



2020 HEALTHY FOOD RETAIL INITIATIVE: FRESH FOR LESS CURBSIDE DELIVERY CASE STUDY

PREPARED BY

KATHRYN JANDA, PHD, MPH
ALEXANDRA VAN DEN BERG, PHD, MPH

INTRODUCTION

History of the Healthy Food Retail Initiative

Access to affordable and quality fruits and vegetables (F&V) is a critical factor in the ability to consume a healthy diet. Individuals living in lower-income neighborhoods are less likely to have access to F&V compared to individuals living in higher income neighborhoods. Consequently, increasing access to healthy food in low-income neighborhoods has become a priority for researchers, advocates, and city planners. Although efforts to increase access have been evaluated, evidence from these studies has been limited for several reasons including weak study designs, lack of dietary intake as main outcome, and assessment of one strategy only (as opposed to comprehensive set of strategies).

In 2016, the City of Austin started the implementation of a city-wide healthy food access initiative that allocated nearly \$500,000 for a comprehensive, multi-sector Healthy Food Retail Initiative (HFRI) in Austin's low-income communities with high rates of chronic disease risk factors. For 2017, the goals of the Access Initiative were to increase food access points where residents can purchase affordable healthy foods, with a strong emphasis on fresh F&V. The following strategies were implemented during the initial phase: 1) strategic placement of farm stands at schools and public housing, 2) stocking of fresh F&V and healthy foods in corner stores, 3) placement of mobile markets at strategic locations, and 4) use of a financial incentive program to purchase locally grown F&V. Implementation of these strategies was entrusted to three local implementing organizations: GAVA, Farmshare Austin, and the Sustainable Food Center (SFC). In 2019, the strategies were adapted and Fresh for Less mobile markets were implemented, with Farmshare Austin handling the operations of the markets and SFC handling community outreach.

Farmshare Mobile Market Program

The market strategy has been implemented by Farmshare Austin since 2016 and involved 10 mobile markets at various locations in low-income communities throughout Austin and Del Valle in 2019. Markets were located at various community locations, such as: recreation centers, clinics, elementary schools, middle school, low-income housing complexes, libraries, and churches. The markets consisted of a pop-up style market that occurred at each site one to two times a week and offered fresh, locally and organically-grown produce, as well as a variety of organic staple goods (such as eggs, pasta, beans, sparkling water, oil, honey, etc.) at subsidized prices. The program also accepted SNAP and Double Up Food Bucks (DUFb). Staff at UTSPH have completed the evaluations of HFRI and Mobile Market programs since 2017 and previous evaluations reports can be found here for the 2019 Evaluation Report and 2018 Evaluation Report.

INTRODUCTION

Farmshare Fresh For Less Curbside Delivery Program

In mid-March, the City of Austin and Travis County instituted a Shelter-in-Place order, which resulted in Farmshare having to pivot their Mobile Market Program, since their markets were strategically placed at locations that were community hubs and were closed due to the order. In approximately two-weeks Farmshare was able to completely pivot and offer a new curbside home delivery program to their customers living in the Eastern Crescent of Travis County. With this model, customers living in the delivery area could place an order online, and later that week Farmshare staff would deliver their order to their homes. Customers could elect to pay online or pay for the groceries upon delivery, and they also could still utilize their SNAP benefits and Double Up Food Bucks (DUFEB), and Pandemic-EBT (as that became available) to pay for their order. As of the time we are writing the evaluation report (December 2020), Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery is the only known home grocery delivery in Central Texas that sells affordable local produce and organic groceries and accepts SNAP, DUFEB, cash and credit cards with no delivery fee and no minimum order.

Purpose and Objective of Case Study

Many organizations have had to pivot in order to best serve their clients and customers during the COVID-19 pandemic, however there has been little exploration into how customers and staff have experienced these changes in services. Therefore, the purpose of this evaluation was to better understand the attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of both Farmshare customers and staff during this pivot to Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery via in-depth qualitative interviews. This was accomplished by conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with Farmshare Customers and Farmshare Staff in November and December 2020.



APPLIED RESEARCH METHODS

The research strategy for this evaluation consisted of in-depth qualitative interviews over the phone for two specific populations: Farmshare customers and Farmshare staff. This research plan and all interview guides were approved by the UTHealth Institutional Review Board Committee (HSC-SPH-16-0388), and no data were collected until approved.

Customer Interviews

The customer interview guide was developed by UTSPH Evaluation Staff in collaboration with Farmshare staff. The phone interview took between 10 and 20 minutes to complete and included questions about their utilization of Farmshare programs (Mobile Market and Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery programs), perceptions about the programs, barriers and facilitators to utilizing the programs, and customer demographics. All participating customers were mailed a \$10 gift card as a thank you for their participation.

Customers were recruited through a flyer that was included in either a Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery order, or that were provided at a socially-distanced community event at a former mobile market site (Southeast Health and Wellness Center). Recruitment flyers consisted of information about the interview process, the incentive (\$10 gift card), and how to sign up for the interview (via a google form or contacting the project manager by e-mail or phone). All recruitment information was available in English and Spanish.

Individuals who demonstrated interest in participating in the program via the Google form, or contacting the project manager were contacted by trained UTSPH Evaluation staff. Individuals were considered eligible to participate in the interviews if they have been a Farmshare customer (Mobile Market and/or Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery), spoke English or Spanish, and over the age of 18. Eligible individuals were told what the interview was about, informed of the \$10 gift card incentive, and then asked if they would be willing to participate in the study by taking the survey. Customers who provided assent were interviewed over the phone in their preferred language (English or Spanish).

Farmshare Staff Interviews

The Farmshare staff interview guide was developed by UTSPH Evaluation Staff in collaboration with upper-level Farmshare staff. The phone interview took between 15 and 30 minutes to complete and included questions about their role in the organization, how their job changed during the pandemic, perceptions about the programs, and future directions of the organizations. All participating staff were mailed a \$10 gift card as a thank you for their participation.

Farmshare staff were informed of the interviews during a Farmshare meeting in late November. All staff were informed of the interview process, the incentive (\$10 gift card), and if they were interested in participating, they provided their contact information. This contact information was then shared to UTSPH evaluation staff.

APPLIED RESEARCH METHODS

Farmshare Staff Interviews Continued

Individuals who demonstrated interest in participating in the program were contacted by trained UTSPH Evaluation staff. Individuals were considered eligible to participate in the interviews if they were Farmshare staff, spoke English or Spanish, and over the age of 18. Eligible individuals were told what the interview was about, informed of the \$10 gift card incentive, and then asked if they would be willing to participate in the study by taking the survey. Farmshare staff who provided assent were interviewed over the phone.

Analyses

For the qualitative analysis, detailed notes from all interviews (customer and staff) were entered onto protected data entry form, and then shared with the UTSPH evaluation team project manager. De-identified interviews were then analyzed by multiple members of the UTSPH evaluation team for emergent themes for each type of interview type, customer and Farmshare staff respectively using grounded theory. Salient themes that were brought up in multiple interviews were identified and presented in the results section. Frequencies for demographic characteristics were performed for the customer interviews as well.



RESULTS

Customer Interviews

Sample

A total of 43 Farmshare customers consented and completed qualitative phone interviews between November 2020 and early January 2021 with UTSPH Evaluation Staff. Demographics of the sample are presented in Table 1. The majority of customers interviewed were women (90.7%), identified as Hispanic (51.2%), and over half of the interviews were completed in English (55.8%). The average household size among participants was between 3 and 4 people in their household.

Table 1: Demographics of Customer Interview Sample

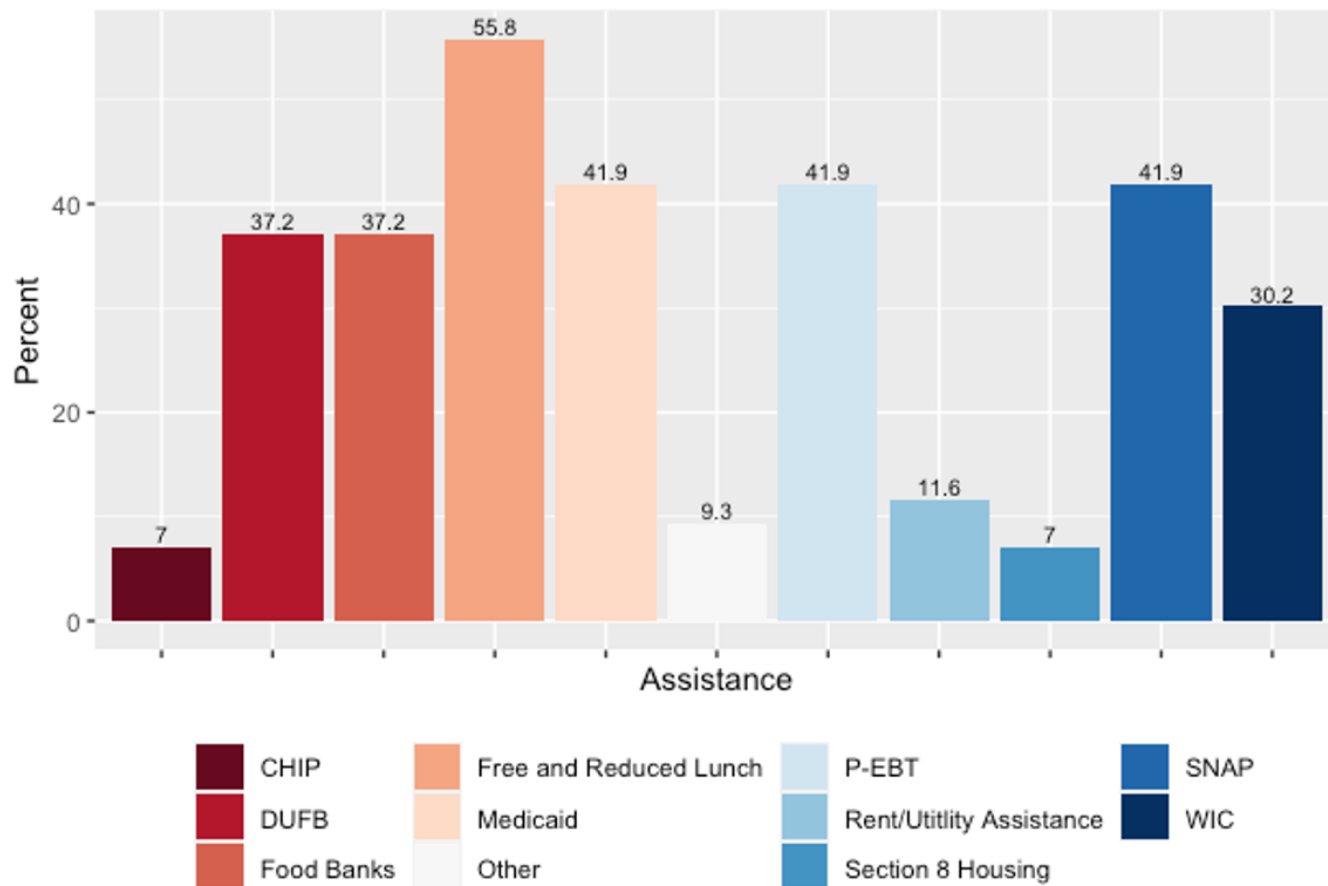
Frequency	
Gender	
Male	9.3%
Female	90.7%
Language of Interview	
Spanish	44.2%
English	55.8%
Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic	51.2%
Non-Hispanic White	34.9%
Black	2.3%
Native American	4.7%
Middle Eastern/North African	2.3%

Farmshare customers were also asked about their utilization of various types of assistance during the last year. Free and reduced lunch was the most commonly cited type of assistance used in the last year (55.85%) followed by SNAP, Pandemic-EBT, and Medicaid (all 41.9% respectively) and Double Up Food Bucks (DUFB) and using Food Banks (both 37.2%). Compared to customers surveyed in 2019, this sample had more women, roughly the same proportion of Hispanic participants, and more interviews were conducted in Spanish in 2020 than in 2019. Additionally, the 2020 sample had higher proportion of customers reporting any type of assistance, with almost double the proportion of participants using SNAP (22.8% in 2019), and approximately triple the proportion of participants reporting they are on/have used WIC (10.9% in 2019), DUFB (12.9% in 2019), and over 7 times the proportion of participants who reported using a food pantry/food bank (5.0% in 2019).

Farmshare customers were also asked about their access to reliable internet, smart phones and computers. All 43 customers interviewed reported having reliable access to a smart phone. Additionally, 95% reported having reliable access to internet at home. However, some mentioned that due to children doing school online, their bandwidth is pretty stretched, so the quality of that internet is sometimes an issue. Finally, about 21% of participants reported not having reliable access to a computer in their home. It is also of note that respondents who did the interview in Spanish were more likely to report having unreliable internet and not having consistent access to a computer in their home than those who did the interview in English.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Percentage of Interviewed Farmshare Customers on Assistance



Customer Salient Themes

Throughout the interviews there were several consistent themes that emerged in the qualitative analysis. These themes were: 1. There was high satisfaction in by customers for both Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery and Mobile Markets; 2. Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery was very well received by customers who utilized the program and reached new clients with specific needs during the pandemic; and 3. Awareness of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery, particularly the lack of awareness of the program among Spanish speaking customers.

Satisfaction with Fresh For Less Curbside Delivery and Mobile Markets

All customers interviewed reported being incredibly satisfied with the Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery and/or Mobile Market programs implemented by Farmshare. For both programs, customers reported being very satisfied with the quality of the products available, the prices (for the quality of produce/staple goods), and their interactions with the Farmshare staff. Additionally, customers reported that they valued the ability to use SNAP, DUFB, and P-EBT with the Mobile Markets and/or Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery. Over 67% of the customers we interviewed had utilized Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery. Those that had not utilized the program either did not live in the delivery area or did not know the program existed. Additionally, those who only utilized the mobile markets reported that they missed being able to frequent the markets in their communities but understand their closures during the pandemic.

RESULTS

Customer Salient Themes Continued

Perceptions of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery

Given that the focus of the interviews were regarding Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery, there were customers gave additional insight on customer perceptions of the program. Among those that had utilized Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery, many reported that they had not previously gone to the Mobile Markets because they were homebound, had issues with transportation, or lived in more rural areas where the mobile markets were not as proximal. Thus, Farmshare expanded their customer base in the midst of the pandemic due to Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery. Additionally, many customers reported that they were particularly appreciative for Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery during COVID-19 because they were elderly and/or were at high risk for COVID. Therefore, the ability to order fresh, local produce to their doors was very reassuring and did not increase their risk of contracting COVID.

Customers also brought up specific strengths and weaknesses of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery. As previously mentioned, customers of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery were incredibly satisfied with the program, and the convenience of utilizing Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery was mentioned consistently by customers. Additionally, customers appreciated that Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery did not require credit cards/online payment, accepted SNAP and DUFEB, and that there was no minimum order requirement. These factors were motivating factors to utilize Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery and addressed barriers that some customers experience when trying to utilize other food delivery services. Finally, customers appreciated that they could pick the items and now that they were high-quality, which is not always the case with other online ordering options.

Weaknesses that were mentioned by customers were mainly focused on the online ordering system. Some customers mentioned that the website could be difficult to work with, especially those who were older or did not have strong computer literacy. Additionally, some mentioned that they wished they could order more frequently than once a week/have a shorter wait period from order to delivery. However, customers recognized that this is a growing program and that Farmshare has limited staff/ability, and they were very impressed that this program was implemented so quickly and effectively.



RESULTS

Customer Salient Themes Continued

Awareness of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery

Another salient theme from the customer interviews was the awareness of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery. Among interviews conducted in English, all customers were aware of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery. However, among interviews conducted in Spanish, just over half of participants were not aware of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery. This could be because the majority of participants completing interviews in Spanish were recruited through the flyers from the Southeast Health and Wellness Center's socially-distanced community event, rather than in the orders of curbside delivery customers. Additionally, the majority of these participants who did not have strong awareness of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery resided in South and Southeast Austin and Del Valle. Awareness of the program among Spanish speaking customers living in North/Northeast Austin was higher. Future evaluation can keep these potential geographic and recruitment differences in mind.

Farmshare Staff Interviews

Sample Description

A total of six Farmshare Staff consented and completed in-depth phone interviews with the UTSPH Evaluation team. These staff represent various roles and responsibilities and worked in the food access, farm, and education and outreach teams with Farmshare. All staff interviewed were women, and staff members worked on average 3 years (median, 2 years) with Farmshare. Thus, they had worked for the organization before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to protect the anonymity of the staff participating in the interviews, no other demographic characteristics of this sample will be shared.

Staff Salient Themes

During these staff interviews, several salient themes emerged. These themes include: 1. Farmshare staff responsibilities were affected by COVID-19; 2. The success of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery; and 3. Future plans with a hybrid model post-pandemic.

COVID-19 Effects On Farmshare Staff Responsibilities

All staff interviewed discussed that their responsibilities and day-to-day tasks/activities were affected by COVID-19. These changes could range from utilizing and distribution Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), virtual meetings, to pivoting to roll out and build the infrastructure to handle Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery. Staff demonstrated pride to be providing a needed service in the midst of a pandemic, and doing so safely. However, these pivots did also result in some staff putting in extra hours to develop and implement Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery, which at times added extra stress. Additional funding for more staff and greater infrastructure for the online ordering platform would be helpful as Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery continues to develop.

RESULTS

Staff Salient Themes Continued

Success of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery

Another salient theme from the staff interviews was the success of Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery. Farmshare staff were able to develop and implement a pivot from Mobile Markets to Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery in under a month at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of the development of this report, Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery remains the only known home grocery delivery program in the Central Texas region that offers affordable locally and organically grown products, accepts SNAP/DUFB, cash, and credit cards with no minimum order requirement or delivery fees. Additionally, Staff reported that while they are reaching fewer customers with Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery than Mobile Markets, they are having higher sales numbers in terms of dollars spent. Additionally, they have found the SNAP sales in 2020 were higher than they were in 2019. Furthermore, they have anecdotally received very positive feedback from customers and, as previously mentioned, feel pride in the way that they have worked quickly and efficiently to develop this program that fills a need in the community while also minimizing exposure to COVID-19 for customers and staff.

Staff also recognized that there was room for growth within the program. The most commonly mentioned areas of improvement were developing greater awareness of the program, and bridging the digital divide with the online ordering system. Furthermore, some staff mentioned the need for developing greater infrastructure for the online ordering process (system, packing, etc.) to make Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery less burdensome and take less staff hours.



Hybrid Model Post-Pandemic

The final theme that was consistently discussed in the staff interviews was the development of a hybrid model to be implemented post-pandemic. Specifically, staff mentioned that they have learned that Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery has been particularly successful at reaching customers in rural areas, where it was hard for Mobile Markets to thrive. Therefore, they discussed utilizing a hybrid model, which would consist of Mobile Markets in the more urban areas where they have been most successful, and also offering Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery in tandem for more rural areas that have been historically more difficult to reach, as well as farm pick-up. This approach would continue to meet customers in their community and improve access to healthy, affordable food in Central Texas.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Farmshare Austin has consistently worked to meet the needs of Central Texans and improve access to healthy, affordable food prior to and during the pandemic. Customers have been incredibly satisfied with Mobile Market and Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery programs and appreciate the work that Farmshare is doing in their communities. As previously mentioned, at the time of development of this report, Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery remains the only known home grocery delivery program in the Central Texas region that offers affordable locally and organically grown products, accepts SNAP/DUFB, cash, and credit cards with no minimum order requirement or delivery fees. Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery has been seen as successful by customers, staff, and sales metrics. Additionally, according to our qualitative interviews with customers, Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery has reached more customers who have received some type of assistance in 2020. This could be due to successful outreach and targeting of customers, but also could be due to the increase in the number of people utilizing assistance programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While there has been great success with Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery, greater community outreach among Spanish-speaking Central Texans would be helpful for further utilization and adoption of the program. Also, greater work to bridge the digital divide and streamlining the online ordering system would be beneficial for both customers and staff. Greater funding for staff, outreach, and infrastructure would also be helpful to address these barriers.

The plans of Farmshare to utilize a hybrid model consisting of Mobile Markets, Fresh for Less Curbside Delivery, and farm pick-ups post-pandemic would enable Farmshare to leverage the successes and strengths of each program to meet the needs of their customers. Particularly, this would enable them to continue to reach historically more difficult to serve rural areas and customers that are homebound or have limited access to transportation.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION OR QUESTIONS PLEASE
CONTACT THE UTSPH EVALUATION TEAM -**

KATHRYN JANDA - KATHRYN.M.JANDA@UTH.TMC.EDU

**ALEXANDRA VAN DEN BERG -
ALEXANDRA.E.VANDENBERG@UTH.TMC.EDU**