Benefits of Farmers’ Markets for Food Access: Results from a Needs Assessment in a Rural County

Karen L. Franck, PhD; Kristen Johnson, PhD, RDN; Soghra Jarvardi, PhD
Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Tennessee Extension

Summary

For a CDC High Obesity Prevention grant, a comprehensive needs assessment was conducted in a county in the Delta Region of Tennessee with adult obesity rates over 40%. The purpose of the grant was to reduce adult obesity rates through community interventions designed to improve access to healthy foods.

Objective

To identify barriers and facilitators for access to healthy food in a county with adult obesity rates over 40%.

Methods

Methods included:

1. Establishing a steering committee of community leaders from the 8 incorporated towns and 1 unincorporated community. These members helped recruit participants for the surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews.
2. Surveys distributed to adults throughout the county. Questions included where people shopped for healthy foods and the quality of healthy foods available. Focus groups questions included asking about access to healthy foods and shopping habits.
3. Focus groups were conducted in the 8 incorporated towns and in 1 unincorporated community. Focus groups questions included asking about access to healthy foods and shopping habits.
4. Key informant interviews were conducted with community leaders and professionals working in agencies that served the county such as the hospital, the health department, the school system and nonprofit agencies. Questions included barriers and facilitators for access to healthy foods.

Results

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS. Qualitative data were organized using Nvivo. Comments were coded by 2 independent coders and tagged. Themes were developed using inductive content analysis.

Table 1. Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Hardeman County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White (%)</td>
<td>806 (74%)</td>
<td>43 (70%)</td>
<td>17 (68%)</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (%)</td>
<td>848 (78%)</td>
<td>41 (67%)</td>
<td>12 (48%)</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty (%)</td>
<td>277 (26%)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over half (55%) of survey respondents indicated shopping at Farmers’ Markets located in the county. The biggest reason for not shopping at the markets was hours of operation (27%) with markets not being open during more convenient hours (such as staying open after 5:00 pm).

Focus group and interview participants identified the Farmers’ Markets as community assets for healthy food especially for residents who lived in the 2 communities where the markets were located. Participants discussed the importance of supporting local farmers and businesses. For focus group and interview participants, major reasons for not shopping at the markets were lack of EBT acceptance, lack of transportation, and distance from their communities to the market locations.

Conclusions

Farmers’ Markets can provide a source of fresh fruits and vegetables in small rural communities and are an important way to support local farmers and businesses. In this rural county with high obesity rates, the 2 Farmers’ Markets were identified as important source of healthy foods; however, barriers limited market usage for others especially for low-income residents. Barriers for low-income residents included not accepting EBT, lack of transportation, and distance from their communities to the market locations. The facilitators and barriers for market usage identified here are similar to those identified in previous studies (Freedman et al., 2016).

These findings indicate the importance of using multiple methods to conduct needs assessments as results from survey data differed from qualitative themes. Furthermore, these results highlight the need to tailor food access interventions to address challenges for specific populations such as low-income residents as well as residents living in outlying areas without Farmers’ Markets.

Next steps include ongoing discussions with community partners to identify strategies to encourage and expand Farmers’ Market usage particularly for low-income residents. This includes opportunities for pop-up markets to overcome distance and travel barriers as well as addressing EBT acceptance among local producers.

References


The authors would like to acknowledge the support and hard work of the Extension Agents, Program Assistants, Project Staff and community members in Hardeman County who work hard every day to improve their communities.

This presentation was supported by the Grant or Cooperative Agreement Number 1NU58DP006558-01, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Department of Health and Human Services.