

# **Food For Our Elders: Expanding the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program in Montgomery County**



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**Prepared for the Montgomery County Council**



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# About the Fellow

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Before attending Georgetown, Alekhya worked as a social sector consultant in Boston, MA, and as a public health researcher in Chandigarh, India. As a Summer Fellow in 2023, she supported the Age-Friendly Montgomery initiative within the Aging & Disability unit of the Department of Health and Human Services and conducted research on older adult needs in preparation for Montgomery County's Third Summit on Aging. Alekhya received her BA in Biology & Society and a minor in Global Health from Cornell University in 2017. She can be reached at [arc169@georgetown.edu](mailto:arc169@georgetown.edu), or on [LinkedIn](#).

## Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

Montgomery County's senior population has been steadily growing over the past thirty years, and residents 65 and over are projected to make up 20% of the County's population by 2040. Montgomery County's 2017 Food Security Plan identified seniors as particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, due to changes in diet, mobility and income in older age. Farmers markets can be a key resource in increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables, by connecting residents to fresh, locally grown produce. However, farmers market produce is often more expensive than supermarket produce, and the cost difference can be prohibitive to low-income residents.

The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) is designed to help low-income seniors access and afford fresh produce at their local farmers markets. Funded by USDA, the SFMNP provides vouchers to low-income seniors, which can be used to purchase fruits and vegetables at farmers markets and farm stands. In Montgomery County, the program is popular and has seen consistently high utilization over the last decade.

Demand for the SFMNP program far outstrips the supply of vouchers that the County receives from the state. In 2023, 35% of low-income seniors who applied to the program did not receive vouchers, which are distributed by a random lottery. The program is advertised exclusively in the County's senior centers, as the Department of Recreation, which administers the program, has limited capacity to manage current levels of demand. Increasing the number of SFMNP vouchers available would allow more low-income seniors to take advantage of the program, and increasing capacity at Recreation would allow for wider outreach and better targeting of resources.

This report details current and historical funding for the SFMNP program in Montgomery County, as well as trends in demand and utilization of vouchers. Based on analysis of state and County level data, as well as interviews with current and past program administrators, I recommend expanding SFMNP at the County level, in order to allow more low-income seniors to take advantage of the program's benefits. I also make several recommendations for programmatic and budgetary changes, to increase the capacity of program administrators and encourage more markets to participate in SFMNP.

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# Disclaimer

The analysis, opinions, and recommendations contained in this report reflect only the views of the Summer Fellow and do not necessarily represent the views of the Montgomery County Council, the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, the Montgomery County Department of Recreation, or any other parties referenced in this report.

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# Introduction

Food insecurity is defined by the USDA as the condition of “lacking access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life, or with uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods.”<sup>1</sup> The connection between food insecurity and public health is well documented. Food insecurity is often tied to income and cost of living, as limited funds can force people to rely on cheap, calorie-rich but nutrient-poor foods, or to go without food altogether. These two options – a diet of processed foods or hunger – can lead to long-term health consequences, such as malnourishment, obesity and chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular disease, for food-insecure communities.<sup>2</sup> Food insecurity can also be exacerbated by social factors such as age, race, and geography.

## Food Insecurity in Montgomery County

In 2019, 9% of Montgomery County residents experienced food insecurity, up from 8% in 2018 and 6% in 2016.<sup>3</sup> Older adults – along with children, foreign-born residents and people with disabilities -- are at the highest risk of food insecurity in Montgomery County, due to factors such as lower incomes, limited transportation options, reduced mobility, limited English proficiency and medically necessary dietary restrictions.<sup>4</sup> Cost of living is a significant driver of food insecurity among older adults, who often live on fixed or limited incomes and can struggle to afford food alongside other necessities like housing and healthcare.

## Senior Food Insecurity in Montgomery County

In 2018, nearly 7 percent of adults over 65 in Montgomery County were estimated to live below the poverty level, with 20,000-30,000 living below the self-sufficiency standard.<sup>5</sup> During the 2022 farmers market season, an average of 13,910 adults over 62 were enrolled in SNAP, indicating a significant need for food benefits among the County’s senior population.<sup>6</sup> With the County’s population rapidly aging, food insecurity among older adults will continue to be a pressing issue; according to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), the proportion of Montgomery County residents age 65+ is projected to rise from 10% in 1990 to 20% by 2040.<sup>7,8</sup> Current resources to help bridge gaps in older adult food security include the County’s



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congregate meal program at senior and community centers; Meals on Wheels, a home delivery of hot, cold and frozen meal; and several nonprofit food banks across the County.

Farmers markets are another important resource that can target intervention in low-income areas where residents have limited access to healthy foods. A small proportion of Montgomery County, including parts of Gaithersburg, Aspen Hill and Colesville, has been identified as a food desert– defined as “areas in which a significant portion of the population has limited access to healthy foods”. In urban areas, this means living more than a mile from the nearest supermarket “. <sup>9,10</sup> Even in non-food-desert areas, farmers markets can still help improve access and consumption of healthy, fresh produce by locating in easily accessible, often walkable, areas. Additionally, farmers markets often provide fresher quality, and therefore more nutritious, fruits and vegetables than supermarkets. This is because farmers market produce is typically in-season, and has been harvested more recently and traveled shorter distances from local farms. <sup>11</sup> While farmers market produce can sometimes be priced higher than supermarket produce due to higher production expenses, many markets accept federal nutrition benefits, such as SNAP and WIC, which helps make locally-grown produce more accessible to lower-income customers.

## **The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program**

### *What is the SFMNP?*

The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) is a US Department of Agriculture (USDA) program designed to combat food insecurity by providing low-income older adults with subsidized access to locally-produced vegetables, fruits, honey and herbs. The federal Farm Bill provides \$20.6 million in funding nationwide for the SFMNP each year, 90% of which goes to supporting food costs. <sup>12,13</sup> The SFMNP awards grants to states, territories and federally recognized Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) to give low-income seniors vouchers which can be redeemed for produce at local farmers markets and community supported agriculture programs (CSAs). The goal of the SFMNP is to “provide fresh, nutritious, locally grown fruits and vegetables from farmers’ markets to low-income seniors, [while] increasing the domestic consumption of agricultural commodities by expanding or aiding in the expansion of domestic farmers’ markets.” <sup>14</sup>

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### *SFMNP in Montgomery County*

The SFMNP, while a federal program, is administered locally by each state. The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service awards grants for both SFMNP and FMNP (a similar program for WIC recipients) to authorized state agencies, who then administer the program.<sup>15</sup> In Maryland, the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) receives this funding and in turn distributes SFMNP vouchers to the Maryland Department of Aging (DOA), which allocates a fixed number of vouchers (based on population and redemption rates) to participating counties.<sup>16,17</sup> Prior to 2021, participants received \$30 in SFMNP benefits per season; in 2021, the benefit amount increased to \$35. In, 2023 benefits increased again to \$50 per participant per season, as a result of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding.<sup>18,19,20</sup> In Montgomery County, the Department of Recreation receives vouchers from DOA and distributes them to eligible residents via a lottery system. Previously, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) administered the lottery system; however, since the lottery occurs at senior centers across the County, and thus requires support from the Department of Recreation, responsibility for administering SFMNP was transferred to Recreation in 2023.

In order to participate in SFMNP, Montgomery County older adults must first pre-register in person at one of the 5-6 participating senior centers during a fixed sign-up period to be entered into the lottery. Eligibility is limited to adults over 60 with household incomes less than 185% of the federal poverty line, and residents must self-certify that they meet the criteria when they pre-register. After the sign-up period closes, the lottery is conducted using a random number generator to select recipients from the pool of applicants. Selected recipients are then notified by email and must pick up their voucher booklet from the same senior center they pre-registered at, within a three-day window. In 2023, the pick-up window began five days after the pre-registration window closed.

### *Demand for SFMNP*

In 2022, 1162 low-income seniors applied for 817 voucher booklets (the number of vouchers allocated to Montgomery County that year). Recall that during this same year, 13,910 low-income seniors were enrolled in SNAP. SNAP has stricter eligibility criteria than SFMNP, which indicates that over 13,910 seniors were likely eligible for SFMNP in 2022. More than 85% of distributed vouchers were redeemed each year over the last decade in Montgomery County (excluding 2020 and 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic), but the County does not receive enough vouchers – and by proxy, funding – to meet the demand from low-income seniors.



In 2023, there were 21 farmers markets operating in Montgomery County. However, only six of these accepted SFMNP benefits, compared to fourteen which accepted FMNP benefits and ten which accepted SNAP benefits.<sup>21</sup>

The following table highlights which farmers markets accept SFMNP and/or other federal nutritional benefit programs in 2023:

**Table 1: Federal Nutritional Benefits accepted at Montgomery County Farmers Markets**

Market	SFMNP Accepted?	Other Federal Nutritional Benefits Accepted
Bethesda Central Farm Market	No	FMNP
Brookmont Farm Market	No	None
Milk Lady Markets Cabin John	Yes	WIC, SNAP, FMNP, FVC*
Gaithersburg Farmers Market	No	WIC, SNAP, MMM, FMNP
Crossroads Farmers Market	Yes	WIC, FMNP, eWIC, SNAP, Fresh Checks
Milk Lady Markets Derwood	Yes	WIC, FMNP, SNAP, FVC
Forest Estates Farmers Market	No	None
Fresh Farm Downtown Silver Spring	Yes	SNAP, FMNP, WIC, FVC
Garett Park Farmers Market	Yes	FMNP, WIC
Kensington Farmers Market	No	None
Lake Potomac Farmers Market	No	None
Main Street Farmers Market	No	None
Montgomery Farm Women's Cooperative Market	No	None
Montgomery Village Farmers Market	No	FMNP
Olney Farmers Market	No	FMNP, WIC, SNAP
Pike Central Farm Market	No	FMNP
Poolesville Farmers' Market	No	None
Potomac Village Farmers Market	No	FMNP, SNAP

Rockville Farmers Market	No	FMNP, SNAP, WIC
Milk Lady Markets Shady Grove	Yes	WIC, FMNP, SNAP, FVC
Takoma Park Farmers Market	No	FMNP, SNAP
The Market at the Family Room	No	None

\*FVC stands for the WIC Fruits and Vegetables Check, the only WIC check which can be used at both supermarkets and farmers markets

## SFMNP Match Programs

Some state and local programs have emerged to supplement benefits provided by SFMNP:

**Maryland Market Money** (MMM) is a statewide program co-run by the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission (SMADC) and Maryland Agriculture and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDO), which provides additional benefits to match SFMNP vouchers and SNAP benefits. SFMNP and SNAP shoppers can receive up to a \$30 per day match on SFMNP funds spent at participating farmers markets across the state. Unlike SFMNP vouchers, which can only be spent on fruits, vegetables, honey and herbs, MMM tokens can be spent on any SNAP-eligible food, including dairy, meat and bread. As of 2023, six markets in Montgomery County accept MMM: Lewis Orchards, Garrett Park Farm Stand, Gaithersburg City Farmers Market, FRESHFARM Silver Spring, Crossroads Farmers Market and Takoma Park Farmers Market.<sup>22</sup>

The Crossroads Farmers Market **Fresh Checks** program and FRESHFARM Silver Spring's **Fresh Match** program provide SFMNP, FMNP, SNAP and WIC shoppers with a dollar-for-dollar match of federal nutritional benefits.<sup>23,24</sup> For example, a SFMNP recipient who spends \$35 in vouchers at the Crossroads or FRESHFARM markets can receive an additional \$35 in tokens to spend at that market. As of 2023, Fresh Checks and Fresh Match tokens can be spent on any SNAP-eligible item. Crossroads was the first farmers market in the nation to launch a dollar-for-dollar nutritional incentive program to match the benefits spent at the market; according to the Crossroads website, “more than \$800,000 in Fresh Checks has been distributed to nearly 24,000 residents” over the last sixteen market seasons.<sup>25</sup> In addition to Crossroads and FRESHFARM Silver Spring, Milk Lady Markets (which operates markets in Derwood, Cabin John and Shady Grove) also doubles SFMNP, SNAP and WIC benefits through its **Matching Dollars** program.<sup>26</sup>

Programs like Maryland Market Money, Fresh Checks and others help to “stretch” each dollar that SFMNP participants receive, thus increasing low-income seniors’ food budget while also putting

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more dollars in the pockets of local farmers and producers. However, these state and local level nutrition benefits are limited to those who have already “won” the County’s SFMNP lottery, as matching benefits are conditional on existing participation in SFMNP. Dollar match programs do not address the current unmet demand for SFMNP benefits among low-income seniors in Montgomery County, and low-income seniors who are not selected through the SFMNP lottery cannot take advantage of programs like MMM, Fresh Checks, Fresh Match or Matching Dollars.

## Research Question

This paper explores the unmet demand for SFMNP vouchers, and provides recommendations for strengthening nutritional benefits for low-income seniors through county-level policy and programmatic adaptations. Drawing on interviews with county administrators, farmers market managers, state officials and other stakeholders, I make the case for additional county funding to increase the number of SFMNP vouchers distributed each year, alongside increased outreach, staffing and data collection, to strengthen senior food security and bolster Montgomery County’s farming economy.

## Methodology

This research report draws upon quantitative and qualitative data from primary interviews and secondary landscape research I conducted.

I conducted interviews with past and current administrators of the SFMNP in Montgomery County, namely Carol Craig, Director of the Senior Nutrition Program within Montgomery County Health and Human Services, and Stacy Sigler, Recreation Supervisor at the Department of Recreation. These interviews helped inform my landscape assessment of the program, as well as recommendations. Carol also provided data on historic funding, demand and utilization of SFMNP vouchers, which are included in this report.

I also conducted interviews with other SFMNP stakeholders including Heather Hulsey and Kelley Koeppen at SMADC who administer the Maryland Market Money program; Sara Servin, Program Manager at the Crossroads Farmers Market; Heather Bois Bruskin, Director of Montgomery County’s

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Office of Food System Resilience; and Mark Powell, whose team at the Maryland Department of Agriculture administers SFMNP at the state level. These interviews helped to illuminate the role of SFMNP within the larger landscape of food security and nutritional benefits programs in Montgomery County, as well as challenges to the success of the current program.

Furthermore, I collected public data on SFMNP fundings and program structure from reports issued by federal and state agencies. I drew upon county reports and dashboards for my research on food insecurity rates and distribution in Montgomery County, as well as published studies of MMM and SFMNP match programs in other parts of the country.

## Findings

Nationally, the SFMNP serves over 800,000 low-income adults each year.<sup>15</sup> Although the USDA requires each state's administering agency to establish a system to evaluate SFMNP outcomes at the state level, Maryland does not publish the results of its evaluation publicly. However, available research from South Carolina, Seattle, Washington and Georgia indicates that the SFMNP is effective at increasing the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables among low-income older adults, has high participant satisfaction and has helped to increase farmer revenue since the program was enacted in 2002.<sup>27</sup>

Between 2017 and 2022, Montgomery County received an average of \$26,396 of SFMNP vouchers each year.<sup>28</sup> At the state level, Maryland received an average of \$220,941 in annual funding for SFMNP between FY 17 and FY 22, which was then allocated by population to each participating county. In FY 2022, the most recent year for which data is available, Maryland received \$260,149 in grant funding for the SFMNP program from the USDA.<sup>29,30</sup> Montgomery County subsequently received \$28,595 worth of SFMNP vouchers, in the form of 5719 five-dollar checks.<sup>28</sup> In 2023, Maryland received \$450,000 through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which allowed the state to provide the maximum \$50 benefit, serve more eligible seniors, and implement other program improvements.<sup>20</sup>

Where available, data on state grant amounts and County-level voucher allotment for 2017-2022 is provided below.

**Table 2: Federal Funding for SFMNP in Montgomery County, FY 2017-FY 2022<sup>28,29</sup>**

Fiscal Year	USDA Program Grant Amount (Maryland)	SFMNP Voucher Booklets Issued to Montgomery County*	Total Value of SFMNP Vouchers Issued to Montgomery County	Maximum SFMNP Benefit Amount
2017	\$208,000	811	\$24,780	\$30
2018	\$208,000	839	\$25,175	\$30
2019	\$206,499	N/A**	N/A**	\$30
2020	\$206,499	843	\$25,290	\$30
2021	\$236,499	817	\$28,595	\$35
2022	\$260,149	817	\$28,595	\$35
2023	N/A	820	\$41,000	\$50

\*Voucher booklets are comprised of multiple \$5 checks, equal to the maximum SFMNP benefit amount. One voucher booklet is issued per SFMNP recipient per season.

\*\*Due to limitations in recordkeeping, data on the number of SFMNP voucher booklets issued to Montgomery County in 2019 was unavailable.

## Demand and Utilization

Unmet demand for SFMNP vouchers is a common trend which emerged both in interviews with program administrators and in program data. In 2022, 1162 low-income seniors applied for vouchers, but the County was only allocated 817 booklets to distribute -- therefore, 30% of applicants had to be turned away due to insufficient number of vouchers. In 2023, 1270 low-income seniors applied for 820 available voucher booklets, leaving 35% of need unmet. Based on interviews with level program administrators, demand for SFMNP vouchers consistently exceeds the supply that Montgomery County receives from the state. High levels of unmet demand also mean that program administrators are reluctant to expand outreach, accessibility, or other efforts that would increase demand further. Voucher redemption rates have also been historically high, indicating that seniors who receive vouchers through the lottery are utilizing them. Voucher redemption rates, which indicate the percentage of distributed vouchers redeemed during the market season, has exceeded 85% every year

since 2011 excepting pandemic years. During 2020 and 2021, demand for vouchers was lower than the state allotment, as seniors were among the most vulnerable to Covid-19 and most did not feel comfortable traveling to senior centers or farmers markets to participate in the program. 2020 and 2021 are the only years of the last decade in which the County did not distribute all its allotted vouchers; however, redemption was still relatively high (70% in 2020) among the reduced number of seniors who did apply and receive vouchers.

**Table 3: SFMNP Redemption Rates in Montgomery County (2011-2020)**

Year	SFMNP Voucher Redemption Rate
2011	87%
2012	94%
2013	95%
2014	N/A*
2015	92%
2016	N/A*
2017	88%
2018	88%
2020	70%

\*\*Due to limitations in recordkeeping, redemption rates for 2014 and 2016 were unavailable

## Record Keeping

Obtaining data on historical demand and utilization of SFMNP vouchers was a challenge during this research because data collection has been inconsistent and decentralized among various stakeholder agencies.

Redemption data is collected by the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA), who receive information on redeemed vouchers based on voucher serial numbers. However, MDA's ability to process and analyze this raw data is limited, and they do not have the capacity to analyze redemption by geography. DHHS has received redemption rate information from the state in previous years, but these reports are not centrally housed which makes analysis difficult.



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DHHS administered the SFMNP up until the 2023 season but has only collected data on application rates since 2020, as a result of the voucher lottery going virtual that year. Prior to 2020, the lottery was conducted on a single day, with interested seniors registering and receiving booklets (if selected) on the same day. Under this process, applicant registration information was not needed after the lottery day, and therefore data on applicant and demand rates were not preserved. Since 2020, the SFMNP lottery has been administered as a staggered process, with registration, lottery drawing and voucher pick-up occurring on different days; as a result, applicant numbers are available for these years as the data were preserved for administrative purposes.

Participant rates – i.e., data on the number of booklets received and disbursed by the County – have been consistently collected by SFMNP program administrators at DHHS. However, there is no central data management process for preserving this historical data. The current Senior Nutrition director, who oversaw administration of SFMNP when it was housed under DHHS, did not have access to all participant data rates for the years before she came into the role, indicating a lack of centralized data management and handoff processes.

## **Barriers to Participation**

The current model of participant outreach and program administration does not allow equal access to participation for all low-income seniors. Currently, SFMNP recruitment, sign-up and voucher distribution occur exclusively at County senior centers; program flyers, for example, are posted only at senior centers. Furthermore, enrollment and voucher pick-up are done in-person only, without any options for online sign-up or delivery. This makes it difficult for low-income seniors who face transportation and mobility challenges to become aware of the program and restricts participation to those who can reliably get to and from a participating senior center.

Program administrators at DHHS say that the SFMNP program is deliberately structured this way, because demand for vouchers already exceeds what the County receives from the state. Expanding outreach or building a website to reach more seniors would cause demand to skyrocket to unmanageable levels, administrators say, leaving a large proportion of applicants “unhappy” when only a small number receive vouchers through the lottery. Limiting participation to those who are already plugged into the County’s senior centers, however, risks leaving a large pool of low-income

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seniors behind. A market manager at Crossroads Farmers Market in Takoma Park, which serves a large population of WIC and SNAP-eligible residents, shared that many residents of nearby senior living facilities qualify for SFMNP but are not aware of the program because they are not connected to the senior centers.<sup>31</sup> Low-income seniors who remain in the workforce may also be less likely to attend senior center programming or have the flexibility to travel to the centers for enrollment and voucher pick-up during the workday. While administering SFMNP through the senior centers may make things logistically easier, and help manage demand, this process also limits participation to those with the most flexibility, mobility, and social enfranchisement.

Furthermore, a lack of income verification may be contributing to inflated demand and mistargeted benefits. One program administrator at DHHS who previously ran the SFMNP program said that the current process, which asks applicants to self-certify that their income falls below 185% of the federal poverty line, leads to some seniors “fudging” their income to gain access to the program.<sup>32</sup> Unlike other income-targeted benefits programs, SFMNP participation is not tied to existing participation in SNAP, Medicaid/Medicare or other federal programs which would make it easier to confirm income eligibility of applicants. Nor does SFMNP require applicants to show income or tax documents to confirm eligibility. However, further research is needed to confirm whether incorrect income reporting is, in fact, a common trend among program participants.

Transportation to farmers markets is another key access challenge for those seniors who do receive voucher booklets. This concern was raised by both program administrators and market managers, as a barrier to voucher utilization. While many farmers markets are located in downtown or high-traffic areas, low-income seniors who lack access to public transportation or a private vehicle may find it difficult to get to markets on market days. While some senior centers bus their members to farmers markets as “day trips”, shuttles are not regular or available to non-senior center members.

## Recommendations

SFMNP can be a valuable tool to increase fresh fruit and vegetable consumption and combat food insecurity among seniors. Modifications, however, are necessary to amplify the benefits of the program to meet current demand. Based on my research, I propose the following recommendations:

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## **Expand Funding to Provide SFMNP Vouchers for More Seniors**

To meet the significant unmet demand for SFMNP vouchers, the Montgomery County Council should work to expand funding for SFMNP and increase the number of voucher booklets available for distribution every year.

One strategy is for the Council to advocate at the state level for Montgomery County to receive a larger allocation of voucher booklets. The state currently allocates voucher booklets according to a combination of population and redemption rates, and Montgomery County has a rapidly growing senior population, as well as historically high redemption rates. If the state is unable to reallocate unused vouchers from other counties to Montgomery County, then advocacy for state supplemental funding is also an option. According to the USDA, “state agencies may supplement the [federal] benefit level with state, local or private funds”.<sup>33</sup> While there are no examples of states supplementing funding to increase the number of vouchers available, there is no reason why Maryland could not be the first to do so – and there is precedence for this kind of advocacy. In May 2023, the Maryland legislature voted to fund 100% of unmet demand for the Maryland Meals for Achievement program, which supplements federal funding for in-classroom breakfast distribution.<sup>34</sup> The Maryland Food System Resiliency Council (which is co-chaired by Office of Food System Resilience Director Heather Bois Bruskin) can be a potential ally in an advocacy campaign for similar state funding for Montgomery County’s SFMNP program.

A second strategy is for the Council to supplement existing SFMNP funding with County dollars to increase the number of vouchers available in Montgomery County. The County currently helps fund the Maryland Market Money program, which helps to increase the maximum benefit available to County SFMNP participants. Similarly, the County should provide additional funding and collaborate with the state to increase the number of Montgomery County SFMNP participants each year.

## **Improve Program Outreach and Accessibility**

Currently, the SFMNP is only advertised in senior centers as a strategy to curb demand for a limited program. While this was adopted as an egalitarian strategy – as any age-eligible resident of the county

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can attend senior center programming – the reality is that many low-income seniors are not connected to the senior centers. With more vouchers available to distribute, program administrators at the Department of Recreation should expand program outreach and work to make participation in SFMNP more accessible.

This includes advertising SFMNP not just in the County senior centers, but also in libraries, grocery stores, senior housing complexes and other public areas. Doing so will allow a more diverse profile of seniors to be notified of the program, instead of limiting awareness to those who have the time and ability to regularly visit the senior centers.

Furthermore, program administrators at the Department of Recreation should also institute online and phone registration options during the SFMNP sign-up period. This will similarly allow more seniors to participate in the lottery, as seniors will only have to travel to the senior center once (to pick up their booklets if selected) instead of twice. The current process of in-person registration can pose a barrier to low-income seniors who have limited transportation options, or who have limited flexibility (for example, those who are employed in shift-based jobs). Program administrators have been reluctant to introduce other options due to fear of excess demand, but with increased funding to support more SFMNP vouchers, online and phone registration can become a viable option without overwhelming the program.

Finally, transportation and language services should be prioritized as a key pillar of SFMNP. Lack of transportation to farmers markets can be a barrier to SFMNP redemption, one which can be addressed by providing free shuttles from senior centers, libraries, senior housing complexes or other gathering points. Additionally, language barriers make it difficult for eligible seniors to apply for vouchers or navigate redeeming vouchers at the market. Currently, Recreation provides Spanish translations of outreach flyers at the senior centers. As outreach expands beyond the senior centers, ensuring that additional translations in the County's top-spoken languages are available will be important for ensuring diverse participation. Similarly, market management should work to recruit multi-lingual staff, or contract the use of a call-in translation service, such as LanguageLine, to support non-English speaking SFMNP recipients on market days.

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## **Strengthen Data Collection and Management**

Furthermore, I recommend creating a standard data collection and management process at the County level, to capture and preserve data on program outcomes. This includes data on the number of low-income seniors applying for SFMNP each year, demographic backgrounds of applicants (including age, gender, race, geography, income, etc.), the number of voucher booklets allotted to the County each year, the number of SFMNP recipients each year, and redemption rates. Collecting and recording these data each year will allow the County to gain a better understanding of SFMNP demand and utilization trends, identify access issues, and better measure the impact of the program.

## **Increase Staffing Resources to Manage SFMNP Administration**

I recommend increasing staffing resources within the Department of Recreation, in order to support the Recreation Supervisors and Senior Center site managers who currently administer SFMNP during the market season in addition to their regular responsibilities. Without additional staffing – even on a parttime or seasonal basis – program administrators will have difficulty managing increased SFMNP demand, and will not have the capacity to implement the previous recommendations on program outreach, accessibility and data collection.

## **Support Markets in Accepting SFMNP Vouchers**

Finally, I recommend that the Council provide financial and logistical support to enable more markets to participate in SFMNP. In 2023, six out of 21 farmers markets in the County accepted SFMNP. Accepting SFMNP vouchers requires market management to complete additional recordkeeping and submit paperwork to the state. Given that many markets – particularly smaller ones – are typically staffed by volunteers, markets do not always have the capacity to take on additional administrative responsibilities. Furthermore, market administrators are not always aware of the requirements to participate in SFMNP (which includes annual in-person training).

I recommend that the Council award grants to help markets cover the administrative costs of participating in SFMNP, including the costs of attending trainings and hiring additional staff. Additionally, I recommend that the County provide all farmers and market administrators with annual

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reminders about the SFMNP program and provide technical support as needed to aid and increase participation.

## Concluding Remarks

The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program is an important tool in the County’s arsenal to combat food insecurity among seniors. Current demand for SFMNP vouchers exceeds the supply that the County receives from the state, and additional state or county funding for the program could allow an expansion to serve more low-income seniors. Additional funding would also allow the program to commit to greater outreach and accessibility to reach a more diverse population of eligible seniors, as well as to provide transportation services and language support to make it easier for recipients to redeem their vouchers on market days. A standardized data collection process would allow the County to better monitor and measure program outcomes, and the Council should consider increasing staffing resources to support these changes. Financial and technical support to encourage more markets to participate in SFMNP can also amplify the impact of the program, by allowing low-income seniors to spend vouchers at more markets across the county.



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