Chester County, Pennsylvania, a generally prosperous region located within the Philadelphia metropolitan area, has various pockets of food insecurity, mainly in low-income neighborhoods where grocery stores are scarce and public transportation is limited. The roving Nourish Mobile Market was established to increase access to healthy, fresh foods countywide. Through its partnership with the Eat Smart Special Project coalition, Nourish expanded into new locations, made its produce more affordable, and provided healthier shelf-stable options. It also broadened its reach: it now has the potential to provide affordable fruits and vegetables to more than 22,000 county residents who receive food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps.

The Challenge

Agriculture provides the largest and most lucrative source of jobs and economic development in Chester County, Pennsylvania, which is known as the “mushroom capital of the world.” However, access to the county’s sparsely available grocery stores can be difficult in the fairly rural region, which lacks widespread public transportation. Finding healthy, affordable food can be especially difficult for low-income residents, putting them more at risk for developing poor diets that can contribute to obesity, diabetes, heart disease and other health problems.

“Sometimes, the difference in making more healthful choices boils down to access and convenience. Teaming up with Nourish allows us to help break down those kinds of barriers and increase opportunities for healthier outcomes for all.”

- Denise Day, CEO of the YMCA of Greater Brandywine
The Solution
Nourish Mobile Market is a social enterprise created by the Good Samaritan Shelter, a Chester County nonprofit that employs its homeless residents at the mobile food market. The Eat Smart Special Project, a coalition comprised of the American Heart Association and about 20 other community organizations, partnered with Nourish to help accomplish its goal of providing healthy foods to more people. The coalition took a three-pronged approach to support Nourish.

First, the mobile market increased its location stops. While Chester County has few grocery stores, it has numerous recreation and fitness facilities, including seven YMCA branches that serve a broad and diverse range of people. Nourish now makes regular visits to all seven YMCA branches across Chester County.

The coalition also supported Nourish in ensuring everyone could afford its food. While the mobile market was eligible to accept payments from SNAP recipients, it lacked the proper electronic equipment to process SNAP transactions. With the coalition’s help, Nourish obtained the appropriate equipment and trained employees on its use.

Finally, the coalition helped Nourish in identifying and replacing some of its packaged foods, including cereal and canned beans, with healthier versions that are lower in fat, sugar and sodium.

Sustaining Success
While increasing the footprint of Nourish, it is just as critical to raise the community’s awareness about the availability of farmers and mobile markets, and the health benefits of eating produce. A bilingual social media marketing campaign is targeting community members near each YMCA branch, helping heighten awareness about the mobile market’s availability and encouraging residents to consume the fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods the market offers.

Nourish also has applied for a federal Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive grant that would be used to implement a creative marketing strategy to help SNAP participants improve their diets by boosting their consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The Eat Smart Special Project’s help in obtaining electronic equipment to allow Nourish to process SNAP transactions led to a system change. Nourish now has the potential to reach the 22,821 Chester County residents who receive SNAP benefits. The implementation of the new equipment also led to better data collection that can be used to shape future marketing and incentive strategies.

Nourish also has helped remove the transportation barrier to healthy foods by bringing its mobile market to popular community settings like the YMCA, where more than 80,000 organization employees and members are exposed to the market’s wide variety of healthy foods and beverage choices.

Results
After swapping many of its former pantry items for food lower in fat, sugar, and sodium, Nourish reduced by half the number of shelf-stable food items that failed to meet the American Heart Association’s healthy dietary guidelines. The market is now working to only stock food deemed nutritious, or healthy in moderation. Nourish will track monthly the number of its transactions, including SNAP payments, at its additional locations to determine its actual reach and impact.

Get Involved
Support the availability of healthy options by utilizing farmers markets and mobile markets. Shop for nutritious food locally, and encourage other people to buy more healthy foods at local farmers markets too.