

Eating in season: Consumer Education to improve nutrition and vendor income through the Women, Infants, and Children Supplemental Food Program

United Community Centers Inc of Brooklyn, NY received \$66,754 to operate educational and promotional activities to increase traffic and sales at the farmers market. Funds were used to conduct consumer education programs focused on women receiving WIC, to expand venues for new products and new vendors, and increase promotional activities at the East New York Farms! Saturday Farmers Market.

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Final Performance Report

October 10, 2010

**United Community Centers Inc, *East New York Farms! Project*
Eating in Season
NY 200 2009
Brooklyn, NY
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Progress Report #2**

Project Summary:

The East New York Farms! Project built on existing resources – our Saturday market, experience in urban agriculture, and availability of food assistance dollars - to expand direct producer-to-consumer marketing opportunities. We did this through three interrelated strategies: 1) Conduct consumer education focused on women receiving WIC, 2) Expand venues for new products and new vendors, and 3) Enhance the atmosphere of our Saturday market to draw more shoppers and encourage shoppers already at the market to stay longer. Our goals and expected results included increased redemption of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program vouchers at our farmers market; establishing a vendor managed revolving loan fund and matching grants program to bring innovative new products to the market; expanding our Wednesday farm stand into a full farmers market with higher sales and vendor participation; and create a destination atmosphere through agritourism at our Saturday market that will encourage customers to stay longer and buy more products. Primary resources for this project included staff time, cooking instructors, cookbooks (to be produced and distributed), market equipment, and revolving loan program start-up funds. Our project manager Sarita Daftary oversaw all project activities, carried out from October 2009 through October 2010.

Project Approach:

Our goals under this project were to increase direct producer-to-consumer sales through two farmers markets by maximizing redemption of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program vouchers at our farmers markets, and to expand both the products and retail venues by supporting new vendors, helping current vendors to test new products, and converting our farm stand to a full-fledged second market. We also aimed to increase both customer attendance and sales per customer, ultimately increasing vendor income, by adding agritourism activities to our Saturday farmers market. Our strategies for achieving these goals, and outcomes achieved, are listed below.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved:

Strategy 1: Conduct consumer education focused on women receiving WIC.

a) Conduct 15 cooking demonstrations at local WIC centers

We have conducted 12 demonstrations at 5 WIC centers, one family shelter, and one young adult pre-natal program. Demonstrations were conducted by three trained

instructors who completed trainings by either the Just Food Community Chef Program or the Cornell University Cooperative Extension Program. Demonstrations were well received by staff and participants.

b) Work with market vendors and gardeners to produce a local foods cookbook.

We have produced 3800 books and distributed over 1100 books so far through WIC centers and other venues. We have collected over 70 recipes from market vendors, customers, and local restaurants that feature of 50 varieties of locally grown fruits, vegetables, and herbs, and also represent the many culinary traditions of our community. We have already seen almost \$100 dollars worth of cookbook coupons redeemed at our market, indicating that the cookbook has been successful in driving customers to the market, and we expect this trend to continue through the rest of our market season. We also deliberately made the coupons redeemable for up to 2 years.

c) Produce large, permanent signs for the market and flyers to educate our community about all purchasing options at the market, including new WIC Fruit and Vegetable checks, as well as EBT, WIC and Senior FMNP, debit/credit, and cash.

We have designed and produced flyers listing all of the options for shopping at our market, and have developed a list of all centers in our area where customers can get these coupons (Senior centers, WIC centers, Food Stamp pre-screening sites and government offices). We have distributed these flyers at our market, as well as at cooking demonstrations and outreach presentations at local community board and tenant association meetings.

We developed and printed three banners specifically explaining purchasing options at our market, which we are now able to display at both entrances to our Saturday market and at the fence at our Wednesday market.

Strategy 2: Expand venues for new products and new vendors.

a) Expand our Wednesday farm stand into a permanent market

Our Wednesday market opened in July 2010 and has been doing very well! We were able to recruit one additional gardener to sell at this market on a regular basis, and one gardener selling periodically. For a small start-up market like this, these few additional vendors have made a great impact in the quantity and variety of produce at the market. We have also expanded a model offered at our Saturday market, a co-op drop-off table, where gardeners who do not have sufficient produce to justify their own table can drop off produce at a collective stand staffed by our youth program. While our efforts to secure an additional upstate farmer have not yet been successful, we have been able to purchase storable produce from farmers at our Saturday market (potatoes, apples, melons, etc) and re-sell them at our Wednesday market. We are still working with our network of farmers as well as farmers from the New Farmer Development Project to recruit an additional farmer. We have also been collecting additional data about sales at this market, in order to better recruit farmers next year. Weekly sales at this market have averaged about \$400 per week.

Due to a generous donation of tables, we did not need to purchase any additional tables, but were able to redistribute the fund intended for tables to buy an additional scale and do some additional advertising.

b) Pilot a New Vendor Assistance program, based on the model of our successful Backyard Exchange Program

We have developed a committee of vendors who designed the parameters for this program, based on our garden-based loan fund. We created an application and contract that was distributed through current vendors and through local economic development organizations such as the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation and the Local Development Corporation of East New York, and through our existing mailing list. Through these means we were able to recruit a new vendor (Soul Sister Quisine), who started a business selling soul food and cakes at our market. Her loans involved purchasing equipment that would allow her to operate her catering business in an outdoor setting, as her previous experience had been indoor catering. Her products have been a successful addition to our market, where we have long had one cooked food vendor selling Caribbean food. Soul Sister Quisine has provided another level of variety at our market that has appealed to our large number of African American customers.

Strategy 3: Enhance the atmosphere of our Saturday market to draw more shoppers and encourage shoppers already at the market to stay longer.

a) *Host a summer Tomato Fest including tasting, a demonstration on how to make salsa and pasta sauce, and u-pick cherry tomatoes*

Based on feedback from our vendors, we decided to shift the focus of this event to organizing an “Old Fashioned Corn Roast and Harvest Exhibition” on September 18th. This event was a huge success, and drew many people to the market to sample a free ear of roast corn, see and vote for the most outstanding produce contributed by vendors (categories such as Tubbiest Tomato and Most Beautiful Bean) and enjoy a “day on the farm” by taking a tour of ½ acre urban farm adjacent to the market. Youth interns led tours for over 30 visitors, explaining the many varieties of vegetables and herbs that we grow, showing off our solar-powered greenhouse, our rainwater collection system, and our beehives! We purchased two standing chalkboards, placed throughout the market, that have been a great help in driving customers to garden-based activities at the market. Chalkboards are used to advertise these daily events, as well as highlight produce that is new that week. Through a corporate volunteer day organized with our garden, we were able to get plywood and paints at no cost to make additional signs.

b) *Host a fall Pumpkin Fest including a pumpkin patch, pumpkin painting, and bobbing for apples*

This event date has been set for Saturday October 30th, and will include a pie contest as well! We have ordered 50 pumpkins and 8 bales of hay for what promises to be an exciting day at the market.

Beneficiaries:

Farmers and vendors benefited directly from this project in several ways. Vendors who sold fruits and vegetables benefited by redeeming more Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupons and new WIC fruit and vegetable vouchers. All vendors also benefited from access to our new loan & grant fund to be able to try new products or start new businesses that will generate income in the future, while reducing their initial financial risk. They also benefited from expanding their marketing opportunities at our new Wednesday market location, where demand and reasonable foot traffic has been proven. Furthermore, Saturday market vendors, especially prepared food vendors, will benefit

from an enhanced market atmosphere as customers will stay longer and spend more money.

Lessons Learned:

We have had some delays in completing all of the cooking demonstrations we had planned before September, because of a few cancellations on the part of either the WIC centers we were partnering with, or in some cases, our cooking instructors due to emergencies. We learned that we could likely schedule extra demonstrations and assume that there would be some cancellations. We also found that the demonstrations were most successful on a regular weekly schedule, so that WIC centers would plan it into their weekly programming. However, combined with the cooking demonstrations funded by our USDA Community Food Projects grant, we conducted a total of 27 demonstrations at WIC centers this year. An evaluator hired through our USDA CFP grant has also helped us in observing all of the demos at WIC centers, and surveying WIC recipients. Her initial findings have shown the demos were effective in teaching participants new ways to use fresh fruits and vegetables and encouraging them to visit the market. Furthermore the demonstration participants really appreciated receiving cookbooks and having such a tangible take-home guide to incorporating more seasonal produce into their meals.

In terms of farmer recruitment, our experiences this year re-emphasized something we already had some sense of – that recruiting farmers to sell in our community is difficult, due to a shortage of farmers and their reluctance to sell in a low-income community. However we found that buying and re-selling from farmers at our Saturday market could be successful, and that in the future we might be better able to draw a farmer by a) expanding the hours of the market and b) working with neighborhood stores and some food pantries to line up some wholesale orders for the farmers, to give them an extra incentive to come to our neighborhood.

Furthermore we found that hosting more and larger agritourism events could very effectively attract more customers and keep them at the market longer. We experienced some of our highest attendance and sales numbers on the days of our Harvest Festival and our Pumpkin Festival.

Additional Information:

The East New York Farms! Project has updated our website, www.eastnewyorkfarms.org

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