

New coalition encourages healthy eating, supports local farms

BY CAROL LEA SPENCE, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food & the Environment. Photo by Stephen Patton

LEXINGTON, Ky., - A successful coalition in Madison, Wisconsin, has sparked the interest of a group of local food advocates in Lexington, so much so that they started a similar pilot project at the University of Kentucky. The program joins employee wellness and community supported agriculture—a true town and gown initiative that stands to benefit a great number of people, its advocates believe.

Tim Woods, UK agricultural economics professor, returned enthused from a trip to Madison where he explored the success of the FairShare Community Supported Agriculture Coalition. For the past 20 years, FairShare has used a voucher system to link consumers with local farmers who produce a bounty of fresh, nutritious food. A wide number of organizations, including the University of Wisconsin, distribute the vouchers to their employees.

“This past year, they (FairShare) offered 9,300 vouchers to employees across Madison,” Woods said. “That’s in the area of \$6 million in revenue to those CSA farms just in the Madison area.”

Woods believes a program like this in Central Kentucky could be a huge benefit for local farmers who are considering offering CSAs as well as consumers who are looking at making healthier food choices.

“We find so few kinds of interventions that will really encourage such a broad base of change in diet, change in lifestyle, change in focus on nutrition,” he said. “Joining a CSA really seems to pull lots and lots of levers.”

So Woods and College of Agriculture, Food and Environment colleagues Alison Davis, Jairus Rossi and James Allen approached the folks in UK’s Health and Wellness program to partner on a study in 2015. Funded by a U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Market Promotion grant, Health and Wellness recruited 90 UK employees to enroll in an organic CSA program. The UKAg researchers conducted an evaluation test and control



study, preliminary results of which show interesting trends.

There was a definite shift among participants toward preparing whole food versus processed, and more folks ate at home than they did before enrolling in a CSA. There was also an increase in the daily average fruit and vegetable consumption.

Interestingly, Woods said, participants’ most common reasons for joining a CSA were not health-related. Instead, people joined to gain access to better quality food, to support farms and farmers and to help their families eat better. Yet at the end of the study, CSA shareholders reported better health outcomes in such areas as annual doctor visits, monthly pharmacy expenditures, and perceived health.

That’s what appeals to UK Health and Wellness manager Jody Ensmann.

“Our mission statement is to improve the health and well-being of the UK community that we serve,” she said. “We try to do that through education, empowerment and providing resources to become healthier, so

this just fit right in line.”

Building on the findings of the research study, the pilot program will continue through the 2016 growing season, with a slightly expanded participation, with Health and Wellness providing \$200 vouchers to participants.

Vanessa Oliver, a dietician with Health and Wellness, said this program has the ability to change how people eat.

“Historically, people in the U.S. don’t eat enough produce in general, specifically vegetables,” she said. “But now they have this box (from a CSA) that they pick up weekly, and they have to use these vegetables. They’ve paid for it, and it’s sitting in the kitchen; they don’t want it to go to waste.”

Oliver provides the education to help people break through their comfort barriers. With a meet-and-greet between future share owners and farmers to help participants choose a share that’s best for them and then through cooking demonstrations, videos and Kentucky Proud recipes, she battles the

nervousness that many people experience when faced with unfamiliar food.

Education is not just for the consumer. Woods said a big part of the program will be to educate farmers on how to do a CSA, which he said is much more difficult than selling at a farmers market.

The College of Agriculture, Food and Environment, with its own organic CSA at the Horticulture Research Farm, already has experience in the field, laying a strong foundation for educational programming for producers who want to learn how to manage a CSA program.

“This program could create some really great opportunities for our local producers,” Woods said. “My own view of it is this CSA voucher thing has as much opportunity to invigorate the local food system as almost anything.”

Mac Stone, chair of the Organic Association of Kentucky and also a member of the family that owns and operates Elmwood Stock Farm, which has offered a CSA for 13 years, said that nationally, the CSA business model has about a 50 or 60 percent renewal rate.

“This (voucher program) is a very useful tool to help CSA farms gain and retain membership,” Stone said. “If it’s easier for farms to get their members, it also increases the conversation about healthy eating and how to cook healthy foods with a new subset of the population—people who weren’t farmers market customers or foodies to begin with.”

The Organic Association of Kentucky became involved to support farmers in their transition to organic production methods.

“If we’re going to meet this kind of demand, we need more farmers, so the farm community is going to have to step up in order to keep up, if the wellness programs see the benefits that we think they’re going to see,” Stone said.

The farms for the second year of the pilot program include the UK CSA Program, Elmwood Stock Farm, Sustainable Harvest Farm, Lazy 8 Stock Farm and Rootbound Farm.

The UK pilot voucher program is the first step in what could be a larger program that benefits employees in other companies, as well as more farmers in the

wider Bluegrass region. All of this takes coordination, however, so Bluegrass Harvest was formed. Part of the Bluegrass Local Food Initiatives of Community Ventures, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide people with opportunities they might not normally have, Bluegrass Harvest was designed with the FairShare Coalition template in mind.

“In Madison, Wisconsin, they had a handful of farmers and 275 shares the first year, and now they have 57 organic farmers and 9,300 shares,” said Sandy Canon, president of Bluegrass Local Food Initiatives. “The potential for growth is extraordinary. The potential for stabilizing farmer income is extraordinary, and the opportunity to increase health outcomes for the good is extraordinary.”

Already, wellness programs in other companies have contacted Canon to see about starting a voucher program for their employees.

“I am really jazzed about it. There are just no down sides,” she said.



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