

Food, Nutrition & Science

FROM THE LEMPert REPORT

Free Food Trucks To Areas In Need HOT TOPIC



There's a lot of talk these days about getting consumers to eat more fruits and vegetables. In fact, the current dietary guidelines recommend that people fill half their plates with fruits and vegetables, and there is clear, scientific evidence that eating this way helps people maintain a healthy weight while also helping them reduce the risk of diet-related chronic diseases. But what about the many communities that just can't afford to buy fresh produce, or live in a food desert where fresh produce is hard to come by? How can they comply with the national recommendations for healthy eating?

Contra Costa, a suburb in the San Francisco Bay area, is one community tackling this issue full force through the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano. They recently developed a community produce truck program that delivers free produce to churches, health clinics, schools and community centers. The rules are simple. Twice a month, the food bank distributes the produce to various areas in the community. Eligible families (one person per household) bring one or two bags with handles and must be present to receive the food.

One thing that makes this program different from other food truck programs is that it is designed to be a self-serve model. The plan is to have the bays of the truck set up so that people can grab a bag of carrots, grab a bag of pears, and serve themselves in a few minutes with little volunteer time being required.

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Though only a few months old, the program has already reached over 2,800 low-income households with each family having received nearly 30 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables to date. The trucks reach Central and East Contra Costa County which includes Concord, Oakley and everywhere in between – with 28 sites in all. And the program continues to grow, doubling since the first distribution. So far, the truck has distributed an incredible variety of produce, including tomatoes, zucchini, cauliflower, corn, celery, oranges, pears, plums and cantaloupe.

“The desire and need for healthy, nutritious foods is apparent in the families’ gratitude and excitement over the items the Food Bank is able to provide. The variety of produce offered will not only help people obtain essential vitamins and minerals that are lacking in many diets, but also help kids grow to love healthy foods,” says Cassandra Brislain, Community Produce Program Coordinator, Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano.

Another important feature of the Contra Costa program is the addition of an on-site nutrition educator that provides participants with information on how to prepare the items healthfully and learn more about why it is so important to include fruits and vegetables in a balanced diet. The Nutrition Educator will also be able to do food tasting at some sites – one recent tasting included watermelon salsa. Nutrition education helps bridge the gap between health recommendations and individual customs and habits.

“We are establishing a model that should increase any food bank’s ability to get fresh produce to the consumer. The program works as an effective way of getting food to those in need at low cost while it also addresses the long-term question of how to improve the nutrition of low-income people,” says the program’s Executive Director, Larry Sly.

Similar programs are popping up in other communities as the need and desire for free or low cost fresh produce increases. Three Forks and Belgrade, Montana, for example, recently launched their food trucks program bringing fresh vegetables to seniors at half off the regular price while providing nutrition education. Another program through Feeding America West Michigan Food Bank uses “mobile pantries” to bring produce and other items to local communities.

“Mobile food pantries are essential for preventing food waste and getting nutritious foods to

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people who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford them," says Elianna Bootzin at Feeding America West Michigan Food Bank.

Bootzin adds that their mobile pantries have come a long way since then-Executive Director John Arnold pioneered the concept in 1998. Back then, not all food bank agencies had the means to distribute perishable items. When Arnold spotted a beverage truck with roll-up sides on the highway, the idea took root. Starting out small with just one donated truck from 7-UP, their food bank's mobile pantries now travel as far south as the Indiana border and as far north as Traverse City.

At the national level, the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (associated with WIC) is successfully providing locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables to areas in need throughout the 50 states. During fiscal year 2011, 18,487 farmers, 4,079 farmers' markets and 3,184 roadside stands were authorized to accept FMNP coupons, and 1.9 million WIC participants received FMNP benefits. Coupons redeemed through the FMNP resulted in over \$16.4 million in revenue to farmers for fiscal year 2011. For fiscal year 2012, \$16.548 million was appropriated by Congress for the FMNP.

The Contra Costa Food Bank plans to expand their program in 2013 to West Contra Costa and Solano counties. Learn more about their program here: <http://www.foodbankccs.org/get-help/community-produce-program.html>. Learn more about the Michigan mobile pantries here: <http://www.feedingamericawestmichigan.org/mobile/>.