

FY09 EBT Implementation Project

The **Main Street Farmers Market** of Washington, Pennsylvania received \$11,413 to establish an EBT program at the market; to educate market managers, vendors and others on EBT use; and to promote EBT use to low-income consumers in this western Pennsylvania community.

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FINAL PERFORMANCE REPORT

01/20/2012

Main Street Farmers Market, Inc.

New EBT Implementation Project

Grant # 12-25-G-0976

Washington, Pa.

Contact: Allan C Lucchini 412-980-1120

lucchini3@comcast.net

Project Summary:

In the spring of 2009 the Main Street Farmers Market, Inc. (Market) decided to address the lack of availability of SNAP/EBT benefits at the Market. We are an inner city market operating in a distressed area with a large population of elderly and low income families. They lacked access to healthy, locally grown, affordable foods. In 2009 the EBT program was providing a safety net for over 5,300 families in Washington County. We believed that finding a way to enable these people to use their benefits at the Market would assist us in fulfilling our mission to improve food safety and security and to provide relief to needy low income and elderly people in our community. We were (and still are) the only farm market in the city and are the only option for people lacking transportation to shop at a farm market.

Project Approach:

We researched the subject of EBT at farmer markets and contacted Diane Egger who was leading EBT projects for New York City's markets. She was very helpful and supportive. We then learned of the Farmers Market Promotion Program and applied for a grant to implement an EBT project at the Market for our 2010 market season. We received a grant in the amount of \$11,413.00 and initiated the program when the Market opened for our seventh year in the spring of 2010.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved;

Through the use of our grant funds we were able to get the EBT program up and running in 2010. We continued to aggressively pursue the expansion of the program throughout our 2011 season and will continue to do so in the future. We have worked diligently in the community to raise awareness of the program. We initiated and continue

to support a high profile advertising campaign (both to the general public and targeted to specific demographics, relevant government agencies, and charitable groups involved in assisting low income families and the elderly). Community outreach is also a large part of our program through both live presentations as well as joint marketing programs. Examples would be our participation with United Way agencies, church groups, local food banks. A specific example would be our participation in the School Backpack Program run by Washington Christian Outreach. The program provides backpacks to students from low income families which are stocked with healthy foods on a weekly basis. The Market has arranged for the backpacks to include SNAP/EBT brochures and information regarding the availability of EBT at the Market as a way of increasing awareness of the program. We are funding the ongoing program through the use of sponsors dollars and state grant funds and intend to continuing doing so for the foreseeable future. The Market is committed to the EBT program.

To date, I would describe the results of the EBT program as mixed. While the program is running smoothly and has been well received in the community, the overall utilization is not where we hoped it would be at the end of our second year. For 2011 EBT sales totaled about \$1,600.00 (versus \$1,908.00 for 2010). We have had very positive feedback from EBT users who have visited the Market, many of whom return on a weekly basis. However, we are still somewhat disappointed by what we see as a significant underutilization of EBT at the Market. Given the large number of people in our area with access to EBT benefits the percentage of them shopping at the market is low. We continue to search for ways to increase this number and in the coming year will continue to expand our outreach and advertising programs.

One collateral benefit which has arisen from implementing EBT has been our connection with local food pantries and the food bank. Early in 2010 our EBT program led to a relationship with a large local food pantry. The Market agreed to create a Food Pantry Token Program which allowed the food pantry to purchase Food Pantry tokens from the Market to distribute to their clients. The clients can then use the tokens to purchase food at the Market. We then use the funds from the sale of the tokens to pay the farmers on a dollar for dollar basis. (at no profit for the Market as we are acting as a facilitator only). This program allows the food pantry to in effect provide their clients with fresh produce, dairy, etc, which they could otherwise provide due to a lack of storage for perishable items. The program has grown and continues to expand.

Beneficiaries:

The primary beneficiaries are of course the elderly and low income EBT users who now have access to healthy, affordable, locally grown foods. The local community as a whole has also benefited through expanding access to EBT at the Market as it helps support the overall success of the Market. Our local farmers/vendors also benefit by way of increased sales and the City of Washington benefits through increased attendance at the Market and increased food security for its citizens.

We are also assisting other farmers markets in our area with setting up EBT at their markets. As we were the first Market in western Pennsylvania to implement such a program there has been a lot of interest in what we are doing. I have consulted with the City of Pittsburgh Public Markets on getting their EBT program up and running. I am

presently assisting the Farmers at the Firehouse Market in Pittsburgh with their program. We will continue to assist wherever we can with EBT programs.

Quantitatively the numbers are still somewhat disappointing:

2010: @\$1,900.00

2011: @\$1,600.00

We intend to find ways to significantly improve these results in the future. The board is committed to growing this program and considers it one of our primary missions. We would be very interested in learning from others in the EBT grant program how they have dealt with this issue. Anything that your team could do to facilitate an exchange of ideas would be greatly appreciated.

Lesson Learned:

Through the implementation of this program we have learned there is a definite need for EBT at Farmers Markets. The EBT cardholders who have shopped at the Market have been universally positive about the program and have become regular customers. I frequently hear comments along the lines of what a blessing it is to have inexpensive fresh food available in the community. Our vendors have also been very supportive of the program and take pride in the fact that they are helping an underserved part of our community. The EBT program has also raised the visibility of the Market in the community.

Interest in starting EBT programs at other Markets is growing in our area and needs to be encouraged and supported in any way possible. Programs like the FMPP Grant program should continue to focus on EBT at Farmers Markets.

We have discovered that convincing EBT users that food is affordable at the Market remains a challenge. One typical comment I get on a regular basis from someone using EBT for the first time at the Market is; "I wish I had known sooner how much food I can buy for my money and how fresh it is." As I said earlier, we are still not satisfied that enough EBT users have gotten the message about the benefits - both monetary and healthy eating - of shopping at the Market despite our having spent a lot of time and money promoting it. We will continue to seek out ways to break through on this.

Local charitable organizations have been valuable allies in assisting us with our community outreach programs. Various United Way Agencies, church affiliated groups fighting hunger and poverty, food banks, etc. have all been supportive of our program and share our vision. Having access to their volunteer networks has been a great help to us in our outreach programs as we are a small, all volunteer group with limited resources.

On a less positive note, we have been disappointed with lack of interest from certain Government Agencies which we had assumed would have had an interest in providing assistance. In particular, we have not been able to interest the Department of Welfare in getting involved in the program. This is rather surprising given the fact that it is the very groups which they are to serve which would benefit the most from the program.

Additional Information:

THE FMPP Grant program made our project possible. Without the Grant we, as a small volunteer group with limited resources, would not have been able to afford the initial implementation costs. Further, without the assistance and guidance of the FMPP team the implementation would have been much more difficult. Now that the program is up and running, we will be able to sustain it indefinitely on our own.

The Grant team was a pleasure to work with and very generous with their assistance. I have found the program to be extremely efficient and well run; the team was flexible in dealing with issues and easy to work with. I was pleasantly surprised to find the program was much simpler and more user friendly than I had anticipated. Thank you all for your support and kindness. It is much appreciated.

Contact Person:

Allan C Lucchini 412-980-1120

Lucchini3@comcast.net