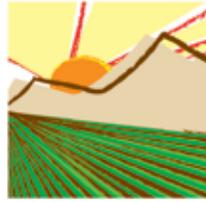


Working together,  
we can create healthier  
communities in the  
San Joaquin Valley.



## Central California REGIONAL OBESITY PREVENTION PROGRAM

Healthy Environments • Healthy Choices • Healthy People

# Kern County Farmers Market: Changing the Face of Public Health

As the Community Health Capacity Building Specialist for the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) at the Kern County Department of Public Health, Dr. Avtar Nijjer-Sidhu had two ambitious goals: to tackle Kern County's growing obesity crisis, and to expand the reach of her county's health department deeper into the communities it serves. One of her solutions? Start a farmers market on the grounds of the Department of Public Health on Mount Vernon Avenue, where surrounding low income community members, neighboring WIC participants, public health clients, and thousands of county workers could buy fresh fruits and vegetables normally hard to come by in this part of Bakersfield. This community in particular is designed in a way that limits opportunities to buy healthy food or enjoy physical activity. All of these environmental challenges have a negative influence on the health of communities and individuals.

### A New Vision

With this farmers market, "We're changing the face of public health," Nijjer-Sidhu explained. "It's not just about vaccinations and health clinics, it's about changing the

environment and creating healthy communities. How better to support the health of the community than to support healthy diets by bringing fresh fruits and vegetables to people who don't have easy access to them?"

Any doubts that the Kern County Farmers Market had "arrived" were dispelled when *The Bakersfield Californian* featured the launch of its 2009 season on the front page of its Thursday, June 18 issue. "It's not easy to buy fruits and vegetables and sometimes it's expensive," Tania Guillen, a mother of three children ages 5, 4 and 3, told the newspaper reporter as she left the market with six bags of fresh produce. For others, it's a place to come, to gather, to get information as well as to shop.

The farmers market was established in April 2007 during "Public Health Week," and is the first farmers market to be certified in California on public health department grounds. "This was an area of Bakersfield with a high concentration of fast food outlets," Nijjer-Sidhu said. "It seemed like the right thing for a public health department to do."

### How They Did It

But after an initial flurry of interest, the market languished



Courtesy of the Kern County Department of Public Health

from a shortage of vendors and diminishing public interest. For the 2008 market season, Nijjer-Sidhu once again secured approval from Kern County's former Director of Public Health, John Nilon, who made available a media specialist to promote the market through flyers, banners, radio and television spots and online publicity. "The promotional work was critical," Nijjer-Sidhu explained. "We were able to approach local farmers and tell them we had a rent-free space

# S U C C E S S S T O R Y



Photo by Loren Knowles

### THE CENTRAL CALIFORNIA REGIONAL OBESITY PREVENTION PROGRAM

is the Central California Public Health Partnership's initiative to create environments that support healthy eating and active living in the San Joaquin Valley. The regional obesity prevention program is administered by the Central California Center for Health and Human Services and is housed under the College of Health and Human Services at California State University, Fresno. The program is funded by The California Endowment.



for them, more than 2,000 County employees nearby and a WIC clinic nearby, and lots of free publicity." Their efforts landed three farm vendors specializing in fresh juice, locally produced nuts and jellies, and fresh produce.

**Other bureaucratic steps** remained – thankfully, none of them insurmountable. A site permit from the County Department of Environmental Health Services had to be obtained, covering access to public restrooms and food safety regulations. Vendors needed to show the Kern County Agriculture Commission that the foods they were selling were in fact grown on their property, not purchased from a big-boxed store. The vendors pay \$10 for a Certified Producer's Application, then this certification could be used to obtain a California Certified Farmer's Market certificate from The California State WIC (Women, Infants and Children) Association which qualifies vendors to redeem WIC vouchers. These vouchers can only be used at certified farmer's markets with two or more vendors.

### A Vision Realized

The effort is well worth it. Establishment of the Kern County Farmers Market within walking distance of a WIC clinic has helped increase the clinic's redemption rate nearly 30% in the past two years. And the more vouchers that are redeemed in a season, the more vouchers the WIC agency can receive the following year for distribution, helping to provide more access for low-income people to more healthy food.

Attracting vendors to Kern County remains a challenge. "There's a lot of competition in LA, West Hollywood, San Luis Obispo," according to Nijjer-Sidhu. "People in metropolitan areas are willing to pay

higher prices. We're always looking for farmers to come here." For help, she turned to the manager of Bakersfield's largest existing farmers market, who happily introduced his stable of vendors to a market located in the midst of Kern County's "island" of government offices.

Kern County's 2009 Farmers Market kicked off during Public Health Week with three vendors, lots of good publicity from local media, and appreciative crowds of shoppers.

"The role of the department is to give the community opportunities to be healthy," said former Director of Public Health John Nilon. "Instead of simply holding classes to educate people, we're providing easy access to healthy foods."

Veva Islas-Hooker, Regional Program Coordinator for CCROPP, sees Kern County's Farmers Market as a model for other public health departments. "This is one clear, innovative approach that other public health departments can adopt to support healthy eating in their communities," Islas-Hooker commented. "Establishing a produce market is an integral way in which public health departments, other businesses, and communities can address obesity and ensure that nutritional food is put in the hands of individuals and families who need it," she added.

**For more information, please contact the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program regional office at 559.228.2140 or go to [www.ccropp.org](http://www.ccropp.org).**

The Kern County Department of Public Health Farmers Market is open seasonally mid-May to mid-September. The market is located at 1800 Mount Vernon Avenue in Bakersfield.

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