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Older Adults Find Fresh Food Through a Unique Partnership

Hunger is an issue for many older adults. Living on a low income often requires individuals to make difficult decisions. *Where is my next meal coming from? Will I buy medicine this month? Or food?* Recognizing the need, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has partnered with farmers markets across the country to help ensure that low-income older adults can obtain healthy, fresh foods while at the same time helping to increase sales for local farmers. This innovative and popular program is called Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP).

Because of funding instability, each year it is unknown exactly how many coupons area agencies on aging will receive. Demand is high for these vouchers since they arrive in such a limited number and AgeOptions partners with local distribution centers, such as Oak Park Township, to distribute the coupons to as many low-income older adults as possible. This year AgeOptions was able to distribute 3,500 vouchers in suburban Cook County.

"The Senior Farmer's Market Nutrition Program is one of our most in-demand programs every year because it gives older adults the freedom to eat the healthy foods they want to eat while connecting with local farmers," Spencer Harstead, AgeOptions nutrition specialist, said.

Celeste Duignan, Nutrition Program manager at Oak Park Township, is a proud organizer of the local SFMNP. "It's a program that assists low-income seniors, while at the same time providing a farm subsidy with no middleman," she said. Farmers sell their goods and older adults get healthy food. Many individuals find more than just fresh produce from their experience. Often, participants find friends and peer support. They will travel to the markets together and share extra fruits and vegetables when they have it. The program brings people together, she said.

Not only does SFMNP provide older adults with healthy meal options and farmers with increased revenues, the program also gives the community a chance to give back. Last year, Oak Park food co-op Sugar Beet provided a demonstration for seniors participating in the voucher program. Sugar Beet sent a professional chef to help teach older adults new and healthy recipes for their fresh produce.

“This program is a positive in the lives of seniors,” Celeste said. “It’s a win-win.”

All 3,500 coupon books have been given out. AgeOptions distributed them to the following agencies in the north, south and west suburbs, which then issued them to low-income older adults:

Aging Care Connections
Oak Park Township
Solutions for Care
North Shore Senior Center
Park Forest Health Department
South Suburban Senior Services
PLOWS Council on Aging