

Guilford County Food Deserts Now Have A Produce Oasis

N.C. Chronic Disease and Injury Section 2016

Summary

The Guilford County Health Department has worked with community partners for a number of years to provide produce to communities designated as food deserts. The Mobile Oasis Farmers Market (MOFM) is literally a movable feast that works with local farmers to provide local produce at a reasonable price to people who live in areas with low access to fruits and vegetables. A network of farmers, funders, partners and volunteers make the program successful. Work continues to make it sustainable.

Challenge

According to the Nutrition Digest of the American Nutrition Association, a food desert is an area whose residents have no access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthful foods. Food deserts are usually found in impoverished areas. The general cause is a lack of grocery stores, farmers markets, or other healthy food providers. Unfortunately many of these same areas contain many fast food locations and convenience stores that provide large amounts of foods that are highly processed and laden with sugar and fats – foods that are known contributors to our nation’s obesity epidemic.

Warnersville, a predominantly African-American neighborhood in Greensboro, NC, is a USDA-designated food desert with high rates of chronic disease, the highest poverty rate in Guilford county, and the highest rates of residents with SNAP benefits. Compounding the problem, more than one-third [American Community Survey 2010-2014 (35.9%)] of the community’s population has no reliable transportation. Warnersville residents were included in a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) process conducted by the Guilford County Health Department as part of the action planning phase of the Guilford County Community Health Assessment in 2011. Residents expressed the desire for better access to fresh produce at affordable prices.

Solution

Without resources for a grocery store or mobile market, a neighborhood farmers market was initiated in summer 2012, and was conducted for two years. In 2014, the Health Department received a grant from the United Way of Greater Greensboro to purchase and outfit a trailer for a seasonal mobile farmers market. With financial and technical support from the Greensboro Parks and Recreation Department, the trailer was converted into the Mobile Oasis Farmers Market (MOFM).

MOFM is a “produce with benefits” store on wheels that brings fresh local fruits and vegetables into food desert areas of Guilford County. The produce is procured from local farmers and sold with a small markup. Purchases may be made with cash, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT), and debit cards. Nutrition educational materials, including healthy recipes, as well as taste testing and incentives, are offered to all customers. SNAP purchases are encouraged through an incentive program that doubles the amount of produce for each dollar spent by customers.

MOFM’s sites and customer base have increased as word spread, along with the use of a free app called Farm Fan to text customers about when MOFM is coming and what produce will be available at what cost.



Solution (Continued) In addition to Guilford County Public Health and Greensboro Parks and Recreation, partners in the MOFM project include the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) Communication Department and Recipe For Success program, the East Market Street Development Corporation, the non-profit Vison Tree CDC, Guilford County Cooperative Extension, Moses Cone Health System and the Prince of Peace Lutheran Church.

Student volunteers/interns provide labor. Funding sources include two \$15,000 grants from the Greater Greensboro United Way (2014 & 2016), a \$5,000 Blue Cross & Blue Shield of North Carolina grant (2014), a \$100,000 USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant (2015-2016) and most recently, a \$100,000 two-year USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP) grant (2016 & 2017).

Results

MOFM now regularly provides fresh produce to several Guilford County food deserts. During the 2015 season total sales tripled from the 2014 pilot markets. Fresh produce was sourced from more farmers, and the MOFM began accepting SNAP/EBT as a form of payment along with cash, debit cards and Moses Cone fruit and vegetable prescriptions. The MOFM customer base doubled, including 800+ Farm Fan customers who received texts each week.

Sustaining Success

The Guilford County Health Department has a \$15,000 grant from the United Way of Greater Greensboro for 2016 and a \$100,000 two-year USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP) grant for enhancements, staffing and operations. The goal is for the project to be financially self-sustaining beyond this time-frame with MOFM sales receipts.

Get Involved

Seeking more space, MOFM staff anticipates moving its base of operation to the location of one of the community partners. With ample space, ground level access, and established relationships with a host of local farmers, this partnership will assist with expanding produce sourcing. Community and student volunteers are always welcome to donate time, expertise, and/or produce to sell.

“The overall project has become a win-win for all those involved, most especially the Guilford County residents we serve.”

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