

**September 21, 2021:** [Combating food insecurity, ASTC members share fresh food with communities - Association of Science and Technology Centers](#)

### **Combating food insecurity, ASTC members share fresh food with communities**

As the pandemic and social unrest have continued to ravage what remains of the status quo, science and technology centers and museums are stepping up their efforts to serve their local communities. One particular kind of activity that has proved vital, especially in recent months, has been addressing food insecurity through farmers markets and related food outreach. By providing access to fresh produce, science kits, garden boxes, and more, ASTC members are helping to combat new and pre-existing issues of social and economic inequity, including supporting people not currently earning a paycheck and those living in food deserts.

More than 54.3 million Americans, including 18 million children, may experience hunger this year due to COVID-19, according to Feeding America, a Chicago-based U.S. hunger-relief organization. This number is up from 37 million who faced hunger in 2018. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, about 12 percent of all U.S. adults—including 21 percent of Black and Latino adults—reported that their households didn't have enough food in July.

#### **Food and science**

At Missoula, Montana's EmPower Place food pantry, distribution has been up 50 percent this summer. "We've increased from about 100 to 150 deliveries a day," said Jessie Herbert-Meny, director of the [spectrUM Discovery Area](#) in Missoula, which partners with the Missoula Food Bank & Community Center (learn more about EmPower Place in [this article](#) from *Dimensions*). That's an essential service in a state where 17 percent of children were already food insecure before COVID-19 (the national average is 17.5 percent, according to Feeding America).

But food isn't all recipients are receiving in their box of groceries; spectrUM is providing take-home science kits. Every Tuesday, spectrUM provides supplies and directions to complete a science project at home, along with the scientific principles behind the endeavor. Other organizations are taking other days of the week so that there is some kind of learning content in each box.

"It's wonderful to see all of these organizations in Missoula start to band together and create activities for families that will be delivered through the food bank," said Herbert-Meny. And the food bank also has a bus that delivers meals so the kits will go with those as well."

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*Jessie Herbert-Meny, director of the [spectrUM Discovery Area](#)*

#### **SNAP benefits**



The Poughkeepsie Waterfront Market, operated by the Mid-Hudson Children’s Museum in Poughkeepsie, New York, provides fresh food to area residents. *Photo courtesy of Lara Litchfield-Kimber*

The Poughkeepsie Waterfront Market, operated by the [Mid-Hudson Children’s Museum](#) in Poughkeepsie, New York, has noted both an increased attendance as well as different purchasing patterns at its weekly farmers market (learn more about Mid-Hudson Children’s Museum

in [this Dimensions article](#)). When it opened in 2017, it was the first U.S. farmers market to be operated by a children’s museum. The goal, according to organizers, was “fighting urban food insecurity and advancing community health.” In 2018, the market was able to begin accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), allowing it to broaden its service to the local community.

Now in its fourth year of operation, the market, which is open Monday afternoons, serves an even more vital role, as additional families find themselves food insecure due to jobs affected by COVID-19. The museum has seen a significant uptick in use of food benefits: in May during its first week of operation this year, the Poughkeepsie Waterfront Market served more SNAP benefit recipients than during the entire summer of 2019.

The fact that many of these SNAP recipients made their way to the Poughkeepsie Waterfront Market was through a combination of rising need and increased outreach, according to Lara Litchfield-Kimber, the museum’s executive director. “We partnered with the community coordinator at a low-income housing tower that is located on our block to promote the market.” Many of the residents at that tower receive both SNAP benefits and Farmers Market Nutrition Program checks through the special supplemental nutrition program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Since WIC serves low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, as well as infants and children up to age five, the market is able to help many small children grow up in a household where eating fresh produce and other healthy foods is the norm.

Mid-Hudson Children’s Museum’s outreach effort has paid off. Shopping at the Poughkeepsie Waterfront Market has become such a routine for so many of the nearby tower’s residents—in addition to many other patrons—that the market now serves about 250 households per week, according to Litchfield-Kimber. This is not only an increase in the number of shoppers, but also the type of buying behavior. Last year, the market might have seen 250 attendees, but they weren’t necessarily there to shop; many were part of groups and some were just there to socialize, according to Litchfield-Kimber. This year, shoppers come alone (a market rule, in order to minimize possible COVID-19 transmission) and are on a mission: they are “shopping heavy, rather than just hanging out,” said Litchfield-Kimber.

Mid-Hudson Children’s Museum and spectrUM Discovery Area were both honored with ASTC’s [Roy L. Shafer Leading Edge Awards](#) in 2019 for their innovative efforts. Read more in [this roundup](#) in *Dimensions*.

### **Putting gardens to use**

ASTC members who are fortunate enough to have a bit of good soil and gardening talents are going the extra mile to grow their own food to share with families who need it. Even for institutions who already had good relationships with community members and organizations, this has helped them broaden their outreach. Planting, tending, and harvesting the gardens provides tangible ways for people to help one another and much-needed food for those who are temporarily struggling.

In addition to its farmers market, Mid-Hudson Children’s Museum has also converted its demonstration garden into a high production garden. The garden was previously used to teach children about planting and growing food, but now it’s in heavy service, with all of the produce harvested from the garden

donated to local residents. “We’re about four weeks in to doing that and have shared more than 70 pounds of produce so far... all from a modest production space,” said Litchfield-Kimber.

“Food is a key component in the resiliency of a community for many reasons,” said Rachel Hogan Carr, executive director of ASTC member [Nurture Nature Center](#). The Center is located in Easton, Pennsylvania, in the Lehigh Valley, at the confluence of the Delaware and Lehigh Rivers. Throughout the pandemic, the center has been able to continue operating their urban garden as well as their Buy Fresh Buy Local program to reduce local hunger. The urban garden, which was once just a patch of land next to the center, has been converted into a rich container garden that doubles as an informal science learning space.



Flowers and vegetables grow from a variety of repurposed containers in Nurture Nature Center’s Urban Recycle Garden in downtown Easton, Pennsylvania. *Photo courtesy of Nurture Nature Center*

“When you start to talk about food, there are so many science components,” said Carr. “We promote the gardening methods that are more sustainable and lead to better environmental outcomes,” she added. “We grow quite a bit of produce in recycled containers to show people how to grow a tremendous amount of food when you don’t have a lot of land,” said Carr.

The garden, which is managed by a coordinator who maintains a watering and tending schedule, “is harvested by residents in the neighborhood who come and take what they need,” said Carr. “People have been routinely harvesting fresh produce, taking advantage of this lush, green garden at the back of this parking lot in this urban downtown. Many residents of our community would otherwise not have access to that kind of food,” said Carr.

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### **Changing behavior**

Allison Czapp, director of the Buy Fresh Buy Local of the Greater Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania, says their region includes nine census tracts that are designated low-income/low-access areas by the USDA’s measurement of fresh food access. Buy Fresh Buy Local, run by **Nurture Nature Center**, offers a SNAP incentive program called Fresh Food Bucks that provides matching dollars for fresh, locally grown produce. “From January through April of this year, we saw a 29% increase in the value of Fresh Food Bucks redemption compared with that same time period in 2019....and that is on top of a few outlets being closed in March and April as they worked to figure out how to operate under new safety guidelines,” said Czapp. “All food pantries have reported increases in the number of families using their services,” she added.

Outreach is key, says Czapp, and made more difficult by the stigma as well as federal guidelines. “SNAP customers in general are hard to reach. There can be such a stigma attached to using a benefit like SNAP,” said Czapp. As a result, social media often isn’t effective. In addition, “we are forbidden by our federal contract to give people information about how to apply for SNAP benefits,” she added. “We have built a broad network of community partners who help us get the word out.”

And even when Buy Fresh Buy Local does reach SNAP recipients, they aren’t on the program very long. “The average length of time a person receives SNAP benefits is six months, so it’s just constant outreach,” said Czapp.

The program helps to educate consumers about local purchasing and provide more outlets for farmers. “My hope is that as people are turning to the local food system more right now, we have a real opportunity to highlight the importance of supporting local farmers, who are better able to pivot smaller supply chains and provide for the community. We are also working with growers and another non-profit to build out infrastructure for a better wholesale marketplace,” explained Czapp.

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*Allison Czapp, director of the Buy Fresh Buy Local of the Greater Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania*

### **An oasis in a food desert**

The Farmers Market at [Minnetrista](#) in Muncie, Indiana, began accepting SNAP tokens last year. “In the state of Indiana, just over 13 percent of Hoosiers are food insecure,” said Betty Brewer, president and chief executive officer of the Minnetrista Cultural Foundation. “In Delaware County where we’re located, 17.2 percent are food insecure,” she added. In addition to increasing outreach to SNAP recipients, the market is partnering with Indiana University Health Ball Memorial Hospital to run a nutrition class that rewards the lower income attendees with an additional \$20 to spend on produce at the farmers market.

The market—now in its 20th year of operation—was deemed an essential business and was allowed to open its summer season during the full lockdown in Indiana. It continues to fulfill its mission providing fresh produce, supporting local producers, and creating an oasis for those living in a food desert.

“The legacy of the Ball family is what guides us—food, food preservation, and canning. Creating a farmers market 20 years ago totally made sense,” said Brewer. At that time, “the next closest farmers market was in Indianapolis, 50 miles away,” she said.

Minnetrista lies on a forty-acre campus, and besides the Saturday morning farmers market, offers gardens, a nature area, a museum facility, historic homes, and children’s play areas. It also hosts educational programs, workshops, community events, and interactive exhibits.

In recent years, a few small farmers markets have begun operating in the region; however, they haven’t covered all the food deserts created by the closing of several locations of a large, local grocery store chain. Minnetrista provides much-needed fresh produce in an underserved quadrant of the city. “We’re on the northeast quadrant of Muncie where about 25–35 percent of residents are below poverty level,” said Brewer.

**Empowering people to grow their own**



Portable, pre-planted “pop-up gardens” containing vegetables and edible flowers from Minnetrista in Muncie, Indiana. *Photo courtesy of Minnetrista*

Minnetrista has also started helping people to grow their own produce. Starting in 2017, it started what they are calling their “pop-up gardens” program: portable, pre-planted gardens that can be grown in any tiny outdoor space. In the spring, the Minnetrista horticulture manager plants canvas containers with a variety of seedlings such as tomatoes, squashes, and edible flowers and distributes them through an adjacent neighborhood association. The crates are easily portable and recipients can get help in learning how to tend them.

Now in the fourth year of the program, community members eager for popup gardens watch their social media and neighborhood association announcements for distribution time. The program has “grown” from about 15 containers to over 40 containers. To satisfy demand, even during the spring lockdown, “staff members were coming on Tuesday and Thursdays and working socially distanced with our horticulture manager and his team to create the containers,” said Brewer.

*We would like to know about all the innovative ways ASTC members continue to serve their missions and communities, including additional efforts to relieve food insecurity. Please share your story with us at [info@astc.org](mailto:info@astc.org) and tag @ScienceCenters when you post on social media.*