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Food Recovery Program at Farmers' Markets Increases Access to Fresh Fruits and Vegetables for Food Insecure Individuals

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ABSTRACT

Food recovery programs are an increasingly popular method to decrease the amount of food waste in the United States while increasing healthy food access for food insecure individuals. One such program is the Heartside Gleaning Initiative that began in 2014 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The program partners with low-income volunteers to collect fresh produce from farmers' markets for redistribution. From June to October 2014, 17,000 pounds of fresh produce was provided to low-income individuals and food pantries. A survey of participants indicated high usage of the produce and high satisfaction with the gleaning program. This program confirms that gleaning is a viable method of reducing barriers to accessing produce for food pantries and food insecure individuals.

KEYWORDS

Food recovery; gleaning; fresh fruits and vegetables; food insecure; farmers' markets

Program objectives

Food recovery programs are an increasingly popular method to decrease the amount of food waste in the United States while increasing healthy food access for food insecure individuals. In the Heartside neighborhood of downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan, approximately 70% of residents experience some degree of food insecurity, liquor stores and gas stations are the only locations to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables (FFV), and fewer than 50% of households have access to a car for ease of shopping. Greater than 65% of the population lives below 150% of the federally defined poverty level (approximately \$16,000 for a single-person household in 2010¹) and the unemployment rate is 25.2%.² Nonprofit organizers working in Heartside recognized that a gleaning program with neighborhood involvement might be successful in providing FFV to those in the neighborhood. To assess the viability of a gleaning program, farmers at 2 local farmers' markets were queried and many indicated they would be willing to donate unsold produce at the close of the Saturday

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market. The resulting Heartside Gleaning Initiative (HGI) promotes healthy eating by gleaning produce from farmers' markets and redistributing it in Heartside and surrounding neighborhoods. The foremost goal of the program is to increase access to FFV, but HGI also strives to promote sustainable food systems by reducing food waste. Additionally, this program provides meaningful volunteer opportunities for under- and unemployed neighborhood residents, while empowering them to improve their health.

Implementation Process

HGI volunteers, consisting of neighborhood residents, students, and other community members, glean and distribute produce every Saturday, June through October. Volunteers go to 2 area farmers' markets where they collect, weigh, and record produce donations and then deliver the gleaned FFV to a low-income apartment complex where more volunteers assist with the distribution process. Complex residents and neighbors select what they want from the produce displayed on tables. A volunteer dietitian prepares and provides recipe samples made from gleaned produce and ingredients commonly found at food pantries. The volunteers then assist with transporting the remaining produce to neighborhood food pantries and meal programs.

Outcomes

The HGI program was highly successful in its first year, with donations from 40 farmers of more than 17,000 pounds and 35 varieties of FFV distributed to low-income recipients. One resident volunteer said, "We can actually see from week to week what these donations are doing. The biggest thing for me is that kids are now getting food that their parents normally can't afford. Families need to buy necessities, and fruits and vegetables are considered a luxury. You can see the gratitude in their faces."

Evaluation

A small sample survey of participants ($n = 17$) found that 70% used 100% of the produce received, 87% shared produce with others, 100% agreed that the quality of the produce was average to very good, and 100% were satisfied with the program. Food pantries and meal programs that received food reported very high satisfaction and 0% waste. Further program assessment should evaluate changes in FFV consumption, self-efficacy, and food security status in volunteers and participants and the impact on food waste reduction, community partnerships, public relations, and tax deductions for farm

donors. This program confirms that gleaning is a viable method of reducing barriers to accessing FFV for food pantries and food insecure individuals.

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