



Evaluation Report: 2015 Market Bucks Pilot Project

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MARKET BUCKS PILOT PROJECT

GUELPH & WELLINGTON TASK FORCE FOR POVERTY ELIMINATION / MARCH 2016

MARKET BUCKS WERE DISTRIBUTED TO
32 ONTARIO WORKS RECIPIENTS



WITH HOUSEHOLDS THAT INCLUDED:
37 ADULTS & 27 DEPENDENTS

FAMILY COMPOSITION



3%
COUPLE WITH
NO CHILDREN



41%
SINGLE
(NO CHILDREN)



13%
TWO PARENT
FAMILY



43%
SOLE SUPPORT
PARENT

62%
FEMALE ♀

35
YEARS
AVERAGE
AGE

68% REDEMPTION RATE

MARKET BUCKS REDEEMED
DURING 3-MONTH PILOT (JULY
TO OCTOBER 2015)

75% PARTICIPATION RATE

RECIPIENTS THAT REDEEMED AT
LEAST SOME OF THEIR MARKET
BUCKS

100% VENDOR PARTICIPATION

ALL VENDORS AT THE NORTH
WELLINGTON FARMERS MARKET
ACCEPTED MARKET BUCKS

INCREASED ACCESS TO HEALTHIER FOOD

ACCORDING TO 100% OF
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



DECREASED RELIANCE ON OTHER FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS



USE OF TRADITIONAL
CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE
PROGRAMS DECREASED 50%
AMONG SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

INCREASED COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

57% OF SURVEY
PARTICIPANTS TALKED TO
COMMUNITY MEMBERS THEY
HADN'T MET BEFORE WHILE AT
THE MARKET

INCREASED MARKET SALES

50% OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS
PURCHASED ITEMS WITH THEIR
OWN MONEY AT THE MARKET

INCREASED MARKET TRAFFIC

68% OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS HAD
NOT BEEN TO THE MARKET BEFORE
RECEIVING MARKET BUCKS

Background

From 2010 – 2013, the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination worked in partnership with emergency food providers and clients, as well as key community stakeholders, to address challenges within the local emergency food system. This involved two extensive research projects with the support of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute/Research Shop at the University of Guelph^{1,2}.

In 2013, the Poverty Task Force (PTF) endorsed a set of recommendations based on this research, which aimed to tackle the significant barriers that exist for those accessing and providing emergency food assistance. Included were a series of short-term recommendations that largely reflected the main areas that people felt needed improvement, including stigma, consistency and transparency of eligibility criteria, accessibility, and food quality³. Over the next two years, considerable work was invested in ensuring these recommendations were implemented. However, much of this work focused on efforts within the geographical boundaries of Guelph.

In late 2014, Lisa Needham (Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health), Ryan Pettipiere (County of Wellington), and Randalin Ellery (PTF), began meeting to discuss strategies that could be implemented in Wellington County to improve food security. In particular, discussions focused on reducing stigma, which was identified as the biggest barrier to accessing service in the County in earlier research⁴, as well as increasing access to fresh, healthy food.

Based on lessons from two existing farmers' market voucher programs, *Harvest Bucks* in London-Middlesex, and *Market Dollars* in Windsor, the group focused efforts on developing a local Market Bucks (MB) Pilot Project.

Market Bucks Pilot Project

The MB Pilot Project allowed consumers to purchase products from farmers' market vendors using vouchers. MB were distributed to Ontario Works clients in Wellington North through funding from the County of Wellington. To reduce the possibility of stigma attached to the use of the MB, they were also sold at full price to any interested party or individual.

¹ (Nelson et al., 2011)

² (Dodd et al., 2013)

³ (Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, 2013)

⁴ (Dodd et al., 2013)

Program Objectives

- Increase access to healthy, nutritious food in a manner that maintains dignity, builds health and community, and challenges inequalities
- Create opportunities for residents on low or fixed incomes to establish self-reliance, and empowerment over their own food procurement
- Increase connection to community by some of our most vulnerable residents
- Increase awareness, knowledge and comfort/familiarity with the farmers' market
- Increase exposure and revenue for local farmers/vendors

Target population

Residents of Wellington North who struggle with food security and access to affordable, fresh, healthy local food⁵. In particular, the program focuses on recipients of Ontario Works, with opportunities to support other low-income community members and include those in other income brackets through direct-purchase.

Description of the Evaluation

The purpose of MB Pilot Project evaluation is to determine if the program objectives were achieved and to inform decisions about the direction of the project now that the pilot stage is complete. The evaluation was designed to collect data and feedback from MB recipients, and other key stakeholders, including Ontario Works (OW) Caseworkers, the OW Manager (Fergus office), the Farmers Market Manager/Facilitator, and the farmers market vendors.

Initial demographic information (Appendix 1) was collected by OW Caseworkers when they distributed MB to clients. Caseworkers coded each demographic profile so the information could later be matched with feedback collected through one-on-one phone interviews with the MB recipients (Appendix 2). Additionally, each voucher was provided a unique number which was tracked by the OW caseworkers as they were distributed to clients. When vouchers were later collected from the vendors, the information was used to understand which clients were redeeming the vouchers.

⁵ Wellington North was selected based on data provided by the County of Wellington, *2014 Ontario Works Caseload Profile*, and Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health, *Addressing Social Determinants of Health in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph*. Both reports identify Wellington North as an area of the Wellington County with higher rates of low income and Ontario Works caseloads. It was also identified as an area that is often underserved in terms of available resources and programs that support those in low income. Finally, a newly established farmers' market in Mount Forest presented the opportunity to try something new and innovative.

Feedback was collected for this evaluation from a variety of other key stakeholders. An online survey was provided to all Wellington North Farmers Market Vendors (Appendix 3), and one-on-one phone interviews were completed with Ontario Works (OW) Caseworkers (Appendix 4) and the OW Manager that participated in the project, as well as the Farmers Market Manager/Facilitator (Appendix 5).

All of the data and information collected was analyzed by PTF staff, with the support of the PTF Research & Knowledge Mobilization Committee.

Results

Market Bucks Recipients

OW Caseworkers made significant efforts to inform all OW clients in Mount Forest about the the MB Pilot Project. In total, 32 clients were provided with MB, which represented households that included 37 adults and 27 dependents, for a total of 64 individuals.

Demographic Profile

Initial demographic information was collected by OW caseworkers when they distributed MB's to their clients. Based on this information, it is understood that the MB participants represented a number of different age categories (Figure 1), with the average recipient 35 years old. Recipients were predominately female (62%), and had been receiving OW assistance for an average of 13-24 months.

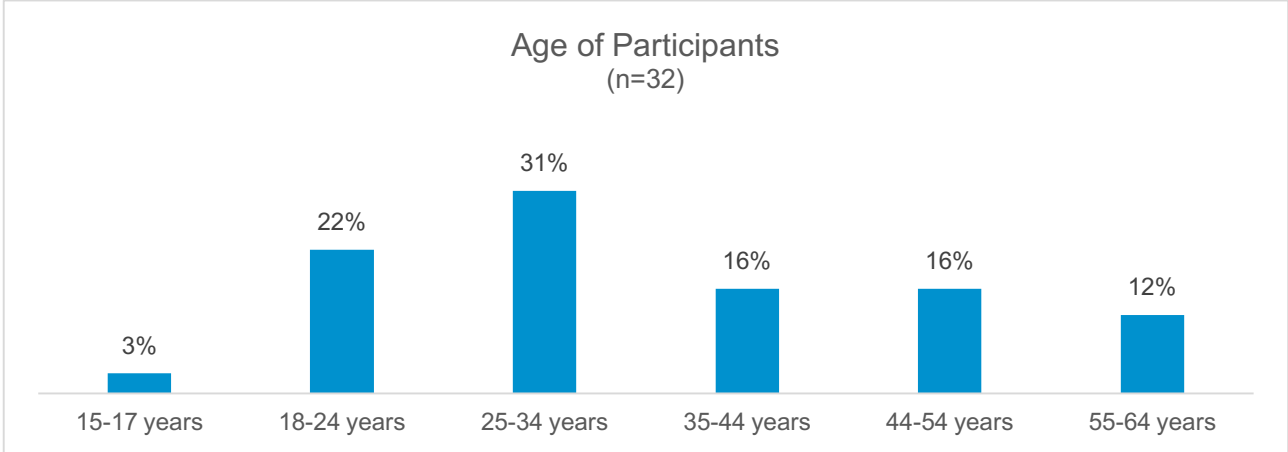


Figure 1: Age of MB Participants

Most of the participants were single (41%) or sole-support parents (43%), while a smaller number were from a two-parent family (13%) or a couple with no children (3%) (Figure 2). This is reflective of overall caseload data from Wellington North, where 52% of clients are single with no children and 38% are sole support parents.

Of the households with dependents (56%), the vast majority (85%) of children were 0-6 years (Figure 3).

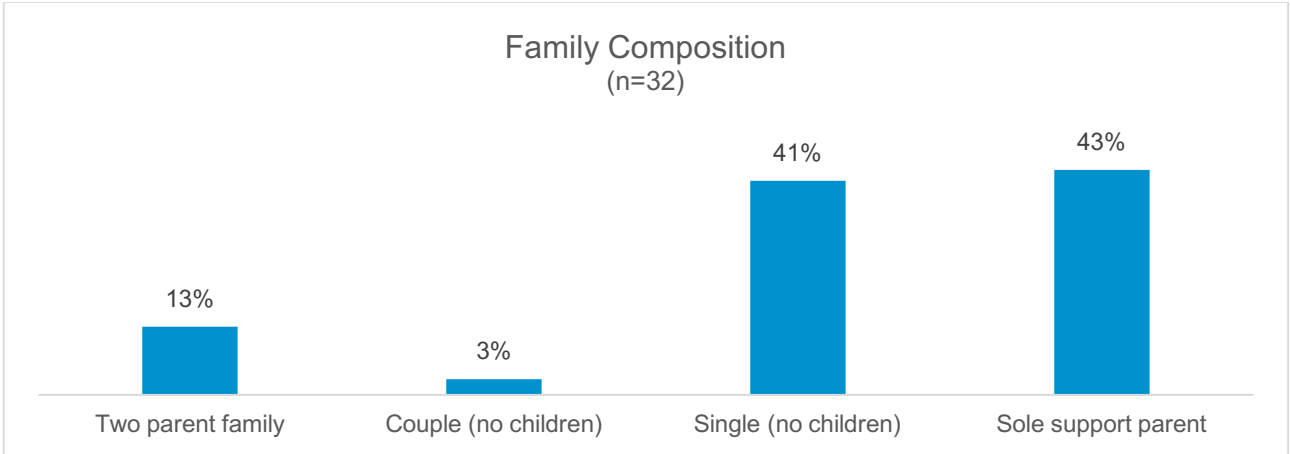


Figure 2: Family Composition of MB Participants

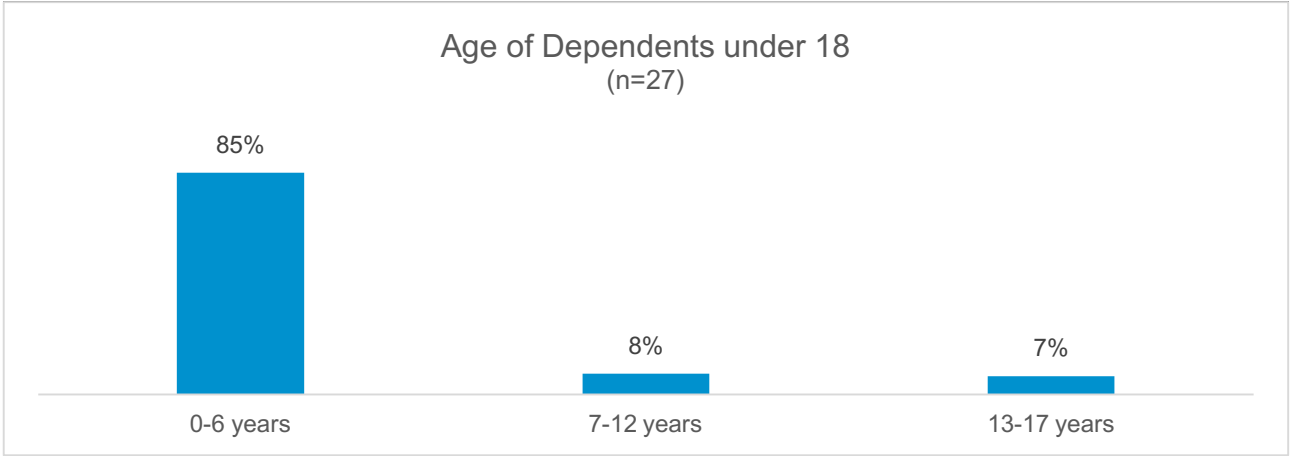


Figure 3: Age of Dependents of MB Participants

Redemption of Market Bucks

Market Bucks equivalent to a monetary value of \$5 were printed and 350 (\$1750) were distributed. A total of 239 (\$1195) vouchers were redeemed over a three-month period from early July to early October, representing a redemption rate of 68%. The MB were distributed to 32 OW clients and redeemed by 24, meaning there was an

overall participation rate of 75%. The vast majority of MB recipients (72%) redeemed more than half of their MB (Figure 4).

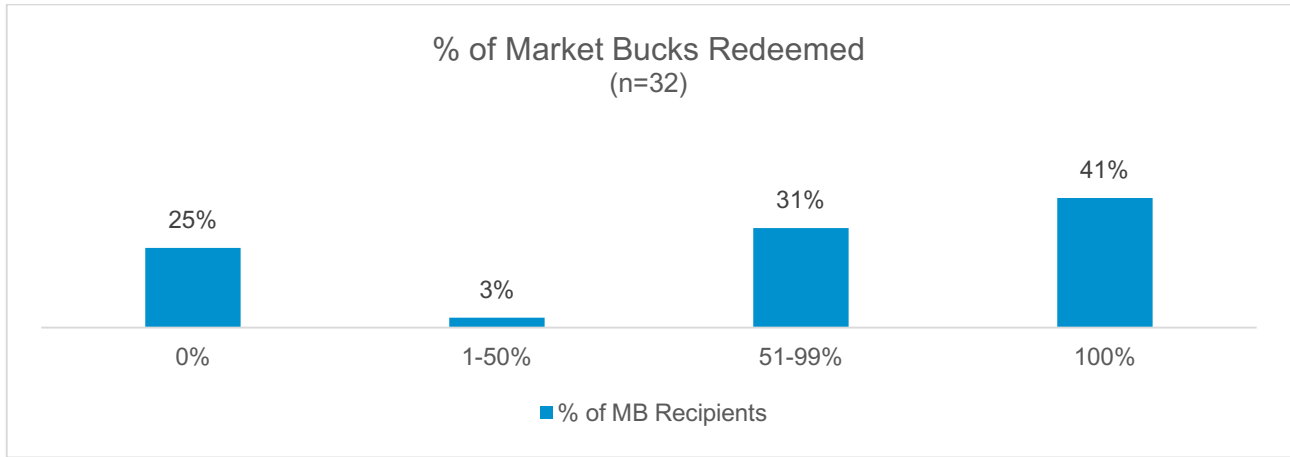


Figure 4: % of Market Bucks Redeemed by Recipients

Survey responses

A total of 19 surveys were completed over the phone with MB recipients, representing a 59% survey participation rate (Figure 5).

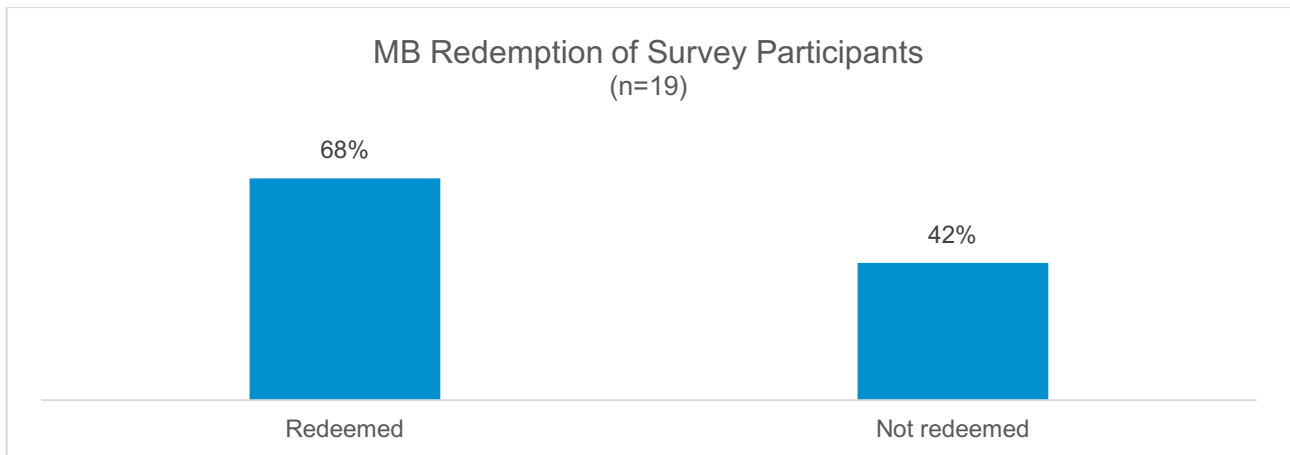


Figure 5: MB Redemption of Survey Participants

A total of 68% of the survey participants redeemed at least some of their MB. These participants were asked a number of questions about the food they purchased. All of the participants reported that they ate most (38%) or all (62%) of the food that they purchased with the MB. All of the participants reported that they purchased fruits and

vegetables. Other purchased items include meats (15%) and baked goods (31%). This is largely reflective of the types of food that is available at the Wellington North Farmers Market, which sells predominately fresh produce. Finally, all of the survey participants that redeemed MB reported that the MB allowed them to eat healthier food compared to their typical diet.

While most of the survey participants redeemed at least some of their MB, 42% did not redeem any. Half (50%) of these survey participants suggested that they did not use their MB because they ran out of time. Other reasons included inconvenient location of farmer's market (38%), and a dislike for the food that was available (13%) (Figure 6). Other options provided that were not selected included: didn't know how to use the MB, child care issues, kids that wouldn't eat the food available, lost MB, and issues with storage and preparation.



Figure 6: Reasons MB were not redeemed

In total, 68% of survey participants indicated that they had received food from at least one other food assistance program prior to receiving MB. Nearly all (92%) of survey participants reported that they used a food bank or pantry. Other programs used included school snack programs (15%), and community gardens (8%). After they received the MB, less than half (46%) of previous food bank or pantry users continued to use these services, while other food assistance programs were not used at all.

Survey participants were asked a number of questions about their experience at the Wellington North Farmer's Market (the Market). The majority (68%) reported that they had not been to the Market before receiving MB. Over half (56%) of the survey participants that answered this question claimed that they visited the Market more than 2 times over the course of the summer (Figure 7).

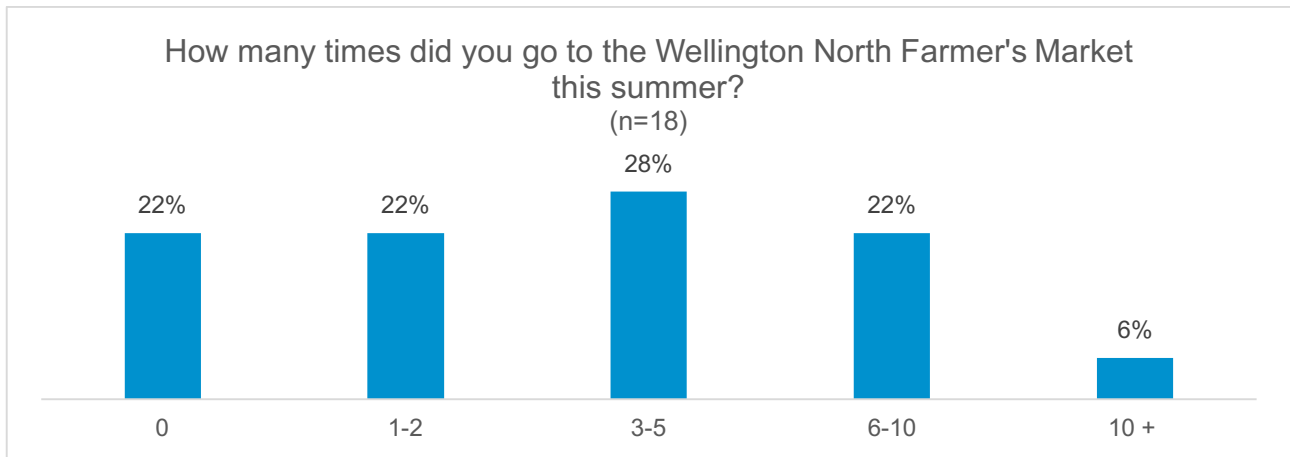


Figure 7: Number of times MB participants went to the Market

The MB survey participants that visited the Market were also asked about their activities and interactions while there. Half (50%) reported that they purchased goods at the Market with their own money, 79% talked to the Market vendors about the food they were purchasing (e.g. how it was grown, how to cook it, etc.), and 57% talked to other community members that they had not met before (Figure 8).

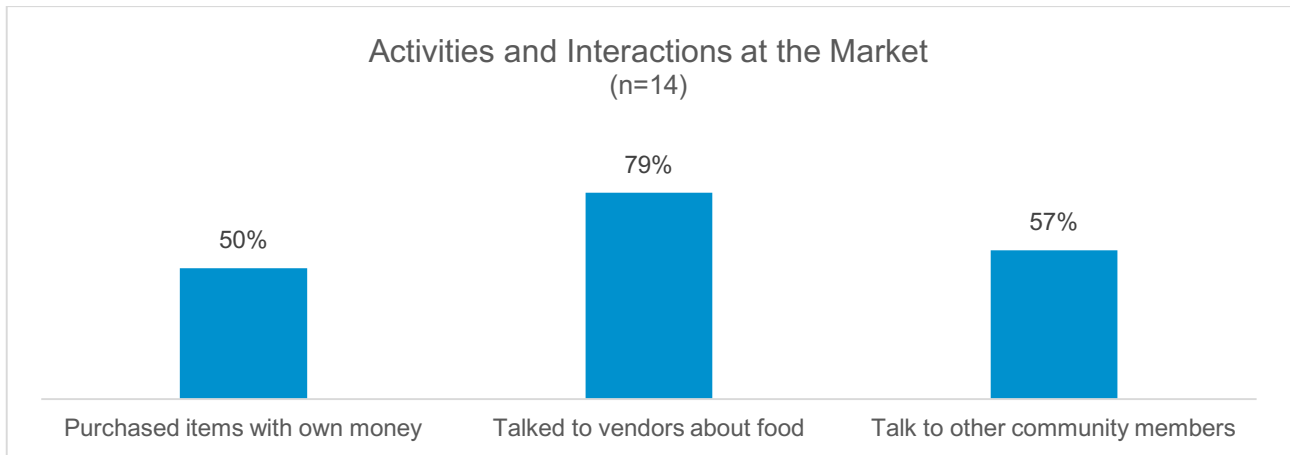


Figure 8: Activities and interactions at the Market

Finally, survey participants were asked if they will return to the Market next summer. Nearly half (47%) said they would, but only if they received Market Bucks. A smaller number (32%) said they would, regardless of whether or not they received Market Bucks, and 12% said they would not.

Key Stakeholders: Ontario Works (OW) Caseworkers & OW Manager

Four caseworkers from the County of Wellington Ontario Works office in Fergus were involved with the distribution of MB and completed a one-on-one interview over the phone. To begin, the caseworkers were asked to share the perceived impacts of the MB on their clients. All of the caseworkers indicated that it allowed clients to purchase healthier food, particularly fresh produce and items that are typically more expensive. When asked to share feedback that their clients shared with them about the MB, caseworkers noted that the overwhelming majority of comments were very positive. Caseworkers noted that some clients returned regularly for additional vouchers, and suggested that the vouchers were allowing them to purchase more fresh produce. One caseworker said the following:

“Clients said it really helped financially because they were able to go to the [farmers] market and provide fresh vegetables for their families as opposed to spending more money at the supermarket.”

Other client feedback shared by the caseworkers related to the limited number of vendors at the Market. It was noted that there was one large produce vendor and they would sometimes run out of food, further limiting the availability of choices. Some clients suggested to their caseworkers that having the MB at other markets, particularly the Fergus market, would increase choice for participants.

Caseworkers were asked if distributing the MB had any impact on the relationship with their clients. All of the caseworkers agreed that providing a “no strings attached” benefit to client had a very positive impact. One caseworker noted:

“[MB] strengthened the relationship between client and caseworker because clients may come to know that caseworkers recognize the need for extra financial help with purchasing food.”

Finally, one caseworker commented meeting clients in Mount Forest provided a unique opportunity to connect. The caseworker noted that they met clients to give them MB at the Mount Forest library, rather than the OW office in Fergus. Clients seemed to appreciate caseworkers making the extra effort to meet them closer to their homes and felt that the library provided a less formal environment which allowed the caseworker and clients the opportunity to see one another as peers.

As part of the administration of the program, caseworkers were provided flexibility to determine how many Market Bucks to distribute to each client. When asked what factors they considered when distributing MB, caseworkers noted that the primary consideration was the number of people in the household. Other considerations included the age of dependents (e.g. more MB provided for households with teenagers) and shelter expenses. Caseworkers noted that they made efforts to ensure that there would be enough to go around, but were increasingly generous once they had a sense of who was actually using them.

Caseworkers were asked to identify any challenges they experienced when trying to distribute the MB to clients. The caseworkers reported that, overall, challenges were very minimal. There was some extra work involved with determining which of their clients were located in Mount Forest, as well as organizing a time to meet and provide the MB. It was also mentioned that there was a tight timeline to distribute the MB, and more time to prepare for the program would have been helpful.

When asked for additional comments about MB, a few caseworkers suggested that the program be extended to other communities in the County, particularly Fergus. A couple of caseworkers also commented that they were surprised that clients outside of Mount Forest did not complain that they did not receive the benefit.

Key Stakeholders: Market Facilitator

April Marshall, Tourism, Marketing & Promotion Manager for the Township of Wellington North, took on the role of Market Facilitator for the purposes of the MB Pilot Project. The Market Facilitator was the main point of contact for the vendors, and took on the responsibility of collecting redeemed vendors from vendors, submitting them to the County, and returning the monetary value back to the vendors. A one-on-one interview was conducted with Marshall to better understand how the MB program functioned on the ground.

When asked about the perceived impacts of the program, Marshall shared the following:

“I could visually see the impact when I went to the market. There was a new demographic coming and the vendors thought it was a great way to bring new customers to the market and help the community.”

Marshall noted that, overall, the vendors were very supportive of the program. The program provided vendors with an opportunity to increase business and offered a promotional opportunity for the Market.

From an administrative perspective, Marshall shared that there was added work of tracking for the vendors and completing the monthly reconciliation process, but that it was manageable. She noted that the reconciliation periods were time intensive, but that adequate time was provided to complete it.

Moving forward, Marshall suggested that increased promotion of the program would be beneficial and could increase sales to the general public. Marshall also noted that she is very supportive of continuing the program during the 2016 season.

Key Stakeholders: Market Vendors

During the 2015 season at the Wellington North Farmer's Market, there were a total of 10 vendors. Of those vendors, 6 were regular vendors and the remaining 4 were inconsistent. All vendors were invited to complete an online survey for this evaluation. A total of 4 vendors completed the survey, representing a participation rate of 40%. However, all the participating vendors noted that they were at the Market 7 or more times, indicating they were regular vendors. Therefore, the survey participation rate among regular vendors was 67%.

Vendors were asked to indicate the types of products they sold at the Market during the 2015 season. The main products sold were fruits and vegetables, grains, meat, baked goods, and other (coffee, plants, flowers, honey and crafts) (Figure 9). Other options that were not selected by survey participants included nuts, milk/dairy, and fish/seafood.

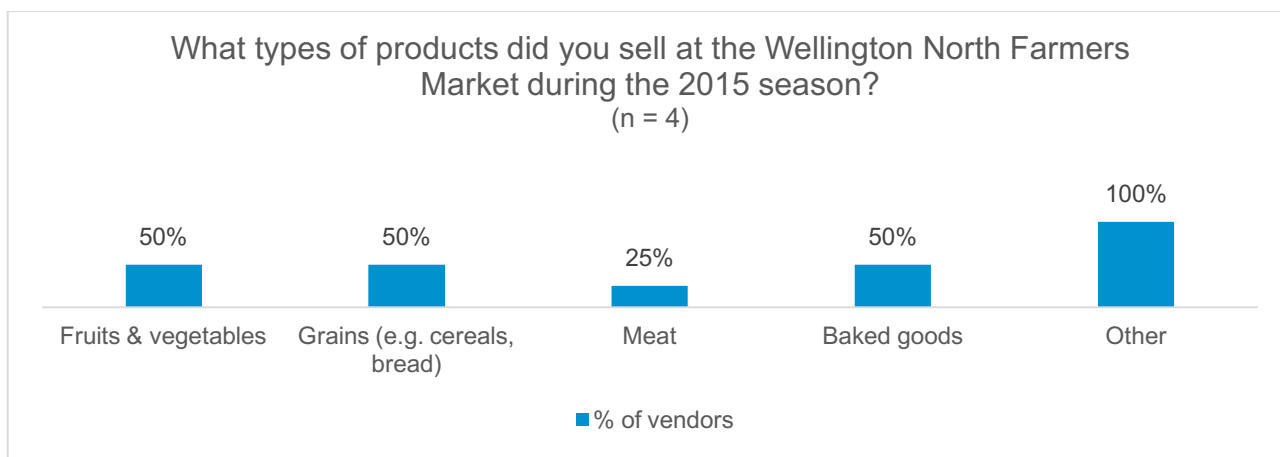


Figure 9: Products sold at the Market

All of the survey participants agreed that the MB program is an important strategy for increasing access to healthy, nutritious food in a manner that maintains dignity, builds health and community, and challenges inequity. When asked to indicate on a scale of 1 (a lot) to 5 (not at all) how much they thought the MB project increased their connection with some of the community's most vulnerable residents, the average score was 3.

In terms of impact on sales, half of the vendors (50%) were unsure if the MB program increased sales over the course of the season, while 25% stated sales did increase and 25% stated sales did not increase.

Overall, vendors were very supportive of the program and did not indicate any challenges with participating. All of the respondents indicated that they would support having MB at the Market during the 2016 season and 75% indicated that they would recommend having MB in other communities in 2016 (25% were not sure).

In terms of possible improvements to the MB program, vendors suggested it is important to increase awareness with general public that anyone can buy and use MB. When asked to rate the overall promotion of the program on a scale of 1 (very well) to 5 (not well), vendors gave an average score of 2.

Discussion

The MB Pilot Project aimed to achieve a number of objectives. Perhaps the most critical to the success of the program, was whether the MB would increase access to nutritious food in a manner that maintains dignity, builds health and community, and challenges inequalities. The evaluation clearly demonstrates that all those that participated by redeeming MB (75%), indicated that it allowed them to eat healthier food compared to their typical diet.

Having choice over the foods MB participants purchased created opportunities for participants to establish self-reliance, and empowerment over their own food procurement. While similar programs in other communities restrict the redemption of vouchers to healthier foods, the evaluation results show that all MB participants used the MB to purchase fresh produce, while some also purchased meats and baked goods. This suggests that restrictions to encourage healthier choices were unnecessary. However, MB participants were also restricted to what was available at the Market and it is unknown whether having additional choices would have resulted in different purchases.

The project itself was designed to ensure that vendors were unaware of how the MB were received, whether it was through OW, as a gift, or purchased dollar-for-dollar. This removed the stigma associated with other charitable food programs where clients receive food solely because of their low-income status. The evaluation suggests that the MB program was more appealing to participants, since less than half continued to use charitable food assistance programs while they were receiving MB. The fact that fresh produce is not typically provided through charitable food assistance programs was also likely a contributing factor to this finding.

The MB project also aimed to increase connection to community for some of its most vulnerable residents. The evaluation results clearly demonstrate that MB participants forged new relationships with the Market vendors, as well as through conversations with community members they had not met before. The feedback from vendors about this was less conclusive. However, it should be noted that the evaluation also notes that not all vendors were accessed equally, due to the types of products they sold, as well as the volume available. Vendors that redeemed higher amounts of vouchers may have had more opportunities to develop connections with MB participants.

Overall, the evaluation results show that the project increased awareness, knowledge and comfort/familiarity with the Market. The majority (68%) reported that they had never been to the Market before receiving MB, and many participants noted that they visited several times over the course of the summer. This finding was confirmed by the Market Facilitator, who observed a new demographic of people from the community visiting the market.

The last objective set out by the project was to increase exposure and revenue for local farmers. While this should be considered less critical than objectives aimed at increasing access to food, the evaluation results demonstrate positive results. Based on the redemption rate alone, the project brought \$1195 in new revenue to the Market. In addition, half of the MB participants reported that they purchased goods at the Market with their own money. Vendors were less confident with only 25% of vendor survey participants stating that they noticed an increase in sales. However, this could again be attributed to the fact that some vendors redeemed a higher number of vouchers than others.

In addition to meeting the stated objectives of the project, there was one important unexpected outcome that is worth noting. The feedback from OW caseworkers clearly suggested that distributing the MB resulted in improved relationships with clients. Providing a “no strings attached” benefit, as well as making the effort to meet clients in their own community, gave caseworkers and clients an opportunity to connect in a positive way.

While the overall evaluation results are encouraging, an important limitation to the extent of the projects success should be noted. Despite efforts to promote the MB to the general public and offers of reduced rates for health and social service providers with low-income clients, the MB were still predominately distributed to OW recipients.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The Market Bucks Pilot Project was developed to improve food security in Wellington County by increasing access to fresh, healthy food for low-income families and individuals. This pilot project was designed to respond to earlier research, which identified stigma as the biggest barrier to accessing charitable food assistance programs in the County. Overall, the evaluation clearly demonstrates that these overall goals were met, while also achieving the following objectives:

- Created opportunities for residents on low or fixed incomes to establish self-reliance, and empowerment over their own food procurement;
- Increased connection to community by some of our most vulnerable residents;
- Increased awareness, knowledge and comfort/familiarity with farmers’ market; and
- Increased exposure and revenue for local farmers/vendors.

Based on the findings from this evaluation, it is recommended:

- THAT the MB project be offered for a second season at the Wellington North Farmers Market.
- THAT funding opportunities be explored to offer 100% funded MB to more low-income families and individuals. In particular, opportunities to offer MB to recipients of Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) should be prioritized.

- THAT opportunities to replicate the project in other communities in Wellington County be identified for the 2016 season.
 - THAT initial efforts to replicate the project within Wellington County focus on communities that have:
 - a relatively high OW caseload and/or a relatively high percentage of people living below the Low-Income Measure to ensure the project is supporting those who need it most;
 - a centrally located market that limits barriers to access created by lack of transportation; and
 - direct involvement from the town or township to ensure there is capacity to support the program through staff.
- THAT additional efforts be made to promote the MB to the general public as a dollar-for-dollar purchase.
- THAT additional efforts be made to encourage health and social service providers to purchase the MB at 50% of the cost to distribute at no-cost to their low-income clients.
- THAT additional efforts are made to ensure the MB are distributed as early as possible, and that notice is provided to recipients about when the Market is closing.
- THAT the PTF, County of Wellington, and Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health continue to work in partnership to move the above recommendations forward.

Works Cited

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