

# Fruit and Vegetable Incentives for SNAP Participants



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## Background

The Washington State Food Insecurity Nutrition Initiative (FINI) is a four year project that aims to increase the access of healthy foods to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants by removing the barrier of price. This initiative is led by multi-sectoral partnerships between the Washington State Department of Health (DoH) and more than 60 organizations. By the end of the FINI project grant, 80 farmers markets, 168 supermarkets, and 8 health systems in Washington State are anticipated to participate.

The FINI project employs a three-pronged approach to make produce more affordable for SNAP participants, which includes:

- Cash value matching at farmers markets
- A 30% discount at Safeway supermarkets for qualifying produce items, including canned and frozen options
- \$10 produce prescriptions from health systems that can be redeemed at Safeway with a qualifying purchase

Although the number of farmers markets licensed to accept SNAP benefits is increasing, the redemption of SNAP benefits at farmers markets has not increased in the same proportion.<sup>[1]</sup> Cost is a key factor influencing SNAP participant shopping behaviors, and perceptions about differences in cost, as well as quality and availability of produce, between farmers markets and supermarkets exist among SNAP participants.<sup>[1]</sup> Washington State DoH is interested in gaining a better understanding of the actual differences between the two venues.

To explore these issues and inform policies and practices that could promote the purchase of fruits and vegetables by SNAP participants, graduate students at the University of Washington conducted a study assessing differences in price, quality, and availability of produce in farmers markets and supermarkets. An assessment tool was developed and used to evaluate eight supermarkets and four farmers markets in Seattle, WA. In addition, interviews with four supermarket produce managers were conducted to gather information on store and customer values regarding local and organic produce, as well as current merchandising strategies to increase fruit and vegetable purchases by SNAP participants.

## Recommendations:

- Consider expanding FINI incentives to include more supermarkets, superstores, and discount grocery stores, especially low-cost retailers.
- Promote purchase of frozen fruit and vegetables given that these foods are convenient, have a longer shelf-life and limited additives.
- Provide in-store labeling and signage around incentive-eligible items and consider expanding educational opportunities that promote increased fruit and vegetable purchases and cooking.
- Increase visibility of EBT-acceptance signs and SNAP-friendly marketing strategies at farmers markets for greater recognition among participants.

### *Expanding Supermarket Incentives*

Compared to farmers markets, supermarkets were found to have a greater variety of produce options that were less expensive and had better quality/appearance. Cost is a key barrier to fruit and vegetable purchases among SNAP participants and farmers markets are often perceived by low-income shoppers as being too expensive.<sup>[2-9]</sup> Our assessment of farmers markets and supermarkets indicate that this perception is likely true; all types of conventional produce and most types of organic produce were found to be more expensive in farmers markets than at supermarkets. In addition, our assessment found fewer varieties of conventional produce at farmers markets, which may present an additional barrier to SNAP participants. Finally, supermarkets scored better in terms of fruit and vegetable appearance in both conventional and organic assessments. Given these findings, FINI can maximize the impact of incentives by:

- Expanding the FINI incentive program to other supermarket chains.
- Considering the inclusion of non-chain grocery stores.



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## Supermarket Promotion of Fresh and Frozen Items



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Researchers recommend promoting frozen produce in supermarkets. Although FINI-eligible frozen produce options were consistently more expensive than their fresh counterparts, these items are already prepared for the consumer and have a much longer shelf life. FINI and supermarket partners can maximize fruit and vegetable purchases among SNAP participants by:

- Creating clear signage identifying FINI-eligible items.
- Strengthen emphasis on frozen fruit and vegetable purchases.

Additionally, previous studies show a strong positive link between increased education about how to use produce and purchase of fruits and vegetables.<sup>[2-9]</sup> Supermarkets should therefore increase educational opportunities for SNAP participants, including how they can best use their benefits, by:

- Providing educational opportunities on how to use fruits and vegetables.
- Providing tips to SNAP participants regarding shelf-stable foods and menu planning.

## EBT & Fresh Bucks Marketing

According to previous studies, well-advertised fruit and vegetable incentive programs are successful in encouraging participants to use their benefits.<sup>[4,5,9-13]</sup> Our assessment found that farmers markets in Seattle advertise the acceptance of EBT and the “Fresh Bucks” program in a variety of ways, from sandwich boards in the main walkway of the market to small signs at information tents. FINI can encourage farmers markets to improve SNAP acceptance awareness by:

- Increasing visibility of EBT-acceptance signs.
- Increasing the use of SNAP-friendly marketing strategies.



**Prepared by University of Washington Graduate Students - March 2016**

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## Citations

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