



Brief—June 2017

# Increasing Access to Produce in South Carolina through the SNAP-Ed Program

## Focus Group Findings

Holly Pope, PhD, Carrie Draper, MSW, Nick Younginer, PhD,  
Chris Paget, MPH, & Amy Mattison-Faye, MPH

### Key Points:

- ⇒ *SC residents with a low-income experience higher rates of negative health outcomes, in part from barriers to accessing healthy foods.*
- ⇒ *25 focus groups were conducted in 6 South Carolina (SC) counties at locations that serve people with limited resources.*
- ⇒ *Primary reported barriers to accessing healthy foods were: lack of affordability and transportation; poor quality of available produce in stores; and distance to available produce.*
- ⇒ *Preferred solutions to increasing healthy food access were: more farmers' markets that accept SNAP, mobile markets, community gardens and summer meal programs for children; and having the ability to purchase foods from local farmers.*
- ⇒ *SNAP-Ed implementers and others should work in partnership with local communities to increase access to healthy foods through the implementation of these preferred strategies.*

### Background

South Carolinians who have a low-income experience disproportionately high rates of negative health outcomes when compared to those with a higher-income. This is, in part, driven by community-level challenges to accessing healthy foods.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) program aims to ensure that individuals who currently or who are likely eligible to receive SNAP (the program currently known as food stamps) are able to adhere to federal nutrition guidelines (e.g., MyPlate) with limited resources. The program is charged with accomplishing this through implementing evidence-based, multi-level interventions. For example, SNAP-Ed implementers could partner with a community center in a low-income area to teach a nutrition education course, while assisting the center in establishing a food garden.

The study sought to gain perspectives from the “target population” of the SNAP-Ed program on 1) barriers experienced in accessing produce and 2) preferred community-based solutions for increasing access.

### Methods

Twenty-five focus groups were conducted with participants from 6 South Carolina (SC) counties who either participated in the SNAP program or were likely eligible to receive SNAP. Participants were recruited from the following types of sites: food banks, a federally qualified health center (FQHC), and a local produce market that accepts SNAP benefits.

A researcher led focus groups of typically 5 to 7 participants. Participants were asked questions about where they usually got produce and any barriers they experienced in accessing produce. Then they reviewed 17 cards that each contained the name and an illustrative photo of a healthy eating strategy (e.g., mobile markets, community gardens, etc.). The participants were asked to select which three strategies they would most like to see take place within their communities to increase access to healthy foods. Once selections were made, the focus group facilitator would ask participants to present and explain their selections. Demographic information was also collected.

## Results

### *Descriptions of the participants*

A total of 165 people participated in focus groups. See key participant demographics in table 1 below:

Table 1: Key demographic information for focus group participants

Currently received SNAP	50%
Race	64% African American; 29% Caucasian; 7% other
Average age	47 years
Had at least a high school education	70%
Inconsistent means of transportation*	46%
Primary sources for accessing food	76% grocery store; 43% big box store; 39% food pantry

\* During the past 12 months

### *Barriers to accessing produce*

The primary barriers to accessing healthy foods among participants were: 1) **lack of affordability**; 2) **lack of transportation**; 3) **poor quality of available produce**; and 4) **distance to available produce** (see table 2).

Table 2: Examples of what participants said about barriers to accessing healthy foods

#### **Lack of affordability**

*“Money. That’s the problem. Fruits are so expensive these days. I mean I would give my children a lot more fruit, for real, if I could afford it.”*

#### **Lack of transportation**

*“You know [name of county] is like the fastest growing county in the United States, but the transit system still sucks... And then they [the bus system] charge you with every bag that you put in there, so we can’t afford that.”*

#### **Poor quality of produce**

*“We have to travel so far just to go to [name of the food outlet], and then when you get there, the fruits and vegetables are not all that great.”*

#### **Distance to available produce**

*“We need something closer, you know, to where we are...It’s out in the country...just a small community, and it seems like the little communities are always ignored.”*

## *Preferred Community-Based Strategies to Increase Access to Fruits and Vegetables*

The top five community-based strategies selected across all the focus groups included: 1) increasing **farmers' markets that accept SNAP** (60%); 2) **mobile markets** (45%); 3) **community gardens** (34%); 4) having the ability to **purchase foods from local farmers** (26%); and 5) **summer meal programs** for children (18%) (table 3).

Table 3: Examples of what participants said about preferred strategies to increase access to produce

### **Farmers' markets that accept SNAP\***

*"Because if you don't have the money, if they'd accept the food stamp card, you could use it and purchase your fruits and vegetables that you might want."*

### **Mobile markets**

*"If someone would come through with some fresh vegetables when I don't have transportation, it would make it accessible to people that can't get out to get it."*

### **Community gardens**

*"It's more convenient for the low-income person. You got a lot of poor people out here. You know, if you got a community garden, that way, we can eat right off our garden. We got plenty of open space that's left out here that we can start a community garden."*

### **Purchase foods from local farmers**

*"I mean, fresh is always better. That, plus you're buying local, so the money stays local. You're helping out your local community."*

### **Summer meal programs for children**

*"Summer program sites for children because you got a lot of families that can't afford the right amount of food for they kids. You got a lot of them that go hungry."*

\* This was a favorable strategy among some participants because the SNAP Healthy Bucks program at farmers' markets offered SNAP participants a \$10 incentive for the first \$5 spent in SNAP dollars.

## **Recommendations and Resources for SNAP-Ed Implementers and Others Working to Increase Healthy Food Access in SC Communities, Based on Preferred Strategies**

### **I. SNAP at Farmers' Markets**

- ⇒ Become **well-versed in the process for farmers' markets to get set-up to accept SNAP** and offer the state's SNAP healthy incentives program ("SNAP Healthy Bucks"), and provide this information to market managers (<https://dss.sc.gov/assistance-programs/food-and-nutrition-programs/healthy-bucks/>). Information on how a farmers' market can become a SNAP retailer and a link to the application can be found here: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer-apply>.
- ⇒ **Assist farmers' markets in securing additional funding** to: 1) hire a SNAP Champion for the market—someone who ideally receives SNAP themselves who helps promote SNAP at the market within the community and operates SNAP on market days, and 2) fund an additional

SNAP healthy incentives program at the market. For example, **Hub City Farmers' Market in Spartanburg, SC offers the state's SNAP Healthy Bucks Program and additionally operates their own "Double SNAP" program, resulting in a significant amount of SNAP redemptions at the market every season.**

- ⇒ **Train markets in promotional strategies**, including using advertisements (some may be free in local papers) and posting fliers where people shop in the community. Messages that might resonate with SNAP-eligible populations within these promotions include: "buy local, so money stays local" and "shop at farmers' markets to help out the local farmer and community."
- ⇒ **Encourage farmers' markets to recruit a wide variety of produce vendors.**
- ⇒ Share information with SNAP-eligible people on which farmers' markets accept SNAP and offer SNAP Healthy Bucks. **A map of these farmers' markets can be found here: <https://gis.dhec.sc.gov/farmersMarkets/>.**

## 2. Mobile Markets

- ⇒ Mobile markets can also **get set up to accept SNAP and participate in the SNAP Healthy Bucks Program.** (See resources in the "SNAP at farmers' markets" section.)
- ⇒ Assist mobile markets in identifying routes and set up locations in low-income areas **where public transportation options do not exist.**

## 3. Community Gardens

- ⇒ **Encourage city and county governments to start community gardening programs** to provide access to garden beds on vacant lots for a nominal cost. Strategies like waiving fees for people who receive SNAP can further help ensure access.
- ⇒ **Ensure SNAP recipients are aware of current community gardening programs.** For example, here is a link to information on the City of Columbia's program in SC: <http://www.columbiasc.net/parks-recreation/programs-activities/community-gardens>.
- ⇒ Let SNAP recipients know they can **use SNAP to purchase seeds and plants to grow produce in a community garden.**
- ⇒ Use **SNAP-Ed funding to purchase supplies needed to start community gardens** in low-income areas, while organizing community members around developing an implementation plan.

## 4. Purchase Foods from Local Farmers

- ⇒ Individual farmers are eligible to **get set up to accept SNAP and participate in the SNAP Healthy Bucks Program.** (See resources in the "SNAP at farmers' markets" section.)
- ⇒ **Encourage community locations** (e.g., libraries or community centers) with limited capacity to start a farmers' market **to host an individual farmer to sell produce.**

## 5. Summer Meal Programs for Children

- ⇒ Work with Summer Food Service Program sponsors (those that prepare the meals) to ensure **high quality meals are served** at current and new locations, especially hot meals and those with a variety of produce options incorporated.
- ⇒ **Connect potential sites** (locations where meals are served) **with sponsors** in their area.
- ⇒ **Incorporate nutrition education** into site programming.
- ⇒ Learn more about how to **start and strengthen summer meal options** for children here: <http://endchildhungersc.org/resources/>.



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**SNAP can help assure a healthier diet for individuals and families! Learn how to apply to receive SNAP benefits here: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/apply>.**

