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# Assessing the SNAP Consumer Environment at Farmers Markets

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**Abstract.** The SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment was developed as a tool for market managers to examine SNAP participant accessibility for redeeming SNAP benefits at farmers markets. By completing the SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment, the tool can serve as a guide for providing practical next steps for market improvement. Extension practitioners and researchers, including SNAP-Ed staff, can use the assessment tool to support policy, systems, and environment change efforts that promote access to local, high-quality foods by SNAP consumers, the redemption of SNAP benefits, and potentially increased sales at farmers markets.

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## INTRODUCTION

Farmers markets are critical elements of healthy, sustainable food systems (Gillespie et al., 2007; Lyson et al., 1995). They serve as prime access points for fresh and healthy local foods, encouraging increases in fruit and vegetable consumption (George et al., 2011), while also supporting local agriculture and economies. They can also address disparities in healthy food access for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants. Unfortunately, SNAP redemption remains low at farmers markets nationally (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2020).

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Education (SNAP-Ed) program has emerged as a key supporter for increasing awareness and purchases at farmers markets among SNAP shoppers (Savoie-Roskos et al., 2016). Although direct education and community engagement efforts have successfully increased fruit and vegetable purchases among consumers already redeeming benefits at farmers markets, these strategies do not address the various other dimensions of access that could further increase SNAP redemption and create repeat customers. User friendly tools that assess markets’ operational practices against dimensions of consumer accessibility can help with attraction and retention of SNAP shoppers.

The Virginia SNAP-Ed program developed the SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment to assess the physical, social, and cultural environment of farmers markets. The tool identifies strategies to support and expand the reach of farmers markets as healthy food destinations by providing Extension professionals with tangible next steps for market managers. The underlying hypothesis is that farmers markets must consistently convey a welcoming experience for SNAP redemption efforts to be successful.

The purpose of this manuscript is to outline the SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment tool and to promote the utility of the assessment for Extension professional use in partnership with farmers market personnel.

## SNAP AT FARMERS MARKET ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

The assessment contains a total of 41 questions broken into time interval sections, with responses being “yes” or “no.” The assessment was created to be completed by an Extension professional with a farmers market manager.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

The tool was designed to be comprehensive yet concise, mutually identify strategies while minimizing respondent burden, as well as to be sensitive enough to detect improvements made over time. Question content was informed by existing research on low-income participants' experiences with farmers markets (Usher, 2015; Freedman et al., 2016), the SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework (USDA, 2016) to ensure alignment with SNAP-Ed evaluative goals, and Virginia SNAP-Ed staff's experiences. The tool was developed using the five dimensions of food access as a conceptual framework (Usher, 2015). The table displays the dimension of food access and the concept it addresses with the correlating questions from SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment tool.

## **CONTENT REVIEW**

Twelve food access experts and stakeholders, including agri-business organizations, farmers market managers, and Cooperative Extension and SNAP-Ed professionals, assessed content validity of the tool. Each reviewer was asked to comment on the tool's ability to address and provide remedies for the dimensions of access, as well as its potential to be adopted by various farmers market partners, its tool structure, and its question clarity.

## **FEASIBILITY TESTING**

The SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment was tested at a convenience sample of ten Virginia farmers markets in 2017 with market managers completing the assessment independently. The tool was tested again at a convenience sample of nine Virginia farmers markets in 2020 with assistance from a trained, SNAP-Ed summer intern. Feasibility testing revealed that 17 of the 19 market managers found the tool to be feasible for use to assess the market environment. All (19 of 19) market managers deemed the tool to be helpful for identifying areas of growth and for providing direction on how to incorporate solutions for current gaps in offerings or practices.

Managers were asked to provide suggested improvements, including opinions on length, content, and proposed solutions. The research team reviewed results to develop further improvement strategies. Four logistical concerns were outlined during the feasibility testing: lack of availability of the tool in .pdf format; hyperlinks not functioning properly; additional space requested for comments; and breaking the assessment into different parts. Other feedback received during feasibility testing revealed the tool provided workable solutions for common problems within the market setting.

## **HOW TO USE THE SNAP AT FARMERS MARKET ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT TOOL**

The SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment was designed to assist Extension professionals in supporting farmers market partners in strengthening their access as food outlets for SNAP shoppers by providing links to resources to improve the user's experience. The assessment is intended to be completed by an Extension professional with the farmers market manager or other staff, but where an Extension professional is not available the assessment can be completed independently by the farmers market personnel. To provide the best support for the partner, the Extension professional should orient themselves with the linked resources within the assessment prior to completing the assessment.

The assessment is separated into three sections; pre-market season, market season, and post-market season. Although each section corresponds to a different time point, the assessment should be fully completed in preparation for the market season or when market managers have the time to devote to potentially altering their market. Each question can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no' response, with each 'no' answer being marked for post completion follow up. 'No' responses can be addressed by using the provided linked resources. The Extension professional should use the tool to help their farmers market partner with identifying which tangible next steps could be feasible for their market.

The assessment tool does not have a scoring system and is, instead, designed to have the Extension professional help the farmers market partner to increase the number of 'yes' responses to the assessment questions over time. The SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment can be completed annually to best support continued market growth in accessibility for SNAP shoppers.

# Assessing the SNAP Consumer Environment at Farmers Markets

**Table 1.** Dimensions of Access Addressed on the SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment

Dimension of Access & Concepts Addressed	Correlating Questions
<p>Acceptability: Have you created a market environment that is inclusive to all customers, including those who receive SNAP benefits?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is your market’s commitment to welcoming all shoppers included in your market’s mission statement?</li> <li>• Is it included on your website, advertising and training manuals?</li> <li>• Have you considered the “Market Champions” outreach mode, which uses local volunteers to talk about your program to their neighbors and around their communities?</li> <li>• Do you have seating available for customers to have a place to relax and/or socialize?</li> <li>• Do you offer family-friendly, educational programming that fits the culture of your market, such as:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nutrition or gardening classes offered through VCE?</li> <li>• Market tours?</li> <li>• New customer welcome/orientation?</li> <li>• Cooking demos, free samples, recipes reflective of your community?</li> <li>• Music/entertainment that reflects the culture(s) of your community?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Have you partnered with local organizations to provide outings for groups, such as day trips for seniors, moms from the local WIC program, Family Nutrition Program nutrition education groups, etc.?</li> <li>• Have you shared sales information and market success stories with your board, vendors, local politicians, and the media to celebrate what your SNAP program does for your community?</li> </ul>
<p>Accessibility: What measures are the market and the individual vendors taking to increase physical access and visibility of their acceptance of SNAP benefits and how are these measures being promoted to the community at large?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do vendors understand SNAP regulations and what purchases are allowed using SNAP?</li> <li>• Do your board, city council and/or market administrator understand the benefit of accepting SNAP to the market and the community?</li> <li>• Is your board aware of your market’s SNAP program?</li> <li>• Is your city/town council aware of your market’s SNAP program?</li> <li>• Do they have quick talking points to explain the program and its benefits to many types of audiences, such as market shoppers, potential funders, etc.?</li> <li>• Have you formed partnerships with community organizations and government agencies to help you get the word out about your SNAP program?</li> <li>• Have you tapped their know-how of how to reach the SNAP population and how to make your market more welcoming to SNAP shoppers?</li> <li>• Do you have a SNAP marketing plan or strategy?</li> <li>• Do you use simple illustrations on advertising materials to explain your SNAP program? This can help low literacy readers or those for whom English is their second language.</li> <li>• Do you have a simple “Frequently Asked Questions” poster or a section of your website about your SNAP program?</li> <li>• Do vendors have quick talking points to educate shoppers about how to shop with SNAP at the farmers market?</li> <li>• Do you have easily recognizable market staff/volunteers (example: wearing a bright colored or market- specific shirt)?</li> <li>• Do you have well-trained staff or volunteers to run the EBT machine?</li> <li>• Do you provide basic information to staff, volunteers and vendors on how SNAP benefits are given out?</li> <li>• Do the volunteers/staff running your EBT machine know how to process paper vouchers in case of machine malfunction?</li> <li>• Are you aware of the public transportation routes to get to your market? Is this information on your website/advertising materials?</li> <li>• Do you have clear signs at the market entrance and throughout the market saying you gladly accept SNAP?</li> <li>• Is the EBT machine clearly visible or do signs point customers to the EBT machine?</li> </ul>

Table 1. (continued)

Dimension of Access & Concepts Addressed	Correlating Questions
Accommodation: Has your market considered the ways in which it meets the needs of the community they serve?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you have your accounting system for SNAP vendor reimbursements set up?</li> <li>• Have you surveyed your community to understand how your market is regarded by both current shoppers and those who have never come to your market?</li> <li>• Are your advertising materials translated into all of the languages in your community?</li> <li>• Are your volunteers or staff fluent in the languages spoken in your community?</li> <li>• Do you offer your staff and volunteers cultural competency training to help them communicate with a variety of customers?</li> <li>• Do the staff or volunteers running your EBT machine have quick talking points to explain your SNAP program and how to shop in the market with SNAP benefits?</li> <li>• Have you taken steps to improve your SNAP program based on ideas from shoppers, vendors, community partners, funders, etc.?</li> </ul>
Affordability: Does your market make it convenient for all consumers to exercise food resource management skills and/or offer promotions that “stretch” the methods of payment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do vendors clearly display all prices?</li> <li>• Have you set aside a budget for SNAP marketing tools?</li> <li>• Do you have funds or a plan for raising funds for a SNAP incentive program?</li> <li>• Do all of your market vendors who sell SNAP approved foods have to accept SNAP?</li> <li>• Have you created a map or list of all vendors, what they sell, and who accepts SNAP?</li> <li>• Have you compiled SNAP sales information?</li> </ul>
Availability: Does the market consider the types of vendors they recruit and are vendors cognizant of the food they are selling?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do vendors have information about SNAP shopper habits at farmers markets?</li> <li>• Have you and your vendors been trained in “Enhancing the Safety of Locally Grown Produce”?</li> <li>• Do you have a sign, newsletter, or social media message alerting SNAP customers to the foods available at the market each day so they can plan a shopping list or meals on a tight budget?</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

The SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment is a unique resource for farmers market managers and Extension professionals invested in increasing traffic to farmers markets and benefit redemption by SNAP shoppers. This tool can be used by in-field practitioners to assess the needs of farmers markets while simultaneously being directed to relevant resources for improving the farmers market SNAP consumer food environment. The resources linked within the tool should be customized for the state or locality in which it is being used for the best user experience and correlation of solutions. Conducting the assessment in preparation for the market season is a strategy for Extension professionals to formulate data-driven, actionable steps for supporting their local farmers market. Conducting the SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment annually would allow improvements to be tracked over time. By using the SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment, SNAP-Ed practitioners and market managers can measure their ability to foster an inclusive environment for all market customers and identify strategies for creating a more inclusive environment.

The SNAP at Farmers Market Environmental Assessment can be obtained by contacting the Virginia Family Nutrition Program at [vafnp@vt.edu](mailto:vafnp@vt.edu) or visiting our website. The tool should be adapted for each state or region as appropriate.

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