

Food Insecurity **in the** COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the number of Virginians who struggle to consistently acquire enough food to feed themselves and their families. It has been estimated that an additional 446,000 Virginians have become food insecure during the pandemic, in addition to the 850,000 Virginians who were already struggling before the pandemic and economic downturn.



Restrictions in response to the pandemic have resulted in huge disruptions to the food supply, including higher food costs, changes in food availability, and changes in operations of retail outlets and emergency food systems. For example, in March 2020, farmers markets were deemed non-essential businesses by Virginia Executive Orders 53 and 55. Farmers markets not only sell local and regionally produced foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables, but also provide nutrition incentives for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants through match funds, making fresh food more affordable. If someone uses \$30 of their SNAP benefits, they can get another \$30 worth of fruits and vegetables free.



Response

Virginia Fresh Match (VFM) is an established statewide network of farmers markets and neighborhood food retail stores who provide point of purchase nutrition incentives for fruits and vegetables for SNAP shoppers.



In response to the pandemic, the VFM network quickly mobilized to address the increased food needs of people who shop with SNAP and to ensure that farmers markets operated safely per Executive orders. In partnership with the Virginia Cooperative Extension Family Nutrition Program (FNP) and the Virginia Farmers Market Association (VAFMA), VFM was able to pivot to address the increased needs of both consumers seeking access to affordable food and the need of farmers and producers seeking outlets for their products. Some examples of farmers markets response across the state include developing innovative alternatives to limits on in-person shopping including drive thru markets, creating new low contact shopping methods (online platforms, ordering by phone), and home delivery services.

VFM, with FNP and VAFMA, led weekly network calls with up to 90 participants who represented farmers markets and food access advocates across the state. These calls allowed for efficient, responsive, and widespread dissemination of rapidly changing state protocols as the pandemic unfolded. They also served as a forum to provide technical assistance to markets, support COVID-19 compliance, facilitate conversations between state agency leadership and market managers, and share resources for how to manage SNAP sales on alternate platforms. Additionally, each partner provided markets with expertise, technical assistance, and resources matching their organization's mission and capacity:

Virginia Family Nutrition Program

- Surveyed farmers market managers across the state to determine the impact of COVID-19 on their operations
- Conducted a social marketing campaign targeting Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) recipients about how to use their benefits at farmers markets and increase their purchasing power through SNAP incentive programs
- Provided online food demonstrations for farmers market partners, showing customers how to use fruits and vegetables



Virginia Fresh Match

- Lifted previous caps on SNAP incentives to increase SNAP consumers' buying power in grocery and farmers market retail settings
- Distributed \$500 in COVID-19 response grant funds to 20 Virginia farmers markets for a total of \$10,000 to assist operators with unexpected COVID-related costs such as increased staff time and Personal Protective Equipment and materials
- Assembled COVID resources, helping partners navigate, share best practices and promote peer mentoring
- Created online/digital marketing templates for farmers markets and retailers to disseminate information about Virginia Fresh Match
- Spearheaded Emergency Produce meetings with public and private stakeholders to utilize available local produce as part of Virginia's COVID-19 emergency feeding response



Virginia Farmers Market Association

- Worked with representatives to put forward House Bill 2302 stating farmers markets be considered essential businesses to the same extent as grocery stores during a state of emergency
- Worked closely with state agencies to adapt policies to allow markets to re-open for in-person shopping
- Provided national webinars for farmers market managers on how to adapt to an online farmers market format
- Developed a central COVID information page for markets to access up to date information

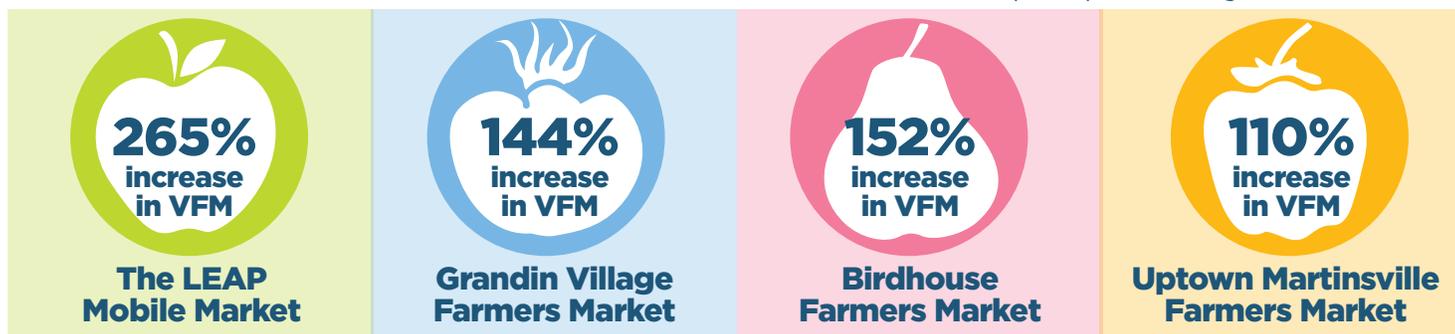


Based on a spring 2020 survey of Virginia farmers market managers (n=90), 76% received support from VAFMA, 70% received support from FNP and 63% received support from VFM.

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Impact of Collaborative Efforts on Farmers Markets and SNAP Participation

Farmers Markets saw dramatic increases in the amount of SNAP incentives redeemed and participation in Virginia Fresh Match:



Farmers Market Managers and SNAP participants mentioned the importance of the availability of match funds to help them thrive:

"I have seen an increase this year in our SNAP usage and have talked with many who have lost their well-paying jobs and literally had their lives turned upside down. There is a family type of feeling to the Farmers Markets where they can purchase much needed food without feeling less than human. Pretty much all of them have said they feel strong again and with the SNAP program stretching their dollars they feel like providers for their families."

- Manassas Farmers Market manager

"Not only has the matching program greatly impacted market customers, but it has also allowed vendors to continue to make sales and prosper during this economically difficult time. This season, 20% of vendor sales came from incentive programs at our markets. We are grateful to be able to offer a VFM program at our farmers markets because not only does it make our markets and local food more accessible, but it supports our local growers and economy."

- Waynesboro Market Manager

"I am amazed. My new customers are up by 50% and half of those are customers with SNAP tokens. I have many older customers using SNAP for the first time who have lost jobs due to COVID. The program has been a great service in putting food on their tables!"

- Tom Weaver of Papa Weaver's Pork.

Tom has been a Virginia pork producer for many years. This year, he reports that his wholesale markets virtually disappeared, and overall sales are 70% of prior years but expenses remain unchanged. At the farmers market, he's seen a shift in customer base and a jump in SNAP sales.

"As a single mother with no income, if they didn't do this and supply the match, we'd go hungry. We moved in with my mom and that takes care of housing, but I am still responsible for providing all the essentials for myself and my children. It helps so much. Without WIC, SNAP and the match, I would not have been able to make ends meet."

- Sara, Spotsylvania Farmers Market

