

Changing The Food Environment: Adding EBT Turns Flea Markets Into Convenient And Affordable Farmers Markets

Boasting low prices and a wide array of new and used merchandise—from clothing, toys, and school supplies to furniture, home appliances, and more—it’s no wonder that flea markets are popular, and becoming more so. The Merced Flea & Farmers Market in California’s rural Central Valley has seen a sharp increase in attendance since the nation’s economic crisis began in fall 2007. On a typical Saturday in spring 2009, the market drew more than 6,000 visitors, up more than 20 percent from two years earlier. And that figure does not include the many children accompanying their families.

“Everybody’s out shopping for a bargain,” says Michelle Mineni, whose father Dennis has operated the flea market for the last 10 years. With 275 vendors housed in three giant barns and outdoor spaces, the market has been serving the community for three decades.

Unfortunately, the recent economic downturn has resulted in families eating poorer quality diets, paradoxically leading to increased obesity and its many negative health consequences.

“We were seeing more and more of our customers turning to food stamps to feed their families,” says

Michelle Mineni, “and so my father applied to the necessary government agencies and brought EBT to the flea markets in 2008.” Their decision proved to be both innovative and timely, as Electronic Benefits Transfer, or EBT, dramatically increases access to fresh fruits and vegetables for local residents receiving government food assistance.

Once the program was in place, the Minenis began working with Claudia Corchado and the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) to help promote EBT at the flea & farmers market.

The technology itself isn’t new; it’s similar to the type of credit card “swipe” device commonly found in most retail stores. Shopping for produce at flea markets isn’t new either. For centuries, Hispanic families have bought most of their produce at local flea markets (known in Spanish as *remates*, *pulgas*, or *tiangis*) as part of cultural and family traditions.

What *is* new is marrying technology to tradition to expand access to healthy food. The process is simple: On their way in to the flea market, customers stop at the main office with their EBT card and the card is charged for a dollar amount specified by



A local vendor makes a fresh sale at the Merced Flea & Farmers Market.

the customer. Customers then leave the office with tokens that they use as currency to buy from the produce vendors, and the vendors, in turn, redeem the tokens for cash back at the office at the end of the day. The tokens never expire and can be used at any of the three flea & farmers markets the Minenis operate in Merced, Atwater, and Ceres.

Setting up EBT was not without its challenges. Federal regulations require that a farmers market association must be formed within a flea market before applying for a Food and Nutrition Service number; flea markets alone do not qualify. The Minenis decided to incur the expense involved because it made good business sense. “We believed that EBT would help us attract more shoppers and more produce vendors, and it would mean more revenue for the vendors.

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Thus the additional cost was worth it.”

Today approximately 40 registered vendors sell fresh fruits and vegetables, usually at much lower prices than supermarkets or convenience stores. “We have produce vendors who provide their own grown produce as well as other vendors who buy wholesale,” Michelle explains. “Both provide fresh fruits and vegetables to the shopper for a lot less than grocery stores due to lower overhead.”

In many farmers markets, discrimination against food stamp recipients is not uncommon, with most markets operating on a cash-only basis. But here at Merced’s flea market-based farmers market, everyone understands the struggle to put food on the table and what a critical difference food assistance can make. The majority of produce vendors at the market (85 percent) are, like their customers, Spanish-speaking; approximately 10 percent speak Hmong.

“It’s like family,” says Michelle Mineni. “Everyone knows everyone else, and the same customers come back every week.”

Implementation of the EBT program at the flea & farmers market on Saturdays in Merced and Thursdays and Sundays in Atwater has gone smoothly. With little promotion beyond a press release, an information table at both markets, and positive word-of-mouth, EBT food sales have doubled in the last year (from 2008 to 2009).

To support other communities interested in this model, CCROPP plans to publish a colorful and easy-to-read *Guide to Establishing Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) at Your Local Outdoor Produce Market*. In addition, KFTV Univision TV and the *Merced Sun-Star* have reported on the markets’ introduction of EBT, and the story has also been featured in the Washington, DC-based Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) newsletter.

The Minenis’ Merced Flea & Farmers Market hosts the area’s annual Bi-National Health Week events at no charge to participating agencies and organizations providing free health screenings to migrant and seasonal farm worker families who do not have routine access to health care. These vision, hearing, blood pressure, and diabetes screenings can be life-saving in some cases, combined with the follow-up care that is part of the Health Week initiative.

In recognition of their contributions to the community, Dennis Mineni

and his family were honored with a CCROPP Cultivator Award in 2009. Dennis serves on the board of directors of the National Flea Market Association and is sharing his successful EBT model with other market operators.

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. CCROPP is funded by The California Endowment.

For more information:

Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program:
www.ccropp.org or (559) 228-2140

To learn more about Merced County, go to:
www.csufresno.edu/ccchhs/institutes_programs/CCROPP/partners/merCo.shtml

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