

## Student Gardens Will Deliver Fresh Produce to Bridge Card Holders' Home

New pilot CSA program seeks to reach food deserts

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Following the prominent Mobile Farmer's Market program they launched last year, the Andrews University Student Gardens are teaming up with the Berrien County Health Department to pioneer a produce-delivery service for Bridge Card holders in Benton Harbor. Funding for the program comes from a \$100,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Community Health.

The Student Gardens have already operated a standard Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) Program for four years. At the beginning of the season, customers sign a contract and pay to receive either a half or full bushel of fresh produce delivered to their home once a week from May to October. CSA programs have existed in various forms across the country for 25 years, but with the new program they're hoping to reach a different market. Many current CSAs are "a little boutique-y," says Garth Woodruff, Student Gardens Director, so the state of Michigan hopes to use this summer's program as a pilot study in reaching food deserts, underprivileged areas that have difficulty accessing fresh food. They "take [the] CSA baskets," Woodruff explains, "and build them into something that's a little bit more usable, staple foods, things like that. Then take a delivery system that takes those with food stamps and puts the food on their

front steps on a weekly basis throughout the summer.” It’s an effort to reach an often-overlooked demographic located mere miles from the abundant farm stands and orchards of Berrien Springs.

The program coordinators hope to get 25 Benton Harbor households to sign up for the service this summer, but they emphasize that this is a minimum, not a limit. As an added incentive to the program, Bridge Card holders can use their Double Up food bucks to pay for produce. Double Up bucks allow customers to receive twice the value they’re charged for in fresh fruits and vegetables; the Student Gardens are setting a limit this summer of \$40 worth of produce for \$20 in Food Bucks per market day. “It’s a way to encourage them to use their Bridge Card and their benefits on healthy food,” explains Ryan Wallace, Mobile Market Coordinator, “instead of at the dollar store buying unhealthy packaged food.

Another major component of the program is education. “The data,” Woodruff notes, “shows that you can’t just make healthy food available and change habits; you have to do a great deal of perception changes, so there’s education, there’s desire, there’s a whole bunch to address besides actually just putting food inside of the demographic.” A large portion of the grant from the state of Michigan will go towards incentive programs, cooking and health classes, marketing, and support groups – all designed to help residents use their new resources to their full potential.

As an example of the program’s possibilities, Woodruff points to the Berrien county juvenile detention center, which is already buying produce from the CSA using a farm-to-school grant. “We deliver three baskets every single week and they feed 45 kids,” he says. “It’s an initiative to try and break down some of those barriers.” The most important component, however, is personal relationships. “When we walk up to the door with the baskets, it’s a whole educational thing: this is kohlrabi, this is fennel, this is bok choy. There’s a lot of interaction that our driver has at the front door of homes, as well as what goes on at the farm stand with the registered dietician [who does demonstrations there].”

Wallace, who will be driving the mobile farm market and doing deliveries with the help of a local intern, agrees. “It’s incredible...the one-on-one personal contact. I’ll be connecting with these people in the community.”

Wallace and Woodruff both emphasize how vital the program – and the Student Gardens as a whole – are both to Andrews’ place in the local community, and the university’s recent emphasis on wellness. Andrews is partnering with United Way, Lakeland Hospital, Southwest Michigan Planning, the YMCA, and the Health Department. Wallace notes that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has historically prioritized healthy living, a key component of which is a fresh and simple diet.

“It’s totally a win-win,” Wallace says, “for the community, for this department and the Agriculture program, for the students who pay their tuition to the university, and for the health message....It’s a virtuous cycle, not a vicious cycle.”

The new Building Healthy Communities CSA program will be “major” for the student gardens, Gardens Manager Arthur Mulyono concludes. After all, “that’s our mission: grow food, grow students, grow community.” “We are the last Agriculture program in North American Adventist

Universities,” says Woodruff. “Our University was moved to this exact location by church founders explicitly for agriculture. And, we are continuing that legacy.”

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