

## SNAPshots: Farmers Market SNAP Success

### The Muskogee Farmers Market: Working Together to Achieve Healthy, Affordable Food Options for Everyone

#### Muskogee Farmers Market Muskogee, Oklahoma

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##### About the Market

Located in the Southern region of Oklahoma's Green Country, the City of Muskogee, with a population of less than 40,000, is a diverse and vibrant community that has served as a center of innovation throughout Oklahoma's history. The community organized the Muskogee Farmers Market (MFM) in the public library parking lot in 1998. With the success of this market and the support of the City in 2007, the MFM found a new home under a custom-built pavilion in the heart of downtown. MFM is run by volunteers and all decisions go through the market's association. MFM is open on Wednesdays and Saturdays with an average of 18 vendors selling only products they grew or produced. This includes a variety of produce, meats, cheese, plants, honey, baked goods, packaged foods, as well as fresh cut flowers, and hand-crafted items. All the products sold are grown or made in Oklahoma with a majority of the vendors living in the city or surrounding communities. When the market found out they could start accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) five years ago, they signed up without hesitation. With more than 20,000 individuals receiving SNAP benefits in the County, this was a great opportunity to give individuals in their community who may not traditionally come to the market the ability to purchase the freshest fruits and vegetables with their SNAP benefits.



*A farmer showing her fresh fruits and vegetables*

## Key Partnerships

The addition of the USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) funded Double Up Oklahoma (DUO) program administered by the Community Service Council of Greater Tulsa increased the incentive for families who utilize SNAP benefits to come to the market. With 49% of Muskogee County living in areas with low access to quality food, defined as living more than 1 mile in urban areas or 10 miles in rural areas from a grocery store, many parts of Muskogee, including downtown, are food deserts.

*By bringing fresh produce downtown, we're bringing awareness and accessibility to make fruits and veggies the first thing SNAP recipients in this area want to buy,"*  
*- Andy Herringshaw*  
*Muskogee Farmers Market Manager*

In addition to accepting SNAP, the market also accepts Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) benefits and Veggie Bucks, a Cherokee Nation grant-funded program that enables low-income seniors to purchase fresh produce. Supported by SNAP-Education funds (SNAP's nutrition education and obesity prevention funding), the Oklahoma Nutrition Information and Education (ONIE) Project created most of the EBT-related signage, in-season produce guides, flyers for schools and the community, direct mailings to SNAP participants, as well as social media advertisements, all showcasing the quality and freshness of produce at the Muskogee market. ONIE supports all SNAP-accepting markets across Oklahoma. Working with the local Oklahoma Department of Human Services office has been a positive experience as they can share the news about the market with their clients. The local newspaper, the Muskogee Phoenix, writes a weekly story on products found at the market and promotes upcoming events.

During the market's day-to-day operations, local community partners along with many volunteers provide tremendous support to enhance the patron's experience no matter their form of payment. The Muskogee County Health Department has been a key supporter since the beginning of the market as they support the market by providing assistance with programming and being a facilitator for many of the partnerships created. This summer the market partnered

with Muskogee Public Schools to host the Wednesday Summer Food Service Program at the market. This was a great opportunity to invite new families to the market. During these market days, children 18 years of age and younger enjoyed a free lunch. Corresponding activities were organized such as market tours, crafts, games, and book giveaways provided by the Muskogee Public Library. The Wednesday markets were packed with parents shopping for farm-fresh food while their children enjoyed the various activities. The market also hosts several cooking demos led by local master gardeners where families learn to prepare and get to taste the fresh seasonal produce found at the market.

## Community Response

Longtime market volunteer and EBT machine facilitator, Silvia Swan, has witnessed how the SNAP/Double Up Oklahoma (DUO) Program benefits local families. She recalls: "When parents find out they get twice as much to purchase fruits



*Child showing her favorite fresh vegetable of choice- string beans!*

and vegetables, their faces light up as they look at their children. After they finish shopping they come back by (the EBT table) and say I'm going to tell my friends! The quality and price of the produce, especially with the DUO, helps SNAP beneficiaries feel great about what they can buy." The DUO program has had a significant effect on SNAP redemptions at the market, resulting in a 33% increase compared to the year prior to the implementation of the program.

### **Overcoming Barriers and Challenges**

Along with its many successes, the MGM has also experienced challenges with the EBT program. The market uses a token-based system for its EBT and currently only has one machine. Eager to purchase produce, many beneficiaries arrive as soon as the market opens creating a long line that continues throughout the market day. The market must also compete with large supermarkets for the attention of SNAP recipients who may not be familiar with its EBT/DUO program.

For first time shoppers Ms. Swan explains,

*It is important to explain the rules of SNAP/DUO in a positive way that does not leave people feeling confused when it comes to the program"*

The market currently uses five forms of non-cash currency scripts that can be overwhelming to first time shoppers. To address this issue, the market developed an easy-to-understand, color-coded chart explaining each script and what can be purchase with each script. Vendors are given the same handout so they can easily know what script their products are eligible to be used. Their goal is to provide the best experience for the customer. Ms. Swan states,

*These interactions build familiarity and confidence (in first time shoppers). They go home feeling empowered that they're doing something good for their family by visiting the market."*

The Muskogee Farmers Market is a wonderful example of a market fully integrating their community, vendors, and shoppers to successfully implement and facilitate an EBT and FINI-funded Double Up program. They are looking forward to continuing to be an integral part of building healthy lifestyles for their community members.



*Volunteer at Muskogee Farmers Market*