

## **Making Local Food and Markets Accessible -- Farm to Fork and New EBT Program**

The **Marin Agricultural Institute** of San Rafael, California received \$24,966 to implement a comprehensive EBT promotion program that increased low-income consumers' access to fresh, local and nutritious food at eight farmers markets in Marin, San Francisco and Alameda Counties.

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# Final Performance Report

December 21, 2011

Recipient Name: Agricultural Institute of Marin

Title of Project: Making Local Food and Markets Accessible: Farm to Fork and New EBT Program

Grant Number: 12-25-G-0912

Location (City/State): San Rafael, CA

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## **Project Summary**

Agricultural Institute of Marin (AIM) launched a multi-lingual EBT outreach and promotion campaign at eight San Francisco Bay Area farmers markets to help increase low-income, consumers, who are participating in CalFresh, access to farmers' markets, while simultaneously bringing food stamp dollars back into farmers markets to support local farmers.

Before the conversion from paper food stamps to Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT), California Food Stamp recipients spent almost \$100,000 per month in food stamps at California farmers' markets. When the transition to the electronic debit card EBT took place in 2002, farmers selling direct at farmers markets in California lost out due to the lack of infrastructure and technology necessary to receive EBT. With the introduction of EBT, California farmers' markets and other outdoor food markets faced serious challenges in remaining accessible to Food Stamp recipients. A movement began in the mid 2000s to bridge the electronic gap at farmers markets. AIM joined this effort in 2008/2009 when it began to research, test and then fully launch a new EBT acceptance program at all of AIM's eight Certified Farmers Markets, with the support of USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP).

AIM's now organization wide EBT program was designed to support healthy food access for people of low-income while increasing the economic benefit from additional sales to local farmers and food producers. In launching this new program, AIM committed its staff and resources to facilitating mutually beneficial relationship between CalFresh participants and local farmers and food producers through the sale of fresh, healthy local food at our San Francisco Bay Area farmers' markets.

## **Project Approach**

Without the necessary infrastructure and administrative systems in place, prior to receiving FMPP support, AIM was unable to operate an EBT program at our farmers markets. In order to launch this organization wide program, AIM needed to create the tools, systems and promotional materials to ensure the program's success, as well as build the organizational and staff capacity to administer the program.

AIM obtained a total of three wireless EBT machines which enable food stamp recipients to redeem funds through their EBT cards and receive tokens/scrip to purchase permitted products at the farmers markets. The list of allowable items was provided by CalFresh, California's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Funding for AIM's EBT program was used to design, translate, print, place and distribute signs, brochures, and fliers and other promotional materials, as well as to

insure proper education and training of staff and volunteers to handle EBT. Additionally, project funds were used to manage and administer the program, as well as to track and report on progress.

The first stage of work involved obtaining EBT machines and uniquely identified wooden tokens, as well as designing, translating and printing promotional signs and materials. The second stage of the project involved training staff and volunteers, conducting on-site and off-site promotion, offering nutrition education and administering an ongoing EBT program. The third stage of work included tracking and evaluating the program. Stage one work was completed by December 2009. Stage two took place primarily during Spring 2010-Fall 2010 and Spring 2011-Fall 2011. Stage three, Fall 2011, included assessments of each market's progress with promoting and transacting EBT.

## **Goals, Outputs, and Outcomes Achieved**

### **Outputs**

- Approximately 200 CA farmers were financially supported through the EBT program
- 3 EBT machines, 6000 wooden tokens/scrip, 6 lockable token bags were purchased/obtained to make the program function
- 6000 multi-lingual brochures and 4000 bilingual fliers designed and distributed to promote EBT  
EBT brochures and fliers were distributed through more than 26 community partners including food stamp offices, food banks, schools and non-profits, as well as on-site at all eight farmers markets
- 10 EBT acceptance signs for farmers market entrance
- 400 educational handouts created and distributed to farmers regarding EBT
- EBT information was added to Agricultural Institute of Marin's website
- From Oct 2009- Sept 2010, AIM saw \$16,565 EBT redeemed (1<sup>st</sup> year of the grant)
- From Oct 2010 - Sept 2011, AIM saw EBT redemption double, totalling \$31,247
- Thousands of hours of staff and volunteer time, both supported by the grant and in-kind, were utilized for the following:
  - Designing and producing brochures, signs, fliers, tokens (AIM team)
  - Developing and implementing EBT tracking systems (Accounting Team)
  - Managing, reporting on and tracking the program (Program Manager)
  - Outreach and promotion (Director of Outreach)
  - EBT market transactions using the wireless machines (Market Managers and volunteers)
  - EBT token counting and data input (Accounting Team)

### **Outcomes**

*Market Managers, Market Manager Assistants, AIM staff and volunteers:* AIM's staff and volunteers who work in the markets, as well as staff organization wide, learned about the importance of EBT acceptance at our farmers markets and how to conduct the EBT transactions at the market. This raised the level of knowledge about CalFresh and how farmers markets play an important role in improving food access among low income members of the communities we serve. After a few months, the administrative systems

became streamlined and easy to implement, however the counting and tracking process does remain labor intensive. AIM staff and volunteers bought in to this new additional role and the program functions very smoothly now. It is now experienced as a normal part of our operations.

*Farmers & Vendors:* Farmers and vendors who have participated learned about the CalFresh program, about the FMPP program, about the importance and benefits of EBT use at the farmers markets, and about the needs that exist in the communities our markets serve. They also learned about the eligible and ineligible items allowed (or not) to be purchased with CalFresh. In the beginning, we needed to educate the farmers and vendors about what CalFresh could be used for. On occasion, when a new farmer begins to work at one of our markets, we need to educate that person about the program. To some degree, the education process of farmers and vendors is ongoing, however we are at a high level of knowledge and understanding for those who return week after week and season after season to our markets.

*Public:* AIM sent out press releases to various political and organizational leaders in the community, as well as to local media outlets, about AIM's EBT acceptance program. This raised the level of awareness about the need in the communities we serve and the number of food stamp recipients in each community we work with. We were also able to get the word out even further to engage in other community leaders (health departments and non-profits) in communicating this program to their constituencies. We have had a wonderful response from community leaders and the public to our program. They are now more aware of the local need that exists and how farmers markets can provide nutritious food options to people of low-income.

*Food Stamp/Cal Fresh participants:* Using our multi-lingual brochure, bilingual flier, as well as through direct one-on-one communications at the farmers markets with food stamp customers, AIM was able to impact thousands of people to let them know about the importance of eating healthy, the benefits of buying from the farmers market, the importance of supporting local farmers, and about the quality of locally grown food. We have been able to one-by-one and family by family influence the eating habits of those who are now using EBT at one of our farmers markets. We have also provided nutrition education to the public and to local farmers, raising the knowledge level and encouraging positive change in attitudes and behaviors.

### **Beneficiaries**

Numerous people, organizations and communities have benefited from the program's accomplishments. These include the following:

- *Farmers and Vendors:* Approximately 200 small family CA farmers benefitted financially through this new EBT program at all of AIM's eight certified farmers markets. Additional sales - due to EBT - totaled \$48,812.
- *Organizations and the Public:* 6000 EBT brochures and 4000 fliers were distributed through more than 26 food stamp offices, food banks, schools & other non-profits, as well as at all eight farmers markets. By working together with other social service organizations, we are helping many of them reach their

mandates for ensuring people of low-income have access to healthy food. In addition, we were able to raise awareness in Marin County in particular, of the great need that exists in the community and that the level of food insecurity has risen both across the nation and here locally.

- *CalFresh Participants:* \$47,812 in Cal Fresh was spent at AIM's eight certified farmers markets over the two year time period of the grant. With an average transaction amount being \$20, there were approximately 2390 transactions that occurred over the time period of the grant. An average of about 3 people per transaction are benefitting from the food purchased.
- *Current and future benefits:* AIM has been able to leverage the \$24,966 FMPP grant to attract additional funding totalling more than \$100,000 over the last few years. Having the foundation of the new EBT program infrastructure has allowed AIM to first accept EBT at all of our markets, then pilot a small incentive program at four markets, then expand to a newly launched Market Match program which provides an incentive to CalFresh/EBT participants to shop using EBT at our of our eight farmers markets. These additional leveraged funds have also enabled AIM to expand our outreach efforts and create additional promotional materials.

In just four months since the FMPP program funding officially ended (between October 1, 2011 and January 31, 2012), an additional \$16,490 has been transacted in EBT. The concurrent Market Match program brought in an additional \$7,229 primarily through just two markets. Two of the markets participating in Market Match during this time period were seasonal and concluded at the end of October.

Therefore, in just four months, the EBT transaction total was equivalent to the total amount of the first year of this grant or half of the total of the second year. In summary, the EBT transaction amounts continue to rapidly increase and are growing at a rate that will likely more than double the previous year's transaction total. We are on course to have approximately \$66,000 in EBT transactions this year and a projected \$50,000 in Market Match transactions, which includes the addition of four more markets to the Market Match program by the end of February/beginning of March through Fall 2012. We anticipate more growth over all in EBT expenditures at AIM's farmers markets, even after the Market Match incentives conclude. Data from other farmers markets show that even after incentives are no longer provided, EBT customers have formed new habits and more often than not, continue to shop at farmers markets.

### **Lessons Learned**

The following are lessons learned from having launched a new EBT program throughout our organization:

- Understanding the target community and the languages spoken by the target audiences is essential for creating culturally appropriate and linguistically relevant materials.
- Connecting with partners, non-profits, local government, social service agencies helps to get the word out in the communities we are trying to reach. Word of mouth is a very important communication tool.
- AIM Staff learned that although we have efficient systems to manage the EBT program, it is still a labor intensive process to count the wooden tokens and to track them. Certainly, we could have benefitted from some additional resources to hire some help. The initial grant we received was relatively small to manage eight markets' EBT programs.
- Basic infrastructure and administrative systems are imperative to creating and operating an EBT program. This can prohibit many farmers markets from having an EBT program.
- Funding support made available to assist farmers markets is critical to encouraging farmers markets to create new EBT programs
- Incentives are an effective and important tool for encouraging new and repeat EBT shoppers at farmers markets. Incentives ultimately help people create new habits of shopping at the farmers market, since it is not as convenient, but often better quality and more fresh than a store.
- Working upstream on policy change is essential to having a long term impact. AIM provides data and findings to our state wide and national partners, which in turn are working on policy changes to assist farmers markets and low-income access to farmers markets.

#### **Additional information**

AIM received additional funding support for incentives and supplemental targeted promotion from the following funding partners: First 5 Marin, Marin Community Foundation, Kaiser Community Benefits program during the time period of the FMPP grant. Attached are AIM's brochures, tokens, signs and other outreach materials that have been used to communicate AIM's EBT program.

#### **Contact person**

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