

Brownsville Farmers' Market: New EBT Project and Marketing Campaign

The **Brownsville Farmers Market** of Brownsville, Texas received \$45,881 to add EBT technology: improve market access for low-income families; increase vendor sales; and increase the number of farmers participating at the market.

[Final Report FY09](#)



Final Performance Report

Brownsville Farmers' Market

Grant Number 12-25-G-0979

Final Report April 1 2011 to September 30 2011 and Summary of September 1 2009 to September 30 2011

Project Summary : During the funding period for this application the Brownsville Farmers' Market (BFM) has met its objectives, reached thousands of people with locally grown produce, and established the infrastructure to support EBT beyond this USDA funding. The purpose of the project was to establish and market EBT at a newly established (and initial) farmers market in Cameron County to address lack of access to affordable produce among low income families in our community. In the United States (U.S.) Hispanic population almost doubled between 1990 and 2007 (from 9% to 15%), and Hispanics are projected to reach 30% of the total population by the year 2050.^{1,2} Mexican Americans represent the largest and most ethnically distinct subgroup in the U.S., and many live in communities with notable health disparities.³ Among all U.S. Hispanics, the median income is falling and poverty rates are rising.⁴ In our border population, with over 90% Mexican Americans, we have the two poorest counties for their size in the U.S.⁵ Health disparities are severe; 50.2% of these Mexican Americans are obese (vs 39.3 % Mexican Americans nationally).⁶ Similarly, nationally the prevalence of diabetes is twice as high in Mexican Americans (10.4%) as in non-Hispanic whites (6.5%), but in a randomly selected cohort of border residents, diabetes is nearly 3 times higher than among Mexican Americans nationally.^{7,8} The risks of diabetes and its complications are huge in this population, with profound implications for human suffering and healthcare costs. Therefore, a farmers market, while only one piece of an overall strategy needed to address these health disparities, is an important element which our Brownsville community has chosen to support. After other cities in the county had tried and failed to support farmers markets, Brownsville has initiated the first and now longest running farmers market (fourth season). Also during the last year we have recruited four new vendors to the market. With the support from USDA (supporting our second and third season) we are the only market accepting EBT. This market not only provides a venue to purchase locally grown produce, it also provides education for healthy cooking, opportunities for health screenings, and exposure to programs increasing the awareness of diabetes and obesity. At least every two months, large community awareness events occur at the market location and allow thousands of people first-hand experience with the market and awareness that EBT is available.

Project Approach: With little difficulty, this project was successful in establishing EBT at the farmers market. We faced some concerns with the technology initially because of the need for a dedicated land phone line, but resolved this issue by leasing a wireless EBT machine, which we continue to use. The cost of this lease is an obstacle for the market long term, but we will monitor best leasing prices available. The larger issue was altering our community to the availability of EBT at the market. Since we started with a baseline of zero customers using their benefits, we have found success in the average of 10 transfers per market over the two years and 100% of our vendors accepting EBT. We have had more difficulty in steadily increasing the

transfers. We did modify the marketing strategies in the second year of the grant to more effectively reach potential EBT customers. We placed ads in popular 'resale item' publications and offered "give aways" at the market with redemption of the ads. We had expected a steady increase in the number of families using EBT but rather found an initial increase that was then maintained over the two years. We attribute some of this, based on customer feedback, to the popularity of the local flea markets that sell packing-shed produce at low prices and accept EBT, and our own Farm Fresh voucher programs that reached thousands of low income families who redeemed a total of \$27,000 worth of vouchers during this same two year period. We are hopeful that in this fourth season we will see the increase in EBT sales because the farm fresh voucher program is unfunded, but may have created an EBT customer base for the market.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved: Our objectives and how they were met are provided below;

1. Establish Infrastructure for EBT Technology at Market Site

We were immediately able to implement this objective including using a wireless technology to have EBT transfers at the park location of the market. We trained individuals to run the equipment and interact properly with EBT customers. We have 100% of vendors who accept EBT. The BFM is committed to offering EBT beyond this USDA funding and has trained additional personnel to use the equipment and has extended the leased equipment.

2. Evaluate Impact of EBT Acceptance on Market Access and Sales

We have found in the evaluation of our EBT access and sales that we have created a solid and consistent EBT customer base over the funding period. We have an average of 10 transactions per market. Our EBT customers regularly attend the market with their families and have incorporated the fresh produce into their diets as evidenced by our evaluation surveys. We did not see an ever increasing number of EBT customers at the market as initially expected, but attribute some of this to the popular option among EBT customers to obtain produce at the local flea market and our other farm fresh voucher programs.

3. Conduct Marketing Campaign to Grow Farmers and Consumers

An extensive marketing campaign was implemented including a website, Facebook page, Spanish and English radio, and newspaper ads, and street signage. Bright signs are used every Saturday along 6th and 7th streets near the market and banners are posted in various locations throughout Brownsville, advertising the Farmers' Market. All marketing clearly delineated the acceptance of EBT at the market. We also attracted television coverage of the market when we hosted large events at our location including weight loss challenge events boasting over 900 registrants. Additionally, the Market is advertised on the Televisa network on a program titled Tu Salud Si Cuenta! (Your Health Matters!). This is a local program through the University of Texas School of Public Health that reaches individuals in both Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Mexico. The focus of the program is to encourage healthy lifestyle behavior changes of eating at least five fruits and vegetables daily, portion control and thirty minutes of physical activity each day. Because of the advertising and the consistently strong customer base the market was able to attract two new farmers and have the market go all year around. This is a substantial change because the summer months are the "off" season for produce in our area, but we were able to support farmers and customers during this time.

4. Measure Impact of Marketing Campaign on Farmers and Consumers

The reach of the Brownsville Farmers' Market has grown from its initial 500 people weekly attendance count to well over 1000 and during its multiple special events reaches up to 3000 people. The market strives to promote healthy eating behaviors by selling locally grown produce. It continues to stand by

its mission to create an event that brings nutritional education, health services, and fresh, locally grown produce to individuals living in South Texas.

The main evaluation tool implemented by the UT School of Public Health for measuring impact of the market is random consumer intercept surveys. In the first season of the market 102 surveys were conducted, in the second 219, and in the third season 171 surveys. The results have helped the market to refine its hours, expand its mix of produce, but primarily have confirmed that the market is a welcomed addition to the community by providing healthy, locally grown produce, increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables consumed by locally families, and offering an enjoyable shopping experience. The results from the third season of the market based on 171 surveys are summarized. Spanish and English versions of the survey were distributed by community health workers. Over half (59%) of the respondents used the English version and the rest used the Spanish (41%). Results from this survey revealed that 32% of the respondents shop at the Market on a weekly basis, a little more than 26% were first time shoppers, and when asked how they found out about the market, 31% said they found out through a friend or family member. When asked what type of items they purchase 62% purchase fruit and 82% vegetables. 59 % of these respondents reported eating at last a little more fruits and vegetables and a greater variety (54%) as a result of shopping at the Farmers' Market. The majority, 82%, felt that the quality of Market fruits and vegetables are "better" in comparison to those found in other places they shop and 72% claimed that the "freshness" of the produce was one of the main reasons to shop at the Market. 44% responded that they purchase less than 10% of their weekly food from the Market. 100% of respondents said they would recommend the Market to friends/family, while 65% rated their overall shopping experience good. With these types of responses from consumers, the Market is sustaining an event that brings nutritional education, health services, and fresh, locally grown produce to individuals living in South Texas.

Beneficiaries. The direct beneficiaries of this project have been Lone Star Card users in Brownsville Texas. More broadly this project benefited the people of Brownsville generally with greater awareness of the market through the extensive media campaign undertaken. The farmers have also benefited from this project as it is the first sustained market in our county and has provided evidence of a model for how to run a market (include health screenings, and larger community awareness activities). In fact, two other markets have now been established and are beginning their second and third season in our county and another two markets in a neighboring county have been established. People in this region now have options to purchase locally grown produce for the first time since grocery stores started shipping in produce globally. Local small farmers for the first time have viable venues for selling their produce.

Lessons Learned: While we achieved our objectives we would have like to have seen more families using EBT and remain dedicated to reaching more families in the coming year (unfunded). Our two biggest lessons learned are 1) use of community health workers to reach low income families with messages about health including the availability of the farmers market and its acceptance of EBT was successful. We reached thousands of low income families with this message and know they came to the market as evidenced by their redemption of \$10,000 worth of vouchers (year 1) and \$17,000 worth of vouchers (year 2). Additional "Lone Star card accepted" signage at the market, Lone Star card accepted printed on the vouchers, and pins worn by farmers indicated Lone Star card accepted also increased awareness. Our other lesson learned was that carefully targeting our media outside the "popular media venues" reaped greater benefits. Ads in the "Bargain Book" a paper that only contains items for resale was more effective in reaching our population of low income families than mainstream newspapers in Spanish or English. Also, we identified Spanish language radio stations overtime that were more popular with our audience through discussions with customers.

Additional Information:

The website created for the market supported by USDA funds is www.brownsvillefarmersmarket.com

We also began a social media page <http://www.facebook.com/BrownsvilleFarmersMarket>

Contact Person:

Belinda Reininger, 956-882-5161, Belinda.m.reininger@uth.tmc.edu.

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