



## An Equal Opportunity Experience

BY LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN

**N**o one should be deprived access to healthy food on the basis of income, right? Unfortunately, although we'd all agree that equality is a good thing, there seems to be a widening gap between high- and low-income consumption of fruits and vegetables. Fortunately, farmers' markets are a proven strategy for breaching that gap by increasing access to healthy foods within low-income households.

Farmers' markets provide a venue for farmers to sell locally-grown produce, meats, eggs, and dairy products directly to consumers. That, too, is a good thing, but perception around farmers' markets continues to limit access to them. First and foremost, because there's a predominant perception that these markets cater to affluent, college educated, white people, there's an attendant presumption that they don't participate in programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

In an effort to dispel this notion, farmers' markets increasingly operate machines that accept SNAP/EBT transactions. The hardworking farmers who run the markets realize that increasing access to low-income and minority consumers can link people in need with affordable whole foods, while simultaneously supporting the economic stability of their farms.



Having previously had the ability to process Electronic Benefit Transaction cards through a non-profit organic farm that withdrew from the market when it closed in 2013, the remaining farmers at the Bridgton Farmers' Market realized the need to apply for funding that would get them back up and running. Fortunately, in 2014 the Farmers Market Coalition (FMC) was contracted by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to administer the Free SNAP EBT Equipment Program, which provides funding for new EBT equipment and related service fees to farmers' markets. The

Bridgton Farmers' Market applied for and was granted the equipment, along with a three-year data contract that allows them to once again process SNAP/EBT transactions. According to the FMC website, from 2014 when the nationwide program began and when it closed in November of 2017, "over 120,000 individual EBT transactions were processed on equipment provided through the program, totaling over \$1.3 million in SNAP benefits."

Like a lot of places, however, the lakes region saw a reduction in SNAP benefits in 2016/2017. And even for those who have them, it's not easy to get through the month. In 2016, the average monthly benefit per Maine participant was \$112.24—that's less than \$4 per day. So when the Bridgton Farmers' Market farmers saw a way to stretch those supplemental benefits, they went for it.

In partnership with the Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets (MFFM), the Bridgton Farmers' Market participates in the Maine Harvest Bucks program, which allows SNAP shoppers to double their purchasing power. For the past three years, the program was funded by a USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant administered by Wholesome Wave. MFFM continues to provide grant funding and support for the program at more than thirty markets. Shop-

pers buying meats, eggs, cheese or bread with SNAP/EBT card receive a 100% match in Maine Harvest Bucks to use toward fresh fruits and vegetables.

Not all farmers' markets participate in the Maine Harvest Bucks program. For one thing, a provision of the grant is that every recipient market has to match the funds with in-kind and monetary donations. In the case of the Bridgton market, there was added incentive to apply because they had received donations from patrons and local businesses that allowed them to meet the match. With regard to in-kind donations (labor and out-reach), the market overmatched the funds.

BrennaMae Thomas-Googins, assistant manager of the Bridgton market, is very involved with both supplemental programs. She works closely with Jimmy DeBiasi, SNAP Program Coordinator for MFFM, and serves on the board. She explains how the two programs work in tandem at the market. Anyone using a card to pay for their purchases (credit, debit or EBT), checks in at the market information booth and is provided a shopping sheet and clipboard on which individual vendors then record their purchases. When finished, shoppers return to the information booth and swipe their card to complete their shopping. Those using a SNAP card are given Maine Harvest Bucks equivalent to their purchase that can be redeemed directly with the farmers. Because Maine Harvest Bucks can only be used for fresh produce, SNAP cards are typically used for eggs, milk, meat and bread. In all cases, shoppers using credit or debit cards are given the opportunity to add \$1 to their purchase to support the program.

BrennaMae notes that it's not uncommon for people to run through their EBT/SNAP benefits before the month is up. "That's when Harvest Bucks show up at the market. People save them up to fill the void."

Maine Harvest Bucks have also filled an important void for seniors living on a fixed income. The Senior FarmShare Program provides income-eligible seniors the opportunity to receive fresh local produce during the growing season, but funding for the program runs out quickly. In its absence, Maine Harvest Bucks provide an additional way for seniors to have access to unprocessed Maine-grown vegetables and fruits.

BrennaMae points to the individual success stories that make the program worth it. In addition to fresh produce, Maine Harvest Bucks can be used to purchase plants, and she tells how one family of three that loves to gar-



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den buys their seedlings at the market so they can grow their own food. Another family is no longer eligible for SNAP benefits because the program worked. By being able to eat and stay healthy, they were able to transition from it. They continue to shop at the market.

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Beyond the farmers outreach efforts to promote the the Maine Harvest Bucks program, BrennaMae states that the best outreach comes from those who use it.

“We try to be consistently present with people to help them promote the program. Word of mouth is so essential to sharing the information. Someone who may not know about it, might be helped by it.”

Which leads to an even bigger success story: by supporting the program through user

outreach, the farmers are being supported, which in turn supports the local economy. For every \$100 spent locally, \$68 will stay in the community. It all comes back to local.

As of this writing, the 2018 Farm Bill had been passed by the House Agriculture Committee and was headed to the floor for a full House vote. In addition to mandating new work requirements for SNAP recipients, the draft proposes cuts in mandatory funding for several local and regional food programs, as well as elimination of the Organic Certification Cost Share Program, which helps farmers meet organic certification expenses. This footnote is not intended to rain on the sunny story of the Bridgton Farmers’ Market farmers, but rather to emphasize the essential role they play in our rural life and economy. Their success is our success. To ensure its continuation, you can make a donation at the market, contact your local and state representatives, and learn more about the Maine Harvest Bucks program at [maineharvestbucks.org](http://maineharvestbucks.org).