

Running a Low-Income CSA

A Brief Overview of the World PEAS 2012 Experience

History and Context

New Entry established the **World PEAS (People Enhancing Agricultural Sustainability) Food Hub** in 2005 with the goal to help beginning, immigrant and refugee farmers connect with local consumers seeking fresh produce. Many small and beginning farmers were struggling with small volumes of produce, transportation, time to access direct markets, or lacked English language skills to effectively access viable markets on their own. By forming a collaborative multi-producer marketing program, small, beginning, immigrant and refugee farmers are able to combine their products to more efficiently and effectively connect with local consumers. Part of the mission of the World PEAS Food Hub (WPC) includes providing fresh, locally-grown fruits and vegetables to low-income populations. This fits within the broader New Entry mission, which includes building long term economic self-reliance and food security among participants and their communities.

Over the years, World PEAS has pursued several strategies to connect low-income consumers to fresh, local produce. Partnerships with the local WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) office, Summer Feeding Programs, and Elder Service Centers (through the homebound senior program) were developed and between 2009 and 2011, World PEAS partnered with the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, (EBNHC) to provide CSA shares to EBNHC low-income clients. The program was funded using a grant from a nutrition program run by EBNHC, combined with donations raised through WPC shareholders. EBNHC purchased 9 shares each year, which were provided to EBNHC clients free of cost. Though the EBNHC was considered a success, World PEAS staff felt that it was important to expand efforts to serve low-income clients in the local Lowell area, where most of our low-income farmers reside.

In October 2011, New Entry received a USDA Farmers' Market Promotion Program (FMPP) grant to cover the operational costs for WPC to run a low-income CSA to serve the residents of Lowell. During the winter of 2012, New Entry also conducted a fundraiser to collect donations for subsidies for the low-income CSA shares. A total of \$15K was raised through the fundraiser. These funds provided resources needed for World PEAS to conduct a pilot program in 2012 (see additional information in the Resource section, below).

Through major outreach efforts with community partners and other divisions within Community Teamwork Inc. (CTI), World PEAS connected directly with low-income clients in Lowell to educate them about the program, screen for eligibility, and register them for the CSA. Clients pay \$10 weekly, in advance, for shares that are worth approximately \$23 each week. They pay either with their SNAP

cards or with cash. Beginning in July 2012, the World PEAS distributes CSA shares weekly at the Lowell Farmer's Market to low-income clients.

In addition, starting in July 2012, World PEAS partnered with Pathfinder, a Lowell-based transitional living community, to distribute the equivalent of 14 shares to homeless and low-income individuals who receive meals at the Pathfinder drop-in center. WPC provides 50% of the cost of these shares, and Pathfinder provides the remaining 50%.

Staffing and Key Partners

The World PEAS CSA **Manager** is the lead on the initiative. They determine the strategic plan for the low-income initiative, including low-income sales goals, outreach plans, and advertising activities; facilitate cross-departmental collaborations between four CTI divisions; create and maintain partnerships for effective outreach; lead meetings with community partners who work with low-income clients to provide information to pass along to their clients; supervise interns in conducting outreach, communications, education and CSA box distribution; work directly with low-income clients to evaluate intake forms, determine eligibility, analyze needs, facilitate pickup and assess the best methods of payment (SNAP/EBT or cash). In total, the efforts by the CSA Manager equate to about 9 hours/week during the planning, development and outreach stage (from January – June), and 3 hours/week during the distribution phase (July – Oct.).

The World PEAS CSA **Coordinator** communicates with farmers to order produce to fulfill low-income CSA orders. They manage the packing process, and deliver the low-income shares to the Lowell Farmers Market. Efforts by the CSA Coordinator equate to about 3 hours/week during the growing season. The low-income CSA distributions also involve four **interns**. The Planning Intern (volunteer) conducted surveys to low-income clients to determine their produce and distribution preferences and capacity to make payment. Efforts by the Planning Intern equated to about 8 hours/week for 3 months. Two Outreach Interns (one volunteer and one work-study) were responsible for presenting outreach materials directly to clients and explaining general parameters and eligibility for the program. Efforts by the Outreach Interns equated to about 6 hours/week from 4 months. The Distribution Intern is responsible for staffing the CSA distribution table at the Lowell Farmer's Market each week, and packing low-income CSA shares. His efforts equate to 6 hours/week for during the distribution period.

World PEAS partnered with four divisions at CTI to conduct outreach. As a Community Action Agency, CTI was well-positioned to connect World PEAS to low-income customers. Outside of CTI, World PEAS partnered with the Merrimack Valley Elder Services organization, the Department of Transitional Assistance, the Lowell Senior Center, and Pathfinder Program. We partnered with the Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition and the University of Massachusetts Lowell Coop Program to hire interns.

Resources

Costs for the pilot low-income CSA season (2012) is estimated as follows:

Salaries and Benefits	8,173
Consultants – Design of Outreach	
Materials/Translation	2,986
Outreach/Promotions	1,657
Rent Allocation for Packing and Distribution Site	2,000
Gas	100
Remote Internet Connection	80
Cell Phone	40
Supplies	500
Indirect Charges	<u>1,538</u>
Total Program and Operating Expenses	17,074

Operations Funding: We received a grant from the USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program to cover two years of operational costs for the low-income CSA; general promotion for use of coupons at the Farmers Market; and technical assistance and quality control for farmers who contribute to the CSA.

CSA Subsidy Funding: A fundraiser was held over the winter of 2012 to secure money to cover the difference between the \$10/share paid by the customer, and the \$23/share cost to World PEAS. A total of \$15,000 was raised to cover subsidies for low-income shares for several years into the future. For our pilot project in 2012, we expect to use \$2,400 in subsidies for the Lowell Farmers Market distribution, and \$2,100 for the Pathfinder program.

Capital Needs: The low-income CSA leverages resources available from the regular World PEAS CSA shareholders, serving over 415 customers in the Boston area. World PEAS has a packing and distribution site and produce delivery truck, which resources are used for administering the low-income CSA.

Other: Approximately 30 World PEAS farmers produce food for the low-income CSA. Also, we utilize CTI's existing EBT machine to process SNAP payments.

Key Activities

Research

We began the project by reviewing case studies developed by other organizations to learn about challenges and logistics inherent in accepting public assistance benefits (SNAP, coupon programs) for CSA shares. During the summer/fall of 2011, New Entry hired a Tufts University undergraduate student to perform outreach to Lowell Farmers Market customers and CTI Early Learning Center clients regarding the alternative SNAP CSA model. Customers were asked to complete a survey regarding their produce purchasing behavior. Through this research, we developed a better understanding of the specific fruits and vegetables preferred by customers, how much customers are willing to pay, and capacity of customers to commit to weekly purchase of a subsidized box of fruits and vegetables. A total of 30 surveys were completed. Contact information of several potential alternative CSA clients was gathered.

Planning

We developed a partnership between CTI's Division of Child and Family Services, Division of Housing and Homeless Services, Workforce Development, and Energy and Community Resources to collaborate on this initiative. We held weekly meetings from January through June 2012 to establish strategy and develop outreach materials.

Outreach Materials

We worked with graphic designers to create postcards and banners to publicize the program. In addition, we hired a translator to prepare materials for our Khmer speaking clients.

Bus Ads: A 144" bus ad was created for local buses which traverse routes throughout the greater Lowell area. The ad ran on the exterior of two buses for the months of May, June and July. In addition, a smaller version of the ad was posted to the interior of 10 buses which run in the greater Lowell area in May, June and July.

Tri-Language Outreach Informational Card: A 6"x 9" outreach card was designed to educate Khmer, Spanish and English speakers regarding the campaign.

English Language Card: A 6" by 4.5" postcard was designed for mailing to English speaking clients. The card was pilot tested during a Community Food Security focus group with Seniors and adjusted based on their feedback.

Radio Ads: The Tufts Friedman school intern developed both 30 second and 60 second radio scripts for broadcast on the local Spanish Language radio program. These ads were translated to Spanish, and broadcast during the month of May.

Direct Client Communications

In the spring of 2012, we hired a graduate student intern from Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition and a community volunteer intern to identify and directly educate potential low-income CSA recipients about the new program. Concurrently, the CSA Manager met with community partners to
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provide outreach materials for distribution. New Entry staff met with staff from Elder Services of the Merrimack Valley (ESMV), to establish opportunities for distribution of outreach materials to ESMV clients who live in the Lowell area. ESMV, located in Lawrence, distributes free lunches throughout the year to hundreds of Lowell clients. We included low-income CSA outreach materials in their lunch packets distributed to low-income seniors.

Determination of Eligibility

Clients were considered to be eligible if they either received SNAP benefits, lived in subsidized housing, or earned no more than 30% of the area median income.

Payment Processing

The CSA Manager received all payments and processed SNAP EBT card transactions using CTI's EBT machine. Payments were made one week in advance of the CSA distribution.

Delivery and Distribution

On a weekly basis, the CSA Coordinator supervises the packing of the low-income shares. The shares are delivered to the Lowell Farmers Market, and distributed to customers who have pre-paid. Shares which are not claimed are donated to CTI's Woman, Infant and Children's Nutrition program.

Goals/Strategies

- **Connect low-income consumers directly to local food producers.**
- **Improve the health and diets of low-income families through affordable, fresh and locally produced fruits and vegetables.**
- **Strengthen the Lowell Farmer's Market as a community resource and location for easy access by targeted constituents.**
- **Expend revenues for New Entry beginning farmers by expanding sales of fresh produce to low-income and senior households in Greater Lowell.**

We established a goal of reaching 15 low-income shareholders during the pilot year. As it turned out, we had a large turnover of customers, and distributed between 11 and 25 shares each week at the Lowell Farmers Market. Eventually, we established a core of about 12 low-income customers who regularly attend the Farmer's Market to pick up their CSA share. In addition, we are selling 14 shares per week to the Pathfinder Program, which reaches even more resource-limited low-income constituents who don't have the capacity to pay for CSA produce. Also, each CSA sale made represents income for World PEAS farmers, many of whom rely on payments from sales of produce to pay their farming and family living expenses.

Lessons Learned

Outreach

We began with assumption that outreach exclusively to SNAP customers would allow us meet our goals. However, we realized that we were not receiving sufficient interest from SNAP customers alone. As a result, we expanded our outreach to include individuals receiving subsidized housing benefits and CTI employees whose income is at or below 30% of the area median. This expansion allowed us to meet our target numbers.

Not all of our outreach mediums were successful. We purchased ads that ran over the Spanish language radio station. However, none of our clients indicated that they heard about the program through these ads. As a result, the ads were considered to be ineffective.

Turnover

We assumed that customers who purchased the low-income program would continue to return each week. However, we found that there was significant turnover due to several factors:

- SNAP benefits are issued once per month, and most individuals spend down their benefits soon after they receive them, not allowing for purchase of more than one or two shares/month;
- Customers realized that the CSA model requires that they spend time preparing food and many were not accustomed to cooking with fresh fruits and vegetables;
- Though we provided information and recipes for the produce distributed, customers were not always comfortable handling and preparing unfamiliar produce or it did not meet their family preferences;
- Customers found that the volume of vegetables included in the weekly shares exceeded their needs;
- Some customers were uncomfortable with the idea that they were not able to choose the produce they received;
- Some customer struggled with transportation to the pickup site and the narrow window of time to claim the shares. As a result, during the months of July and August, we continued to perform outreach to replace the customers who dropped out. Eventually, we found a core group of about 12 individuals who were interested (and able) to purchase shares each week.

We feel that some of the turnover could have been prevented through better communication with prospective customers. The CSA model does not work for everyone, and our clients would have benefited from clear messaging regarding expectations for CSA customers. We needed to work more to align the clients' needs to the needs of the CSA. Initial conversations with the clients could have flushed out whether they truly enjoy cooking, have the time to prepare meals, and whether they and their family are comfortable with exploring new tastes and unfamiliar produce.

Next Steps

Going forward, World PEAS staff realized that targeting individual consumers who need to pre-pay on a weekly basis is a very labor-intensive process and creates inconsistent CSA participation. A goal moving forward is to develop strong partnerships with local social service providers (similar to the Pathfinder / EBHNC model) whereby the service provider can leverage additional resources and assist in absorbing multiple shares each week and commit to purchasing a consistent supply of shares for their clients. To expand the low-income CSA program, the ideal scenario would be to have multiple service providers each agreeing to support 15-25 shares per week to be distributed in their programming for low-income clients or to partner with low-income housing units or assisted living facilities where World PEAS delivers shares directly to clients that have the capacity to cook the produce. This type of model could be combined with additional training and nutrition outreach in healthy eating/cooking of fresh produce.