

Local Markets Find Boost Through CalFresh Benefits

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<http://lbfresh.org/news/local-markets-find-boost-through-calfresh-benefits/>

A study by the [University of Southern California](#) finds that during the height of the pandemic, one in four Los Angeles County households experienced food insecurity. Food security continues to be a prominent concern even as restrictions lift and re-openings continue.

COVID-19 pointed to a lack of resilience within our food system, Dr. Libby Gustin, a professor from California State University Long Beach, with a focus on Sustainable Food Systems, tells Long Beach Fresh. But, Dr. Gustin concedes, it also showed people the importance of local sustainable food systems.

In light of May being CalFresh awareness month, Long Beach Fresh is looking to shed light on the amazing benefits that nutrition programs can offer to promote local food in communities that are food insecure.

“Having [farmers markets] in places that are food deserts is important [for increasing usage of nutrition programs],” says Dr. Gustin.

[Market Match](#), a nutrition incentive program primarily offered at farmers markets, can promote community member’s access to healthy local foods by increasing the amount of money people spend at the farmer’s market.

Currently, Long Beach has [six weekly farmers markets](#), of which, two are participating in Market Match incentives, says Kelli Johnson, manager of six [Harbor Area Farmers Markets](#). Market Match is made possible at these locations through funding from HALA.

“Our weekend market is not currently in the program, though we would like it to be,” says Johnson. “It is purely a funding issue.”

In 2020 3.5 million dollars in Market Match was redeemed by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) users, shares [Melanie Wong](#) of California Food Policy Council. This is “money that would not be accessible any other way,” says Wong.

The model for the markets that Johnson works at are focused on food security, so being able to provide those additional dollars to spend on healthy local foods is important for the community.

“It’s very predictable, you look at the end of the month when people run out of their food stamps, and the sales are down,” says Johnson. “People are very reliant on CalFresh and the benefits; it makes a really big difference.”

These nutrition incentives do more than just promote healthy eating habits. A study by [Colorado State University Fort Collins](#) finds that healthy nutrition incentives support economic development and jobs.

According to the study, for every dollar invested in healthy food incentives, there is an expected result of up to three dollars of economic activity generated.

“There is no downside to participating [in nutrition incentives] other than the program requires funding,” says Johnson. “If there were more money budgeted for nutrition incentives all three of our Long Beach markets would participate.”

Another way to expand nutrition incentives is to provide them in local corner stores. [Healthy Neighborhood Market](#), a program by the LA Food Policy Council, supports transitioning neighborhood markets to operate as healthy food retailers. As of 2016, of the 51 markets that participated in the program, 100 percent of store owners saw an increase in healthy food purchases.

There are [barriers](#) that slow down the introduction of healthy alternatives at local stores, such as lack of refrigeration space and accessing affordable produce. As the Healthy Neighborhood Market Program continues to expand, other programs supporting nutrition incentives and healthy alternatives aim to address these issues.

The [Healthy Market Partnership](#), a program, run by Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, also offers an opportunity for convenience stores to provide more nutritious foods to the local community.

“It’s fair to say that the program has a handful of stores participating at any given time, and that the number is expected to grow due to relief and recovery funds becoming available to make necessary changes,” says Tony Damico, Co-Director of Long Beach Fresh (LB Fresh) and a Healthy Market Partner.

The [program’s scorecard assessment strategy](#) helps support convenience stores during their transition, introducing marketing techniques, recipe cards, or in-store healthy cooking workshops. According to a study by the [Center for Disease Control](#), corner store owners and managers play crucial roles in healthy eating initiatives, and further developing programs to introduce produce in convenience stores can increase the potential to use owners/managers as a resource.

“In the coming months, LB Fresh wants to focus on helping willing stores in the partnership apply for the statewide nutrition incentives program as they implement healthy store changes,” says Damico.

Whether offered at markets or stores, there needs to be an increase in healthy food awareness, and many organizations have to continue to advocate for the government to fund nutrition incentives. Hunger Action LA is pushing for \$20 million in the upcoming [fiscal budget for 2021/2022](#) for Market Match. You can learn more [here](#).

Above Photo by Jacqueline Fuller on [instagram.com/goodveg_](https://www.instagram.com/goodveg_)



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