

A mobile farmers' market for senior and WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program beneficiaries

Final Report for CNE09-060

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation

Funds awarded in 2009: \$19,498.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2009

Grant Recipient: Threshold Foundation

Region: Northeast

State: Pennsylvania

Project Leader:

[Schirlyn Kamara](#)

Threshold Foundation

Project Information

Summary:

Mobile Farmers' Market

Threshold Foundation launched and operated a Mobile Farmers Market (MFM) to deliver fresh produce to seniors at independent living facilities beneficiaries of the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program and to residents of low-income neighborhoods throughout Lancaster City, where we are located, and adjoining areas in Chester County, and Philadelphia. In part, the MFM project is a demonstration of the financial and operational feasibility of a mobile produce marketing system. The MFM delivered and sold produce grown by local youth on our two small farms in Lancaster and additional produce purchased from local farmers through a daily auction in Lancaster County.

The system we create promises to add another option for community economic development and sustainable agriculture by expanding direct marketing opportunities for Threshold Foundation farmers and for local farmers.

Project Objectives:

The following objectives enabled us to work towards our goal.

The overall goal was to address the needs of three groups:

- (1) Seniors and residents of low-income neighborhoods lack of access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables.
- (2) Offer direct marketing opportunities for Farmers in our area of Lancaster County and southeastern Pennsylvania.
- (3) Provide Dig It! young farmers with an opportunity to expand their marketing opportunities.

Introduction:

According to the USDA Economic Research Service, the overall value added by the nation's farmers and ranchers of consumer food expenditures has fallen from 22.8 percent in 1950 to only 7.9 percent in 2000. As the farmer's share of the consumer food dollar continues to drop, there is an increasing need for direct marketing vehicles that offer sustainable methods for selling local produce to nearby consumers.

Farmers markets, CSAs, and on-farm methods (U pick, agri-tourism) currently appear to be the leading methods. Few farmers participate in such forms of direct marketing. Many view direct marketing as a low return effort. These forms of direct marketing, while they are growing in popularity and number, still fail to meet the needs of many seniors and low income families who have little access to transportation.

The purpose of this program is to organize around "sustainable agriculture" and "community food security" by expanding the market for local foods (produced at our farm and by farmers in the Lancaster area through a distribution system that will increase their income without requiring their time and offering consumers quality local produce at a price lower than the supermarkets they can't get to.

The emphasis of community food security has been one of assuring that everyone in a community has access to good quality, culturally appropriate food.

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Research

Materials and methods:

1. In April we began soliciting managers at independent living senior apartments and homes, and sent out a copy of our brochure with a letter introducing ourselves. By the end of April we received calls back from managers of 14 different senior citizens centers and independent living facilities in Philadelphia, Coatesville and Lancaster County we scheduled their delivery dates and times. Some facilities turned down the MFM service this past year so we were not able to sell in adjoining areas of Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties.
2. In the month of June we hung door knob hangers on homes in Lancaster City listing dates, times and location that the mobile market would come to specific areas. We circulated through low income areas of Lancaster City selling the fresh produce using a small box truck outfitted with shelves and coolers to carry the produce.
3. A newspaper article was done by the local newspaper

Research results and discussion:

The MFM was an effective method of delivering fresh produce to senior citizens at three sites in Philadelphia, one in Coatesville, and 10 in Lancaster County where no markets exist for senior citizens to use farmers' market vouchers. The MFM also served low-income families throughout Lancaster City during its four month trial. We would also take the Mobile market to community events and offer taste tests.

The organization delivered 12,987 pounds of produce to about 800 customers (some were repeat customers) in the first year of operation, during June to early October,

2009. This estimate assumes that the average customer, whether buying with cash or Farmers Nutrition Program, purchased about \$10.

Eighty four percent of seniors and WIC clients surveyed said they were eating more fresh fruits and vegetables as a result, and 97% said they planned to use the market the following year.

The MFM project has also opened up new markets for one local farmer so far the farmer benefited from this new outlet for his crops. Although, if all real costs were considered, the Mobile Farmers Market is not yet an economically self-sufficient means of delivering fresh produce.

However, the Threshold Foundation has great potential and a variety of options are available to MFM.

Although we gained approval from Pennsylvania's Housing Development Corporation (HDC) to sell produce at subsidized senior housing sites some of the sites turned our service down some of those sites that turned us down have already called to sign up for next season's deliveries.

However the Lancaster City run was not as forthcoming as we had hoped this first year. We did have customers that really looked forward to our coming but for the most part a lot of the residents who did our survey a few months before we started had moved or began working low paying jobs at all kinds of hours and days. It was difficult to schedule a time that worked for all or most of the residents. We also found that same issue with the mixed low income apartment complexes what we mean by mixed is complexes where elderly and young adults with families live.

Participation Summary

Education & Outreach Activities and Participation Summary

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

The mobile market promotes itself by driving through the neighborhoods and drawing attention with its bright colors and logos. In the beginning, we utilized existing networks, event tabling, and door knob hangers to inform residents about the truck that they saw driving through their neighborhoods. Word-of-mouth has also been an important form of advertising for us.

Additionally, we often bring the mobile market to community events, and sometimes offer taste tests, and also use articles in local newspapers. To get the word out in the elderly communities, the managers of the facilities promote for us. The managers advertise on their in-house station that show coming events to the residents. They also include the dates that we are coming in a monthly newsletter and the put posters in the lobby and other areas where the senior frequently go.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

From June to early October, 2009, the Threshold delivered fresh produce to 14

different senior citizens centers and independent living facilities in Philadelphia, Coatesville and Lancaster County and circulated through low income areas of Lancaster City selling the fresh produce using a small box truck outfitted with shelves and coolers to carry the produce.

The organization kept records of financial transactions, which showed that sales totaled \$12,611.

Of the 12,987 pounds delivered through this system, 1,562 was produced by the organization's garden, 718 more pounds than last years' 844 pounds.

It is estimated that the Mobile market has served between 800 and 1,000 customers most of who were return customers.

Both city residents and seniors who regularly shopped with us really looked forward to our coming.

Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

Future Recommendations

In addition to purchasing produce at local auction we recommend making arrangements to purchase produce from farmers at farmers' markets on the same day that you sell it to your customers.

It would be good to have an entry ramp and a sound system so that you are heard driving in the neighborhood, also having refrigeration and solar panels for electricity.

The need to continue to document research on a mobile market for 3-5 years we feel is very important.

We recommend conducting an annual survey focused on customer service and product quality so that you can continue to offer your community the products it desires to purchase.

Other ways of limiting travel time may be by taking orders and having one person in the neighborhood take neighborhood orders and becoming the drop off spot for all orders in their neighborhood.

In developing a mobile market, it is important to be articulate and realistic about your goals for the project and be aware that financial success is unlikely for at least the first 3 to 5 years. Although the mobile market model has many positive and worthwhile attributes, it will not make lots of money. Be prepared to subsidize the project continually and recruit funders who are willing to support the project based on the mission even as it loses money. You also have to have board members that understand the mission of the project even as it loses money.

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