Increasing local food consumption in rural communities by partnering with nontraditional food retailers

Partnering with nontraditional retailers in rural communities can be an effective method for food hubs to reach new customers, but its reach is limited. These sites may require additional institutional customers in the community that can serve as anchor buyers to spread out the delivery costs.

What was done and why?

Many rural communities no longer have grocery stores. Residents in those communities may need to travel 15 miles or more to find a store where fresh food is available. However, some of these rural communities may have other businesses that could serve as outlets for local products.

The project investigators collaborated with these small rural businesses—“nontraditional retailers”—to increase access to local, healthy foods, especially fruits and vegetables. The project relied on investment in food hub staff time to develop and manage these new sites, purchase refrigerated coolers and displays at these sites, and creative marketing strategies to attract and retain new customers.

This project was incorporated into a larger project funded by a USDA Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) grant which helped with installation of refrigeration and freezer storage at the food hub facility and provided funds to develop a branding and marketing program for the food hub.

What did we learn?

Some best practice ideas learned from the community food box pilot program:

- Identify a person to serve as a community recruiter to spread the work about the program. For this project, recruiters were viewed as local sales people and were given incentives for reaching recruitment goals.
- Consider paid advertising in local newspapers and shoppers to spread the word. Ads can be purchased for about $20 per week.
- Identify pick-up sites that are convenient for customers. While minimal supervision is required, a long window of time for pickup is ideal, especially with options during lunch or in the evening.
- Create an easy system for subscription management. This worksite food box program is email based with weekly payments through PayPal®. In rural communities, not everyone uses email regularly and may not use PayPal®. It is wise to explore alternative subscription options.

Working with nontraditional retailers requires creativity, innovation and local partners to assist with customer recruitment and sales. Such partnerships can help achieve community food access objectives, but may not provide major revenue streams for food hubs.