

Extension Programming to Enhance Urban Well-Being

Case Study Snapshot Produce Perks in Cleveland, Ohio

Data from the [Map the Meal Gap \(MMG\)](#) project and the [Hunger in America 2014 \(HIA 2014\)](#) report indicates there are differences in food insecurity across the rural-urban divide (Gundersen et al., 2017). To address food security for physical and community wellbeing the [Cleveland-Cuyahoga Food Policy Coalition](#) (FPC), co-led by the local Ohio State University (OSU) Extension team, initiated the [Produce Perks](#), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) incentive program which offers a dollar-for-dollar match on the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables to all SNAP participants. Through the review of annual community reports conducted by local health departments, think tanks, and research centers, the FPC recognized the need to improve the health of people living in food insecure communities (Tiwari & Ambinakudige, 2021) by increasing access to affordable healthy food.



According to the United States Census, Cuyahoga County, Ohio has a population of 1.24 million and Cleveland, the largest city in the county, has a population of 380,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In the popular press, Cleveland has been described as “a city of ethnic enclaves divided into east and west by the Cuyahoga River” (Hallal, 2016). The inner and outer ring suburbs also have distinct east and west cultures. Complexity and opportunity are evident in the county with 49 cities and towns, 33 school districts, 12 colleges and universities, and a substantial healthcare sector.

Since its inception in 2007, the FPC gradually evolved through many stages with multiple stakeholder interests. Initially, the FPC inventoried and assessed the location of grocery stores, farmers’ markets, farm stands, and food pantries. A [collective impact model](#) was implemented to intentionally establish broad community ownership at all levels, from SNAP participants to local farmers, neighborhood-based farmers’ market managers, 10 influential public and private organizations, and other local food stakeholders.

Four local foundations solely funded the Produce Perks program for the first eight years. The 2014 Farm Bill solidified the program within the county and eventually in the state of Ohio with the support of [Wholesome Wave](#). In 2016, the multisector Ohio Nutrition Incentive Network formed and Produce Perks Midwest was identified as the network’s intermediary. As Produce Perks expanded, additional incentives were added in Cuyahoga County as part of the [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#) and [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families](#)

[\(TANF\)](#). Over time, the core group addressed natural growth uses such as ownership and proprietorship, as well as role clarity, turf, and trust.

Communication materials are available in English and Spanish, with aspirations of adding resources in five additional languages. In addition to the economic incentives and education for families, local food producers, farmers' market managers, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) staff benefit from the economic flows of the program and education provided through Extension. The Produce Perks Farmers' Market Collective provides a formal platform for training, feedback, and idea sharing. Extension attracts interns and AmeriCorps VISTA to support the program and leverages university resources for project support, such as government affairs and urban soil faculty, staff, and students. Cuyahoga County is located 2 hours away from The Ohio State University Columbus campus, which provides both challenges and opportunities for the OSU Extension team to collaborate with local [public urban serving universities](#) and members of the [Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities \(CUMU\)](#) in close proximity to the OSU Extension Cuyahoga County (Cleveland) office.

Produce Perks has been recognized by the United States Department of Agriculture, the programs current primary funder, as a model SNAP incentive program. The impact of Produce Perks on the local economy and healthy eating behaviors increased each year. Growing evidence shows that fruit and vegetable incentives improve healthy eating behaviors (John et al., 2021) and have local economic benefits for families, farmers, and the local economy. Interactions among families and farmers also fosters a sense of community. The farmers' market managers and Extension staff are positively impacted by implementing Perks. Gatherings of the market managers provide one of the few opportunities for them to network as a group.

Urban food security depends on an extensive and complex array of processes occurring at many scales and geographies (Biehl et al., 2018). With a diverse team of 20 Extension professionals and hundreds of volunteers, OSU Extension partners with city, county, state, and national organizations for multidisciplinary food system and other related programs for wellbeing. Urban communities are rich in resources. In addition to traditional partners, the Extension team navigates more than 30 grants and contracts each year with groups than include NASA, the NFL, and other collaborators.

This case was contributed by Nicole Debose, leader of [Ohio State University Extension, Cuyahoga County](#) and representative on the National Urban Extension Leader Steering Council. Prior to joining OSU Extension, Nicole worked for Cuyahoga County Health and Human Services.

[Follow this link for the complete case study.](#)

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