

Homebound Seniors and Fresh Produce: Interventions to Improve Affordability and Access

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Introduction

For seniors, eating adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables can help prevent or manage chronic disease and promote quality of life. The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) is a federal nutrition assistance program that aims to increase the affordability of fresh, local produce for low-income seniors. However, seniors often have to travel to public places like senior centers to enroll in the program. Because of this, homebound seniors are underserved by the SFMNP program and are similarly challenged to access fresh fruit and vegetables. For example, recent research has found that 83% of seniors who applied for meals on wheels (MOW) are unable to shop for groceries, and that in MOW clients' homes, fruits and vegetables make up only 12% of non-MOW calories in the home (Hallman et al., 2015).

To address this, two interventions were conducted with MOW clients:

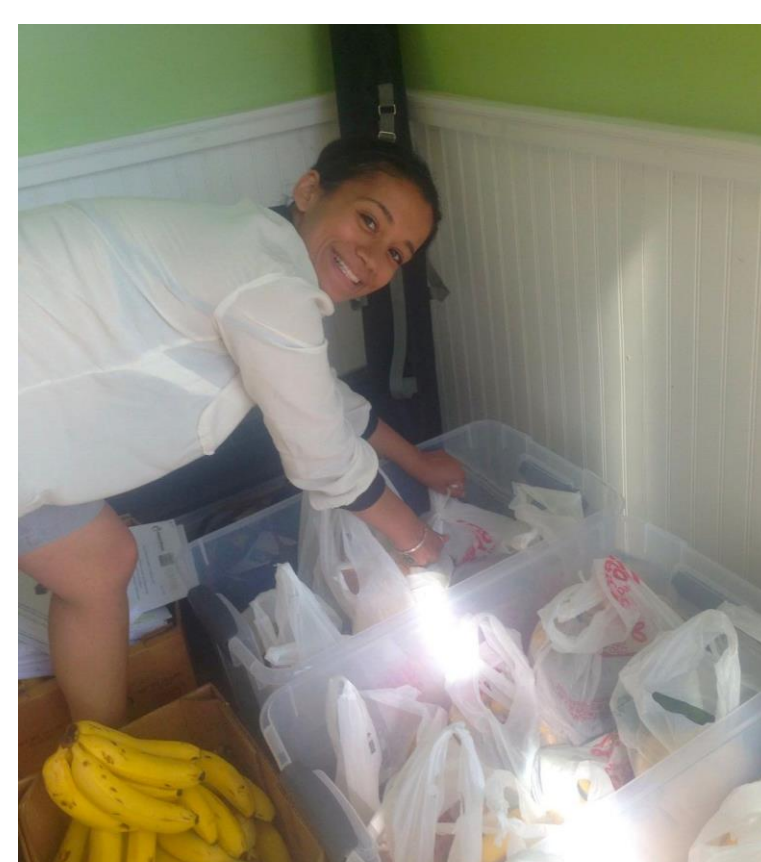
1. SFMNP enrollment for income-eligible clients, and
2. Four bi-weekly deliveries of fresh fruit and vegetables in July and August, 2014.

Methods

In partnership with Meals on Wheels in Greater New Brunswick (MOWGNB), 19 income-eligible clients were identified and offered in-home enrollment for SFMNP. The fresh produce was purchased from the New Brunswick Community Farmers' Market (NBCFM), using SFMNP vouchers and funds donated from NBCFM. Bags of fresh produce were delivered to all 60 clients via the MOWGNB volunteer delivery network.



NBCFM and project staff preparing produce bags.



Assessments were collected after every delivery, and clients could provide feedback on produce selection and quality. Post-intervention telephone interviews were conducted with 17 program participants.

Findings



Farmers' market access

"[I haven't gone to the farmers' market] recently. We are kind of incapacitated ... so we very rarely travel far from the house."

- 82% report having gone to a farmers' market in the past, but many of them can no longer travel to the market.



Fruit and vegetable consumption

"I'm definitely sure it made a big difference because I wasn't used to eating that much fruit. I eat fruit, but not like that I really took note of it too, so I definitely have to start buying more fruit."

- 56% reported a change in vegetable consumption
- 65% reported a change in fruit consumption



SFMNP participation

"I go to the senior center, and they give out the vouchers... I haven't been going there for a while... because I got sick, and I couldn't get to the building."

- 27% were aware of the SFMNP program, but only one (7%) had ever participated in the program.
- Of approximately 19 potentially income-eligible MOWGNB recipients approached, 13 agreed to enroll in SFMNP.



Desire to participate next year

"[It] helped me out food-wise too as far as blending things in that helped me extend my food situation out. It helped me out a lot there...I'll manage but I am going to miss it."

- 100% of respondents said that they would participate if the program were to be offered again.

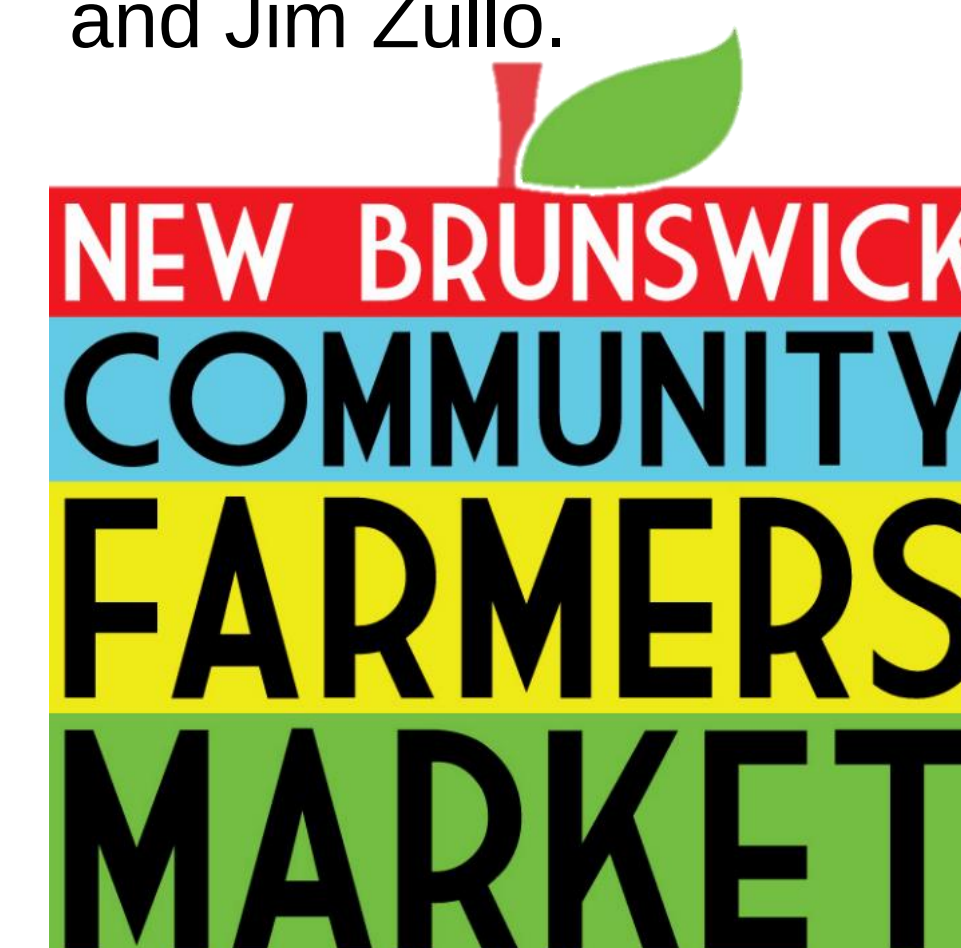
Conclusions

As expected, many MOWGNB clients were not able to access fresh fruit and vegetables from local farmers markets before the program was implemented. In addition, none were currently enrolled in the SFMNP, and most had never heard of the program. Program participants reported changes in fruit and vegetable consumption (most were increases), and extremely high satisfaction with the fruits and vegetables delivered. One hundred percent of those interviewed reported that they would like to participate again.

The project will continue. NBCFM has offered to donate all of the produce for produce home delivery for the summer of 2015. However, the amount of work required for the SFMNP in-home enrollment was not worth the relatively small financial contribution, and will not be repeated in 2015.

Collaborators

This project would not have been possible without our collaborators, especially the clients of MOWGNB. In addition, SFMNP vouchers were provided by the Middlesex County Office on Aging and Disabled Services. Special thanks to the volunteer delivery helpers of MOWGNB, Shareka Fitz, Carolina Mueller, Sarah Dixon, William Hallman, "Farmer Dave" Byrne, Mary DeMarco, Linda Higgins and Jim Zullo.



References: Hallman, W., Byrd-Bredbenner, C., Cuite, C., McWilliams, R., Senger-Mersich, A., Sastri, N., Nettekville, L. (under review). Nutritional Adequacy and Quality of the Home Food Supply Quality of Elderly Recipients of Home Delivered Meals. Manuscript submitted for publication.