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Fresh produce for low-income folks

October 27, 2011 - 10:11pm

FED GRANT ALLOWS FARMERS MARKET PURCHASES WITH FOOD STAMPS

BY CAROLYN LUCAS-ZENK | WEST HAWAII TODAY

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently awarded nearly \$165,000 to two West Hawaii nonprofits to support direct marketing efforts and increase access to fresh produce in low-income areas.

Getting fruits and vegetables from six area farmers markets into the hands of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program recipients will get a little easier next year. A \$90,460 grant to The Kohala Center will allow these customers to pay with electronic benefits transfer, or EBT, cards -- the replacement for food stamps, said Melanie Bondera, rural cooperative development specialist for the Laulima Center, a program of The Kohala Center.

The income limit for people qualifying for the state's SNAP is less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Nearly 24 percent of Hawaii County households are low-income, with incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty level, according to a June 2011 Yale University report.

The Kohala Center will promote markets accepting EBT to SNAP recipients and hopes to bring at least 1,800 low-income families to the markets over the next year.

"Low-income households on Hawaii Island spend nearly double what their mainland counterparts spend on food. Increasing EBT access at farmers markets will respond to the immediate needs of island residents to obtain fresh local food that will improve the overall health of their families," Bondera said. "This project will increase income at the six farmers markets, create expanded demand for local farm products, and benefit our rural island economy by investing more dollars into our local food system."

The locations are: Hooulu Community Farmers Market at the Outrigger Keauhou Beach Resort (10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesdays), Keauhou Farmers Market at the Keauhou Shopping Center (8 a.m. to noon Saturdays), Kinoole Farmers Market in Hilo (7 a.m. to noon Saturdays), Makuu Farmers Market in Puna (8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sundays), Volcano Farmers Market (6:30 to 10 a.m. Sundays), and Hilo Coffee Mill Farmers Market (7 a.m. to noon Saturdays). The Kohala Center will also train managers and vendors at each market, who will be responsible for managing and sustaining the EBT program after the one-year grant ends, Bondera said.

If market sites have a telephone line and electricity, managers can get a free EBT card reader machine from the state. But this isn't the case for all the participating markets. Wireless machines, each costing about \$1,250, will be purchased, Bondera said.

EBT use at farmers markets is not a new concept. The Hilo Farmers Market has been accepting EBT for more than a decade, Bondera said.

The Hilo Farmers Market was also the site of a USDA demonstration in 1998 that proved a system using a EBT terminal and paper scrip could be successfully implemented and maintained.

Asked about the results of the EBT transfer systems at farmers markets nationwide, as well preventing fraud, Carmen Humphrey, Farmers Market Promotion Program branch chief, deferred questions to USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. Agency officials couldn't be reach for comment Thursday.

A Food and Nutrition Service report to Congress stated 936 farmers markets redeemed \$4.3 million of the approximately \$50 billion total SNAP redemption (0.01 percent) in fiscal year 2009.

The Farmers Market Promotion Program "doesn't ensure these organizations' own bailiwick." It does help them buy the equipment stated in their grant application, Humphrey said.

Heritage Ranch Inc. will use its \$74,010 grant to launch programs that increase the local foods available to consumers. It operates the One Island Sustainable Living Center in Honaunau and has offered educational programs for two years.

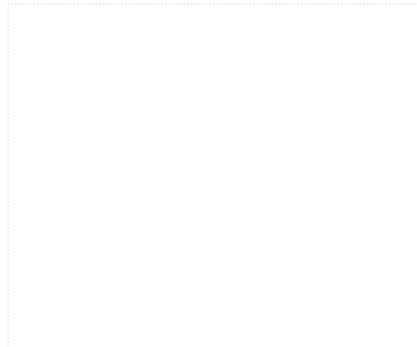
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Through the two-year grant, the nonprofit will expand those programs, as well as "foster farmer-to-buyer and farmer-to-consumer connections that bring more local food products to local families and help build a local green economy," said One Island Director Marcy Montgomery.

A survey will be conducted to learn what foods restaurants and grocery stores would buy from local farmers if there was reliable availability. Then a farmers working group will be created to meet those demands, Montgomery said.

Heritage Ranch plans to empower Honaunau farms to increase visibility and delivery of local foods directly to households. This includes increasing the Honaunau Now! co-op booth's presence at farmers markets, opening a new Wednesday Farm Direct Booth in Honaunau, expanding subscriber Community Supported Agriculture services in Kona, and purchasing a solar-powered cooler and freezer to store products, Montgomery said.

Heritage Ranch will launch a gleaning project that raises funds to bring local schools to visit One Island's farm and greenhouse. It will also provide fruits and vegetables to the food bank, Montgomery said.

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"FED GRANT ALLOWS FARMERS MARKET PURCAHSES WITH FOOD STAMPS"

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Aren't there programs that correct for spelling and grammar in the newspaper world? I keep seeing simple errors (such as I make daily) all over the media - from WHT to Time. Maybe everyone is so busy trying to post their news first that they don't have time to read/correct the errors.

Pity.

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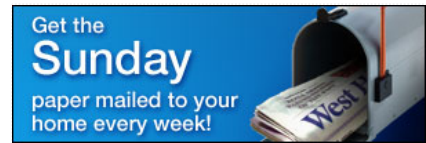
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