



Hoophouses for Health

Hoophouses for Health Program Description

The Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) at Michigan State University (MSU), Michigan Farmers Market Association (MIFMA), and the MSU Department of Horticulture have partnered to develop an innovative program that seeks to benefit farmers, farmers markets, early childhood programs, K-12 schools, and vulnerable families. With funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Hoophouses for Health helps farmers by providing capital for hoophouses, which increases their ability to provide healthy, locally produced foods for an extended season to vulnerable families.

Farmers “repay” their hoophouse loans by distributing eligible food items or food-producing plants to vulnerable families. The repayment period is 5 years.

To help facilitate the distribution of food, vouchers are distributed within the community surrounding the farmers market at which the farmer(s) sells. Vouchers are given to vulnerable families by community organizations. Families then present these vouchers to participating farmers at the farmers market. Farmers can accept vouchers for any eligible food items or food-producing plants. Eligible food items include any food items grown or produced by the loan recipients on their farms. Products do not have to come from the hoophouse purchased through the program. Value-added products that the farmer produces may also be eligible if at least 50% of the ingredients by weight were grown or produced by the farmer. Food items will be clearly labeled so that customers can easily tell which items they can purchase with their vouchers. Farmers will submit the vouchers they collect to MIFMA and the value of the vouchers will be deducted from their loan principals as “repayment.”

Participating Farmers Markets

Farmers markets participating in the Hoophouses for Health program are identified on MIFMA’s Find a Farmers Market listing at <http://mifma.org/findafarmersmarket/>. Just search using the Hoophouses for Health option. As the program grows, it will expand to other farmers markets throughout the state. Farmers markets interested in participating in the Hoophouses for Health program can visit www.hoophousesoforhealth.org for more information about how to become an approved market.

Community Organization Involvement

Community voucher distribution partners work with vulnerable families who have young children within a community surrounding a farmers market location. Community partners provide vouchers to these families. Community organizations interested in becoming a Hoophouses for Health partner must complete a Community Partner Commitment Form available online at www.hoophousesoforhealth.org.

Voucher Distribution Instructions

Voucher Allotments

The amount of vouchers that will be distributed each year will be determined by several factors including: (1) the number of farmers selling at the local farmers market that are participating in this program, (2) the amount of loan principal each farmer plans to “repay” during the market season, and (3) the estimated voucher redemption rate. The voucher redemption rate will influence the number of vouchers that need to be distributed in order to ensure that the necessary number is redeemed and will be calculated based on previous experience with similar programs within the community.

Voucher distribution and redemption will be closely monitored to ensure that farmers are redeeming enough vouchers to meet their repayment goals while not restricting their capacity for cash sales. Voucher distribution numbers may need to be adjusted throughout the season to ensure these goals can be met.

Who is Eligible to Receive Vouchers?

Any individual who is eligible to receive federal food assistance benefits from programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants and Children (WIC), or the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), is eligible to receive vouchers in this program. Additionally, any family who has a child enrolled in Early Head Start, Head Start or Great Start Readiness Program is eligible. Additional community partners may receive vouchers to distribute if their program is approved by MIFMA.

Vouchers should only be distributed to adults who are at least 18 years old unless the person is a teenage parent. Each family member is eligible to receive vouchers, but the vouchers must be distributed to a parent or guardian. For example, a mother with two children, ages 4 and 10, can collect vouchers for herself and both of her children.

No family should receive more than \$16 in vouchers each month per family member. This means a family of four is eligible to receive \$16 (one sheet of vouchers) a month for each member of their family, for a total of \$64 a month in vouchers.

Voucher Distribution

Our preference is for community partners to incorporate voucher distribution into their current programming. It is far more likely that vouchers will be redeemed if they are distributed in person with an oral explanation. Written communication can be an important reinforcement of instructions, but should not be the only form of communication about the program.

Consider incorporating voucher distribution into programs focused on:

- Health & Nutrition
- Cooking
- Food Preservation
- Stretching Your Food Dollars
- Gardening (because participants may use vouchers to purchase food producing plants)

In order to assist with incorporating voucher distribution into programming, **organizations can use to up 25% of the vouchers they are assigned to distribute to purchase items that will support programming efforts.** For example, if a cooking or food preservation demonstration is planned, vouchers can be used to purchase the produce necessary to demonstrate the skill. Please be considerate to the participating farmers by placing large

orders ahead of time for pick up at the farmers market. This will ensure that they bring enough produce to meet your needs and the needs of their regular market customers.

We also encourage you to coordinate with farmers and market managers to strengthen these programs. These individuals can provide expertise, resources, and perhaps a location for programming to take place. Our experience with other incentive programs has shown that distributing vouchers at the farmers market greatly increases the redemption rate.

Please consider timing voucher distributions so that proportions of vouchers are distributed regularly throughout the season. This will help the participating farmers avoid receiving an abundance of vouchers one week followed by weeks when no vouchers are redeemed. In order to assist with the timing of voucher distributions, MIFMA will work with community organizations to ensure that they have vouchers on-hand to distribute evenly throughout the farmers market season.

Evaluation and Reporting Requirements

Community organizations that assist with voucher distribution will be required to participate in all program evaluation efforts including written surveys, focus groups and/or interviews. Community organizations will be required to keep electronic records of when and where voucher distribution takes place. They will also be asked to provide a general description of the population to which the vouchers were distributed. A Google spreadsheet will be provided to assist in recording this information.

Questions or Concerns

If you have questions or concerns about this process, please contact Tyler Vuillemot by email at tyler@mifma.org or by phone at 517-432-3381.

