

Meals Plus Program—An Innovative Approach for Providing Local Produce to Meals on Wheels Clients

Abstract

Extension programming often strives to achieve maximum impact on a minimum budget, but when it comes to sourcing local produce, asking farmers to donate sellable commodity can result in a dip into their profits. By connecting community partners, Extension can facilitate collaborations that work in the favor of all participating parties and ultimately provide a valuable service. This model was implemented in the development of the Meals Plus program, an add-on service to Salt Lake County Meals on Wheels (MOW). The Meals Plus program delivered 130–160 shares of local produce weekly to MOW clients during Salt Lake County's 5-month farmers' market season.

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Program Purpose

Nationally, one in six seniors over age 60 are threatened by hunger (Gunderson & Ziliak, 2014), and 60% of the 2.5 million Meals on Wheels (MOW) recipients have six to 14 chronic health conditions (Meals on Wheels Association of America, 2014). Salt Lake County's MOW program delivers 1,300 midday meals to homebound seniors to enable them to live at home independently. A typical client is female, aged 80–90, homebound, and living on an annual income of \$10,000–\$14,000. Of surveyed Salt Lake County MOW participants, 75% identified MOW meals as their primary meal each day (Salt Lake County Aging Services, personal communication, December 22, 2014). A study of Cache County, Utah, seniors found that "MOW participants reported a greater number and severity of physical problems than congregated meal participants" (Lauritzen & Windham, 1994). Hot meals meet rigorous national nutrition standards, but many seniors still lack access to a variety of locally grown raw fruits and vegetables. The Meals Plus program (MPP) fills this void by providing shares (as with community-supported agriculture programs) of diverse and locally grown produce to MOW clients weekly. A share comprises five to seven seasonal items.

Program Objectives

- Source and package locally grown produce to disseminate weekly to homebound MOW seniors.

- Use community partners with complementary missions to increase the quantity and diversity of donated produce.
- Use community volunteers to grow and package produce shares.
- Use the existing MOW distribution system to deliver shares to clients.
- Evaluate client use of produce provided in shares.

Program Design

The MPP was modeled after a similar program in San Diego County, California, the More on the Menu (MOM) program, which spends \$65,000 annually to provide fresh produce to 240 clients weekly (More on the Menu, 2014). A weekly MOM share consists of seven to 10 pieces of fresh fruits and vegetables that are purchased from a local grocer. One difference between the San Diego and Salt Lake programs is the lack of a budget to purchase produce by the latter. Initially, MPP organizers had planned to partner with a local food bank to source produce for the program. When this collaboration failed to come to fruition, organizers approached Extension for help.

Extension faculty have a track record of working with urban growers, but when they approached farmers for donations, they heard consistent feedback and found it tough to ask growers to cut into their profit margins. This situation is supported by a recent study that found that urban farmers rated production costs as the most challenging aspect of farming (Oberholtzer, Dimitri, & Pressman, 2014). One urban grower commented that he leaves food in the field every year because he does not have the manpower to harvest his plants clean. By coordinating innovative partnerships between governmental organizations, nonprofit entities, urban producers, and volunteers, Extension was able to identify multiple growers who collectively provided over \$22,000 worth of fresh produce to the MPP (see Table 1 for a list of produce provided in 2014).

Table 1.
2014 MPP Donated Produce List

June		July		August		September		
<i>Produce</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Produce</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Produce</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Produce</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Produce</i>
beet, Swiss chard, spinach	<i>chenopod</i>	beet, Swiss chard	<i>chenopod</i>	beet, Swiss chard	<i>chenopod</i>	arugula, broccoli, cabbage, collard green, kale, radish, turnip	<i>brassica</i>	beet, Swiss chard, spinach

cabbage, collard green, kale, turnip, radish	<i>brassica</i>	arugula, collard green, kale, radish	<i>brassica</i>	kale, radish	<i>brassica</i>	garlic, onion	<i>allium</i>	arugula, collard green, kale, radish
green onion, onion, leek	<i>allium</i>	garlic, onion	<i>allium</i>	leek, onion	<i>allium</i>	mixed herbs	<i>herbs</i>	garlic, leek
mixed herbs	<i>herbs</i>	mixed herbs	<i>herbs</i>	mixed herbs	<i>herbs</i>	lettuce	<i>leafy green</i>	mixed herbs
lettuce	<i>leafy green</i>	lettuce	<i>leafy green</i>	lettuce	<i>leafy green</i>	green bean, bean	<i>legume</i>	lettuce
pea	<i>legume</i>	green bean	<i>legume</i>	green bean	<i>legume</i>	carrot, fennel, parsnip	<i>parsley</i>	bean
rhubarb	<i>buckwheat</i>	carrot	<i>parsley</i>	carrot, fennel	<i>parsley</i>	cucumber, summer squash, zucchini	<i>cucurbit</i>	carrot
cherry	<i>tree fruit</i>	cucumber, summer squash, zucchini	<i>cucurbit</i>	cucumber, summer squash, zucchini	<i>cucurbit</i>	okra	<i>mallow</i>	cucumber, summer squash, zucchini
		okra	<i>mallow</i>	okra	<i>mallow</i>	pepper, tomatillo, tomato, eggplant, potato	<i>nightshade</i>	okra
		pepper	<i>nightshade</i>	pepper, tomatillo, tomato	<i>nightshade</i>	apple, pear	<i>tree fruit</i>	pepper, tomato, eggplant, potato
		apricot, nectarine, pear,	<i>tree fruit</i>	corn	<i>grass</i>	raspberry	<i>small fruit</i>	apple

		plum						
		blackberry	<i>small fruit</i>	sweet potato	<i>morning glory</i>			
				apricot, nectarine, pear, plum	<i>tree fruit</i>			
				blackberry	<i>small fruit</i>			

Participating Partners

Four primary partners agreed to grow produce for the MPP in 2014 and 2015 (Wagner, 2015).

1. The Salt Lake County Jail Horticulture Program grows a diverse 1.5-acre garden, and prisoners sell produce at a farmers' market. This program donates a portion of its crop to the MPP.
2. Green Urban Lunchbox is a nonprofit organization that participates in the Salt Lake City fruit share program. Volunteers harvest fruit from registered trees across the county. Part of the organization's mission is to donate fruit to local food assistance programs.
3. Bell Organic is an urban community-supported agriculture farm located in Salt Lake County. Bell Organic hosted youth from a state-operated juvenile justice program weekly at the farm, where the youth completed community service hours. In exchange for their labor, Bell Organic agreed to donate produce to the MPP in 2015.
4. Master Gardeners and other community volunteers tend the Meals Plus Harvest Garden located in a popular Salt Lake County park. The highly visible garden advertises the program to the public (Figure 1), provides hands-on gardening experience to volunteers, and grows produce for the MPP.

Figure 1.
Meals Plus Harvest Garden Signage



Program Delivery

Participating growers agreed to deliver produce weekly to a predetermined location at a predetermined time. Monday was determined to be the best day for delivery by MPP partners because growers harvested on the weekend or Monday morning and MOW delivery trucks delivered meals to clients Tuesday morning. By harvesting and packaging produce close to the delivery day, organizers ensured that clients received unspoiled produce. Produce was sorted by organizers and volunteers, packaged into shares, and if necessary, refrigerated overnight. All donated produce was packaged uncut and unwashed. Packaged shares were clearly marked with a sticker informing recipients to thoroughly wash produce before consumption. At the end of the growing season, recipients were surveyed to evaluate their use of received produce.

Program Highlights

In its first year, the MPP accomplished the following achievements:

- 2,090 shares of produce were packaged and disseminated to 130–160 clients weekly.
- 9,017 lb of produce, having a farmers' market value of \$22,000, were donated.
- 1,700 volunteer service hours—having an in-kind value of \$38,500 (\$22.65/hr Utah value)—were donated by community volunteers.

Program Evaluation

At the conclusion of the season, Salt Lake County Aging Services administered a satisfaction survey and provided a compiled summary of client feedback to Utah State University Extension.

- 91% of recipients reported enjoyment of received produce.
- 70% of recipients reported consumption of all produce received.

- 86% of recipients felt that the produce provided in the shares improved their health.
- 96% of recipients responded that they would recommend the MPP to friends.

Implications

Although previous studies have explored the link between local food markets and consumption of local produce (Ohri-Vachaspati, Masi, Taggart, Konen, & Kerrigan, 2009), there is limited information on programs that specifically target MOW clients. It is logical to use established food distribution systems to disseminate fresh produce to clients in need. Extension can support like programs that provide a valuable service to people in need by identifying and facilitating mutually beneficial relationships among community partners with complementary missions.

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