

impact

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Caldwell Senior Produce Program strengthens connections, community and health

AT A GLANCE

Caldwell Senior Produce Program participants share benefits of produce vouchers, connecting to community and supporting local vendors.

The Situation

Food insecurity and poverty are serious problems among seniors. With the accompanying likelihood of reduced nutrient intake, this population is increasingly susceptible to a myriad of poor health outcomes. According to the Meals on Wheels Association of America, 37,120 seniors in Idaho are currently threatened by hunger. The Idaho Food Bank reports that senior citizens make up a disproportionate percentage of those struggling with food/nutrition insecurity and are being served by local food pantries. In the current economic climate, many adults are struggling to be healthy. In Canyon County, 21% of adults reported that they considered themselves in fair or poor health with 30% being physically inactive.

The USDA's Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program is a national initiative to provide low-income seniors with access to locally grown produce, honey and herbs; increase consumption of locally produced commodities; and aid in the development of additional farmers' markets. Because Idaho does not participate in the USDA's program, UI Extension and Caldwell Health Coalition worked to establish a local senior produce program.



Seniors purchasing produce with vouchers from the Caldwell Senior Produce Program at the Caldwell Farmers Market.

Our Response

The Caldwell Health Coalition with University of Idaho Extension launched the Caldwell Senior Produce Program in summer 2021 and operated the program again in summer 2022. The Caldwell Senior Produce Program is fashioned after the USDA's program, with modifications. The main goal is to improve and expand seniors' diets by adding fresh fruits and vegetables while supporting local produce vendors. Secondary goals include an increase in physical activity and a sense of community connection for seniors.

Seniors 60 years and older can take part in the program by visiting the weekly booth at Caldwell's Farm to Fork Market. First-time participants — one per household — complete a six-question survey to receive

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a reusable weekly punch card and \$6 in produce vouchers. Age, income and residence are not verified. Vouchers are not restricted to specific weeks and may be used throughout the market season. Eligible items include fruits and vegetables, mushrooms, eggs, herbs and food-producing plants. The program runs for 16 weeks of the market, June to September. Funds are evenly allotted across the market season, serving up to 98 households weekly.

The summer 2021 Caldwell Senior Produce Program was funded with \$5,000 each from St. Luke's Health System and Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation. Summer 2022 was funded with \$5,000 each from St. Luke's and the City of Caldwell. Destination Caldwell manages the market, recruits produce vendors and facilitates all voucher reimbursement. The Caldwell Senior Produce Program is managed by UI Extension and Caldwell Health Coalition, with both teen and adult volunteers staffing the weekly booth.

Participation in 2022 included 481 individual households. Over 16 weeks, 1,658 sets of vouchers were distributed. A majority (60%) of participants were between 60 and 69 years old. When asked whether they came to the market specifically because of the senior produce program, 42% of participants replied yes.

Program Outcomes

UI Extension hosted a focus group with participating seniors in October 2022. Three key themes emerged from the seniors: Caldwell Senior Produce Program was a benefit to their wellbeing; they engaged in social connections and physical activity; and they like supporting local vendors.

Purchasing fruits, vegetables and eggs with vouchers helped with seniors' grocery budget. If they participated each week, they received a total of \$96 added to

their summer food budget. "It's a lot of money" mentioned one senior. When social security benefits are limited and with other expenses on the rise, the vouchers help with purchasing produce. "That \$6 helped me to have more money to spend on gas" stated another senior. Others shared "Eggs can go a long way." "I didn't have to buy peaches or zucchinis or cherries from my own budget." Participants expressed a shared priority of wellness: "The market wants you well. They want you coming back. They want you healthy." "It matters to me to know that the food I get is fresh."

When asked if the Caldwell Senior Produce Program made an impact on their life, all seniors mentioned aspects of belonging and community connection. Social isolation is a leading cause of depression and corresponds with other health issues. Socializing within a safe community space is a benefit to seniors. "I've enjoyed meeting people and talking to the other seniors. It is difficult for me to socialize — this expands my people beyond my partner and neighbor." Others stated that meeting and watching people, enjoying the live music and dancing on the Caldwell Plaza were benefits. Several mentioned that they came to get their vouchers and produce but stayed to see friends or listen to music. One senior shared "Family situations are that we isolate ourselves and we don't even need to. I always look forward to going."

Meeting the vendors and learning their story was an important aspect of the market for the seniors. "I had a running conversation with several vendors." Some seniors wanted to learn more and asked if they could purchase produce at the vendor's farm. Others specifically confirmed with the vendors that they were appropriately reimbursed for the vouchers and benefited from participating. While the vouchers covered produce, seniors often made purchases at other vendor booths, supporting a thriving market.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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