NUTRITION INCENTIVES AT LOCAL FOOD STORES
Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) Project, April 2015-March 2018

WHY THIS MATTERS

Maine is building a vibrant farm and food economy—but not all Mainers have access to local food. “Nutrition incentive” programs have proven successful at farmers’ markets and through farm share programs, providing bonus fruits and vegetables to customers using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps). But many Maine farmers sell their products wholesale to local retailers, and most Mainers still purchase their food at the grocery store.

**Neighbors in Need**

- Maine ranks 3rd in the nation, and 1st in New England, for the portion of households experiencing “very low food security”
- SNAP alone is not enough: the average SNAP benefit in Maine is $1.19 per meal
- Only 1 out of 9 Mainers eats the daily recommendation of fruits and vegetables

**Maine Farmers**

Maine has the most farmland in New England and a growing number of farmers growing fruits and vegetables year-round. We have the potential to help address food insecurity locally while building new markets for farmers.

WHERE: Outlets that participated

How can we help bridge this gap between farmers and shoppers?

Maine Farmland Trust’s FINI project, awarded in 2015, expanded nutrition incentives into local stores and food hubs. We hoped to make Maine-grown foods easier to access at convenient locations, and build efficiencies by integrating our Farm Fresh Rewards program into a store’s technology and checkout processes. This way, farmers can market their products wherever fits best for them, while the store administers the program. This program is a win-win-win: SNAP shoppers buy more fresh, local food; Maine farmers gain new customers; and more food dollars stay in the local economy.

GOALS

1. Expand access to local fruits and vegetables
2. Increase the number of low-income shoppers who buy local foods
3. Increase sales for local farmers
4. Develop more connections between farmers and eaters

HOW IT WORKS

At most locations, for every $5 SNAP customers spend on local food, they receive a $5 Farm Fresh Rewards voucher to purchase additional Maine-grown fruits and vegetables, doubling their SNAP dollars.

WHO

- Over 1000 households using SNAP benefits, impacting 2500 individuals
- 373 farms selling to participating outlets
- More than 20 participating outlets

*Funding supporters include United States Department of Agriculture and Harvard Pilgrim Healthcare Foundation

† Data sources available upon request, contact Maine Farmland Trust
We evaluated both the process and the outcomes of our Farm Fresh Rewards program through customer pre- and post-surveys, two focus groups with customers, interviews with key store staff, and monthly sales reports from participating stores. Here are some of our key findings.

MORE FRUITS AND VEGETABLES
• Over $170,000 worth of incentives were redeemed for local fruits and vegetables.
• Two-thirds (69%) of responding customers report buying a little or a lot more fruits and vegetables as a result of this program.
• Most (63%) responding customers note that they or others in their household are eating more fruits and vegetables.
• Half (50%) of responding customers report trying new fruits and vegetables, especially mushrooms, new types of greens, and heirloom or heritage varieties of produce.

MORE LOCAL FOOD
Participating shoppers are buying more local foods in general, not just fruits and vegetables:
• 45% report buying more local dairy
• 34% report buying more local eggs
• 29% report buying more local honey or maple syrup
• 25% report buying more local meat or poultry

Stores that had not previously categorized local items recognized the significant benefit of knowing the extent of their local sales and sharing that number with other customers and funders.

Anecdotally, multiple stores reported selling more vegetables through this program, building local sales, and as a result, increasing their direct purchases from farms. More research is needed to measure the direct economic impact of the program on farmers.

“[This program] has allowed me to be more concerned about it being local...Before the priority was the bottom line of how you could make your money go as far.” –Customer

“It definitely made us aware of having local options in each category...it’s a good sort of tie in to make sure we have the local products that people want to buy and thinking about price too, the products that people who use EBT cards could afford to buy...”
–Store staff

INCREASED LOCAL CONNECTION
• The top benefit of participating in the program, cited by more than two-thirds (69%) of responding customers, is that they “feel more connected with farmers and other food producers.”
• More than half (56%) of responding customers note that they “feel more connected with community.”
• Most (92%) of responding customers note in the pre-survey that they enjoy some sort of social activity at the store, including talking with staff, meeting new people, spending time with friends or family, and participating in events or programming.

POSITIVE HEALTH IMPACT
Most (95%) of responding customers noticed a benefit from the program, including 56% who noted that the program has positively benefited their health or that of their household.

“This program is literally a life saver and reduces my MaineCare costs.” –Customer
SHoppers

“...it's interesting to see that something so simple as a voucher program, how it's actually affecting people making healthy choices, and healthy not just for us but for our community, and beyond our community. I don't know these farmers, but I'm pretty sure that it's making a big impact for them as well, which is pretty exciting.”  —Customer

“This program is on many levels a life-safer, in that I get to eat...good quality food, I get to support my local farmers and vendors, and in my mind all of that is a win-win. Overall the mental and physical health benefits and the opportunity to get more food is huge for me. It's a big deal.”  —Customer

“To supplement my food coming to my house, I go to the food pantry, which is...very disempowering, very condescending, so I try to not go if I don’t have to, but sometimes I have to. I’m comparing it to going to the co-op; I feel empowered, and a little more secure when I go there to get my needs met in terms of food.”  —Customer

FARMERS

“We really love that our local food co-op "The Belfast Coop" offers nutrition incentives. It is a win for our farm and fellow farmers in that more people are encouraged to buy local products (hopefully [our] yogurt and kefir!) and great for our community that folks can utilize these programs to support our local co-ops and small businesses, and fantastic that families get to see their benefits stretched further and are able to enjoy fresh local fruits and veggies grown in their communities.”  —Farmer

 WORDS FROM THE GROUND

STORES

Stores feel that the program brings in a wider demographic of customers, and reaches people who they otherwise would not.

One staff person noted that it makes the store “more accessible to more people and makes the whole idea of eating local...produce more doable.”

“I've really enjoyed seeing the front end staff have an opportunity to connect with the customers more, and they have an opportunity...to highlight local products...and talk about what is in season and to bring in more of that connection instead of having a speedy transaction... it pauses you there, sort of reaching out and connecting over what we want to be sharing: food, community, and local products.”  —Store staff

“Even though there are costs associated with it, the results are what's worth it. It's just really valuable for us. In terms of accessibility it's worth that investment.”  —Store staff

Unity Food Hub customers picking up Thanksgiving Harvest Shares
This project has established the many benefits of local-based nutrition incentives at local stores. Recognizing that success, we are excited to expand this program beyond the initial grant period.

Over the past three years of this project, we have identified a number of challenges that remain to be addressed, as well as new ideas to strengthen this type of program for deeper and more long-lasting impacts.

**REACH NEW CUSTOMERS**

**CHALLENGE:** 33% of customers who signed up for the program were already shopping at the store “all the time,” and 47% of customers in the pre-survey heard about the program from staff at the market. This indicates that there is a huge opportunity to bring more new customers into participating stores.

**IDEA:** One customer recommended that we “find people that are already participating in the program and maybe set up a mentor program.” We are piloting this idea through a new Community Food Champions program in the Portland area to help spread the word.

**MOVE BEYOND PRICE**

**CHALLENGE:** Nutrition incentive programs address the financial barrier to eating more local fruits and vegetables. Yet there are still other barriers: cooking knowledge, time, transportation—to name a few.

**IDEA:** We are working with a number of other organizations across the state that are focused on addressing these challenges, such as Maine SNAP-Ed’s nutrition educators, to build customer knowledge and provide complementary resources, leading to a deeper and more long-lasting impact for all.

**CULTIVATE STORES**

**CHALLENGE:** The stores working on this project are primarily small grocers that work closely with farmers, many with a community-oriented mission. We have an opportunity to help other stores incorporate local food access into their businesses, to replicate these successes on a larger scale.

**IDEA:** We are working with Point of Sale (POS) providers to incorporate more technological efficiencies into our programs, such as a loyalty program that tracks points for customers, and more automatic accounting and reporting systems overall. We have been conferring with other organizations in this field across the U.S. to build more replicable solutions and help facilitate program administration.

**BUILD LOCAL FOOD CONNECTIONS**

**CHALLENGE:** Maine is a hub for farming innovation, yet sourcing a large assortment of local fruits and vegetables all year can still be difficult.

**IDEA:** Maine Farmland Trust’s Farming For Wholesale program is supporting more Maine farmers in growing their businesses to be able to supply more food for more Mainers, connecting the dots in our food system.

**SHARE THE MODEL**

The vast majority (97%) of participating customers would recommend this program to a friend. We hope to share our successes and learnings with other groups—beginning with other organizations working on nutrition incentives in New England—to increase access to local fruits and vegetables for shoppers beyond Maine as well.

Local food is becoming more and more popular. And, if we are to meet the New England Food Vision’s goal of “all New England residents [having access to] adequate, healthy, culturally appropriate food at all times,” we need to make sure the momentum grows for everyone. Until we can build a food system that better serves all eaters and farmers together, nutrition incentives are a powerful and needed tool.