

## Farm Fresh to Table

Early 2020, the Mercer County Horticulture Agent planned programs for the local farmers market with two objectives in mind. The first one, try to increase attendance at the local farmers market by bringing young families to the market. The second, provide fresh produce to children from low income families.

Other local groups within the community were having similar ideas of wanting to get fresh produce to low income children in the community. Through word of mouth at different Extension events, the following groups joined forces: the Mercer County Horticulture Agent partnered with Mercer County Supplemental Nutrition Assistant (SNAP), the Mercer County Farmers' Market, Family Resource Center (FRC) through Mercer County Schools, Mercer County Community Endowment (MCCE), and Heart of Kentucky United Way (HKUW). The Horticulture Agent, SNAP assistant and FRC provided educational material, while MCCE and HKUW provided funding.

Through an already existing cooking club for low income youth in the school system, the Mercer County Farmers Market would provide a bag of fresh produce during the summer months to the participating children. The children visited the market once a month during the months of June, July, and August. These pick-up days were scheduled on normal farmers market days. Each child received a large bag of produce valued at \$20. After completing a pre-survey they received a set of veggie vouchers to shop with valued at \$10. In each bag were multiple recipes that correlated with the produce in that month's bag. The SNAP assistant provided educational resources and demonstrated how to prepare the produce received in the bags. Farmers market members were reimbursed for their produce at the end of the season.

There were a lot of moving parts to this program. Starting a week out from a pick up date, farmers market members reported to the Horticulture Agent, using a shared Google doc what they planned to bring. The Horticulture Agent would track this information and shared it with SNAP assistant, allowing them to start selecting recipes and preparing a lesson for the upcoming week.

At the day of the pick-up, farmers market members would arrive an hour before the market opened. The Horticulture Agent checked in the items along with the farmers market treasurer, keeping track of what each farmer should be paid for their items (at the time, the farmers market members were reimbursed by the farmers market, with the intention the funders of this program (MCCE & HKUW) would reimburse the market at the end of the program). Once check in was completed, the market members bagged the produce and prepared it for pick up.

When the families arrived to pick up their bags they completed a pre-survey for both SNAP and the market. These surveys contained a few of the following questions: Have they been to the market before? How are their current eating habits? Do they shop at the farmers market currently? Once completing the survey, the children were given \$10 worth of veggie vouchers.

These vouchers could be used at the farmers market all summer. At the end of this program, once the participants filled out a post-survey, they received more veggie vouchers.

Once receiving their bags, the SNAP assistant would meet with the children over Zoom and demonstrate one of the recipes placed in the bags. They would discuss the different types of produce they received and how to prepare it. Children shared pictures of the recipes they prepared with their families.

At the final bag pick up, the participants were given a post-survey to fill out. We found that 70% of the participants are now adding a new vegetable to their meal planning due to the exposure to this program. 100% of the participants planned to start shopping at the farmers market as part of their regular grocery routine.

After a successful first year, even with COVID restrictions, all groups involved have decided to repeat the program with a new set of goals for the 2021 market season. We plan to increase the number of bags we can supply to children. Last year, we supplied produce to 15 children and plan to raise the number 20, depending on funding. Another goal, as restrictions start to lift, is to incorporate the mobile summer feeding program implemented by the schools. The farmers market would be a location for the feeding program food truck. The market plans to hand out veggie vouchers to children visiting the food truck. And finally, plan more family events. This program not only provides fresh produce to children, but helps our local farmers and economy.