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THE MARYLAND MARKET MONEY PROGRAM IN FARMERS MARKETS: CUSTOMER PERSPECTIVES

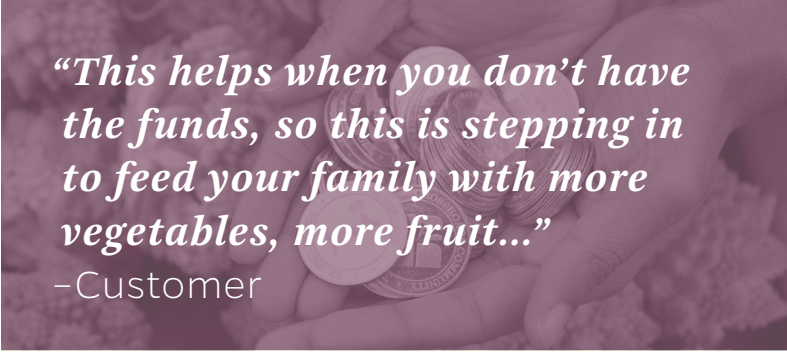
INTRODUCTION

One of the most effective ways to increase the purchase and consumption of fruits and vegetables is through financial incentives for low-income households. With these incentives, diet quality improves, too. Because most farmers markets in the US allow federal nutrition assistance* participants to use their benefits, some markets have implemented incentive programs to further improve access to fruits and vegetables. In Maryland, the Maryland Market Money (MMM) provides SNAP, WIC and FMNP participants with an extra \$5 per day when they use their nutrition assistance benefits at the market. Effective program implementation is critical to ensuring program success.

STUDY SUMMARY

In 2016 and 2017, researchers conducted a brief survey with MMM participants at four farmers markets in Maryland, gathering data on nutrition assistance, farmers market visits, and fruit and vegetable consumption. Some participants also took part in a short interview, which provided information about their perspectives along with barriers, facilitators, and recommendations. Survey participants received an additional MMM \$5 voucher.

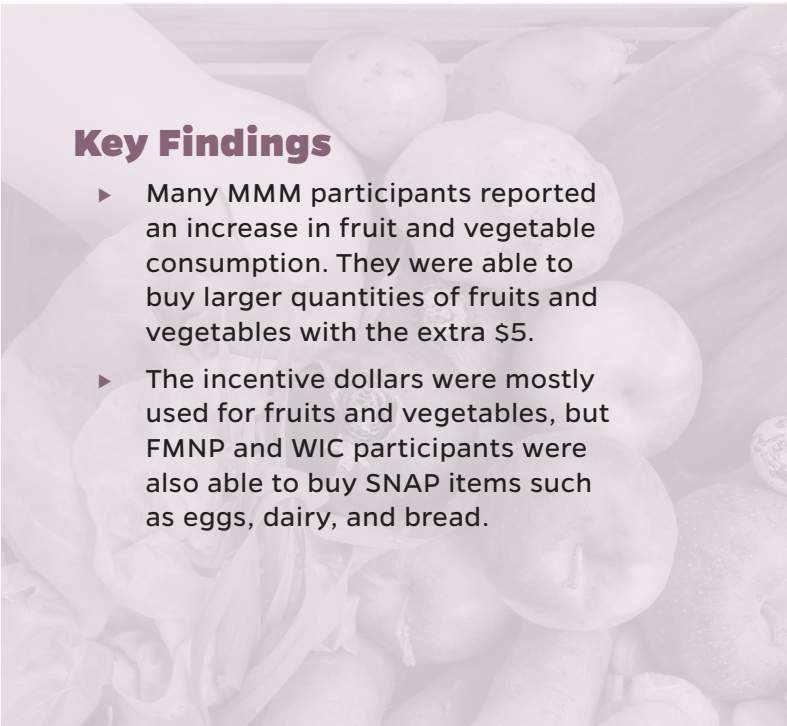
*The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, The Infants, and Children (WIC), and Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) for WIC and seniors



“This helps when you don’t have the funds, so this is stepping in to feed your family with more vegetables, more fruit...”

–Customer

Key Findings

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- ▶ Many MMM participants reported an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption. They were able to buy larger quantities of fruits and vegetables with the extra \$5.
 - ▶ The incentive dollars were mostly used for fruits and vegetables, but FMNP and WIC participants were also able to buy SNAP items such as eggs, dairy, and bread.

Facilitators

- ▶ Many customers liked that the MMM program used a universal coin, which could be spent at all participating markets. This was easier for customers who shopped at multiple vendors and markets.
- ▶ Many customers felt there was a community within the market and did not feel stigmatized.
- ▶ *“Yes, it’s nice to get an additional five dollars, but more importantly, you’re exposed to fresh foods, you’re exposed to people who really care about their environment. And so, if anything, the biggest benefit is you walk away more educated than when you arrived.”*—Customer
- ▶ Many customers liked that they could support local farmers by using their MMM voucher to purchase more products.

Barriers

- ▶ Some customers mentioned challenges with the logistics of the program, including receiving benefits and exchanging receipts.
- ▶ Some customers arrived at the market unaware that the program existed, indicating other potential customers could be missing out on an opportunity to participate.
- ▶ Inconsistent and unsustainable program funding caused challenges for participants. Sometimes funding would run out before the end of the season.

Policy Recommendations

- ▶ Increase and sustain funding.
 - ▷ Advocate for state or county level funding to support incentives as a public health intervention. Several states are currently supporting such efforts.
 - ▷ Ensure there is stable funding so that customers don’t have to worry about losing the opportunity for incentives throughout the season.
 - ▷ Increase the incentive amount so customers can purchase more produce and increase revenue for vendors. Research has shown that larger incentives increases purchasing.

Program Recommendations

- ▶ More use of promotional and educational materials.
 - ▷ Within the market, include signs that indicate which vendors are participating.
 - ▷ Improve customer education on eligible products and how the program works.
 - ▷ Facilitate partnerships with organizations outside the market such as, senior centers, WIC clinics, healthcare providers, supermarkets and government offices, to help raise awareness of the program.
 - ▷ Increase communication and program updates.
 - In the absence of increased funding, communicate with customers about funding status throughout the season.
- ▶ Implement a more streamlined process for customers to receive benefits and exchange receipts.



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