

Prescription for Health

2009 Report



Introduction

In the summer of 2008, Washtenaw County Public Health (WCPH) launched Prescription for Health as a pilot program to encourage patients at Ypsilanti health clinics to increase their fruit and vegetable consumption by shopping at the Downtown Ypsilanti Farmers' Market. Previous community assessments found a lack of fresh produce available in Ypsilanti's downtown area, lower fruit and vegetable consumption and higher chronic disease risk among Ypsilanti residents compared to the rest of the county. While physicians or nutritionists at local health clinics might advise a healthier diet, many residents face a challenge to find healthier food in a community filled with convenience and liquor stores.

The impetus behind PFH included the hypothesis that many clinic patients were simply unaware of the farmers' market as a healthy food resource. By providing a packet to each patient at the participating clinics which contained

"The PFH program underscores the message we give that healthy food is important and plays a significant role in health improvement."
--Clinic staff person

\$5.00 worth of tokens to redeem for fresh produce at the market, PFH encouraged low-income patients to shop there. In addition, the PFH program built patient awareness that they could use their EBT (Food Stamp) cards at the market to access Food Stamp benefits. (Farmers' markets typically are a non-traditional Food Stamp venue so it is understandable that people were not aware of this feature.) PFH successfully forged a connection between the health care sector and the fresh food sector. This connection was a "win" for all involved – the patients, the clinics, the farmers, and the farmers' market.

After a successful first season, the four original Ypsilanti clinics -- The Corner Health Center, Neighborhood Health Clinic, University of Michigan Ypsilanti Health Center, and Hope Clinic – were joined by Ann Arbor's Packard Health clinic in 2009. The overall goals for 2009 were to:

- Increase the number of patients who used the tokens after receiving them at the clinic (i.e. overall token redemption),
- Increase the number of patients who were aware that they could use their EBT/Bridge card at the market *and* used their card at the market.

In addition to the clinic program, WCPH launched a modified PFH program at 10 food pantries in Ypsilanti (see page 3 for more information about the pantry program).

Program Participants

The 2009 program reached a very similar population to 2008. Of the 358 participants (clinic patients) who filled out a pre-program survey:

- 72% were female
- 49% were African American, 39% White, 7% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Native American, 4% Other, and 1% Asian
- Average age was 40
- 42% were a parent or guardian to children under 18 years of age who lived in their household
- 10% of female participants were pregnant

Also similar to 2008, the 2009 program participants were at high risk for food insecurity:

- 72% had a yearly income of less than \$15,000
- 63.5% were concerned about having enough food in the past 30 days
- 47% used Food Stamps
- 61% had not shopped at the Farmers' Market before. This was a decrease from 2008, when 80% had not shopped at the Farmers' Market before.

Goal 1: Increase Redemption of Tokens

For the 2009 program year, clinics agreed to several program changes in order to increase the overall token redemption from the 41% token redemption rate in 2008.

First, the program started earlier and ended earlier. The 2008 evaluation found that patients who were prescribed the program late in the season redeemed significantly fewer tokens. In 2009 the program ran from June 15 – August 25. However, one clinic still had PFH packets left at the end of August, and they were allowed to distribute them until mid-September. Patients could redeem tokens until the market closed at the end of October.



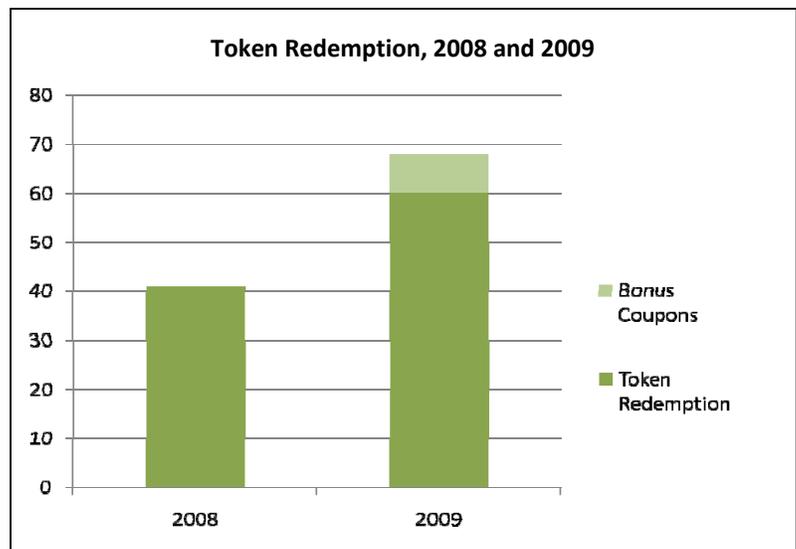
Second, WCPH strongly encouraged clinics to offer the program only to patients who lived in 48197 and 48198 zip codes. In 2008, local participants were much more likely to get to the market and use their tokens. Some flexibility was expected for patients that worked or visited family in Ypsilanti or who chose to drive to Ypsilanti for this market.

Third, clinics were allowed to prescribe multiple packets to individual patients as part of an on-going clinic group or to patients who return on a regular basis.

Finally, in 2009 WCPH tried a new method to encourage people to come to the market: a “bonus” coupon in each packet was redeemable for another \$5.00 in tokens at the market (see picture above). On several days, WCPH staffed a PFH table at the market to handle coupon redemption and offer recipes.

WCPH tracked the number of tokens spent at the market throughout the season to determine both redemption rates overall and for individual clinics. The tracking showed that many more patients who received PFH packets used their tokens at the farmers’ market (see chart).

- An average of 60% of the tokens was redeemed at the market, up from 41% in 2008. This translated to \$2815.00 spent on fresh produce at the market.
- 168 patients took their “bonus” coupons to the market in exchange for \$5.00 more tokens, accounting for \$840 in additional tokens spent on produce. When participants redeemed their coupons they spent 95% of those bonus tokens.
- Including coupon tokens, the overall redemption rate for all clinics was 68%, and the total spent on produce was \$3655.00.
- Interestingly, most participants (71.7%) received only one PFH packet, which was higher than 2008 (54%).



Goal 2: Increase the number of patients who were aware that they could use their EBT/Bridge card at the market *and* used card at market.

Because there are few healthy food resources in the 48197 and 48198 zip codes and a high proportion of PFH participants are low income and/or food insecure, WCPH felt it was important that the PFH program help establish the farmers' market as a regular source of healthy food for participants. Connecting PFH participants who are EBT/Bridge card users to the market was a big step in this direction.

WCPH staff highlighted EBT availability at the market in several ways. In 2008, information about EBT availability was included in a brochure inside the packet; evaluation results found that many people did not read the brochure. For 2009, WCPH placed a large sticker on the outside of each packet to give EBT information instead of using a brochure. WCPH also provided a script for clinic staff to use which included the EBT information, as well as posters that highlighted EBT availability.

EBT Evaluation Data	2008	2009
% of participants who received food stamps (<i>Asked on pre-program survey</i>)	49% (165/337)	47% (167/355)
At end of season, % of participants who were aware the farmers' market accepts food stamps (<i>Asked on post-program survey</i>)	44% (45/102)	76% (85/112)
At end of season, % of participants who receive food stamps and were aware the market accepted food stamps (<i>Asked on post-program survey</i>)	48% (26/54)	83% (50/60)
% of participants who received food stamps and used them at the market (<i>Asked on post-program survey</i>)	10% (4/40)	34% (16/47)

The 2009 post-program survey of 112 patients from all clinics found a significant increase in awareness of EBT availability and use of the Bridge card at the market. In addition, more post-program respondents said they were "very likely" to shop at the market next year on a regular basis in 2009 (58%) compared to 2008 (51%).

Food Pantry Program Summary

Food Gatherers, Washtenaw County's food bank and food rescue organization, provided funding for the pantry program. Staff at ten food pantries in Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor distributed 455 PFH packets to pantry clients. Each packet contained \$10 in tokens, information on the farmers' market (including location, hours of operation, EBT accepted, etc) and how to use the PFH tokens. To evaluate, token redemption was tracked; a 1-page survey was collected from all participants before receiving a packet; post-program interviews were completed with staff at nine pantries. The survey results indicate this PFH program reached very low income, food insecure, and diverse population:

- 74% have a yearly income less than \$15,000
- 50% are parents or guardians to children under 18 who live in their household
- 82% have been concerned about having enough food for themselves or their families in the past 30 days
- 58% received food stamps
- 54% African American; 33% White; 8% Latino
- 66% female; 33% male
- 75% lived in Ypsilanti zip codes (48197 or 48198)
- 63% had not shopped at the Farmers' Market before

Of the 4550 tokens that were distributed to pantry participants, 2841 (62%) were redeemed. Redemption occurred between July and October.

Feedback from Clinic and Pantry Staff

Feedback from both clinic staff and pantry staff and volunteers was overwhelmingly positive. 100% of clinic staff reported that the program was worthwhile for their agency to be involved in, and 80% said that the program complemented the health advice given by medical staff.

Pantry staff also agreed that the program enhanced their capacity to serve clients, and was useful for increasing access to fresh foods, thus leading to a more healthy

and balanced diet among their clients overall. All clinic and pantry sites want to participate again next year if the program is available, and are also interested in ways to extend the program's benefits beyond the growing season.

"Food security and access to healthy foods is a fundamental need to support patients who are attempting to improve their diet for better health.."

—Clinic staff person

"Pantries have limited budgets and are not able to purchase all the foods they would like to provide. Being able to go the extra mile in providing nutritious food without it costing the pantry was a huge success."

—Pantry staff person

Prescription for Health...the future

At this time, Washtenaw County Public Health does not have funds to continue the program in 2010. However, WCPH is actively seeking funding to expand Prescription for Health to several other clinics, human service agencies, and pantries county-wide, with an emphasis on helping participants get connected to federal food assistance programs. WCPH is open to ideas for continuing the program! Please see the contact information below.

Special thanks

WCPH intern Leslie Paulson spent countless hours coordinating the Prescription for Health program in 2009. She helped design materials, communicated with clinics, sorted tokens, and most of all, helped solve the dozens of little problems that arose over the summer.

Thanks to the Michigan Department of Community Health's Cardiovascular Health, Nutrition and Physical Activity Section and Food Gatherers for funding portions of the program. Thanks also to the participating clinics and food pantries, who contributed many hours of staff and volunteer time to make sure the program ran smoothly.

More information

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