About 34,000 people live within the five square miles that make up Chester, Pennsylvania, a former shipyard town that boasted a population twice its size in the 1950s. Located just outside of Philadelphia, Chester began to shrink as shipyard jobs disappeared, along with businesses taking other types of work with them. As unemployment rose, so did poverty. Today, because of a shortage of grocery stores, many Chester residents also live in a constant state of food insecurity. The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program is working in Chester to improve access to healthy, nutritious food through a program that also supports the work of local farmers markets. The program uses $2 coupons known as Chester Food Bucks to help stretch household budgets when redeemed for fresh fruits and vegetables at participating farmers markets. For recipients of Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, formerly known as food stamps, they also have the potential to increase a consumer’s buying power by 40 percent. Chester Food Bucks also have demonstrated to regional farmers the need and demand for their produce by low-income consumers.

The Challenge

Only 50 percent of working-age residents in Chester, Pennsylvania, are employed. Joblessness, along with low-wage paying jobs, have left many residents in poverty. Limited access to nutritious, affordable food has also become a problem for residents because Chester has only one traditional grocery store. As a result, many people have unhealthy diets, which put them at greater risk for developing diabetes, stroke, heart disease, obesity and other chronic illnesses.

“The farm serves the residents of Chester and its location is perfect. Many residents can have the opportunity to purchase fresh produce in a location where they receive health care.”

– Janel L. Francis, ChesPenn Health Services outreach and enrollment assistant

Work made possible with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
The Food Trust, a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that everyone has access to affordable and nutritious food, operates a program that provides $2 coupons called Chester Food Bucks. These vouchers help low-income families put healthy food on the table and encourage them to choose fruits and vegetables whenever possible. Each coupon can be used toward the purchase of produce at a farmers market that meets on the second Thursday every month from July through October outside the Chester Community Hospital. In addition, SNAP recipients who use their benefits to buy produce receive $2 in Food Buck coupons for every $5 they spend at the market, effectively boosting the purchasing power of SNAP participants by 40 percent.

The Solution
The local ANCHOR project distributed Chester Food Bucks over a period of three months to local residents. The coupons were distributed at health fairs that featured cooking demonstrations and recipes that included various produce as ingredients, all of which could be purchased at farmers markets. The vouchers also were distributed through dieticians working with patients through the local hospital system. The Food Bucks program helped make nutritious fruits and vegetables more widely available to low-income families while promoting the work of the local farmers market. According to recent polling commissioned by the American Heart Association, strong support exists throughout Chester for increasing the number of farmers markets that accept nutrition benefits. The community also backs providing incentives to farmers and other business operators.

Promotional campaigns were launched on social media and on public buses to publicize the farmers market and encourage residents to utilize the Chester Food Bucks they had. The Food Trust also plans to track the redemption rates of the vouchers to provide a clearer picture of the program’s impact on the community. The American Heart Association’s ANCHOR program will also start planning strategy for the following farmers market season that begins in the spring.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The distribution of the Chester Food Bucks is creating a systems change, one supported by the American Heart Association’s local ANCHOR team’s ongoing work to expand access to affordable, local produce. The American Heart Association ANCHOR team is also working with additional farmers to encourage them to accept SNAP payments so that fresh produce is accessible to a broader group of the community, particularly low-income residents. Getting more farmers markets to accept SNAP payments would represent both a systems and environmental change.

Results
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Get Involved
ANCHOR is working with partners throughout Chester, Pennsylvania to increase healthy food and beverage options for residents. To learn more about these efforts, including efforts to boost exposure to farmers markets, please check out www.heart.org/hearthealthychester.