

Addressing Food Insecurity through the FRESH Delivery Project, Osapa Tunowa

The Chickasaw Nation

Poonam Gupta and Elaine Waxman

Tailoring communication methods is key to reaching tribal members, particularly those who may relocate frequently. Using e-mail, text, phone calls, and reaching out to relatives may be needed to encourage participation and get program feedback.

In communities with significant transportation barriers, implementing “last mile” delivery can increase participation.

Flexibility in data collection throughout the program can support ongoing program monitoring and real-time implementation of learnings.

Promising practices could include offering fresh produce via mobile markets, a last-mile delivery option, and opportunities for providing feedback.

Tribal communities face additional barriers to healthy food access and elevated food insecurity. In 2020, the Walmart Foundation awarded grants to 11 community-based projects offering innovative approaches to supporting healthy food access. The grants focused on initiatives that improve access to fresh foods for regions and populations experiencing disproportionately high rates of food insecurity. The Urban Institute was engaged by the Walmart Foundation to assess lessons learned across the 11 grant sites to inform future efforts to improve healthy food access in other communities. This fact sheet provides a brief summary of the Chickasaw Nation’s initiative, which focused on reducing food insecurity among tribal members by using a mobile market format to increase access to fruits and vegetables for tribal members in mostly rural areas.

FRESH PRODUCE DISTRIBUTION

The Chickasaw Nation partnered with the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma (RFBO) to expand its existing Packed Promise program, which provided a monthly food box and \$15 Fresh Check meant to purchase fresh produce at local grocery stores, into the Fresh Delivery Project called “Osapa Tunowa” (traveling garden). This program consists of a mobile market distributing prepackaged boxes of fruits and vegetables at 12 predetermined sites covering a large geographic area. This program’s aim was increasing redemption of Fresh Checks, which saw low rates of uptake in the earlier program. The goal of this new initiative was to bring fresh produce directly to Chickasaw members in food-insecure communities so they could more readily use their checks to redeem produce at the mobile market. To connect participants to their own food heritage, the program used Chickasaw names for and stories about cultural foods in their nutrition education materials.

Food insecurity in tribal communities. Members of the Chickasaw Nation have experienced historical dispossession of their land and food resources and ongoing economic and health disadvantages. As a result, Chickasaw members face significantly higher rates of food insecurity than other groups and can benefit from targeted interventions.

Partnership with RFBO. This project was Chickasaw Nation’s first partnership with RFBO. The program created five types of boxes with varying fruits and vegetables in partnership with the food bank. The program had to pivot from its original model of providing choice to participants via mobile market trucks because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, after the first year, the program started seeing a decrease in participants coming to the distribution sites, so the program requested an extension and reintroduced choice: clients can choose from 10 different fruit and vegetable RFBO-sourced options, and the prices are often lower than in a grocery store. They immediately saw an uptick in participation, and a staff member noted, “The excitement of people coming and getting what they want, it’s night and day. Choice makes a huge difference, and it feels like a different program.”

ONGOING PROGRAMMING SHIFTS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF PARTICIPANTS

In addition to shifting the program model, Osapa Tunowa staff also tailored other program components to meet the needs of their tribal members. As a staff member aptly put it, “Anytime you’re working with a vulnerable population, you can’t be scared of the adjustments you need to make.”

Tailoring communication methods. Some tribal member households move frequently and change their phone numbers, making it difficult to relay distribution dates and times and obtain data. The Chickasaw Nation team staff worked to reach participants by phone, e-mail, mail, text, and sometimes through relatives. They also utilized One Call Now, an automated outreach system, to send food distribution reminders.

Increasing participation with “last mile” delivery. Some of the 12 distribution sites saw high pickup rates, while others utilized “last mile” delivery. Although the program did not include delivery in the original project proposal, Osapa Tunowa staff delivered some meals to participants’ doors, which became critical to the program’s success. In low takeup areas, staff found that some families lived nearby but had significant transportation barriers. One staff member described a grandmother who used a wheelchair, was taking care of four grandchildren, lacked access to a functional vehicle, and could not pick up boxes. “Being close to the community is not enough,” said one grantee staff member.

Allowing for flexible data collection. Program staff conducted pre- and post-program surveys to assess barriers to redeeming Fresh Checks, satisfaction with Osapa Tunowa, and outcomes, such as frequency of eating fresh fruits and vegetables. Participants received cards with nutrition education, including Chickasaw produce names and traditional stories. Knowledge of these food items was also assessed at baseline and post-program. The staff also gathered real-time feedback from the full-time driver who interacted with participants during food distribution drops.

Including participant feedback. During the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain issues made it difficult for the food bank partner to secure a reliable variety of produce. The need to pack and transport the produce over large distances also constrained produce variety. For larger families who received multiple boxes, the lack of choice made prepacked boxes less appealing. The Chickasaw Nation has increased choice for tribal families and is still considering the logistical challenges of covering a large geographic area.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Last-mile delivery and mobile markets are flexible and responsive approaches to addressing food insecurity in dispersed tribal communities. With limited retail food options in rural tribal areas, it can be difficult for families to access fresh foods, and transportation costs may mean federal benefits, such as SNAP, may not stretch as far. Bringing fresh fruits and vegetables directly to communities can help address this gap. Using intentional data collection and listening to frontline staff and participant feedback helps program staff redesign features.

ADDITIONAL READING

FROM SAFETY NET TO SOLID GROUND

Four Policies That Matter for Scaling Healthy Food Access Interventions

Elaine Waxman and Cassandra Martinchek