

FY 2012

FY 2012 Nurture Nature Center

Nonprofit, Low income consumers, Underserved Communities, New Direct Marketing, Urban area, CSA Network, Existing EBT

\$75,561 to the Nurture Nature Center of Easton, Pennsylvania, for providing affordable CSA delivery to a food desert and educating students about healthy foods, allowing them to “meet their farmer,” and taste the fresh foods they may not otherwise be aware of, and introducing a distribution system to retail outlets, creating bilingual flyers and posters to advertise it.

**Farmers Market Promotion Program
Final Performance Report
For the Period October 1, 2012 to September 30, 2014**

Date: November 6, 2014
Recipient Name: Nurture Nature Center
Project Title: Food Desert Project to improve Fresh Food Access in South Side Bethlehem
Grant Number: 12-25-G-1628
Project Location: Easton, PA
Year of Grant Award: 2012
Amount Awarded: \$ 73,413
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Summary:

We improved fresh food access in low-income areas by establishing Farm Share programs (affordable weekly deliveries of fresh produce) in four low-income neighborhoods, serving 121 members over the two-year period. We educated over 400 students about healthy foods by presenting our “CSA in the Classroom” program to classrooms in eight different elementary schools, one middle school, and a YMCA children’s group. We also worked to develop wholesale purchases of locally grown foods by running a pilot project online food hub, creating a wholesale food guide, working with wholesale buyers, and providing educational workshops for farmers about scaling-up.

Goals & Objectives:

Our objective was to improve fresh food access in the food deserts of the Lehigh Valley through the availability of affordable Farm Shares to 30 members. We were also looking to increase education of children about healthy foods through our CSA in the Classroom program, Local Foods Guide, local farmers’ markets, and local food events. Our third objective was to improve distribution of locally grown foods by determining which farms in the region sell wholesale and creating a wholesale food guide listing 50 farmers; creating a local online food hub involving 20 farmers; creating a farm inspection program to reduce vendor fraud; and providing workshops to increase farmers’ knowledge of selling to wholesale markets (packing, safety, logistics. etc.)

Activities, Beneficiaries & Lessons Learned:

1. **Farm Shares:**

We hired a contractor to research fresh food access issues in the Lehigh Valley food deserts, including current food resources (farmers' markets, corner stores, and possible CSA delivery sites), the availability of public transit, the use of EBT and FMNP vouchers, and the availability of

emergency food resources in these areas. Her report was included as “Chapter 3. Food Access” in *Assessment Report: Lehigh Valley Local Food Economy* (available at <http://buylocalgreaterlehighvalley.org/news-and-events/assessment-report-lehigh-valley-local-food-economy/>). This report was presented at several public forums and to Northampton County Council in order to raise awareness about food access issues and discuss possible strategies to address these issues.

As we began organizing our Farm Share (low-cost CSA) program for South Side Bethlehem, we realized that there was a great demand for this type of program in two other food-insecure areas in our region: West Ward in Easton and Jordan Heights in Allentown. So rather than just arrange the one program, we expanded and organized three Farm Share programs to start in the spring of 2013. We partnered with Sacred Heart Hospital in the Jordan Heights Neighborhood of Allentown, the Hispanic Center in South Side Bethlehem, and the West Ward Neighborhood Partnership in Easton, along with three of our farmers, to provide weekly deliveries of low-cost Farm Shares (fresh vegetables) to these low-income residents. We advertised the programs with posters and flyers throughout the communities, held “Meet the Farmer” nights, and had the community partners assist in recruiting over 70 members. We also worked with our participating farmers to get them registered with the USDA to accept SNAP payments, and six participants used SNAP benefits to pay for their weekly shares in 2013.

At the end of the first season, we surveyed participants in all three 2013 Farm Share programs and compiled the responses. The results showed that:

- 73% of participants learned about the program through the community partner;
- **81% of participants ate more fresh vegetables because of the program; and**
- 40% tried something new.

Participants stated that they liked the convenience, the price, and the freshness and variety of the produce. When asked what they liked least, many participants said nothing. There were some comments about the weekly pick-ups: a few participants would forget to pick up the shares, miss weeks, or found it hard to come every week. The weekly requirement, however, was probably the primary reason why participants were eating more fresh vegetables. There was also a suggestion to provide reusable shopping bags. Overall, participants gave the program a rating of 8.7 out of 10.

When surveyed, 68% of participants said that they would like to participate again in 2014, while another 20% indicated that they would possibly sign up again, depending on their circumstances. Participants were asked about item preferences, and this information was given to the farmers so that they could make some adjustments to what they planted the following year.

The South Side Bethlehem site had the fewest number of participants, ending the season with only six members. In 2014, we began searching for a new site in South Side Bethlehem. We reached out to administrators at Donegan Elementary School, a community school, who were very interested in the program. Bilingual posters were created and distributed throughout the neighborhood. Postcards were mailed directly to residents about the program. A “Meet the Farmer”

information session was scheduled at the beginning of a family movie being held at the school. Despite these efforts, no members were recruited from this neighborhood.

At this point, we realized that we needed to better determine the needs of this community. South Side Bethlehem is a unique neighborhood with a young population made up of 49% minority households; 24% of the population is Hispanic. The median income is only \$37,000, and nearly 35% live below the poverty level. The Hispanic Center staff who worked with the program in 2013 offered the following criticism:

- Lack of choice in which vegetables are received each week;
- Vegetables had dirt and sometimes bugs on them;
- There were too many greens in the beginning of the season;
- Vegetables were more expensive/less attractive than those at discount grocery stores;
- Members were unfamiliar with some vegetables and needed instructions on how to store, clean and prepare them;
- Vegetables should be more culturally appropriate; and
- It was difficult for residents to sign a contract in advance without knowing what they were getting.

From this information, we concluded that a farm stand might be more appropriate for this neighborhood. Initially, the season would not start until mid-June, a time when there is much more variety to be had locally, alleviating the complaint of “too many greens.” Members could select their own produce, and there would not be the need for a contract. It would be important to have culturally appropriate produce, including herbs like cilantro and recao, many varieties of chilies, and sweet potatoes, and fruit. In addition, there would need to be education about what is grown in the Lehigh Valley and seasonality, as well as workshops on cooking and storing fresh produce. There were also concerns about the cost of the program: although the price was reasonable, low-income residents still could not afford the share payments. With any program, increased promotion of SNAP acceptance should occur. We are in discussions with a local church to create such a market type program in 2015.

We created a new site in Allentown for 2014, partnering with Simplicity Outreach as a community partner. We have held a “Meet the Farmer” event and distributed posters in the neighborhood, and members are currently being registered. Both the West Ward and Sacred Heart Hospital sites are running again in 2014 without any assistance from NNC. At the end of the second season, we surveyed the 51 participants in the three 2014 Farm Share programs and compiled the responses. The results showed that:

- 55% of participants learned about the program through the community partner (more were hearing about it by word of mouth);
- **81% of participants ate more fresh vegetables because of the program (same as 2013); and**
- 59% tried something new (higher than 2013).

Overall, participants gave the program a rating of 8.6 out of 10. When surveyed, 78% of participants said that they would like to participate again in 2015 (up from 68% in 2013).

The Farm Share program was very successful. We far exceeded our first year goal of 15 participants and our second year goal of 30 per week, as we delivered more than 70 shares the first year and 51 shares the second year. Additionally, these programs will continue in the future without the need for outside assistance, and one farmer is expanding the program to multiple sites.

We also worked with a hospital to implement the program for their employees at their main campus in South Side Bethlehem in 2013. By 2014, they had 100 employees signed up to receive weekly shares, and the hospital organized to deduct the payments from their paychecks and pay the farmer directly. This program was so well-received that we are now working with the hospital to expand the program to their other five locations.

We were also asked to present how to organize and evaluate a Farm Share program at the Health Education Council's fourth national conference "Promising Practices to Promote Tobacco-Free Active Living and Healthy Eating in Low Socioeconomic Status Populations" in Washington, DC in April, 2014.

2. CSA in the Classroom

We presented our "CSA in the Classroom" program to classrooms in eight different elementary schools (Muhlenberg, Roosevelt, Jefferson, Donegan, Cheston, Easton, William Penn, March, and Miller Heights) and one middle school (Easton) in the Lehigh Valley. For the program, an educator provided a 20 minute presentation about which fruits and vegetables grow in the Lehigh Valley and why it's important to eat fresh, local produce. Local farmers then spoke about their farm and offered a taste of a locally grown food. Bookmarks advertising the closest farmers' market, market bucks, a Local Foods Guide <http://nnc.uberflip.com/i/133765>, and pencils were handed out to students. Students were surveyed both before and after the presentation to about their eating habits and from where their food comes; 391 students completed the surveys. Teachers were also surveyed about the program.

We contracted with the Social Science Research Center at Lehigh University to analyze the surveys (report attached). According to their report:

- 84.4% of students reported that they like vegetables and 57.1% ate them over the past day.
- 97.7% of students reported that they like fruit and 62.0% ate fruit that day.
- Statistical tests show no evidence that the program increased student desire for, or consumption of, fruits and vegetables. There is also no evidence the program led to greater reliance on farmer's markets, though this result varied some by school.
- Students were able to cite freshness, healthiness, taste, and lack of chemical exposure as benefits of eating locally grown food.
- 79.6% of students found the program interesting.
- 9 out of 10 teachers found the program very educational and very enjoyable for the students.
- Teachers complimented how engaging the program is and offered numerous suggestions to improve the program such as more interaction and simpler worksheets for elementary schools.

In addition, the report stated:

“The CSA in the Classroom program showed some success in educating students about locally-grown food. After the program, more students were able to identify the benefits of supporting local agriculture than could before it. This increase, combined with many students reporting that they found the program interesting because of what they learned and 9 of 10 teachers saying the program was very educational, indicates that the program is succeeding in at least part of its mission of educating students about locally-grown food.”

“Given that students and teachers pointed toward the exposure to foods in the presentation as one of the most popular parts of the program, there is reason to believe that the program may have expanded the fruits and vegetables that students are aware of and might consume in the future.” The report also provided guidance to improve the program: “Having more interaction and activities will help to keep students’ attention and keep them interested in what they are learning.”

The presentation was also given to a group of children from the YMCA, although survey data was not collected for this group.

3. Improved Distribution & Wholesale

We set up an online ordering system at LehighValley.LocalOrb.it. We compiled a list of nearly 500 farms, mailed them information packages about the food hub, and invited them to join. We hired a local food distributor to make the deliveries for our Local Food Hub.

On March 4th, 2013, we held a “Growing for Wholesale” workshop to educate farmers about post-harvest handling, safety issues, wholesale buyer expectations, and the new local food hub. We had 15 farmers attend. We surveyed attendees, and they gave the workshop an overall rating of 7.7 out of 10. 100% of the farmer attendees responded that they learned something that will improve the profitability of their farm.

We had 18 farmers register to sell local foods on our Local Food Hub site. Our baseline was 0, and we surpassed our launch goal of 5 farmers. We also had 14 buyers register on the site. Again, we met our launch goal of 5 buyers, and surpassed our first year goal of 10 buyers. Unfortunately, despite these participants and weekly calls and emails to buyers, we had only three purchases through the Hub from July to September. We closed the Hub at the end of the first year.

There were a number of challenges. The first was getting restaurants to change their ordering habits. Although we either met or contacted chefs/owners each week to remind them about placing their Hub orders, and each week they assured us that they wanted this service and were going to order, only one restaurant actually used the Hub, and only for two orders. In interviews with the chefs/owners, we were not given any reasons why orders were not being placed; we were assured that they would order the next week. This, however, did not happen. The second challenge was pricing. Farmers were not willing to pay for the Hub services; rather, they just added the 20% Hub fee to the cost of the products. This may have been a major deterrent for the buyers (although they

did not say so). In interviews with the farmers, they indicated that they would rather make the deliveries themselves and bill the buyers directly, rather than pay us to do this. Several of the farmers indicated that they would prefer if we acted as a facilitator, rather than as a business intermediary, which we did for the second year of the grant

With this in mind, we created a wholesale directory listing 31 farms who are either currently or interested in selling to wholesale buyers. This is below our original goal of having 50 farms listed in the wholesale directory. We have realized that there are not that many farms ready to sell to wholesale markets and that education is needed.

We partnered with Penn State Cooperative Extension in December 2013 to offer a two-day farmer workshop entitled, “Organic Vegetable Intensive”. This workshop offered presentations about improving systems and season extension in order to successfully increase vegetable production.

We partnered with The Seed Farm and Penn State Cooperative Extension in order to present the workshop “Scaling Up - Food Safety, Post-Harvest Handling, Equipment and Efficiencies to Meet a Growing Market for Farm to Institutional Sales” on October 23rd, 2014. We presented information about wholesale market opportunities for local produce and organized a panel of wholesale buyers and a local distributor. 52 people attended. When surveyed, 10 farmers indicated that they were currently growing for wholesale, 14 farmers stated that they plan to add farm to institutional sales in the next two years, and another eight farmers indicated that they were considering it. Although this is below our goal of having 20 farmers involved in wholesale sales by the end of the grant period, it indicates that our farmers are moving in this direction. The survey indicated that the vast majority of these growers had increased their production over the past few years. 97 percent of those surveyed indicated that they learned something about wholesale markets, and comments indicated that they really appreciated being able to hear from the panel members.

We developed relationships with a number of wholesale buyers throughout the grant period. We have been working with Sodexo, which has 46 accounts in the Lehigh Valley, five of which are college food service accounts. We introduced the Sodexo college buyers to several local farmers. They have toured a number of these farms and have begun to purchase modest amounts of produce from them. We have also been working to find a local distributor that is willing to make pick-ups at our local farms, maintain farm identity, and deliver to local accounts. This has proved to be quite a challenge! The distributors stated that it is not cost effective for them to visit numerous small farms. Although one distributor was willing, they would not maintain farm identity once the produce was in their hands. We have recently been in discussion with Common Market, a non-profit food hub out of Philadelphia, who is interested in expanding to the Lehigh Valley. It is part of their mission to retain local farm identity throughout the delivery process. We have introduced them to Sodexo, and they have recently applied to be a certified vendor. We are optimistic that local produce purchases will increase in the near future.

The wholesale farm directory was distributed to Sodexo, as well as several restaurants and other institutional buyers. One college is now making large weekly orders from several of our local farms. We have been promoting the use of locally grown foods by these businesses to the public. On October 27th, 2013, we held a Harvest event to promote restaurants and food service providers

that are providing locally grown foods. Grant funds were used to advertise the event, and over 500 people attended to “Taste the Difference!” We also used grant funds to help advertise Easton Restaurant Week <http://www.eastonrestaurantweek.com/index.html>, in which 16 restaurants had at least one item on the menu featuring farms from Northampton County.

As part of the local food hub, we set up a farm inspection program. Our contractor made farm visits to each of the 18 farms in the food hub to ensure that they were growing the foods offered through the hub. Once the hub was closed, the contractor continued to do farm visits at the request of local farmers’ markets. Through this process, we were able to identify three operations that were posing as farms, but that were actually purchasing the majority of their goods from others and reselling them as their own. Our local farmers and market managers were grateful that we were preserving the integrity of the markets. The majority of the farms were running legitimate operations, and we used these farm visits as a time to gather more information about the farms for marketing purposes.

Attachments:

Farm Share Poster example
CSA in the Classroom bookmark example
CSA in the Classroom Report
Wholesale Directory
Flyer for Scaling Up workshop