



Marion County

Fresh, Local Produce- Just one Perk at Marion's Downtown Market

At a Glance

The Produce Perks incentive program provides a dollar for dollar match to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients to use at local farmers' markets. Over \$900 worth of Produce Perks incentive dollars were redeemed in the first year of the program, helping to alleviate some of the barriers faced by those living in poverty. This collaborative food access solution has not only served to improve diet qualities but has helped to assist the local economy through the support of area farmers and created a centralized community hub in an underutilized downtown space. The incentive program would not have happened without the collaboration of several organizations which included the Marion Community Food Development, Inc., Downtown Marion Inc., City of Marion, Marion Public Health's Creating Healthy Communities Coalition, Produce Perks Central Ohio,

Marion City County Regional Planning Commission, and The Ohio State University Extension Marion County.

Public Health Challenge

Healthy diets can prevent and reduce many chronic diseases and contribute to an improved quality of life. All too often, food choices are determined based not only on availability but also affordability. This is especially true for the nearly 1,200 Marion City residents living in the downtown area. According to the American Community Survey, over 40 percent of residents in this area are living in poverty. The USDA Food Access Research Atlas has identified this neighborhood as being food insecure based on having limited access to a full-service grocery store, coupled with higher rates of low-income families. Based on the last County Health Assessment, over 76 percent of Marion adults report eating fewer than the

recommended five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day. In an effort to increase access to fresh local produce, community partners worked together to offer nutrition incentives, and to establish a market that was inclusive and welcoming to all!

Approach

In 2017, the downtown Marion Market began accepting SNAP benefits. 2017 evaluation results revealed only 10 percent of sales involved Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) transactions. This data helped to inform the Creating Healthy Communities coalition as we looked to implement an equitable food access strategy in our community. A newly formed statewide nutrition incentive network proved to offer just that solution with the Produce Perks Nutrition Incentive program. The program helps those most vulnerable for food insecurity by stretching their



SNAP benefits and offering a dollar for dollar match, up to \$20. This multifaceted approach resonated as an opportunity to increase access to locally grown produce, and also as a mechanism to increase sales and foot traffic, generate new customers, and retain and attract new farmers and vendors.

“What we saw were people from all pockets of our community coming to visit the market. Not only were they shopping at the market, but they were staying around and congregating. This was the exact atmosphere that we wanted to create!”

—Jim Lavelle, Marion Market Manager

Results

In the first year of the incentive program, SNAP sales were around \$1,100 with over \$900 in Produce Perks redeemed. Interviews conducted with local farmers indicated increased market attendance, new customers, and an increase in sales from previous years. All farmers supported the program and would recommend it to other vendors. In addition to the nutrition incentive program, community leaders and partners worked in collaboration to enhance the market experience. A change in venue offered a more ideal community setting with park-like amenities and local entertainment. Beyond that of the Produce Perks program, the market offered additional benefits e.g., senior vouchers and WIC Farmers' Market

Coupons. Thanks to the support of the local extension office, several community engagement opportunities were offered during the summer months. This broad approach led to a more diverse audience visiting the market than noted in previous years.

What's Next

Goals moving forward for the Marion Market include improving education and awareness of incentive programs, increasing the number of SNAP recipients utilizing Produce Perks, generating more vendors selling local produce at the market, and boosting overall market attendance. Additionally, through the process of relocating the farmers' market to the current location, community leaders and residents have expressed support and identified a common vision to see this downtown space become a vibrant community hub of resident activity and communal gatherings. Lastly, in an effort to support and sustain this work beyond our county boundaries, local stakeholders will advocate and offer continued support as we build momentum of the Produce Perks program and the Statewide Nutrition Incentive Network.

Find Out More

We all have a role in supporting our local food system and economy! Increase the demand for local products by visiting local markets, buying local produce, and increasing the demand for healthy, fresh food choices.

Are you interested in bringing healthy foods to families in need? Are you looking to support your local farmers and support local economy? To find out more about the Produce Perks Program and the Ohio Nutrition Incentive Network visit www.produceperks.org



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