

Local Efforts towards Addressing Disparities in DeKalb (LEAD DeKalb) Nutrition Initiative Evaluation: Mobile Farmers Market Evaluation Report Executive Summary – January 2021

INTRODUCTION

The Local Efforts towards Addressing Disparities in DeKalb (LEAD DeKalb) initiative was implemented by the DeKalb County Board of Health's (DCBOH's) Health Assessment and Promotion Department through a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) program. The most recent iteration of LEAD DeKalb incorporates three initiatives in the areas of:

- Nutrition
- Physical Activity
- Community-Clinical Linkages

This summary focuses on the nutrition initiative, specifically, the Fresh on DeK: DeKalb Mobile Farmers Market, produced in partnership with the University of Georgia (UGA) Extension. Though the market has been in operation for six years, 2020 marked the first year that operations were devoted to food giveaways. This was to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security in DeKalb County. In June 2020, ETR Services, LLC, (ETR) in collaboration with the DCBOH, revised the data collection protocols for the mobile farmers market to shorten the survey and include questions specific to COVID-19 and its impact on food choices. Due to the need for social distancing, surveys were distributed via SurveyMonkey by UGA in three rounds in August and October 2020. A total of 173 market participants were sent the survey link; 125 (72.25%) participants responded to the survey. Responses were compiled in Microsoft Excel and evaluators conducted descriptive analyses to produce the following results.

RESULTS

As in years prior¹, the 2020 market participants are mostly composed of middle-aged and older African-American women. Over 73% of those surveyed are female with 23% between the ages of 65 and 74 years old. Over 29% are retired and 24% reported working full time. About 12% reported some job loss or uncertainty regarding employment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 13 respondents (10.4%) reported being employed by or working for the State of Georgia.

Education levels of market participants trend towards the high end of the continuum. Forty-eight percent reported having a college or advanced degree; 21% have some college experience. Household income levels are more widely distributed than in prior years; 16.8% of participants reported incomes higher than \$60,000/year; 12% reported incomes between \$40,000 and \$59,999/year, 21.6% reported incomes between \$20,000 and \$39,999/year, and 10.4% reported incomes of \$19,999 or less. Notably, 26% preferred not to answer this question. Over 67% reported not receiving any food assistance benefits; 16.8% reported receiving benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Food Stamps.

In terms of household composition, 29.6% reported being married, 27.2% reported being single, and 12% reported being separated or divorced. Thirty-six percent of households have two adults and 26.4% have one; 14.4% have three adults. Forty-nine percent of households reported having no children in the home; 16.8% and 13.6% have one or two, respectively.

Survey responses were robust across most of the market stops except for Georgia Piedmont Technical College with only three surveys collected (2.4%). Exchange Recreation Center, Lou Walker Senior Center, and East Lake YMCA account for over half of all responses with each site providing over 20 surveys. Respondents generally drive to the market (reported by 97.6%); two respondents walk – one to Clarkson Public Library and one to Greater Piney Grove Baptist Church. One respondent reported using the bus to get to the market at East Lake YMCA.

More than half (54.4%) of respondents noted that the nearest market stop is 1 to 5 miles from their home; 26.4% noted that the closest market stop is 6 to 10 miles from home. In comparison, the distance respondents would have to travel to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables if there were no mobile market is roughly the same; 51.2% reported other produce sources being 1 to 5 miles from their home and 24.8% reported having to travel 6 to 10 miles to shop if there were no mobile market. Notably, only 4.8% reported the mobile market is more than 10 miles from their home while 13.6% reported other fresh fruit and vegetable sources being more than 10 miles from home.

¹ See 2019 Fresh on DeK Executive Summary report.

In terms of convenience of the mobile farmers market, participants overwhelmingly agreed that market stop locations (83.2%) and days and times (83.2%) are “convenient for me.” Also, most participants (84%) agreed that market stops provide easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Overall, participants continue to see a strong need for the market in their neighborhood; 76% reported the market is extremely needed. While quality, variety, prices, and support to local farmers are very important to most participants (69% or greater), SNAP acceptance, food demonstrations, offering other activities, and socializing at the market are less essential to participants (35% or less). Most respondents were repeat customers to the mobile market. While 30.4% noted this was their first time visiting the market during the year, 24% noted having been to the market 4 to 5 times during the year. Another 17.6% visited the market 2 to 3 times during the year and 22.4% had visited the market 6 times or more during the year. Additionally, 35.2% of respondents reported having visited the market in previous years.

Participants were also asked what changes, if any, they recommend for improving the market. Thirty-three percent of respondents suggested more convenient market days/hours, including extended hours, additional days, and weekends. An additional 16% recommended more convenient market stop locations, including several recommendations for the Columbia East Senior Residence, Flat Shoals Library, and the Stonecrest Mall, Tucker, Lithonia, Covington Highway/Wesley Chapel, Turner Hill Rd, South Deshon Rd., and Cedar Grove areas.

Overall, 80% of participants were satisfied” or very satisfied with the market in 2020. Over 73% reported consuming more fruits and/or vegetables and 68% reported consuming more variety due to shopping at the mobile farmers market.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

“Due to the Pandemic my income has decreased.” - Mobile farmers market participant

“Thank you all for supplying these weekly. It has really helped supplement my food budget.” - Mobile farmers market participant

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown impacted the continuity and availability of resources for and services to the DeKalb community, including related to food security. To help alleviate the negative effects on community health, the DCBOH and UGA utilized the mobile farmers market to disseminate free food during the 2020 market season. Survey questions were included to gather information regarding the community’s current ability to secure food and the market’s role in this process.

Due to the pandemic, respondents reported changing their overall expenditures on food; 41.6% of respondents reported spending more and 32% reported spending less on food. Over 13% reported that their spending stayed the same. In addition, respondents noted purchasing different types of foods due to the pandemic. Over 72% noted a change but data were not gathered to provide information on the relative healthfulness of foods being consumed during the pandemic. Over 14% reported no change in the types of food consumed.

Even though the data do not capture the types of food consumed more frequently during the pandemic, data on the types of support needed to ensure families have access to fresh fruits and vegetables provide some indication of a need for more affordable food. Over 30% of respondents noted some form of support to ensure access to fresh fruits and vegetables during the pandemic. This includes income support (30.4%), food vouchers or subsidies (32%), and food donations (38.4%). A total of 25 participants (or 20%) indicated needing no support during the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

Findings from the 2020 Fresh on DeK: DeKalb Mobile Farmers Market survey suggest an ongoing need for the market. While most trends mirror findings from prior years, one notable difference is the broader range of income and the apparent reduction in household resources available for healthy food purchases due to the pandemic.

Future surveys should capture respondents’ perceptions of the distance from their place of work as market stops tend to vary in proximity to both residential communities and possible places of work. Also, future site selection and the prolonged effects of the pandemic may alter the mix of participants that continue to utilize the mobile market as a source for securing healthy foods.