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Buying Power, Community Power: Increasing Access to Produce through *Bulk Produce Buying Clubs*

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Executive Summary: Fruits and vegetables are expensive and difficult to access for low-income communities. A bulk produce buying club could help improve access by bringing fruits and vegetables into communities at lower prices, particularly through the usage of SNAP. Further they can empower communities to participate in local and regional food systems.

The majority of Americans do not consume the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables, especially those experiencing food insecurity and hunger.^{1,2,3,4,5,6} About 60% of Americans consume less than 2 and a half cups of fruits and vegetables daily.² Fruits and vegetables have nutrients that are important for maintaining health.⁷ They also have protective health benefits, such as lowering risk for chronic diseases like cardiovascular disease, stroke, and some cancers.^{8,9,10} The high water and fiber content in fruits and vegetables may help with managing weight, as well.⁷ Increasing fruit and vegetable intake has implications not only for improved personal health but for better community and population health.¹¹

Accessing fruits and vegetables is even more difficult for people with limited economic resources. Barriers such as transportation, physical environment, cost, and preferences all affect fruit and vegetable consumption.^{12,13,14} Research on food deserts demonstrates that people do not necessarily have stores providing a variety of nutritious, fresh food within walking distance.^{12,15} This may contribute to less consumption of fruits and vegetables. In addition, fruits and vegetables often cost more than other foods, particularly in places without many options.¹⁴ Finally, fruits and vegetables may not be preferred because of lack of familiarity.¹³

Approaching fruit and vegetable consumption from a position of community engagement has benefits over addressing individual eating behaviors. Communities can collectively work together to use food to increase community and economic development, environmental benefits, and improved health.¹⁶ The community can use their collective numbers to increase their buying power, which could lower prices, provide a variety of nutritious options, and support local food producers and distributors. In addition, working together can build a social support system that goes beyond the simple act of eating. ***Bulk produce buying clubs are a collective action strategy communities can use to increase access to fresh produce.***

Are Buying Clubs the Best Way to Increase Access to Produce?

Other options for increasing access to produce in low-income communities exist, such as farmers' markets, mobile pantries and markets, co-operatives, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Starting a bulk produce buying club does not exclude these other alternative food networks. However, this approach does have several advantages as a first step in increasing community food security.

Advantages of Bulk Produce Buying Clubs Over Alternative Strategies:

- ⇒ Do not require much start-up capital.
- ⇒ Do not require a permanent location for operation.
- ⇒ Can be run through all or primarily volunteer labor.¹⁷
- ⇒ Do not need a large amount of participants to be successful. Buying clubs can start with approximately ten people.¹⁷
- ⇒ Allow for the building of capacity and can address the needs of hundreds or thousands of people.
- ⇒ Consumers have direct control over the purchases and products, such as the types and quantity of produce purchased.¹⁷

How Do You Start a Bulk Produce Buying Club?

Starting a bulk produce buying club is a simple process. The essential steps involved include the following: gather 5 to 10 people you trust; get something to sort food into and containers or bags for members to take the food home in; decide where and how often you will buy produce; combine your money and shop; and then divvy up the produce. Often people purchase produce from farmers' markets or get it delivered from local food distributors.

A Story of the Creation of a Bulk Produce Buying Club in Detroit...

Mike Score, an MSU Agricultural Innovation Counselor, worked with the Coalition of Black Farmers to bring nutritious food into Detroit's Chene Ferry neighborhood. They launched a farmers' market in 2004, which failed. The Coalition met with neighborhood residents, who said they did want access to fresh produce. However, since they used SNAP for their grocery purchases, a machine to accept this form of payment would be critical for them to be able to participate in making purchases. What was born from this was a bulk produce buying club, which utilized funds from a grant. In 2006, the Coalition was able to get an EBT reading machine, and then get a bulk produce buying club up and running. The produce is purchased from neighborhood gardens, local farms, and a market.¹⁸

Bulk Produce Buying Clubs & SNAP:

Accepting SNAP is essential for the success of community based approaches for increasing access to fresh produce, such as bulk produce buying clubs.¹¹ Accepting SNAP benefits gives more people the opportunity to participate, as well as could increase the income of local farmers and/or distributors supplying the produce.¹⁹ However, challenges remain for being able to use SNAP when participating in a bulk produce buying club. For example, one model requires participants to take turns purchasing the produce in bulk to distribute to club members, and SNAP recipients currently are not allowed to give their EBT card to someone else to make purchases on their behalf. Within another model, food distributors deliver the produce to communities to be divvied up; currently, few food distributors are set-up to accept SNAP as a form of payment.



Recommendations for Community Organizations:

- ⇒ Present the buying club concept at a resident council or community association meeting, to discuss the benefits and recruit potential leaders.
- ⇒ Advertise for and conduct community meetings to recruit potential members.
- ⇒ Actively engage community members, such as by developing and conducting an interest survey. Find out how often residents would like to participate, and how much they can afford to spend.
- ⇒ Connect with a local distributor and/or farmers. Ensure they accept SNAP. If they do not currently accept SNAP, help them in completing the process.
- ⇒ Incorporate incentive programs and nutrition education opportunities.

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