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FIELD NOTES: PEOPLE, PROGRAMS, & POLICIES* Farmers' Market Produce Delivery Program for Mitigating Nutritional Risk in Older Adults

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Abstract

Community-dwelling older adults in disadvantaged neighborhoods may face nutritional risks not mitigated by existing programs. The Senior Market Basket Program, administered by nonprofit organization P.E.E.R., Inc., is a unique approach to serving community-dwelling senior adults and a valuable model for integrating targeted social services into local food systems. The program ensures access to fresh produce during the growing season for a defined target population.

Keywords

nutrition; food security; older adults; aging in place; farmers' market; food systems

Nutritional risk is a salient issue for community-dwelling older adults, especially those living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Existing programs (eg, those providing home-delivered or congregate meals) are valuable in mitigating nutritional risks and promoting healthy aging in place but are inadequate for addressing the scope of the need among a growing population of at-risk older adults. P.E.E.R., Inc. (Promoting Empowerment and Enrichment Resources) is a small, nonprofit community development organization modeling a unique approach to increasing food security in community-dwelling older adults.

P.E.E.R., Inc. actively promotes good nutrition and food security across all age groups and particularly among older low-income residents in the South East Lake neighborhood of

*The *FIELD NOTES* column presents best practices in community-based projects and programs that address hunger and environmental nutrition issues. The Journal will highlight the work of an organization or program that exemplifies the goals of the Journal to examine hunger and the interconnectedness among individual, political, and institutional factors that govern how people produce, procure, and consume food and the implications on nutrition and health. Readers are encouraged to submit original contributions on programs and/or project "snapshots" that give a program or project's mission, objectives, implementation process, outcomes, evaluation and contact information. Limit to 300-600 words.

Birmingham, Alabama, a community notorious for urban decay and limited resources. The organization's flagship program, the East Lake Farmers Market, is a thriving weekly event that brings together local farmers and producers with neighborhood residents who gather to share in community life. The Senior Market Basket Program, an innovative outreach of the farmers' market, extends the benefits of the market to low-income seniors residing in 2 US Department of Housing and Urban Development retirement homes located near the market. These independent living facilities have no dining room or meal services. Targeting these residences ensures program utilization by the intended population without the need for cumbersome intake procedures and allows for simple in-home delivery of the food. Current enrollment is 140 participants—75% of those eligible. The program is free to participants and supported primarily by charitable grants from local foundations.

Program participants are provided with a seasonal supply of fresh fruits and vegetables for 4 months of the growing season. The quantity, which includes 5 to 7 unique foods, is sufficient for one person for the week. Food is preordered from the farmers before the market based on what is plentiful for farmers and tasteful to seniors. Rotating volunteer groups of approximately 15 people operate the program weekly. When farmers arrive at the market on Saturday mornings, volunteers pick up the designated food and move it to the packing area, where they organize one cardboard box for each participant. Food is packed into boxes based on the planned distribution; for example, 2 tomatoes per person. All boxes include recipes for healthy preparation of the produce for that week. Boxes are then loaded onto P.E.E.R., Inc.'s mobile market truck, driven to the retirement homes, and unloaded. Volunteers take the boxes directly to participants in their homes, greet them warmly, unload the food in their kitchens, and take away the empty boxes (which are reused the following week). The packing and delivery process takes 3 hours. In addition to the direct benefits of the program for seniors, the program benefits the farmers vending with the market because they are guaranteed bulk purchases each week. This strengthens and stabilizes the market for the broader community.

Evaluation of the Senior Market Basket Program indicates that the program improves food security and nutrition among participants, with 94% of them reporting eating more fresh fruits and vegetables as a result of participation. Participants are overwhelmingly satisfied with the program for these reasons: (1) the food is fresh, flavorful, and high quality; (2) the food is delivered by weekly visitors; (3) the program helps them save money; and (4) the food is healthy. Findings also indicate a need for complementary nutrition education to promote healthful preparation of the produce. Future evaluation could include assessing how program participation affects nutrition-related health outcomes. Possible applications include outreach projects for farmers' markets, food banks and pantries, and other food system initiatives.

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