

Reaching the Heights: New farmers' market encouraging healthy eating in diverse neighborhood

The City Height farmers' market was the first in San Diego County to accept food stamps. It accepts WIC coupons and is providing dollar-for-dollar matching up to \$10 apiece to WIC voucher recipients and food stamp users through a \$10,000 grant from the Wholesome Wave Foundation. The market also launched a Senior Nutrition Farmers' Market program for seniors receiving Social Security income – those qualified by income received a \$20 voucher to buy produce at any San Diego County farmers' market. 150 seniors were registered in the first hour after the program launched.

Blanca Melendrez, San Diego-Imperial Regional director of the Network for a Healthy California articulated the vision of the market, "We want to provide access to fresh, culturally appropriate and locally grown foods at affordable prices. We want to offer a culturally diverse open-air market and educate the community about nutrition; and we want to increase dollars entering and staying in City Heights. Melendrez has been working in cooperation with a coalition of local organizations, along with larger regional coalitions and soliciting the opinions of residents to ensure that these goals are attainable. Local charities have provided storage facilities and free parking, aiding in the sustainability of the market.

The organizers are bringing in resources to promote healthy eating and cooking. There have been booths that address diabetes and obesity issues, promote exercise and do health screening.

For immigrant residents, the appeal is that they finally have a local market reminiscent of their shopping experience in their former country. They are used to shopping in open-air markets and embrace the familiarity the farmers' market provides.

Additionally, the International Rescue Committee is working to establish a community garden in the neighborhood with 8-, 600-square-foot plots as well as three larger spots for people interested in moving into a farm incubator project that would encourage growers to produce crops for the market. Vendors are being encouraged to look at their own crops more creatively. A survey is being done to find out what crops there is a demand for. For example, farmers who grow turnips typically discard the greens, but Vietnamese like to cook soups with turnip greens, which are usually hard to find and expensive – so there's a market for something farmers are already producing.

The acceptance of food stamps is by far the most noteworthy piece of this market. San Diego County is one of the few in California that doesn't automatically include food stamps in its farms' market program. The City Heights market hopes to serve as a model for other markets. At the market volunteers

screen residents to find out if they're qualified for food stamps. They are then enrolled and issued an EBT card, which they can use to get 10, \$1 tokens for use at the market. At the market, they swipe the card at an EBT machine to receive tokens. At the end of the day vendors can go to the market manager to cash in the tokens they receive. San Diego County reportedly has the lowest participation in food stamps in the nation. The City Heights farmers' market serves as an opportunity to increase food security with healthy food and promote food stamps and WIC.

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