



Creating Innovative Partnerships between Farmers Markets and Food Hubs

Background: The COVID pandemic created a critical situation in our food system. Businesses and schools shut down and transportation became a nightmare. Farmers markets were among the casualties. With market closures, and transportation woes, access to food became limited in many areas. To address those challenges, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) created a grant opportunity to help farmers markets and food hubs work together to provide food and a delivery system to help meet this unexpected need.

Project goals: Creating a partnership which will expand the number of specialty crops available to consumers, help food hubs expand their customer base, and aid more specialty crop producers. IDALS created a mini-grant program, offering farmers markets and food hubs working together funding of up to \$3,000 to purchase supplies, software or to help offset marketing or delivery costs to launch this new collaborative platform.

Project results: Four applications were approved. One applicant left their position, and the project was not fulfilled.

How were funds spent:

- Advertising, supplies, coordination, online platform costs
- Expanded market from 1x/2 weeks to 2x/week
- Sent informational emails weekly to 5,000 customers with product availability
- Helped farmers set up online storefronts

Partnership changes (information provided is the average)

- New individual customers – 68
- New producers – 8
- Additional specialty crops offered – 17
- Extended hours
- Went from wholesale only to online farmers market

Sales info

- Increase in sales of 21%

Outcomes

- Retained income for farmers – new retail avenue was utilized by 25 vendors
- New & retained local food customers – retained customers who couldn't shop in person & recruited new customers that hadn't shopped at the farmers market previously
- Establishment of a reliable, online source for local foods to the adjacent community
- Farmers gained new market option & increased brand recognition of their products
- Became a reliable neighborhood market for local food – one partnership had \$535,000 in sales through this new platform
- Launched online farmers market w 41 regional growers
- 11,000 orders fulfilled

Best Practice/lesson learned

- Creation of a "team" developed new working relationships between the market and the food hub
- Improved communication between the market and the hub
- It takes a lot of logistics & creativity to create a contact-free online only farmers market
- Created new community collaborations to implement this opportunity
- All participants plan to continue this new relationship and online platform