

Double Dollars: Transforming Food Accessibility Through Incentives

Katherine Bennett 09 June 2011

Summary

The Double Dollars partnership targets families and heads of households in order to improve the well-being of Philadelphia communities and create lasting connections between healthy food and hungry stomachs. Partners in the Double Dollars initiative include Fair Food, Wholesome Wave Foundation, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and the Philadelphia Department of Public Health.

At United Way's second annual Strategic Partnership Conference: Creating Innovation and Impact Through Partnership, Double Dollars was awarded a prize of \$2,500 for their existing operation, which provides incentives for healthy food purchases to low-income populations in Philadelphia. [Read about the Strategic Partnership Conference here.](#)

Introduction

Nearly 1 in 4 people in Philadelphia lives in poverty, double

the rates experienced at both the national and state levels. More than one-third of all children in Philadelphia live in poverty. According to the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger (2010), in 2009, more than 316,000 Philadelphia residents received help from a food pantry. As of January 2011, more than 441,000 Philadelphia residents rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) to put food on their tables.

Programs such as Wholesome Wave's Double Value Coupon Program increase the use of SNAP dollars to purchase healthy food options by providing incentives for purchases. In partnership with Wholesome Wave Foundation and state and local governmental agencies, Fair Food has successfully implemented the Double Dollars program in Philadelphia.

The Problem: Gaps in Food Access

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The majority of Philadelphia's citizens live below the national poverty level. The city is consistently ranked the highest for rates of obesity, although the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger (2010) has found that more than 25 percent of the population is cited as chronically hungry.

This apparent paradox is created by a gap in

Philadelphia's food access systems. Many neighborhoods fail to offer full-service grocery options, leaving residents little choice in purchasing options for grocery needs. People living in these areas, known as food deserts, show increased risk for health problems associated with poor diet. As mortality rates from heart disease and diabetes climb, the need for increased access to healthy, affordable food for low-income residents has become clear.

The Solution: The Double Dollars Program

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As noted by the White House Task Force on Child Obesity, collaborative efforts between public and private sectors and between government and educators are needed to ensure that we provide each child with the tools necessary for healthy lives. Food deserts can be addressed by lowering the relative prices of healthier foods; developing or reformulating food products to be healthier; and reducing the incidence of hunger, which has been linked to obesity. Collaborative approaches from farmers markets, foundations, local governments and nonprofits have shown an ability to improve the health and nutrition of low-income families and their children.

Past incentive projects have demonstrated success in increasing fruit and vegetable consumption in households. Researchers at the University of California,

Los Angeles, showed that participants given double-value vouchers for local farmers markets consumed an average of three additional servings of fruits and vegetables each day as compared to those who did not receive coupons (Parker-Pope 2008). The study also showed a behavioral change six months after the coupon program had ceased, with participants maintaining the higher rate of produce consumption.

In order to improve the well-being of Philadelphia's families, an incentive program was generated through a partnership between Fair Foods, the Wholesome Wave Foundation, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and the Philadelphia Department of Public Health. The Double Dollars program targets families and heads of households who receive SNAP benefits by providing incentives for healthy purchase options. The partnership's overall mission is to encourage and promote the purchase and consumption of fresh, local and healthy food among low-income individuals.

The Double Dollars program provides a simple solution. The program doubles the value of any purchase made with SNAP dollars at farmers markets, up to \$20 a week. Fair Foods has successfully implemented this program at the Fair Food Farmstand in Philadelphia's Reading Terminal Market. The Reading Terminal Market is centrally located, easily accessed by public transportation and open seven days a week, year-round. According to the

U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (2009), the market redeems the highest number of SNAP dollars in Pennsylvania. Currently, fifteen merchants accept Electronic Benefit Transfers. Fair Foods Farmstand is one of the largest vendors in the market, carrying a variety of fresh produce, meats and dairy products from more than 90 sustainable farm producers in the region.

The Fair Food Farmstand's valuable location in Reading Terminal Market places the collaborative in an exceptional position to affect low-income populations with greater health risks. This partnership, comprising both public and private entities, uses a multi-tiered approach. Each partner adds value to Double Dollars' collective goal:

- **Fair Food** manages the Farm Food Farmstand. The nonprofit agency is committed to building healthy local food systems in Philadelphia. The organization works directly with both buyers and growers to bring fresh, healthy and local products to the Philadelphia marketplace while educating the community about sustainable practices in agriculture.
- **Wholesome Wave** has provided start-up funds to the Double Dollars program and provides technical assistance through program design, evaluation and data collection. The nonprofit organization implements Double Value Coupon Programs that enable communities experiencing high rates of food insecurity to increase their consumption of fresh,

healthy, locally grown foods. Their Double Value Coupon Program runs in 12 states and the District of Columbia at nearly a hundred farmers markets and farm stands.

- **The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare** has also contributed start-up funds to the program to support critical outreach to the communities who will benefit. The department plans to utilize the data collected from the Farmstand in future planning and programs on the state level.
- **The Philadelphia Department of Public Health** has provided Double Dollars with a sophisticated point-of-sale system. This system provides vital resources as a state-of-the-art data source for the partnership as it moves forward.

Conclusion

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Double Dollars is very different from any other incentive program; the partnership in an exceptional physical position to reach the most vulnerable populations in Philadelphia. People using federal food benefits are able to access the Reading Terminal Market from every part of the city by train, trolley, bus and subway.

The sophistication of the Farmstand's point-of-sale system will also afford the partnership the ability to

understand and disseminate the consumer use data. Never before, on such a large scale, has a farm stand been able to collect data in order to drive advocacy and policy on behalf of at-risk populations. The Double Dollars program and Philadelphia will be the first to create comprehensive analysis of Double Value Coupon Program's impact.

The long-term goal of Double Dollars is to more fully understand these coupons' effectiveness in driving behavior change, in continuing behavior change post-incentive, and in serving as a tool for recruiting SNAP-eligible individuals. Additionally, the program plans to evaluate the value of supporting behavior change through one-on-one engagement.

This partnership may also have a significant impact on the benefits that individuals receive. One of the long-term goals of Double Dollars is to enroll shoppers in SNAP assistance and target current beneficiaries for re-enrollment efforts. This will benefit individuals today and in the coming years.

Katherine Bennett holds a master's degree in Nonprofit Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice and a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Temple University's Fox School of Business. She currently works for the Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia. She has previously worked

both in the private sector, for a Fortune 500 financial services provider, and the public sector, for an economic development agency. Her interests lie in small business development and improving Philadelphia's economic landscape for entrepreneurs.

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