



EVALUATION
SYNOPSIS
MAY 2024



Executive Summary

During the first quarter of 2024 the New Mexico Farmers' Marketing Association (NMFMA) carried out a process and outcomes evaluation of its 2023 FreshRx activities among its partner health clinics. The evaluation goal was *"to assess how effective, appropriate, and inclusive the NMFMA's FreshRx program activities were in 2023 and to determine how programming can be improved in the future,"* as program impacts on health and behavior change are assessed annually by the National Training and Evaluation Center for the NMFMA's federally funded FreshRx programs. The evaluation included primary data collection using both quantitative and qualitative methods along with a desk review of key program documents and data previously collected for state reporting and for national research and evaluation efforts.

Overall feedback on the FreshRx program was extremely positive, with numerous partners highlighting how the program benefits individual lives, especially among marginalized populations and those that are impacted most by food insecurity and health disparities. All evaluation respondents spoke very clearly of the importance of this type of program and the positive impacts that FreshRx provides. There was consistent appreciation for the program and its ability to reach vulnerable populations. This was coupled with feedback that current resources are not adequate to meet the needs of clients served by program partners, as only a limited number of participants benefit from the program each year. Partner staff further indicated that FreshRx is contributing to broader shifts in how health clinics and other community-based partners address food insecurity and diet-related health disparities. The experiences shared through this evaluation show that the program is having a broad impact on partner perspectives as to the benefits of produce prescriptions as an important tool in helping clients address diet-related disease and food insecurity. In this way, importantly, the program is impacting the wider system despite having limited resources and a limited reach.

Program benefits extend beyond the food incentive to include the local food economy and food environment. For example, whereas many produce prescription programs around the country do not have a local sourcing requirement, all produce must be locally grown in New Mexico for the NMFMA program. As a result, individual farmers as well as local food hubs in New Mexico are benefiting. FreshRx partners highlighted appreciation for fostering partnerships with local farmers and that the program contributes to the local economy. The program is also finding success in promoting awareness around access to local food. Despite the various successes, several challenges were raised that will require attention in the future - including transportation as well as a number of issues with farmers' markets and with the food boxes/bags.

It is clear from the evaluation that there is an important story here to tell, especially in using food from local producers to help respond to and address food insecurity in the state. Expanding funding and resources would enable organizations to serve more people and meet more of the current need for produce prescription food incentive and complementary activity resources. As momentum at state and national levels continues around including produce prescriptions as a covered healthcare cost - through Medicaid and eventually private providers - it will also be important to advocate for maintaining a local food system component as part of the FreshRx experience in New Mexico. The connection of the produce prescription to local producers was a theme emphasized by many evaluation respondents, highlighting the importance of incorporating local priorities and community-based models when considering solutions at a wider scale.



Introduction

The New Mexico Farmers' Marketing Association (NMFMA) is currently implementing a FreshRx produce prescription program, which aims to increase the consumption of fresh, New Mexico-grown produce among nutritionally-at-risk, low-income residents, and to increase produce sales for local farmers. To do this, the NMFMA works through health clinics and other community-based partners in numerous parts of the state. In 2023, the NMFMA worked with 23 partners in Northern, Central, and Southern New Mexico, reaching 1550 families through this program. All produce provided through the NMFMA's FreshRx must be locally grown, and the food incentive is given either through a CSA-style food bag / box or through food vouchers to be redeemed at participating farmers' markets. Total sales for local producers during 2023 reached nearly \$550,000 – \$100,000 through voucher use at 18 participating market outlets, and just over \$450,000 for food bags/ boxes from 9 participating farms/ aggregators/food hub suppliers.

The NMFMA's FreshRx program is part of a broader nationwide network of Produce Prescription initiatives that aim to positively impact fruit and vegetable intake, food security, and the local economy among priority populations. Program participants are selected based on a few criteria: if they are food insecure;¹ if they are a member of a low-income household that suffers from, or is at risk of developing, a diet-related health condition; or if they receive Medicaid or SNAP benefits. Produce Prescription projects thus attempt to reach populations with limited access to healthcare and who will benefit from the food incentive and associated complementary activities. This type of program is particularly relevant in New Mexico, where high rates of poverty and one of the lowest fruit and vegetable consumption rates in the country contribute to high levels of obesity and food insecurity. At the same time, the state has a robust local food system movement supported by a long tradition of small and mid-sized agriculture produced especially by land-based communities, as well as an active effort of community health clinics and food security organizations working to improve health and nutrition.

¹ The USDA defines food insecurity as "the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways." See here (accessed 4/10/24): <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/measurement/>

Evaluation Scope

The evaluation goal was “to assess how effective, appropriate, and inclusive the NMFMA’s FreshRx program activities were in 2023 and to determine how programming can be improved in the future.” This evaluation is distinct from the efforts being led by the GusNIP Training, Technical Assistance, Evaluation, and Information Center (NTAE), which is responsible for determining impacts of produce prescription programs nationwide on participant food security status, fruit and vegetable intake, perceived health status, and other program impacts through pre- and post-activity surveys among participants. This evaluation was meant to build upon and complement – rather than duplicate – the NTAE’s work, and it included primary data collection using both quantitative (via a survey) and qualitative (via Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIs)) methods along with a desk review. Data collected through the evaluation was done with health clinic partner staff, who provided a wealth of information based on their experiences with the program.

This synopsis presents a high-level summary of findings and recommendations. An in-depth, detailed report is also available.

Overall Findings & Recommendations

Introduction

Feedback on FreshRx was extremely positive, with numerous partners highlighting the importance of telling the story of how the program benefits individuals, especially among marginalized populations and those most impacted by food insecurity and health disparities. There was consistent appreciation for the program along with a recognition that current resources are not adequate to meet the needs of those served by program partners. Providing access to fresh, healthy, and local food was noted by many respondents as the program’s greatest benefit.

Key Overall Findings

The FreshRx program is contributing to broader shifts in how health clinics and other community-based partners address food insecurity.

The FreshRx program is contributing to shifts in how community partners and health providers address food insecurity and diet-related health disparities. One partner whose clinic only started implementing FreshRx in 2023 shared: “This is something that’s new for our kind of facility. Thinking broadly, thinking more complex beyond a medical framework and actually thinking about how we can provide resources to our communities that are not medical.” Another partner that has been implementing FreshRx for many years noted: “One of the neat things that I’ve been able to see is that... when you have these providers who start thinking about these types of resources really as that Food is Medicine... And it becomes this valuable piece of what a provider can do for a patient.” All FGD and KI respondents spoke about the importance of this type of program and the positive impacts that FreshRx provides. The experiences shared through the evaluation show that the program is having a broad impact on partner perspectives as to the benefits of produce prescriptions as a tool in addressing diet-related disease and food insecurity. FreshRx is thus impacting the wider system despite having limited resources and limited reach.



FreshRx reached vulnerable, marginalized populations but resources are not sufficient to meet the need.

The broad FreshRx eligibility and targeting criteria meant that partners were able to reach marginalized populations in need. Selecting participants varied quite a bit from partner to partner, as each individual partner determined more specifically who would benefit, since, as one FGD participant noted when discussing eligibility criteria: *"Food insecurity, chronic conditions - [that's] most of our patient population basically."* Regardless of how exactly each partner decided to further refine its targeting approach, the FreshRx program clearly serves populations in need. One FGD participant summed it up as, *"Overall, (the program) has helped a very, very marginalized group of people. Very marginalized - health-wise, finances, food choices, and so on and so forth."* While the program is serving those in need, there is significantly more demand than current resources can support. One partner likened the reach they have in one area as a drop in the bucket compared to the need for this type of intervention. Several partners also noted that staff capacity would be a challenge when thinking about increasing the number of participants.

Partners and participants alike greatly appreciate the program.

Partners expressed appreciation for their organizations being able to participate in FreshRx. During one KII, a partner noted: *"We would just really like to thank all the people that got us the bags and collected the food and bagged everything and then, you know, brought it to us... because that's just so helpful... We're...very appreciative and thankful for this opportunity."* Many partners also emphasized that the program improves the care that they can provide and was contributing to building a sense of agency, self-efficacy, and longer-term behavior change among families by providing a concrete resource for managing their health. One provider noted, *"If we can get them to a point where they can use that resource, or you know, we can offer the resource, and then they can utilize that resource and sustain with that resource. I think that's where we're headed with this program."* According to the NTAE survey data, more than 90% of 313 respondents stated that they had a positive or very positive experience with FreshRx. Partners additionally spoke of how much participants appreciate FreshRx. One interviewee said, *"We never heard nothing bad ever, ever about anything. Just people say, 'thank you,' you know... and then a lot of more, just like, 'Thank you for thinking of me.'"* Another interviewee explained that *"I had nothing but positive feedback from a lot of the clients just saying like, right now, cause of the cost of groceries right now, just being kind of outrageous... that they were really happy when I would give them...[their] vouchers."* An FGD participant exclaimed: *"There are families who do come to our site to pick up the bags, and... seeing the reaction on their face of receiving the bag... It's pure joy, like they're excited to receive the bag, and you know they look forward to every week coming in and picking up the bags."*



Program benefits extend beyond the food incentive to include the local food economy and food environment.

In addition to benefiting program participants and their families, FreshRx in New Mexico also has an impact on the local economy. Whereas many produce prescription programs around the country do not have a local food sourcing requirement, all produce must be locally grown in New Mexico for the NMFMA FreshRx program.² As a result, individual farmers as well as local food hubs and distributors in New Mexico are benefiting from FreshRx sales. In 2023, for example, FreshRx sales through the NMFMA program totaled \$547,315. FreshRx partners expressed great appreciation for the program allowing them to foster partnerships with local farmers and that the program contributes to the local economy. One FGD participant said, *“For this type of programming the resource being funds to procure locally grown produce. ... I think (about) the economic benefit of that, too. Just pumping dollars back into our local economy, supporting our local growers... It makes a whole lot of sense economically, you know.”*

Through FreshRx many participants are also introduced to farmers’ markets for the first time. During FGDs and KIs, partner staff discussed the educational aspect for participants, partner staff, and providers alike in learning more about farmers’ markets. One FGD participant noted, *“The FreshRx vouchers introduced to a lot of patients that had never been to a farmers’ market before. And it was the first time, so that was something new for them, and they had a very good experience.”* This same respondent later commented, *“I also had a few moms that were saying, ‘Okay, I like to take my kids with me, because that way they can experience to go and choose a vegetable that they have never eaten before... They can go in and try something new that they haven’t tried before, especially when it comes to vegetables.”* The food boxes/ bags were also used to provide supplementary information to promote healthy, local foods - this included recipes, nutritional value, information on source farms, etc. One partner note: *“The produce bags that we were getting were fantastic educational tools.”*

FreshRx utilizes a very flexible program model.

The NMFMA FreshRx program uses a very flexible model that allows partners to adapt the program to fit their needs and available resources. This flexibility was noticed in several areas, including: who benefits (based on the broad eligibility criteria); how the incentive is provided (for example, with vouchers, it depends on the partner how often during the season vouchers were provided to participants; for food boxes boxes/ bags, most partners required participant pick-up but there are partners that did home delivery); frequency and consistency of follow-up with participants; and what, if any, complementary activities (such as nutrition education, cooking classes, etc.) are provided. As a result, it is important to note that the ways in which partners implemented the program were very diverse. In addition, few - if any - partners were able to offer the full suite of complementary activities. The flexible model seemed to be appreciated by most partners, with one FGD participant stating *“Unfortunately, not all programs are like that. But this one really, I think tailors to be as flexible as possible.”* However, staff from one clinic noted: *“It would be nice to have a framework for new clinics who are implementing the program. We appreciate the flexibility, but structure would have been helpful.”*

² According to the NTAE, as of FY2022, less than 8% out of nearly 800 Produce Prescription sites included a stipulation of “only state or regionally grown FVs” (fruits and vegetables).



In spite of the successes, several challenges were consistently reported - including transportation and some issues with farmers' markets and the food boxes/bags.

Transportation and/or distribution was raised as a major issue in nearly every FGD and KII. For participants using vouchers, transportation to farmers' markets was consistently noted as a barrier, especially for populations that lived further from participating markets. For food box/ bag recipients, there were a few partners that provided home delivery some or all of the time but noted the time and logistical challenges this posed. Transportation was also highlighted as a limit in terms of the potential geographic reach of the program: *"For me...(the greatest barrier)...is always going to be transportation. And yet, so until we can figure out home delivery models and the resources to support that we're going to be missing a big chunk of people, especially, and rural parts of our state."* A second major challenge revolved around issues with farmers' markets. One concern that came up consistently was the limited days and hours that markets are open and that these times often didn't work very well for FreshRx participants. It was also reported that a couple of markets only had one or two items at various times of the season, which limited participant ability to get a variety of produce from the market and to be able to choose what they wanted. Moreover, there were reports of difficulties participants had in obtaining tokens and limited availability of tokens. With the food boxes/ bags, there were two main critiques raised, the first being that the boxes/bags contained too many foods that were new or unfamiliar to participants. While partners said there were participants that appreciated getting new items to try, it also led to reports of participants throwing out certain products that they did not know what to do with and to program dissatisfaction for some participants, despite efforts to provide information on ways to utilize the unfamiliar foods. One partner also noted that some families had told them there was too much redundancy in the products provided each week, and that families *"decided to decline [participating] the second year just because they were telling us that there was a lot of redundancy in the produce... If they were getting the same thing in their bags every week, it started to get a little overwhelming for them, and they didn't know what to do with it."* In spite of these challenges, the overall quality and freshness of the food sourced at farmers' markets and through the boxes/ bags was consistently commented on and highlighted by FreshRx program partners.

Overall Recommendations

1) Work with partners to clearly define the most important desired outcomes for participants

- while acknowledging the need for balancing both food and nutrition security along with limits funders place on what types of foods can be provided.

2) Develop long-term planning approaches for program participants.

This is especially relevant to the length of time participants will receive the food incentive along with general criteria to determine when participants will no longer receive the incentive; and how to continue providing access to resources that facilitate fruit and vegetable consumption post FreshRx participation. One avenue for doing this would be to promote food assistance programs that also have a local food systems component, such as Double Up Food Bucks for SNAP recipients, the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, and the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. As an example, based on baseline data from the NTAE, 45% of NMFMA FreshRx participants used SNAP in the past 30 days, and approximately 75% of that group have been using SNAP for at least one year. This seems to indicate there could be tremendous potential in linking FreshRx participants to Double Up Food Bucks.

3) Maintain overall programming flexibility while providing tools and guidance for the partners who need it.

It is important for partners to have the ability to adapt the FreshRx program model to suit their needs and capacities as well as the local context and participant needs. At the same time, it is also important that program leadership provide more structure for those who need it, especially newer partners. This could be done through further building out of a FreshRx Community of Practice as a space for sharing of tools, information, best practices, and lessons learned.

4) Prioritize addressing challenges that are most within the NMFMA's and partners' control.

There are several issues related to improving participant experience at farmers' markets (enhancing customer services at the markets and encouraging partners to provide greater support to first-time market goers) and food box/bag product selection (ensuring a better balance of products) that can be acted upon in the immediate future. The transportation issue, though, is a major systemic barrier that goes well beyond the program and what is in the program's control. As a result, addressing transportation challenges will likely go beyond program resources. The NMFMA, however, can continue to explore alternative distribution models, creative partnerships, or small-scale trial-and-error type pilots.

5) Tell the FreshRx story and advocate for sustained and expanded long-term resources that maintain the program's local economy and community connections.

It is clear from the evaluation that there is an important story to tell, especially in using local food to address food insecurity in the state. Expanding funding and resources for FreshRx would enable organizations to serve more people and meet more of the current need for food incentive and complementary activity resources. As momentum continues around including produce prescriptions as a covered healthcare cost, it will also be important to advocate for maintaining a local food system component as part of the FreshRx experience in New Mexico. The connection of the produce prescription to local producers was a theme emphasized by many evaluation respondents, highlighting the importance of incorporating local priorities and community-based models when considering solutions at a wider scale.

