

Healthy Food as Health Care: Increasing Sales of Maine Grown Food to Hospital Food Service Through Relationship building to Hospital Employees through Workplace Incentives and to Hospital Patients through Outreach and Improved Access, Including New EBT Projects

Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) of Unity, Maine received \$68,450, to increase purchases of Maine-grown food by the food service program, employees and patients at Maine General, Maine's third largest healthcare provider. The project provided patients with educational materials on the availability, affordability and nutritional advantages of locally grown food; and gave participating farmers and market managers outreach assistance and training.

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Final Performance Report

December 28, 2011

Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA)
Healthy Food as Health Care
Grant Number: 12-25-G-0941
Unity, ME

Project Summary

In order to support Maine's emerging new generation of farmers, new markets must be developed. The healthcare industry in Maine is an excellent example of an underserved market for locally grown foods. Food and Nutrition Services in hospitals typically source the majority of their food from national distribution chains and are not aware of the availability of locally grown foods and likewise local farmers do not know how to get their foot in the door to talk to food service directors about the potential for supplying the hospital. Maine has an ambitious and expanding pool of new farmers looking to begin a career in growing food for Maine people. Maine's institutions, including schools & hospitals, are increasingly seeking local food connections. Bates, Bowdoin and Colby colleges are nationally recognized as leaders in the farm-to-campus movement. Hospitals are a next obvious match between local farms and institutions.

Project Approach

This project focused on working with Maine's third largest healthcare provider, MaineGeneral Health, to increase purchases of Maine-grown food by their Food and Nutrition Services department, which prepares meals for patients and for a cafeteria serving staff and visitors. At the outset of the project, the hospital established a goal of spending \$54,000 annually (75% of its produce budget) on produce from local farms. The hospital developed a relationship with the manager of a local market to provide sourcing and delivery services for the local foods buying program. Barrels Community Market is a mission-based non-profit market with a focus on buying local products, and working with local schools and institutions on sourcing local foods. At the end of the first year of the local foods buying program, the hospital had purchased over \$11,500 in produce from local farms, and during the course of year two, which concluded at the end of this grant project, the hospital had purchased just over \$16,000 in produce from local farms. MaineGeneral Health's Food and Nutrition Service directors are enthusiastic about the future of the program and will continue to work toward the 75% goal.

This project also set out to increase employees' and patients' knowledge about the availability of food from local farms. MaineGeneral Health's Marketing Department and Workplace Wellness Office carried out different promotional activities and

events to accomplish this, including: community health ads in the newspaper promoting area farmers' markets; promotion of farmer's markets in two bi-monthly community calendars sent first class to 3,000 businesses and individuals; and an employee wellness incentive program which rewarded employees engaging in different wellness activities with vouchers to one of two local farmers' markets. Future plans for engaging employees and patients with more consumption of local foods include: a continuation of the farmers' market voucher incentive program; an on-site weekly farmers' market; and events and information to highlight local farm products being used in cafeteria meals.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved

The primary goal of the project was to create a new market for foods grown on local farms, and that objective was achieved. Previous to this project, MaineGeneral Health did not have any direct connection to farms in the area. Now, with a successful relationship established with Barrels Market to provide sourcing and distribution services as well as liability coverage, the Food and Nutrition service makes regular purchases of foods from over a dozen local farms. Maine's third largest healthcare provider is now two years into a program to purchase foods from local farms and the program is expected to continue to grow, and will eventually meet the benchmark established at the outset of the project, which was to spend 75% of the annual fresh produce budget in local foods.

This project has also expanded existing markets for local foods by promoting local farmers' markets on several fronts to the entire MaineGeneral community. We had hoped to engage at least 100 employees in an incentive program for buying foods from local farms, but by structuring the incentive in the form of \$5 vouchers to spend at a local farmers' market, the program reached upwards of 500 employees, with each participating employee receiving between one and four vouchers. Newspaper ads and promotions of farmers' markets in other MaineGeneral publications reached thousands of Maine households.

Beneficiaries

At present, at least a dozen local farms benefit from long term increased sales to MaineGeneral Health, and we expect that number to continue to grow over time as the local foods program continues to grow. In 2010 the hospital purchased over \$11,500 in produce from local farms, and in 2011 the hospital had purchased just over \$16,000 in produce from local farms. The hospital still aims to increase that number to at least \$54,000 annually.

Barrels Community Market benefits from having established a successful sourcing and delivery relationship with a hospital. Barrels hopes to expand sales to institutional markets, and the experience of working with MaineGeneral will be useful in developing future accounts with other institutions, hospitals or otherwise.

Developing relationships with more institutions will continue to expand markets for local farms.

MaineGeneral patients, employees and visitors benefit from increased access to fresh, local, healthful foods and information on how to source more of such foods for use in their personal lives.

Other institutions, in Maine and elsewhere, who want to make a commitment to local foods purchases will benefit from the MaineGeneral example and can call on the players involved in this project for help answering questions to establish their own local foods buying program.

The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) benefits from having a test market for a farm food safety program in development, which we plan to bring to a wider segment of small diversified farms as an alternative to the Good Agricultural Practices food safety certification.

Lessons Learned

This project provided an opportunity to learn in detail what is required to establish a successful local foods purchasing program in a hospital setting, and several notable lessons were learned:

- 1. The first critical lesson learned in this project is the need for an alternative to the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) food safety certification program that meets both the needs of small farms, and of markets that require rigorous food safety standards.** Hospitals serve food to many immune-compromised individuals and they must have assurances that the food they serve is free of harmful pathogens. Small diversified farms such as the ones supplying MaineGeneral typically find the GAP certification program, which is the most commonly used program for verifying farm food safety practices, to be too costly and inflexible to their types of farm operations. GAP standards favor large, monoculture farming systems and certification is based on a pass/fail point system where, for example, having animals present on a farm can result in a failing score. As a result of our work with MaineGeneral, MOFGA has developed a protocol for evaluating and documenting farm food safety practices which are designed around the Hazard Analysis, Critical Control Point (HACCP) model for minimizing risk in a food operation. This is the standard that has been used for years by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to regulate the seafood industry. The directors of Food and Nutrition at MaineGeneral have expressed their preference for this approach over the GAP model, since the HACCP-based farm food safety plan is a whole system approach that addresses any potential point of contamination in the process, and documents what systems are in place to prevent it. The MaineGeneral Food and Nutrition directors have demonstrated a serious commitment to this model, and developed a food safety checklist to use when they went on farm visits to meet the farmers, see the farm operations, verify that

practices on the farm met their rigorous standards, and flagged areas of concern for farmers to address. MOFGA has developed training for farmers in developing a farm food safety plan and is in the process of developing a standalone farm food safety certification program that will verify the documentation and implementation of the farm food safety plan. This program will create market access for small farmers who are not a good fit for GAP certification, as well as provide an alternative to GAP for those markets, like MaineGeneral, who do not feel that the GAP model adequately addresses pathogen concerns.

2. A second critical lesson learned is that there are ways for institutional buyers to have direct relationships with farms while still utilizing the services of a “middleman” to streamline the transactions between the farms and the institution. It was not feasible, for neither MaineGeneral nor for the local farms, for MaineGeneral to directly source small quantities from many farms to meet weekly produce needs. This was not feasible for the farms because of the amount of liability insurance they would need to carry to become an approved MaineGeneral vendor, and in many cases the difficulty a small farm would have with being able to supply product on a consistent basis. This was not feasible for MaineGeneral because of the additional time and resources it would require to find the farms to work with to begin with, and then manage the logistics of placing weekly, or bi-weekly orders and oversee timely and consistent delivery of product from all those sources. A key relationship in the success of this project, then, was the one with Barrels Community Market (Barrels). Barrels streamlines the relationship between the farms and the hospital by bridging the gap between the two worlds. Barrels already has: relationships with the farms; capacity to create weekly availability sheets and coordinate bookkeeping and payments; liability insurance needed to provide the hospital with the protection they need; a physical site for product to be aggregated before delivery; and the capacity for bi-weekly delivery to two locations. The Food and Nutrition directors at MaineGeneral were quite interested in having relationships with the farms supplying them with produce, and have even been to visit most of the farms. The arrangement with Barrels has allowed these direct relationships to form while streamlining the process for both the buyer and the sellers.

3. A third lesson learned is the challenge of fitting foods grown on local farms into a hospital food program given the constraints of a production-oriented kitchen. The local foods buying program needed to be implemented in such a way as to not totally disrupt the staffing and cost structure of the kitchens. Much of the produce purchased by the hospital is minimally processed (peeled and/or cut), and switching to buying all of those items in whole form would have an enormous impact on the staffing needs of the kitchen. While projects to provide infrastructure for minimal processing of Maine grown produce are in development in places around the state, most of the food available from local farms at present is available only in whole form. MaineGeneral, therefore, focused its purchases of local foods around those produce items they were already buying in whole form and were available locally, such as cucumbers, tomatoes, and zucchini. When any of the

minimally processed produce that the hospital purchases becomes available from local sources, they have indicated an interest in switching to, or at least trying, those sources.

Another need identified around fitting local foods into an institutional kitchen setting is for farmers to be familiar with appropriate varieties. For example, a farm might grow a variety of tomato that is too large to fit into the hospital's tomato slicers. The Food and Nutrition directors at MaineGeneral have indicated a desire to have more opportunity to communicate with the farmers about growing crops and varieties that best suit their needs so they can continue to grow the local foods buying program. Barrels Market will help coordinate a winter meeting between the growers and buyers so the farmers can get the information in time to plan for the next growing season.

Additional Information

It is important to note that this program would not be successful without the support of upper level management at MaineGeneral Health. Fresh, high quality produce like what comes direct from the fields of local farms is more costly than what comes off the truck from a national distribution chain. A commitment to a local foods buying program therefore requires an increase in the food budget, and upper level management at MaineGeneral understood this and made that commitment from the beginning. This has allowed the Food and Nutrition Program the fiscal freedom to start and grow a local foods buying program. The directors of Food and Nutrition are thrilled to have the opportunity to work with a premium product, and they report that patrons absolutely recognize the difference in quality when the local produce is served.

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