

A Story of Compassion

USDA Faith-Based and Community Initiatives

First Baptist Church of Cranford/Elizabeth Elizabeth, New Jersey

The city of Elizabeth, New Jersey, is an urban community ruled by concrete and traffic. To many, the idea of fresh fruits and vegetables consists of traveling to the local grocery store and picking up days-old products. To others, having a quality family meal after a hard day of work means picking up a couple of orders of greasy, unhealthy, high calorie dishes from the nearby fast food chain. But even with these significant concerns, the major issue the city of Elizabeth faces is the nutritional health of its “at risk” population.

This population consists of both ends of the age spectrum, both the elderly and the young. Each group runs the highest risk of receiving inadequate amounts of daily nutrition. This is caused by many factors including: lack of adequate care, limited resources, and what is available at the nearby convenience store. Reverend Diana Brown recognized the need to provide a healthier food selection to her community.

As the senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Cranford/Elizabeth, Reverend Diana Brown’s mission is to provide avenues for the improving of the quality of life within her 130-person strong congregation and their surrounding community. Her plan was simple – bring fresh, locally grown produce to residents of Elizabeth who would not ordinarily have access to these nutritious foods. To accomplish this, she took it upon herself to establish a farmers’ market where people of all ages could find the quality

foods they need to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Reverend Brown knew that a large proportion of the community was already reaping the benefits of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, also known as WIC. Through the WIC program, recipients receive vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables, information on healthy eating, referrals for health care, and a support network for new mothers. With her efforts geared towards establishing a farmers’ market, she explored the possibility of becoming a distribution site of WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) vouchers, giving participants the convenience of picking up their vouchers and using them to purchase produce without having to travel to another location. As Reverend Brown states, “convenience is the key to success.”

Prior to the market being introduced to the community, the First Baptist Church distributed flyers and took out ads to promote the markets and to emphasize the acceptance and redemption of FMNP and SFMNP vouchers from customers. In addition, a monthly newsletter entitled “Nutrition Speaks” was created and distributed weekly to all market customers sharing educational information about food safety, food storage and food preparation.

Today the Elizabeth Farmers’ Market is a great success. On a recent Friday, the stand located in front of the church was well stocked with New Jersey Fresh fruits and vegetables that attracted many customers from all over the area.



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Customers included an elderly couple who commented that the market provides convenience, quality, and reasonable prices as well as a place to redeem their SFMNP coupons. Another customer was a WIC client who appreciated the quality of the produce as well as the convenience of having a market that accepts FMNP vouchers.

Dave Korey, a representative of Asprocolas Acres Farms who operates the farm stand, sees a great potential for growth of the program. A former government employee, Mr. Korey classifies Reverend Brown's idea as a "win-win situation for all concerned. The government benefits because the community has access to fresh produce which results in a health population. And, we have an opportunity to sell our product" says Korey. In fact, he mentions that his customers will often continue to frequently visit the market even when the vouchers run out. "Last year, we had our WIC customers and seniors buying produce through November" said Korey. "The program... is definitely a good thing."

The market operates from May to November every Friday starting at 8:00 a.m. People love the project so much that some even pitching in. Harvey Washington receives SFMNP vouchers and also helps run the stand, "The program is helping women and children, it's convenient, and is definitely a good thing," said Washington. When asked what his favorite fruit or vegetable was Mr. Washington comments, "I don't have a favorite, I like 'em all." The church also hires local teenagers to help operate the stand, giving them valuable work experience.

In addition to having an on-site stand, the First Baptist Church offers homebound seniors within the area weekly home delivery. In its first year of operation, 14 home deliveries were made utilizing transportation donated by the City of Elizabeth. The participants call the church each week to see what produce is available, and their orders are delivered directly to their homes. Reverend Browns thinks "it is especially important to provide our homebound seniors with nutritious foods, as well as a friendly visit." Since its inception, more and more home-bound seniors continue to place orders and use their senior vouchers. "It is especially important to provide our homebound seniors with nutritious foods, as well as a friendly visit."

The success of Reverend Brown's project is evident in the number of customers served. During the first four-months of the program 858 WIC recipients and 287 senior citizens redeemed vouchers for produce along with 789 individuals from the community. In addition, 1,762 WIC vouchers and 590 senior vouchers for a total of 2,352 vouchers were redeemed through the program at the First Baptist Church.

Reverend Brown's project is now able to provide residents with a healthy selection of produce. With half the season gone the Farmers' Market is still going strong. Because of the commitment and dedication of employees, the support of numerous agencies, and the idea of a kind-hearted Reverend - the Farmers' Market shows no sign of slowing down. And, with the love and support from the entire community, it never will.



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How the Initiative is Helping

An integral part of the project was the funding provided through the New Jersey WIC Mini-Grant Program. The mini-grant program was inspired in part by President Bush's Faith-Based and Community Initiative, which seeks to level the playing field for all applicants. The program simplifies the application process, and facilitates partnerships with faith-based and community organizations.

The First Baptist Church of Cranford/Elizabeth is an excellent example of how the mini-grant program is successfully helping those in need. Reverend Brown's Elizabeth project earned a much needed \$5,000 mini-grant that helped cover expenses such as staff, rent, transportation, and advertising. To fully develop this venture's potential partnerships were forged with the Elizabeth WIC office, Union County Senior Services, the New Jersey Office of Aging, Asprocolas Acres Farms, Rutgers Cooperative Extension Services, the City of Elizabeth and the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. Each of these agencies provided a helping hand in a cooperative outreach effort to ensure that the project would grow and succeed.

