

Improving Access to Healthy Food and Supporting Local Food Systems through the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) Program

Dr. Ashton Potter Wright, Bluegrass Farm to Table

*House Committee on Agriculture, Subcommittee on Nutrition
February 3, 2016*

Introduction

Subcommittee Chairwoman Walorski, Ranking Member McGovern, and members of the Subcommittee on Nutrition, it is an honor to be here to testify on the Bluegrass Double Dollars Pilot Program—a project supported by the USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) program. Thank you for the opportunity to share what we have learned from our pilot project relating to food insecurity, nutrition, economic development, and public-private partnerships. And a special thank you to my fellow witnesses for sharing their strategies to reduce food insecurity through the implementation of nutrition incentive programs.

I manage Bluegrass Farm to Table, an initiative of the City of Lexington's Office of Economic Development. Bluegrass Farm to Table serves as a mechanism to increase coordination and collaboration among stakeholders at all levels of the local food system—from production to consumption—and to improve the nutritional health in the region. FINI presents an incredible opportunity to tackle both of these priorities. In partnership with Blue Grass Community Foundation, Bluegrass Farm to Table manages the Bluegrass Double Dollars Pilot Program funded by FINI. Bluegrass Double Dollars aims to improve access to affordable, locally grown produce for low-income individuals participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Simultaneously, Bluegrass Double Dollars strives to stimulate Kentucky's farm economy by increasing the demand for locally grown fruits and vegetables.

Based on our experience as a FINI pilot project recipient, we recommend that the Committee provide USDA with an increase of resources to:

- encourage stronger multi-sector partnerships;
- increase coordination and collaboration with state SNAP offices; and
- develop a community of practice for FINI grantees.

Background

One in five Kentucky residents (828,000) participates in SNAP—the majority of whom are children, elderly, or the disabled. 16.4% of all households are considered food insecure.¹ Additionally, Kentucky has the 5th highest prevalence of obesity in the nation (prevalence = 33.2%).² High rates of obesity correlate with high rates of chronic health conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and certain cancers. Therefore, it is imperative to continue to find solutions to address these problems, particularly among low-income and food insecure individuals.

A documented strategy to help reduce many of the aforementioned chronic health conditions is to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables. However, low-income individuals are often unable to locate, purchase, and prepare healthier food items. Two of the critical barriers to the purchase and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables among low-income Lexington residents are the lack of access and affordability. Specifically, access is particularly problematic for low-income individuals who live in the pockets of food deserts

¹ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities analysis of data from USDA Food and Nutrition Service, FY 2013

² "The State of Obesity: Better Policies for a Healthier America" from Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2014.

where fresh fruit and vegetables are not available. The fresh fruits and vegetables that are available, particularly those that are locally grown, are often too expensive for low-income individuals to purchase. The Bluegrass Double Dollars program aims to reduce these barriers.

Kentucky enjoys a rich agricultural history, largely steeped in tobacco production. Over time, farmers have begun to transition to vegetable production. Most farms in Kentucky are small (under 50 acres) and depend on direct-to-consumer markets to sustain their farm enterprises. With a ready and growing supply of local produce and other farm products, many of these small to medium-sized producers are eager to grow their customer base and welcome the opportunity to partner with programs, such as Bluegrass Double Dollars.

Bluegrass Double Dollars Pilot Program

The Bluegrass Double Dollars program is a collaborative public-private partnership between Bluegrass Farm to Table and Blue Grass Community Foundation. The program is designed to make local produce more accessible to SNAP participants in the Lexington area while expanding the market for local food producers. Specifically, the program allows SNAP beneficiaries to double their purchasing power to buy locally grown fruits and vegetables at three pilot sites—a farmers' market, a cooperatively owned grocery store, and a corner store. The program provides incentives for Kentucky-grown produce coupled with targeted community outreach and education to help SNAP participants become more familiar with and more willing to purchase locally-grown produce. According to our pilot project evaluation data, 90% of respondents said the Bluegrass Double Dollars program encouraged them to purchase more locally grown fruits and vegetables and that they would be more likely to shop at venues where they know the program will be offered.

This collaborative economic initiative is focused on supporting both Kentucky SNAP participants and Kentucky farmers. In the first six months of our pilot, the average redemption rate of our incentive vouchers was nearly 80%, and the total value of Double Dollars redeemed for Kentucky grown produce was just over \$15,000—a win-win for SNAP recipients and Kentucky farmers. The pilot program has gained momentum as participation and redemption have increased nearly each month the program has been in place.

Value of FINI

The Food Insecurity Nutrition Assistance Program represents a unique opportunity to meet the two primary goals of Bluegrass Farm to Table—supporting food-related agricultural development and the improvement of nutritional health in the region. The architects of FINI should be commended for providing multiple levels of funding (pilots, projects, and large-scale projects) to develop programs with varying scales and scopes as opposed to taking a one-size-fits-all approach. The pilot funding parameters afforded our planning team in Lexington a great deal of flexibility when designing and implementing our incentive program.

There is tremendous value in non-profits partnering with the federal government on incentive programs such as FINI. It demonstrates that the federal government is committed to promoting healthy eating and reducing food insecurity. Having the FINI pilot project grant also allows us to leverage support and buy-in from partner organizations to help sustain the Bluegrass Double Dollars program. Because our pilot demonstrates the benefits of healthy eating and supporting local farmers, it allows us to partner with stakeholders and funders in both the health and agriculture sectors.

Lessons learned and recommendations from the field

FINI provides a strong foundation for developing sustainable incentive programs to improve healthy eating among food insecure individuals. It also provides a unique opportunity to support local food producers. To build on this momentum and to improve future iterations of the program, we recommend that the Committee provide USDA with an increase in resources to:

- Encourage strong multi-sector partnerships;
- Increase coordination and collaboration with state SNAP offices; and
- Develop a community of practice for FINI grantees.

Encourage strong multi-sector partnerships

Strong multi-sector partnerships should be encouraged in an effort to develop holistic and sustainable incentive programs that encourage healthy eating among SNAP recipients. The FINI program provides a unique opportunity for building stronger partnerships between the food security and local agriculture sectors because it gives preference to projects that incentivize locally or regionally sourced produce. Future federal opportunities should build on this momentum. Practitioners working on food security and local food systems should be challenged to work with one another to develop creative and sustainable solutions that improve access to healthy, affordable, local food while stimulating the local and regional food economies. Increased synergy between these two sectors has the potential to maximize funding, leverage existing resources, and foster multi-sector collaboration.

Bluegrass Farm to Table and its partner organizations were thrilled to see FINI as a provision in the Agriculture Act of 2014 (Farm Bill) because it allows for increased collaboration

between organizations working to address food insecurity and those working to build strong local food economies. The key multi-sector partners involved in Bluegrass Double Dollars include: a community foundation, a cooperatively owned grocery store, a farmers' market, a corner store located in a food desert, Cooperative Extension/SNAP Education Staff, and the University of Kentucky's College of Agriculture, Food, and Environment.

Increased coordination and collaboration with state/local SNAP offices

A more comprehensive approach to educating SNAP recipients about where they can use their SNAP benefits, particularly places that routinely offer healthy, locally produced food is needed. Specifically, we recommend that future FINI requests for proposals incentivize state and local SNAP offices to work collaboratively with FINI grantees to help educate SNAP beneficiaries about where they can use their SNAP benefits for the purchase of produce and encourage them to take advantage of incentive programs such as Bluegrass Double Dollars. We heard stories from program participants that it was not until they heard about the Bluegrass Double Dollars Program that they realized they could even use their SNAP benefits at the farmers' market and the cooperatively owned grocery store. We recognize that educating SNAP users about locations where they can take advantage of the incentive program is an integral component of the program; therefore, we will continue to invest in education and outreach aimed at a wider audience of SNAP users in the Lexington.

Because state and local SNAP offices are tasked with the responsibility of issuing and managing benefits, beneficiaries view them as a trusted source of information. If state and local SNAP offices are incentivized to make healthy eating, especially from local and regional markets, an internal priority, SNAP recipients will be encouraged to use their benefits for locally

grown produce, which directly benefits local farm economies. Because all SNAP beneficiaries come into contact with their state and/or local office while participating in the program, partnering with these offices is a much more efficient way to ensure that all possible beneficiaries are receiving pertinent information related to available incentive programs than grantee organizations operating alone. Cultivating this buy-in from state and local SNAP offices is critical to the future success of programs like FINI.

Develop a community of practice for FINI grantees

In the spirit of maximizing federal dollars and minimizing redundancy, we recommend that the USDA develop a community of practice for organizations implementing incentive programs through FINI to share best practices and lessons learned on a regular and recurring basis. This peer-to-peer technical assistance network would streamline the development of resources on which all FINI grantees are working, including technology development, logistics, and education.

Developing the appropriate technology to issue and redeem incentives is time and resource intensive. Our pilot, and likely others, would benefit tremendously from utilizing a standardized technology platform that could be easily tailored to different types of venues (farmers' markets, retail establishments, etc.) while allowing for streamlined incentive issuance, redemption, and reporting/data collection. It is our understanding that several of the programs that have been implementing incentive programs have experimented with various types of technological applications, yet none have found a tool that works well for both farmers' market and retail settings. Working collaboratively in a community of practice to develop such a tool would be tremendously valuable.

Currently, there is no incentive for grant recipients to work together. Establishing a community of practice would ensure that federal resources are being maximized in the most efficient manner. Additionally, because many of the pilot projects involve unique partnerships, it would benefit the entire group to learn from and collaborate with organizations from different sectors. Increased coordination and collaboration among government entities, non-profits, and the private sector could have tremendous positive implications for the success of SNAP incentive programs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the FINI program provides us with the opportunity to bridge the gap between the important work of reducing food insecurity and stimulating local food systems, more work remains to ensure that future funding opportunities encourage strong multi-sector partnerships; coordination and collaboration with state/local SNAP Offices, and the development of a community of practice for FINI grantees. Again, I sincerely thank Chairwoman Walorski, Ranking Member McGovern, and members of the Subcommittee for providing me with the opportunity to share our lessons learned from the field.

#