

Use American Rescue Plan Act Funds for Farmers' Markets



Farmers' markets are a community amenity that can also be used to provide local, healthy foods to people in need of assistance. Many markets provide food access programs including SNAP EBT, PoP, PoP+, VeggieRx, and Market Shares that can be matched with Market Bucks (see glossary). Farmers' markets are a visible community space where low-income people can connect to a range of programs that can help them access healthy, local foods. The funds that low-income consumers receive from these programs are paid to food farmers and food makers, thus helping the local farm and food economy in addition to promoting healthy eating. Farmers' markets are important sites for low-income members of the community to leverage national and state funds to access fresh foods.

As the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds are allocated to local governments across the state, they could be used to support low-income consumers while enhancing community food systems. There is specific language in the ARPA that directs funds to food and nutrition assistance including expanding resources for SNAP EBT, and WIC programs¹. The funds are also meant to support small businesses, public health, and building infrastructure to ease the burdens of the pandemic. Choosing ARPA funds to ensure farmers' markets have the resources needed to provide food access programs would provide a vital public service, supporting both food security and nutrition for at-risk households and addressing issues of public health. The ARPA funds can be used effectively and efficiently to bolster the existing structures farmers' markets provide for collaborative, community-based, local food access and distribution.

There is time to build out these programs to ensure their impact long-term as the deadline to spend the funds is December 31, 2024².

ARPA Funds for Farmers' Markets

- Basic infrastructure investments: permanent signage, onsite storage, etc.
- Farmers' Market Food Hubs:
 - Market Share Boxes
 - VeggieRx

¹ National Association of Counties, *Legislative Analysis for Counties: American Rescue Plan Act of 2021*, (NACo), 12

² National Association of Counties, *Legislative Analysis for Counties: American Rescue Plan Act of 2021*, 6

Basic Investment

Responses from a Minnesota Farmers' Market Association July 2021 survey to its market managers returned an overwhelming response for needed infrastructure at markets: permanent signage, street barricades, storage sheds, info booth, handwashing stations – basic elements of a thriving community farmers' market that would help grow more vendors and provide more local food to the community. Additionally, managers expressed a need for funding to increase food access programs at their markets.

Following are two examples of successful and replicable food access programs run through farmers' markets in rural Minnesota. The Aitkin County CARE Market Share Boxes, and the VeggieRx program in Wabasha County, prove that local farms and farmers' markets can be part of efforts to ensure that everyone in the community has access to healthy food. Both of these programs were developed through the Farmers' Market Hub project, <https://farmersmarkethub.org/>, which leveraged grant funds over three years to lay the groundwork of regulatory approval, infrastructure, and staffing that made these food access programs possible.

These kinds of local food efforts do not happen without resources to pay for staff time, equipment, supplies, mileage for volunteers, and other costs - and for the food to be distributed. Local food systems and food access initiatives must rest upon fair payment to farmers and food producers for the food they produce, and fair compensation to workers for their effort.

Aitkin County CARE Market Share Boxes



L to R: Allison Rian, Lynne Jacobs, Joy Janzen, Carroll Janzen – part of the weekly crew who packed and delivered the Market Share boxes in the Aitkin area.

In fall of 2020, Aitkin County Coordinating Area Resources Effectively (ACC) developed a program, funded by a grant from the Administration for Community Living, a part of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. The project was a partnership with the Aitkin Food Hub (AFH) to support healthy eating for Aitkin County's large senior and disabled adult population. ACC is a non-profit organization that supports seniors and disabled adults while the AFH provides farmers expanded market opportunities through aggregating foodstuffs, such as through "market share boxes," in which foods from different farmers are boxed together for sale.

Lynne Jacobs of ACC, upon hearing about the grant opportunity, brainstormed with Erik Heimark and Jay Rigdon from Maple Ridge Produce on how they could get food to older adults. Together, they landed on the market share box program idea, for which Jacobs applied for the available funds. After ACC received the grant, Jacobs and Allison Rian, the AFH manager, mobilized to provide healthy food for their community. From mid-September through October of 2020, folks from ACC, AFH, and many volunteers sorted, boxed, and delivered food bought with the grant to senior and disabled adults in Aitkin County.

Federal Grant, Local Impact

ACC received \$13,322 from the Administration for Community Living, a federal elderly and disabled person group. From the federal level, the MN Board on Aging distributed the funds that Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging then distributed to local groups, including ACC. Nearly \$9,000 went toward paying for the food and boxes, while the rest paid for delivery mileage costs, and some personnel costs. Between 3 to 8 volunteers donated their time to deliver the boxes each week, while the grant covered their gas expense for deliveries. The grant came from the federal level, but the local groups used this money to best leverage their “on the ground” knowledge to efficiently deliver local food and make an impact on senior nutrition. That existing local knowledge and infrastructure came about as a result of previous grant funds, but it could be achieved with ARPA funds in other communities.

Food Safety Licensing and Existing Community Assets

ACC and the AFH had several logistic and community assets already developed that made the implementation of the program efficient. AFH had a MDA mobile retail food license, liability insurance, and the organizational system necessary to aggregate foodstuffs from different farmers in an open-air environment. ACC leveraged community connections that the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency developed when they delivered food for a separate USDA program. ACC also had a working network of volunteers who helped deliver and pack healthy food. These existing community assets were important to the success of the program.

Delivering Greater Nutrition and Culinary Knowledge



Each week, the Aitkin Food Hub crew packed approximately 50 market share boxes. These boxes gathered food from 7 farmers who came early before the farmers’ market opened to drop off their food. To maintain food safety and achieve compliance, handwashing stations and bathrooms were available to all food packers. Additionally, food was kept off the ground on sanitized surfaces underneath the open-air canopies that are common at farmers’ markets. Packaging and sorting the goods took between 30 minutes and 1 hour depending on the number of volunteers and the availability of goods to deliver that day. In sum, 265 market share boxes served 353

individuals with over eight meals' worth of primarily fresh produce, or about \$25 worth of food, offered in each box. Leftover food was delivered to three assisted living facilities, thus contributing to the nutrition of an additional 88 individuals. Included in each box were recipes on a variety of vegetables from the week's bounty, as well as information on ACC's programs that support elders and disabled adults.

For more information on how your community can spearhead similar opportunities with the incoming money from the ARPA, contact Lynne Jacobs, the Director of Aitkin County CARE, at aitkincountycare@gmail.com, or Allison Rian, the Aitkin Food Hub manager, at allisonjrian@gmail.com.

Gundersen St. Elizabeth Medical Center and Wabasha Farmers' Market VeggieRx Program

The VeggieRx program was started in 2020 by a pharmacist at Gundersen St. Elizabeth Medical Center and has become a great partnership between the Wabasha Farmers' Market and Gundersen St. Elizabeth Medical Center with support from the St. Elizabeth Community Foundation. The VeggieRx program was started as a way to create long term solutions to health concerns by increasing access to fresh and healthy local fruits and vegetables while encouraging the development of healthy eating practices. The program specifically targets people who struggle with accessing healthy food but is open to participants of all socioeconomic statuses who are willing to meet the program participation

requirements. It provides a weekly \$20 voucher to participants to spend at the Wabasha Farmers' Market for 8 weeks during the market season. In order to receive the weekly vouchers, each participant must attend three meetings throughout the season. At the first meeting participants are given a Veggie Rx with 4 "refills," which is renewed for an additional 4 "refills" following participation in the second meeting. These meetings are learning opportunities that introduce participants to how to navigate the online ordering platform of the market, new produce options, and teach how to incorporate fruits, vegetables, and herbs into a healthy, daily diet. Meetings are offered both in person and on Zoom to make meetings more easily accessible. Participants also receive weekly emails with recipes and cooking tips and have the option to participate in a private Facebook group where they can share photos of their produce, share recipes, ask questions, and provide encouragement to other participants. The program is so successful that it grew in just one year from 10 participants receiving \$10 vouchers each week, to 40 participants receiving \$20 vouchers each week.



L to r: Amber Day, Amy Sapola, Sara George - in front of the Wabasha Farmers' Market's mobile walk-in cooler.

Funding and Cost Break Down

VeggieRx vouchers and the pharmacist's time are funded by the Gundersen St. Elizabeth Medical Center through the St. Elizabeth Community Development Foundation. There was also funding through Wabasha County SHIP for administrative and supply costs the second year of the program. This public-private partnership allowed public funds to be leveraged to increase financial impact and reach the greatest number of people. The primary cost expenditure is the vouchers that pay the farmers for their food, so program cost depends on the number of participants. In 2020, participants spent \$800 at the market and in 2021 they will spend an estimated \$6,400. Other costs include promotional materials, vouchers, bags, and a stipend for the Wabasha Farmers' Market Manager for the additional work needed to coordinate the Veggie Rx orders, add educational flyers to the bags, answer participant questions, assist with the online platform, and attend the meetings.

Operational Structure

The Wabasha Farmers' Market is currently an online only market with in-person pick-ups. They hold an MDA retail food handlers license and follow food safety guidelines, providing a gravity fed hand wash station and maintain sanitized tables for pick-ups. Each participant pre-orders their vegetable items online. Their orders are sorted and organized by the individual farmers who bring them to the designated pick-up location on the market day. If a participant purchases from multiple vendors, the market manager collects all of their orders into one box. Veggie orders are held in an on-site walk-in cooler (seen in the above photograph). When the participants arrive, they present their voucher to the market manager who gives them their bag of pre-selected items. VeggieRx could work the same way at an in-person farmers market, with the only limitation being the participants would have to spend their entire voucher at one vendor booth. Then the vendors would redeem their vouchers through the market manager at the end of the day.

This market infrastructure and the food handling and accounting systems in place in Wabasha are the result of previous work, both grant-funded and volunteer-based. ARPA funds could help other communities replicate the structure and operation of farmers' market hubs that is needed as the foundation to launch food access programs like the Veggie Rx. Development of the infrastructure and operational systems is not a trivial task, but once established, the structure lends itself to multiple types of food access and community food security initiatives.

Impact

VeggieRx is a unique food access program. It gives people freedom in their food choices and includes nutrition education so participants can continue healthy eating after they finish the program. It also addresses community health concerns while supporting local farmers. This approach has also proven to build healthy habits as many 2020 participants continued to shop at the Wabasha Farmers' Market in 2021 and recommended the program to family and friends. With rising food insecurity due to the global pandemic, the program had a larger impact than originally intended and continues to garner strong community support.

For more information on how your community can spearhead similar opportunities contact Sara George, the Program Coordinator for Renewing the Countryside, at 715-651-5046 or sara@rtcinfo.org or Amy Sapola, Clinical Pharmacist at Gundersen St. Elizabeth amsapol1@gundersenhealth.org.

Glossary

EBT: Electronic Benefits Transfer; a method of delivering governmental benefits to low-income individuals via a card similar to a debit card.

Market Bucks: Farmers' market incentive program designed to help SNAP customers increase their purchasing power at farmers' markets by receiving a dollar-for-dollar match on all SNAP spending up to \$10.

Market Shares: A method of packaging food that aggregates produce and other food products from multiple farmers into one box. These boxes have a variety of foods for one customer.

MDA: Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

POP: *Power of Produce* is a farmers' market incentive program for children ages 2-12. Each child receives a \$2 token to spend on fresh produce.

POP+: *Power of Produce +* is a farmers' market incentive program that functions the same as POP but targets retirement age shoppers.

SHIP: Statewide Health Improvement Partnership; a program of the Minnesota Department of Health's Office of Statewide Health Improvement Initiatives. Counties or multi-county boards across the state have SHIP coordinators on staff.

SNAP: *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* is a federal program administered by USDA. Provides low-income individuals with a monthly dollar amount on an EBT card, to spend on eligible food items to increase their access to food.

VeggieRx: A healthy eating incentive program designed as a partnership of farmers' markets, local healthcare providers, and a local or regional SHIP office. Provides some form of subsidy or incentive to participants to spend at the market to increase healthy eating habits and reduce health risks.

WIC: *Women, Infants, and Children* is a federal special supplemental nutrition program for healthcare and nutrition of low-income pregnant women, breastfeeding women, and children under the age of five. Provides weekly vouchers that can be spent on nutrient rich food and infant food.

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