fresh fruits and vegetables for families and individuals experiencing food insecurity.

Response

Create Better Health, formerly known as Utah's SNAP-Ed program, created the *Buy Produce for Your Neighbor* healthy food drive initiative to address food insecurity and low consumption of fruits and vegetables. Create Better Health staff promoted fresh, local produce donations at farmers' markets by working with farmers, market vendors, managers, food pantry directors, USU Extension's Master Gardener program volunteers, and USU Extension county faculty. Donors dropped off extra produce they purchased at the farmers' market, providing additional support to local producers. Then, Create Better Health staff and partners delivered donations to local food pantries. The Buy Produce for Your Neighbor program began in the Summer of 2019 and was adapted to include donations from communities that do not have farmers markets. Two program variations include *Share Produce with Your Neighbor* and *Grow Produce for Your Neighbor*. Both adaptations utilize household gardeners and USU Master Gardeners who donate excess produce they grow.

Figure 1: Buy Produce for Your Neighbor Donation Collection Booth at Ogden Farmers' Market.



Target Audience

The primary target audience of the *Buy Produce for Your Neighbor* program is food pantry clients in Utah. The eligibility requirements for food pantries vary by location, but many clients are families and individuals with lower incomes who experience food insecurity. For example, the Cache Community Food Pantry describe their clients as single-parent households, people with disabilities, and people with limited incomes (Cache Food Pantry, 2021).

Results

The reach of the *Buy Produce for Your Neighbor* program has expanded since it began, providing donations to one (1) food pantry in 2019, five (5) in 2020, and eleven (11) in 2021. The amount of donated food has also increased significantly over the past three years that the Create Better Health team has implemented the project. Approximately 381 lbs. of food were donated in 2019, while 6,206 lbs. were donated in 2021. This represents a 1500% increase in the amount of food donated to pantries over a three-year period. While the program has not conducted an outcome evaluation directly with food pantry clients to assess the changes in diets and nutritional intake due to the donations, it has received positive feedback from farmers' market produce donors, food pantry customers, and employees.

Figure 2: Buy Produce for Your Neighbor Donations at the Cache Valley Gardeners' Market.



One farmers' market donor said: "I saw your sign at one of the vendors, so that's where I purchased this produce." Clear marketing helped this donor understand how to support the program and increase sales at a farmers' market partner. A single mother of six children expressed gratitude for the program and its impact on her family after receiving fresh produce from her local food pantry, saying, "This is the only way my family can get fresh fruits and vegetables; we are so grateful for this program." Multiple food pantry employees report that the program is valuable to their pantry and clients. One director said she values working with USU Extension and Create Better Health. She noted the Buy Produce for Your Neighbor program is particularly beneficial due to the quality of donations, and the system works well with pantries' everchanging storage capacity. She stated that regular smaller contributions throughout the harvest season were much more manageable than larger one-time donations.

Public Value and Next Steps

Create Better Health has improved food access to lower income families in Utah through the Buy Produce for Your Neighbor program. This program has been particularly valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic; the Utah Food Bank president has reported a 300% increase in the demand for food assistance (Lee, 2020). In addition, food pantry clients have expressed a desire for more fresh food options (Utahns Against Hunger, 2021). The increase in donations of high-quality fresh produce addresses a critical need at food pantries by providing access to recommended servings

of fruits and vegetables to low income families. Since donations are supported by local farmers, the Buy Produce for Your Neighbor program also helps local agriculture.

The *Buy Produce for Your Neighbor* program will continue to expand in the future. Due to media news coverage during 2021 (e.g., Foster & Lane, 2021; Reese, 2021; The Place, 2021), many new farmers' markets have expressed interest in participating in the program. Additionally, expanding the program's partnership with the USU Master Gardeners program will likely lead to an increase in the program's reach, particularly in rural Utah, where there are fewer farmers markets.

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