

Telling Missouri's Public Health Stories



Farmers' Market on Wheels

Once a week a large white truck rolls into Elsberry, a town of just under 2,000 in rural Lincoln County, Missouri. Like a Farmers' Market on wheels, the Harvest Hauler mobile market is loaded with fresh fruits and vegetables grown by local farmers, and is a welcome sight to residents with no other access to these healthy foods.

"These rural communities are food deserts," says mobile market operator Rebecca Grutsch. "There is no grocery store and no other access to fresh fruits and vegetables within walking distance."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warn "limited access to affordable, healthier foods is one factor that may make it harder for some Americans to eat a healthy diet and could negatively affect their health."

In Elsberry, volunteers unload tables and spread fresh produce out for local residents to purchase. As people look over the selection, staff offer suggestions on how to choose, use and store each type of produce. They share ideas for preparing the produce using simple recipes.



"When I first started," says Grutsch, "I didn't realize that some people don't have an oven. Now we offer recipes that can be fixed in the microwave or a crockpot, and we encourage people to eat the produce raw."

All of the produce on the truck comes from local farmers in Lincoln, Warren, Pike and Montgomery counties. When a farmer applies to become a vendor, Grutsch verifies their farmer's insurance and conducts a site visit to check food handling processes on their farm, using her expertise as an Environmental Public Health Specialist. She agrees to buy a minimum of 50 pounds of produce from them each week and offers a level price all season. Last year Grutsch bought from eight farmers, and hopes to see that number grow this year.

"We buy from all levels of farmers – big and small," says Grutsch. "That gives us a good variety during the season."

One of the requirements of the USDA grant that funded the project was that the produce be sourced from local producers, contributing to the local economy and employment. The grant covered the purchase of the truck, material handling and point-of-sale items like the cash register and card readers. The Lincoln County Health Department agreed to cover operating expenses.

In May, the Harvest Hauler kicks off its second season delivering food to rural residents in Lincoln and Montgomery counties. Last year the truck ran from June through October, and Grutsch says it took a while for the idea to catch on. She used Facebook to promote the truck and by midsummer they were very busy. In fact,

their customer base had nearly tripled from the start of the season. When school started in August, business slowed down again. She says this year they will expand the season through November.

“We have a better idea this year of the local growing market, and hope to continue to serve our communities later into the fall.”

She says they will offer giveaways, raffles and incentives to continue to draw customers to the truck throughout the growing season. The truck will arrive at its stops earlier in the day when temperatures are cooler. Grutsch is also planning to take advance orders and make deliveries.

The truck also stops weekly in the small community of Wellsville in neighboring Montgomery County, where resident Harold Thompson is likely to be first in line, with a big smile on his face. Thompson says he is happy and excited to have the Harvest Hauler in his community and plans his menus around the produce on the truck.

The Montgomery County Health Department partners with Grutsch and the Lincoln County Health Department on the Harvest Hauler project, providing funding and staff assistance.

Grutsch spends 20 – 30 hours a week managing the program. She says her busiest time is during the summer when she has to pick up produce from local farmers, package it, load the truck and keep up with Facebook and advertising. Still, she has big dreams to do more. “I would like to expand the truck so that people could actually walk onto it to shop, rather than us having to set up tables outside.”



She adds, “We want to bring in more EBT customers this year. We also want to do more demonstrations to help people learn how to use the produce and encourage them to taste fruits and vegetables they may not have tried before – like turnips.” She laughs. “I had never had them before!”

“Feedback has been very positive,” says Grutsch. “Our customers say they are grateful that we are in their community, and they are ecstatic that we are helping their community grow, as well. Even people with access to drive appreciate the availability of farm-fresh produce.

They are happy about the healthy recipes and say they learn new things every time the truck comes.”

The #HealthierMO initiative is seeking more stories like this one that demonstrate how partners in Missouri’s greater public health system are working together to transform the future of public health in our state and offer ever resident the opportunity for a healthier life. If you have a story to share, message us on Facebook @HealthierMO or email Communications Coordinator Jaci McReynolds at jmcreynolds@healthiermo.org. Learn more about the initiative and how you can get involved at HealthierMO.org or on Facebook @HealthierMO.