Introduction

Americans are increasingly seeking farmers markets and direct producer-to-consumer venues to purchase locally grown, nutritious food. Unfortunately, at many markets, participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) cannot use their benefits because the markets lack wireless terminals needed to process Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) sales.

USDA and states fully fund the cost of hardware and fees associated with this technology in retail stores—but similar support has not been extended to farmers markets or other direct points of sale. This inequity denies farmers market access to many SNAP participants. It also denies farmers access to a significant customer base for their goods, not only from SNAP customers, but also from other patrons who might prefer to use credit cards. As part of the farm bill reauthorization, Congress should provide the means for direct market venues to obtain this equipment—and the training, outreach capacity, and technical assistance necessary to support this access.
Key Points

- Appropriate EBT technology at farmers markets could improve the diets and health of SNAP participants by increasing access to fresh, local or regional fruits and vegetables.
- Support for farmers markets via SNAP benefits could be an important asset to communities and local economies. A 2011 report by the Union of Concerned Scientists found that even a small government investment in 500 farmers markets per year could generate between 6,000 to 14,500 jobs in five years.

Public Health Concerns

- Consuming fruits and vegetables has been associated with a reduced risk of illnesses such as type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and certain cancers.
- Some data suggest that fruits and vegetables may also protect against strokes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, hypertension, diverticulosis, and cataracts.
- Shopping at farmers markets has been shown to increase fruit and vegetable purchases and consumption among nutrition assistance participants.
- In one study, access to farmers markets led to low-income women consuming an additional 1.4 servings of fruits and vegetables per 1,000 calories eaten.

Critical Legislation

SNAP is a major part of America’s food security safety net and is the most significant investment in the farm bill. Currently, SNAP participants may use their benefits only at vendors that can accommodate an EBT system; EBT requires point-of-sale terminals similar to credit card machines, and may need electricity and phone lines. As part of the farm bill reauthorization, Congress should provide the means for direct market venues, such as farmers markets, to have EBT capacity.

Action

- Congress should invest in the technology that enables farmers markets and other direct marketing venues to accept SNAP benefits.
- This investment should include the necessary administrative, outreach and training needs to ensure successful use of the technology.

Who We Are

Based within the Bloomberg School of Public Health, The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) is an academic center that conducts and promotes research and communicates information about the complex inter-relationships among food production, diet, environment and human health.

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