

A Directory of Mobile Markets Addressing Food Access in Low-income Communities

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Project background

This report is the first phase of a study assessing the feasibility of using a mobile market model to address food access challenges in rural agricultural communities in California. The goal of this report is to identify and create a directory of existing mobile market projects operating in low-income communities throughout the US and to identify the key characteristics of the mobile market strategies and policy issues impacting mobile market operations.

Findings from several studies indicate that farmworkers suffer from food insecurity and diet-related diseases.¹²³The USDA defines food insecurity as limited access to adequate food due to lack of money and other resources.⁴ There are several measures for defining food access, but most measures take in to account the proximity to healthy food retail establishments and affordability of healthy foods.⁵ Food access is limited by several factors including limited retail establishments, lack of transportation, low-incomes.

One key factor limiting food access is the food retail environment. Grocery stores run on very thin margins and the lack of profitability in low-income communities has led to a flight of brick and mortar grocery stores in urban centers and rural communities thus creating “food deserts” – or areas lacking healthy food access. Thus, mobile markets are increasing in popularity as a strategy to address food insecurity and diet-related diseases stemming, in part, from limited food access in low-income communities throughout the US. This report provides an overview of these projects and their strategies.

Section 1: Overview of mobile market projects

This report is a review of mobile markets operating throughout the US to increase food access for low income, underserved neighborhoods or communities with limited food options and barriers to healthy eating. The first section of the report provides an overview of the different features of mobile markets, outlines key strategies employed by mobile market practitioners, and identifies some policy implications for mobile markets. The second section of this report is a directory of the mobile market projects. This directory of projects is by no means an exhaustive list of all the mobile market projects operating; the intent of this directory is to provide a snap shot of the mobile market movement underway throughout this country.

Although mobile markets are not a new concept, there has been a recent surge in mobile market projects over the past few years. People’s Grocery Mobile Market, started in 2002 (and closed in 2008) is the oldest project in this directory, while the majority of projects launched in the past two years.

The following are some characteristics of the mobile markets featured in this directory:

Scheduling

- Most programs operate on a regular weekly schedule
- Some programs operate seasonally, closing for the winter
- The number days each program operates per week varies from one day to 6 days per week
- Some programs make up to four stops per day
- The length of time at each stop ranges from 30 minutes to six hours (farmers' market stop)
- Some programs start operating as early as 9am, and the latest operating time among the markets is 7pm.

Access sites

- Senior housing
- Senior centers
- Public housing
- Public schools
- Parks
- Community centers
- Community based organizations
- Churches
- Hospitals
- Health clinics
- Farmers' markets
- Libraries
- Boys and Girls Club
- Salvation Army
- Farms
- Department of Social Service offices
- Office complexes
- Home deliveries
- YMCAs
- Special events
- Family resource centers
- Recreation centers
- Employment centers

Pricing

- Most programs price food comparable to, or competitive with, or even slightly below, discount grocery stores in the area
- A few projects price food at wholesale pricing
- Some projects offer a matching funds program ("double your dollars", 2:1, or "bonus bucks") that provides EBT clients with up to twice as much value of product for dollars spent on their EBT card
- Many programs issue incentives or coupons, such as Senior Checks, or return customer incentives
- Many programs offer 20% to 50% discounts for clients paying with EBT cards

Forms of payment accepted

- All programs accept cash, credit, and debit and some programs accept checks
- Most programs accept SNAP EBT benefits and WIC (or are in the application process)
- One program accepts currency from a local community currency program

Foods offered

- Most of the mobile markets in this directory offer a variety of grocery items including fresh fruits and vegetables, dry goods, eggs, meat, dairy, bread, and cooking staples
- A few additional items offered by some mobile markets include: packaged healthy snacks, bulk foods, household items and toiletries
- A few mobile markets offer simple to prepare meal-kits (meal ingredients and recipes)

Product sourcing

- Local farmers
- Community gardens
- Farmers' markets
- Local gardeners
- Urban farms
- Food distribution companies
- Local grocery stores
- Local consumer food co-ops

Vehicle types and configurations

- Many mobile market projects acquired and retrofitted used delivery vehicles, such as postal trucks, newspaper delivery trucks, and bread delivery trucks
- Some programs received donated school or city buses
- Other vehicles converted into mobile markets include box trucks and delivery vans
- A few projects operate 28 to 40 foot temperature-controlled trailers pulled by a pick-up truck.
- Mobile markets operating smaller vehicles often compensate for size by setting up a farm stand outside the truck or by hanging produce baskets on the outside of the truck
- Larger mobile markets feature standup refrigerators and freezers and shelving with baskets or boxes to hold produce
- A few mobile market projects run their vehicles with biodiesel and have solar panels to collect power to run electrical equipment (EBT/Credit card machines and scales) refrigeration units, interior lighting, and sound systems that play music during market stops

Mobile market partnerships

Mobile markets are complex operations that reflect the complexity of the food access issue. As a result they require extensive partnerships to realize their optimum impact in the community. Many mobile market projects employ innovative strategies and partnerships to build and operate a mobile market program. In a way, mobile markets are emblematic of the process of community building through catalyzing community assets and partnerships toward addressing community needs. The following graphic represents vital functions required for successful operation of a mobile market and illustrates the opportunities for partnerships and collaboration to fulfill these functions and expand the capacity of a project.



Key elements of mobile markets

1. **Connection to Community.** Community trust is critical for successful mobile markets. A project must have a connection to the community through meaningful community engagement. Mobile markets employ several strategies to demonstrate a genuine commitment to and respect for community members including: creation of project advisory committees with representation from community leaders and residents; participatory community assessments; hiring community members to operate the market; and developing official partnerships with community organizations that provide funding to facilitate community involvement.
2. **Consistent schedules.** Operating a consistent and regular schedule - so that the market stop is on the same day of the week and time of the day - is critical so that community members can plan ahead and fit shopping into their day. This schedule needs to be posted and promoted in the community through a website, phone number on the outside of the market vehicle, and through word of mouth.
3. **Location selection.** It is important to select market stop sites based on resident input, convenience, and community organization partnerships; a market stop site must also meet certain safety and regulatory qualifications and accommodate the market vehicle.
4. **Convenience and product selection.** Optimally, a mobile market is large enough to offer a variety of products so that community members can buy most of the basics in one location. The market quickly becomes an inconvenient model if the resident needs to stop at another store to pick up the remaining items they need. Offering a selection of pre-packaged or semi-prepared foods is important to address the needs of residents who lack the time or facilities to prepare food.
5. **Affordability.** A key element of mobile markets is that they provide high quality fresh food at affordable prices. Apart from supply side cost-controlling strategies many programs achieve this goal through federal food assistance program benefits (SNAP, WIC) utilized by mobile market shoppers. Several mobile markets offer incentive and matching programs, funded by innovative programs like Wholesome Wave,⁶ that increase the value of food assistance program benefits used to buy fresh fruits and vegetables purchased through mobile markets – for example, double value or 2:1 match type programs.
6. **Nutrition and fitness education.** It is important for mobile markets to offer some level of nutrition education to help clients learn about the nutritional value of the items sold in the market, how to plan and shop for food, and how to prepare the meals using the items purchased in the market. Some strategies offered by mobile markets include: health and diabetes screenings,

nutrition education, cooking demonstrations, food samples, recipe cards, and cooking classes. Some mobile markets also incorporate fitness activities.

7. ***Cultural appropriateness.*** Offering culturally appropriate foods and environment increases the likelihood that residents will feel comfortable shopping at the mobile market. Many mobile markets incorporate cultural elements such as hip-hop music, artwork, familiar foods, and community-based staff who speak the same language as local residents.
8. ***Innovative partnerships and collaborations.*** Partnerships are a key element to the operation of mobile markets. Some mobile market projects stem from existing collaborations while others develop formal partnerships specifically to start a mobile market. Most mobile markets partner with other organizations to implement the mobile market program, for example, to manage distribution logistics and/or provide nutrition education. Some mobile market programs used an extensive network of partners to build their programs prior to launching their market. For example, a few programs elicited help from architecture and design organizations, or business incubators, or transit agencies for vehicle donation.
9. ***Sustainability.*** Mobile markets are extremely resource intensive and complex. One key strategy to facilitate the success and sustainability of a mobile market is to catalyze existing production or distribution infrastructures to operate the mobile market. Another approach is to operate the mobile market within a high capacity organization so that overhead and administration costs are less taxing on the project.

Policy implications for mobile markets

The current trend of mobile markets is relatively new and therefore current policies and regulations do not accommodate the mobile market business model. The following are a few of the policy implications for mobile markets with some potential suggestions for changes that could positively impact mobile markets.

- ❖ **There is ambiguity in the classification of mobile markets in the existing public health regulations and food vendor codes.**
 - Develop a mobile market vending permit category that addresses the specific activities of mobile markets to clarify requirements for mobile market permits and reduce uncertainty for insurance companies.
 - Develop code uniformity across regulatory agencies.
- ❖ **Municipal codes and ordinances do not encourage or incentivize mobile markets to operate in communities with limited food access.**

- Develop neighborhood events to promote mobile markets in “food desert” neighborhoods.
- Revise city zoning laws to allow mobile markets to vend for longer periods of time on city streets and public property.

❖ **Several barriers limit participation in and utilization of food assistance programs.**

- Reduce barriers to SNAP (CalFresh) utilization among farmworker and immigrant communities.
- Develop and promote incentive and matching programs that increase the value of food assistance program benefits used to buy fresh fruits and vegetables purchased through mobile markets. For example, double your dollars type programs that allow people to receive \$10 worth of fruits and vegetables for \$5.
- Allow EBT benefits to purchase healthy pre-packaged prepared foods similar to the Restaurant Meals Program that allows the elderly, homeless and disabled individuals to buy low-cost prepared meals.
- Reduce cost and barriers for mobile food vendors to receive wireless EBT card reader devices.
- Develop a program that assists mobile markets to become authorized WIC vendors.

Section 2: Mobile Market Project Directory

Arcadia's Mobile Farmers' Market⁷

Washington D.C.

Mobile Market Launch Date: 2012

Organizational Structure: Non-profit

This project is operated by Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food and Agriculture, a non-profit educational farm with a food distribution hub started by the Neighborhood Restaurant Group (NRG) to supply restaurants and the community with local foods.

Beans & Greens⁸

Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas

Mobile Market Launch Date: May 2011

Organizational Structure: Foundation

Beans & Greens is a pilot project, founded and operated by the Menorah Legacy Foundation, featuring a SNAP matching program and mobile market.

BusFarm⁹

Richmond, Virginia

Project Launch Date: 2009

Organizational Structure: For-profit converting to a non-profit

BusFarm is a non-profit (pending) project started by Farm 2 Family, a for profit farm that operates a mobile farmers' market and an indoor market.

Chattanooga Mobile Market¹⁰

Chattanooga, Tennessee

Mobile Market Launch Date: June 2012

Organizational Structure: Collaborative: YMCA, County Health Department, Food advocacy organization, Food Bank

A collaborative of five key partners operates this project including:

- YMCA of Metropolitan Chattanooga (manages project and provides staffing)
- Chattanooga Food Bank (provides operational logistics and storage)
- Hamilton County Health Department Step ONE program (provides nutrition and fitness education)
- Gaining Ground (provides local food advocacy and promotion)

- Grow Healthy Together Chattanooga (a neighborhood coalition providing connection to the community)

Freshmobile¹¹

Madison, Wisconsin

Mobile Market Launch Date: June 2012

Organizational Structure: Non-profit

The owner of Fresh Madison Market, a local grocery store, founded Freshmobile.

Fresh Moves Mobile Produce Market¹²

Chicago, Illinois

Mobile Market Launch Date: May 2011

Organizational Structure: Non-profit

Started by Food Desert Action, an organization developed to address food deserts in Chicago

Fulton Fresh¹³

Atlanta, GA

Mobile Market Launch Date: 2011

Organizational Structure: County Cooperative Extension

Operated by Fulton County Cooperative Extension, an agricultural outreach and education program that is supported by Fulton County and the University of Georgia.

Garden on the Go¹⁴

Indianapolis, Indiana

Mobile Market Launch Date: 2011

Organizational Structure: Partnership: University health center and grocery home delivery service

This project is a partnership between Garden on the Go, an initiative developed and operated by Indiana University Health and Green B.E.A.N. Delivery, a regional grocery home delivery service (provides the truck and distribution logistics).

Gorge Grown Mobile Farmers Market¹⁵

Hood River, Oregon

Mobile Market Launch Date: 2008

Organizational Structure: Non-profit

Gorge Grown Food Network is a “citizen-driven” local food advocacy organization that operates several programs – farmers’ markets, farm-to-institution, research and advocacy.

Greensgrow Farms Neighborhood Markets¹⁶

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Mobile Market Launch Date: 2011

Organizational Structure: Non-profit

Greensgrow Farms, an urban farm program including a nursery, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, farmers markets and other farm and food related projects, operates this mobile market.

Healthy Harvest Mobile Market¹⁷

Kansas City, Missouri

Mobile Market Launch Date: July 2012

Organizational Structure: Non-profit hospital

Healthy Harvest Mobile Market is a project operated by the Hospital Hill Economic Development Corporation, an economic development organization initiated by the Truman Medical Centers to start community grocery stores in partnership with the hospital.

Hub City Farmers’ Market Mobile Market¹⁸

Spartanburg, South Carolina

Mobile Market Launch Date: July 2012

Organizational Structure: Partnership: non-profit

The Hub City Farmers’ Market, a local farmers’ market management organization, operates the market logistics and Partner for Active Living, a non-profit, promotes active lifestyles and advocates for bikeable and walkable communities.

MoGro¹⁹

Santo Domingo Pueblo, New Mexico

Mobile Market Launch date: April 2011 (shut down for modifications and reopened in June 2012)

Organizational Structure: Partnership: for-profit LLC, university and food coop/distributor

This project is a partnership operated by three key entities:

- MoGro is a LLC founded by retired Sysco Corp CEO and his wife specifically for the mobile market project.
- Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health provides connection to the rural, Native American pueblos and provides nutrition and fitness education.
- La Montanita Coop, a Consumer food coop and food distributor manages the trailer operations, food purchasing and storage, and MoGro employees.

My Street Grocery²⁰

Portland, Oregon

Mobile Market Launch Date: April 2012

Organizational Structure: For-profit social enterprise

My Street Grocery was founded by Portland State MBA students specifically to operate a mobile market.

Nashville Mobile Market²¹

Nashville, Tennessee

Mobile Market Launch Date: February 2012

Organizational Structure: University

The Nashville Mobile Market is a Student-run social enterprise venture through Vanderbilt University' Center for Health Services.

People's Grocery²²

West Oakland, California

Mobile Market Launch date: 2002 (closed in 2008)

Organizational Structure: Non-profit

People's Grocery is a food justice organization operating urban agriculture projects, nutrition education programs, and youth-focused social enterprises. People's Grocery was one of the first programs in the country to address food access issues via mobile market.

Real Food Farm Mobile Farmers' Market²³

Baltimore, Maryland

Mobile Market Launch Date: 2011

Organizational Structure: Non-profit

This project is operated by Real Food Farm, an urban agriculture enterprise and education farm that is a program of CivicWorks, a Baltimore community service agency.

Veggie Mobile²⁴

Troy, New York

Mobile Market Launch Date: 2007

Organizational Structure: Non-profit

Veggie Mobile is a project of Capital District Community Gardens, a community service organization operating community gardens.

West Philadelphia Fresh Food Hub²⁵

West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Mobile Market Launch Date: April 2012

Organizational Structure: Non-profit

The West Philadelphia Fresh Food Hub was started by two urban agriculture organizations: Preston's Paradise and Greensgrow Farms Philadelphia Project.

Endnotes

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⁹ <http://thefarmbus.com>

¹⁰ <http://chattanoogaamobilemarket.org/>

¹¹ <http://www.marketonwheels.com/>

¹² <http://freshmoves.org/>

¹³ <http://www.fultoncountyga.gov/fulcohome>

¹⁴ <http://iuhealth.org/garden-on-the-go/>

¹⁵ <http://www.gorgegrown.com/default.cfm>

¹⁶ <http://www.greensgrow.org/farm/index.php>

¹⁷ <http://www.hhedc.com/Default.aspx>

¹⁸ <http://www.hubcityfm.org/>

¹⁹ <http://www.mogro.net/>

²⁰ <http://mystreetgrocery.com/>

²¹ <http://www.nashvillemobilemarket.org/>

²² <http://www.peoplesgrocery.org/>

²³ <http://www.realfoodfarm.org/>

²⁴ <http://theveggiemobile.blogspot.com/>

²⁵ <http://www.prestonsparadise.org/>