



FRESHFARM

Produce Plus Evaluation Report

March 2024

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This report was prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC on behalf of FRESHFARM with funding from the DC Department of Health through their Produce Plus grant.

March 2024

Executive Summary

In April 2023, FRESHFARM engaged Sharp Insight to support evaluation of the Produce Plus program for the FY23 program year. Sharp Insight partnered with the FRESHFARM evaluation team to develop a survey and an interview guide and secure Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Through analysis of Produce Plus program data, survey responses from 1,441 participants, and interviews with seven participants, FRESHFARM and DC Health aimed to gain a greater understanding of:

- Characteristics of Produce Plus program participants
- The extent to which the Produce Plus program achieved stated implementation goals
- Program participants' experience in the program
- Program participants' satisfaction with their experience in the program
- The extent to which program participants report changes in their lives, food security status, or health as a result of the program
- Successes, challenges, and recommendations for future program implementation

Program Outputs

In 2023, a total of 11,396 individuals applied for Produce Plus, with 67% approved and 33% waitlisted. Among the 7,579 individuals who were issued a Produce Plus card, 5,445 (72%) activated their card and 5,205 made at least one purchase. From June 1 through November 30, 2023, Produce Plus participants redeemed a total of \$875,132 in Produce Plus benefits at 58 markets¹ across Washington, DC.

Key Findings

In general, survey respondents and interview participants were satisfied with the program and reported positive health outcomes as a result of their participation in the program. In both the survey and in interviews, a large proportion of respondents shared positive feedback and 99% of survey respondents noted they would like to participate again next year. Nearly all survey respondents (98%) agreed or strongly agreed that, because they participated in Produce Plus, they ate more fruits and vegetables, and multiple survey respondents shared specific health gains they (and/or their doctors) noticed.

¹ Some locations offer markets on different days (e.g., Columbia Heights on Wednesday and on Saturday plus a CSA program). Each market day or program is counted separately.

Successes

- Participants described positive ways that their health improved and/or that their fruit and vegetable consumption increased due to their participation in Produce Plus.
- Participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the Produce Plus program.
- FRESHFARM worked to make Produce Plus as accessible as possible, through language support and strategic partnerships, to reach customers with highest need.
- The local food economy benefited from the Produce Plus program, with \$875,132 in incentives leading to an economic impact of \$1,487,724.
- The information available through the digital Produce Plus card enabled FRESHFARM to respond to trends and allocate resources where needed based on real-time data.

Challenges

- Participants identified areas where improved communication might enhance the Produce Plus experience.
- Some participants described specific challenges with vendors, including behavior, technology, and signage.
- Although the survey response rate was high, respondents may not reflect the full range of experiences of Produce Plus participants.
- Demand for Produce Plus exceeded the supply of funding, resulting in one-third (33%) of applicants not being able to participate.

Recommendations

- Consider ways to get vendors to serve as ambassadors for the program.
- Consider ways to increase representation in future evaluation efforts.
- Consider ways to mitigate rising food costs within the Produce Plus program.
- Continue using the data from Produce Plus cards, as well as this report, to make recommendations to policymakers for continued program support and expansion.

Background / Context

FRESHFARM believes that fair, equitable access to healthy foods is vital to nourishing a sustainable food future. Food access programs connect underserved communities with local foods grown by regional farmers, ensuring that fresh and local foods are accessible to all, regardless of income or background, while amplifying growers' vital role in improving food security in the region.

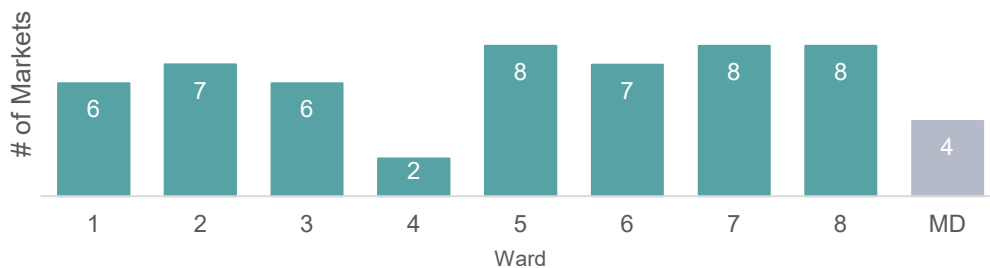
Produce Plus is DC Health's city-wide produce incentive program, operated by FRESHFARM. The Produce Plus program provides locally grown, fresh produce to DC residents who have limited access to fresh, healthy food. Approved participants receive an electronic card with a fixed dollar amount to spend each month from June through November; benefits can be spent on fresh fruits and vegetables from eligible Produce Plus vendors at farmers markets and farm stands. The Produce Plus allotment is \$40 per month, from June through November 2023.

The program approves applicants on a first-served basis, as determined by the timestamp on their enrollment submission, though actual enrollment can take longer depending on the ease of data cleaning. In 2023, a total of 11,396 individuals applied for Produce Plus, with two-thirds approved and one-third waitlisted, as seen in the table below.

Result of Produce Plus Application	Individuals	% of Applicants
Approved to participate in Produce Plus	7,579	67%
Waitlisted	3,817	33%
Total Produce Plus applicants in 2023	11,396	100%

This program year, **52 vendors** participated in Produce Plus at **56 markets** across DC. The chart below shows the number of participating markets in each Ward. Note that some markets occur on multiple days of the week – each of these is counted separately. Four markets are listed as Maryland; these vendors also participate in Produce Plus at markets in DC.

Participating farmers markets (n=56) are distributed across all eight Wards.



In April 2023, FRESHFARM engaged Sharp Insight to support evaluation of Produce Plus for the FY23 program year. Core evaluation activities included the development of a 10-item program user survey and a 30-minute interview guide; securing of IRB approval for this work; analysis of relevant data, including program data, survey data, and interview responses; and summary reporting. Over 1,400 participants completed the survey and seven participated in interviews.

Key Partners

To fulfill the work of the Produce Plus program, FRESHFARM engaged multiple partners and collaborators.

DC Health provided funding for the Produce Plus program and participated in biweekly evaluation meetings as representatives on the Evaluation Team.

Non-FRESHFARM markets participated in the Produce Plus Program, with vendors accepting Produce Plus from eligible shoppers.

Sharp Insight, LLC (Sharp Insight) served as FRESHFARM's external evaluation partner, assisting with evaluation tool development (survey and interview guide), the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, data analyses, and reporting.

This report, developed by Sharp Insight, will be shared with the DC Health team that oversees Produce Plus. A summary of key findings will be shared with farmers market managers (both FRESHFARM and partner markets) as well as program participants and members of the DC Council.

Evaluation Approach

In April 2023, FRESHFARM engaged Sharp Insight to support evaluation of the Produce Plus program for the FY23 program year. Sharp Insight partnered with the FRESHFARM evaluation team to develop a survey and an interview guide and secure Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. This study received approval from Solutions IRB on August 15, 2023, and from the DC Health IRB on November 20, 2023.

Evaluation Questions

The questions guiding this evaluation included:

- What are the characteristics of program participants?
- To what extent did the program achieve stated implementation goals?
- How do program participants describe their experience in the program?
- To what extent are program participants satisfied with their experience in the program?
- To what extent do program participants report changes in their lives, food security status, or health as a result of the program?
- What successes, challenges, and recommendations for future program implementation emerge?

Evaluation Data Sources

This evaluation draws on data from three sources: program-level data collected and maintained by FRESHFARM, a ten-item Produce Plus participant survey, and interviews with Produce Plus participants. Conversations with the FRESHFARM evaluation team, composed of FRESHFARM staff members and representatives from DC Health, informed the development of successes, challenges, and recommendations. Each of these is described below.

Program Data

From June through November 2023, FRESHFARM collected program data related to Produce Plus, including demographic and enrollment data for participants, the dollar value of Produce Plus benefits redeemed, and the number of transactions by market and by vendor. FRESHFARM provided this information to Sharp Insight for inclusion in this report.

Produce Plus Participant Survey

The Produce Plus survey collected information about Produce Plus participation, experience, and satisfaction with the program. The survey was administered online via SurveyMonkey in November 2023 and was offered in four languages (English, Spanish, traditional Chinese, and simplified Chinese). Survey participants were recruited via text and/or email message, where FRESHFARM

shared a link to the survey; survey respondents were not offered an incentive for completion of the survey.

Produce Plus Participant Interviews

Evaluation of a separate FRESHFARM incentive program was underway at the same time as the Produce Plus evaluation. For that program, shoppers completed a survey at the market and afterward they were offered an opportunity to participate in an interview about their experience using incentive programs, including Produce Plus. Participants who opted-in to the interview were 18 years of age or older, received a farmers market incentive, spoke English or Spanish, and consented to be recorded for data analysis purposes.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone and lasted approximately 30 minutes. After interviews were completed, each participant received a \$15 gift certificate to spend at the farmers market. Each interview was recorded and sent to an IRB-approved third party for transcription prior to Sharp Insight's analysis and reporting.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Program data were shared with Sharp Insight by FRESHFARM and analyzed in Excel; quantitative analyses focusing on descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages) were conducted to assess outputs, outcomes, and data trends. Quantitative analyses were also conducted for the survey data. Responses were downloaded from SurveyMonkey into Microsoft Excel and were cleaned to remove incomplete responses, defined as any responses less than 20% complete and/or any responses that did not select "yes" to the consent question. Following this process, quantitative analyses were conducted, also focusing on descriptive statistics; data visualizations were developed to support the interpretation of key findings.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were included in the survey and were the focus of the interview analyses. Survey data were coded and themed in Excel, while interview data were analyzed using a template analysis methodology to identify patterns in the ways participants discussed their FRESHFARM experience. Template analysis allowed the evaluators to develop a coding structure in advance based on the interview guide and apply that "template" to the transcripts. This deductive coding method is more efficient than less structured, purely inductive coding processes while still allowing for new codes to emerge organically during the coding process. Coding of all transcripts was conducted in Dedoose, a web-based application that is designed for qualitative data analysis and mixed methods research. Following the coding and theming of both the survey and interview findings, evaluators analyzed and reported findings supported by exemplary quotes.

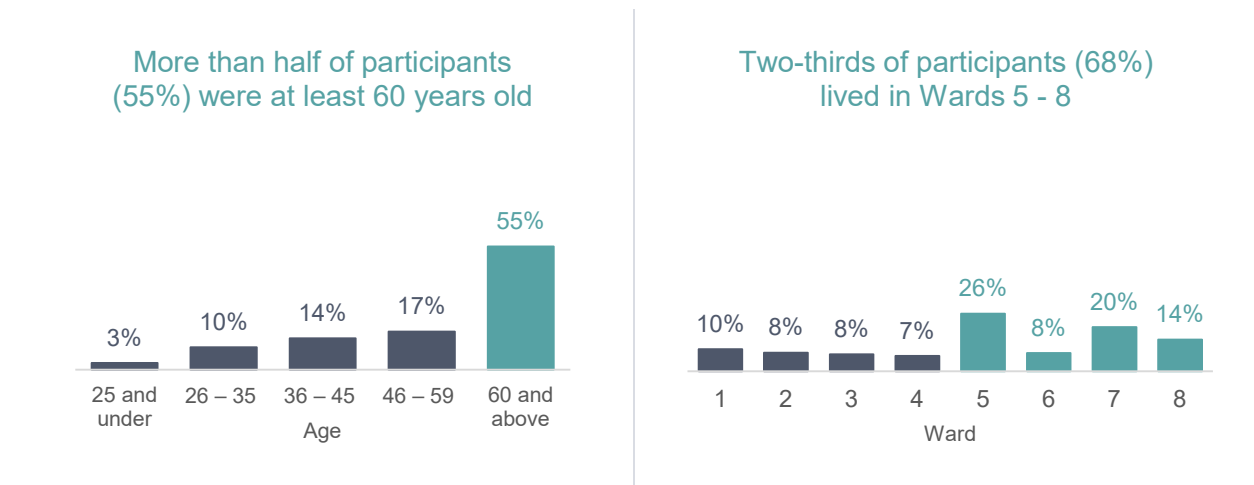
Produce Plus Program Data

FRESHFARM provided the program data included in this section of the report. In 2023, a total of 11,396 individuals applied for Produce Plus, with 67% approved and 33% waitlisted, as seen below.

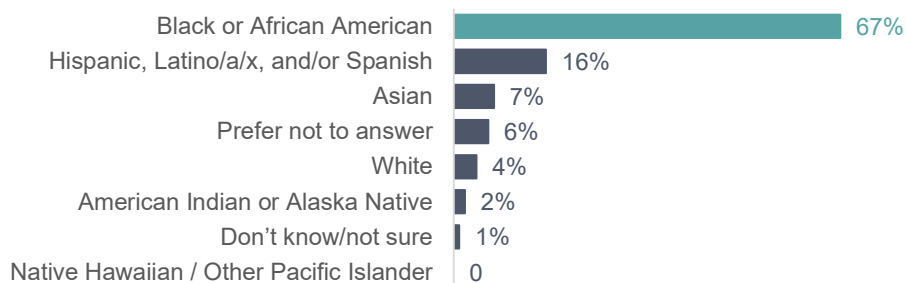
Result of Produce Plus Application	Individuals	% of Applicants
Approved to participate in Produce Plus	7,579	67%
Waitlisted	3,817	33%
Total Produce Plus applicants in 2023	11,396	100%

Characteristics of Produce Plus Participants (n=5,445)

Among the 7,579 individuals who were approved to participate in Produce Plus, 5,445 (72%) activated their Produce Plus card. The charts below illustrate characteristics of Produce Plus participants, those who activated their card (n=5,445). *Note that 240 individuals activated their card but did not make any purchases; they are still counted as “participants” for the purposes of this report.*

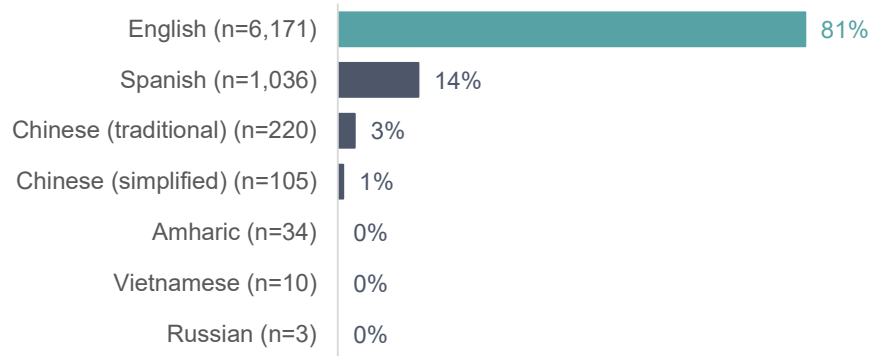


Two-thirds of participants (67%) were Black or African American



The Produce Plus survey was offered in the four most commonly preferred languages of those approved for Produce Plus: English, Spanish, Chinese (traditional) and Chinese (simplified).

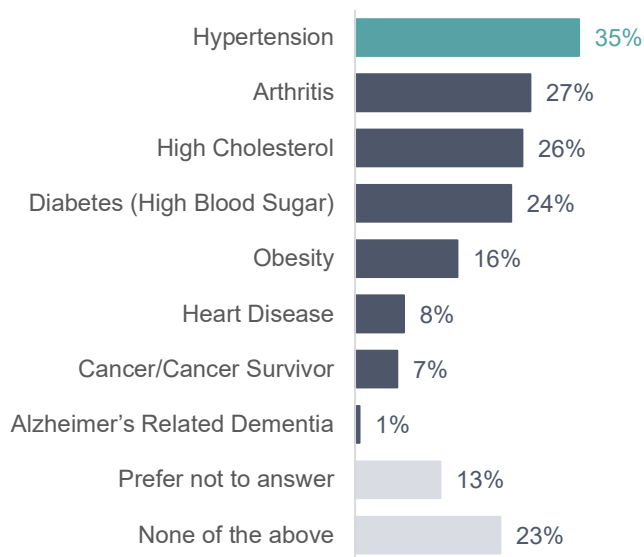
English is the preferred language for 8 out of 10 individuals approved for Produce Plus (n=7,579)



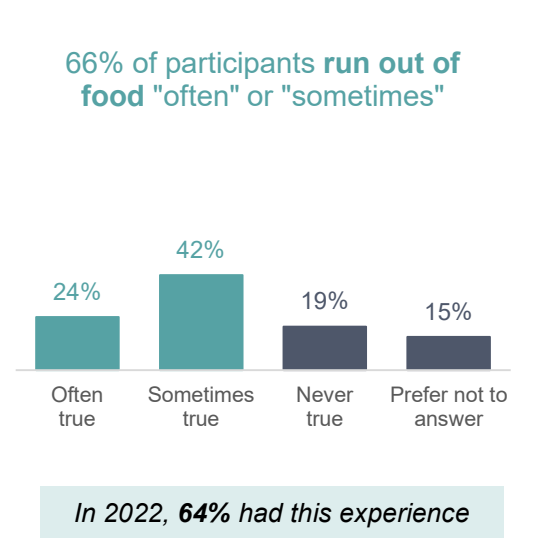
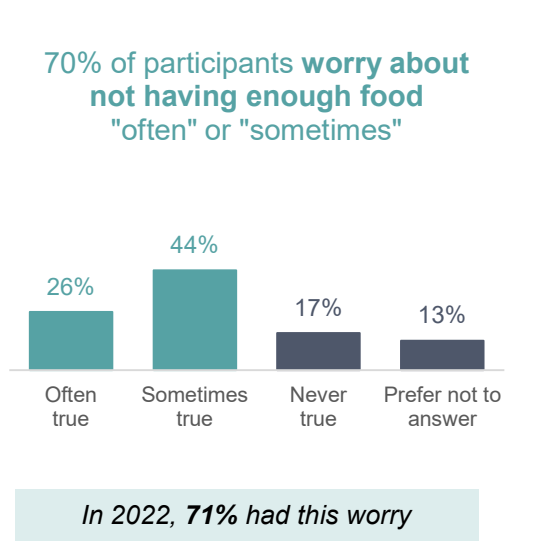
Participants' Health and Food Security Status (n=5,445)

At enrollment, Produce Plus participants were asked to share information about any chronic conditions they experience. The chart below outlines the frequency with which chronic health conditions were reported by participants. The most common health condition was hypertension (35%) followed by arthritis (27%), high cholesterol (26%) and diabetes (24%). *Note participants may have selected more than one condition, if applicable.*

More than one-third of participants (35%) reported having hypertension



When they enrolled in the program, participants were also asked to share how often they worry about not having enough food and how often they run out of food. At least two-thirds of participants reported these experiences “often” or “sometimes,” as shown below.



Produce Plus Redemption

From June 1 through November 30, 2023, Produce Plus participants redeemed a total of **\$875,132** in Produce Plus benefits at 56 markets² across Washington, DC.

Participation and Redemption Rates Over Time	Yr 1 - 2022	Yr 2 - 2023	Change from Yr 1 to Yr 2*
Individuals approved to participate in Produce Plus	6,090	7,579	↑
% of individuals with activated cards who made at least one purchase	93%	91%	↓
% of individuals with activated cards who spent at least 80% of their allotment	54%	60%	↑
% of individuals with activated cards who spent 100% of their allotment	33%	37%	↑
Individuals who activated their card but did not spend any funds	426 (7%)	240 (4%)	↓

* Note that a green arrow indicates desired change and a gray arrow indicates change in the less-desired direction.

² Some locations offer markets on different days (e.g., Columbia Heights on Wednesday and on Saturday plus a CSA program). Each market day or program is counted separately.

Economic Impact

The Nutrition Incentive Program Training, Technical Assistance, Evaluation, and Information Center (NTAE) offers a geographically-tailored [Economic Impact Calculator](#) to estimate the economic impact of nutrition incentive projects within a region. Nutrition incentive programs use this tool to estimate the statewide economic impact of their program. The **total economic impact** of Produce Plus-funded nutrition incentives in DC includes the increased household purchases of fruits and vegetables (i.e., total amount of incentives redeemed) and the re-spending of those incentive dollars in the economy by individuals and businesses in the supply chain. As seen in the table below, the \$875,132 redeemed in Produce Plus incentives resulted in total economic impact of nearly \$1.5 million.

Total Economic Impact of Produce Plus <i>June – November 2023</i>		
State	Incentives Redeemed	Economic Impact
DC	\$875,132	\$1,487,724

Progress Toward Achieving Stated Implementation Goals

FRESHFARM's logic model includes targets for several program goals related to nutrition incentive programming. The table below summarizes progress toward achieving Produce Plus goals in Year 1 and Year 2.

Output Metric	Target	Year 1 (2022)		Year 2 (2023)	
# of DC residents participating in Produce Plus	5,000+	5,656 <i>(113% of target)</i>	✓	5,445 <i>(109% of target)</i>	✓
# of individuals receiving produce deliveries ³	200	206 <i>(103% of target)</i>	✓	163 <i>(82% of target)</i>	
# of residents receiving indirect education on benefits <i>Market Guides printed and distributed</i>	4,000	~6,000 <i>(~150% of target)</i>	✓	~8,000 <i>(~200% of target)</i>	✓
# of Produce Plus Hotline calls received	<i>No target set</i>	3,968	N/A	30,371	N/A
✓ = the target was met (or exceeded)					

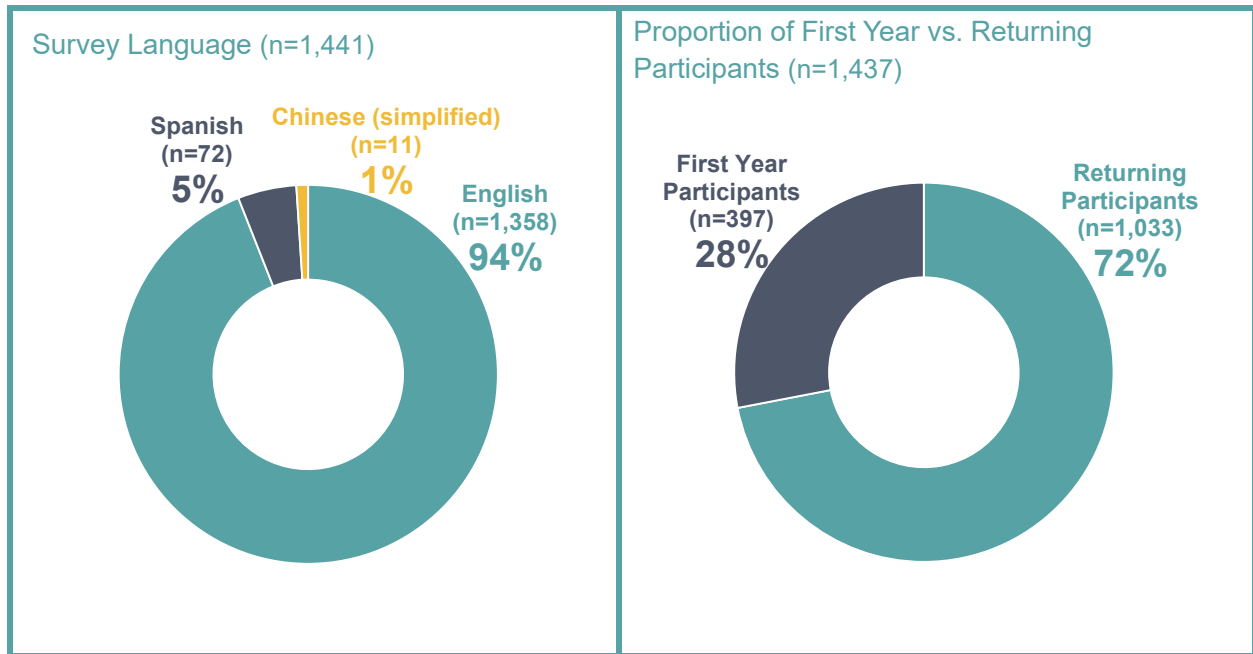
³ The majority of individuals receiving produce deliveries have mobility and/or transportation challenges that make it difficult for them to shop in person at a farmers market.

Produce Plus Survey and Interview Findings

FRESHFARM received a total of 1,441 complete survey responses (a 28% response rate, based on 5,205 participants who activated their card and made at least one purchase). In addition, seven individuals participated in interviews. Characteristics of the participants are outlined below.

Survey Respondent Characteristics

As seen in the charts below, the majority of survey respondents completed the survey in English (94%) and had participated in Produce Plus previously (72%).



Interview Participant Characteristics

The seven individuals who participated in interviews were not asked to provide demographic information; however one interview was completed in Spanish and six were completed in English.

Interview participants reported shopping at a total of eight different markets, with many visiting more than one market. Three interviewees reported shopping at Dupont Circle and/or Columbia Heights, two at Uptown, and one each at Arcadia, Mount Pleasant, Penn Quarter, and Van Ness. They also reported that they frequently shop at farmers markets with three interviewees doing so once a week and another three doing so 2-3 times a month. The final interviewee reported shopping at farmers markets “as needed.”

The sub-sections below highlight key findings from surveys and/or interviews related to program implementation, program participants’ experiences in and satisfaction with the program, and reports about the impact the program had on participants’ lives.

Produce Plus Implementation

Survey and interview participants were asked about their experience signing up for Produce Plus and activating and using their Produce Plus card. The following findings emerged.



More than one-half (58%) of respondents signed up for Produce Plus online. The next most common enrollment method was in-person at a market (19%), followed by over the phone (10%). Less than 10% of participants enrolled in-person at an event or through a partner organization. (n=1,437)

Nearly all respondents reported that their enrollment, activation, and use of the Produce Plus card was easy.

97% agreed or strongly agreed that “using my Produce Plus Card at markets to buy fruits and vegetables is easy.” (n=1,433)

While there was agreement overall, some nuances were reported in open-ended data. One survey respondent remarked, “*Some of the market vendors are familiar with how to use the technology and others are not so it is not uniformly easy to make purchases.*” A second commented, “*Shopping [with] the card is easy. However, a few vendors did not accept the card and I went elsewhere.*”



96% agreed or strongly agreed that “signing up for Produce Plus was easy.” (n=1,436)

One survey respondent appreciated the “*ease of sign up [and] the respect, enthusiasm & kindness inherent in Produce Plus marketing & messaging.*”

93% agreed or strongly agreed that “activating my Produce Plus card was easy.” (n=1,431)

However, one interviewee shared a challenge with activating their Produce Plus card: “*When I was issued the card it was supposed to be activated in 24 hours. Then when it wasn't activated, I had to call in [...] So just some challenges with when you're new to the program, and you're given a card, it's activation.*”

Program Participant Experience and Satisfaction

Satisfaction with the Produce Plus program was high across multiple aspects of the participant experience.

Most respondents (97%) reported that they are treated with respect every time they use their Produce Plus card to buy fruits and vegetables. 69% strongly agreed with this statement and 28% agreed. (n=1,432)



One survey respondent said, *“At every location, the folks were very pleasant and helpful!”*

Another survey respondent agreed, saying, *“El personal de los Mercados son muy amables / The staff at the Markets are very friendly.”*

A third survey respondent commented, *“I have never felt treated any differently from other shoppers.”*

A fourth survey respondent shared additional details, *“I go to Millers Farm – they help carry your groceries to your car and help you with any produce you need help with [e.g.] understand[ing] what a mustard green is from kale.”*

8 out of 10 respondents (80%) reported that every farmer they want to buy fruits or vegetables from accepts the Produce Plus card. While **51% strongly agreed** with this statement and 29% agreed, it is notable that 16% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed. (n=1,427)



One survey respondent commented, *“... I had difficulty obtaining a list of participating vendors in the different markets. [...] [I]t would be nice if you would provide some type of identifying indicator of which are participating in the program instead of having to wait in line to ask. Note: Not all vendors have identifying signs (at least not where I can view them).”*

One interviewee remarked, *“Some farmer stands are less excited about Produce Plus. And some have outright refused to take it even though they have been told to and that can be embarrassing.”*



Nearly all respondents (99%) are interested in participating in Produce Plus again next season. (n=1,439)

Impacts of Produce Plus on Participants' Lives

Produce Plus participants report positive changes in their health and/or lives as a result of their participation in the program.

Nearly all respondents (98%) agreed or strongly agreed that, because they participate in Produce Plus, they eat more fruits and vegetables. 72% strongly agreed with this statement and 26% agreed. (n=1,425)



One survey respondent shared, *"I am truly eating more fruits and different vegetables because of the Produce Plus Card."*

Another wrote, *"I snack on the fresh fruits and vegetables. Instead of low nutrition high calorie food."*

A third commented, *"Me alimento mejor porque puedo comer variedad de ensaladas y fruta a diario / I eat better because I can eat a variety of salads and fruit daily."*

92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they can afford more fruits and vegetables because they participate in Produce Plus. 67% strongly agreed with this statement and 25% agreed. (n=1,417)

When asked what they liked best about the Produce Plus program, many survey respondents talked about being able to afford more fruits and vegetables, including:



- *"Being able to buy fresh fruits and vegetables that are affordable from the farmers. Thanks to Produce Plus, I'm able to purchase these items."*
- *"I can afford healthy fruits and vegetables, because I get food stamps and they are not enough, I am so thankful for the produce plus program."*
- *"I like it helps me buy fruits and vegetables I wouldn't buy due to lack of money so this helps us eat more healthy."*
- *"It helps me to able to get fruits and vegetables that I can't normally afford. It's a blessing."*
- *"可以让我低收入人群吃到新鲜蔬菜水果，也让我身体更加健康。 / It allows low-income people like me to eat fresh vegetables and fruits, and it also makes me healthier."*

However, some survey respondents also commented on high prices. One said, *"The prices are too high where I shop so \$40.00 is only [enough] for 2 weeks."*

Nearly all respondents (96%) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel healthier because they participate in Produce Plus. 55% strongly agreed with this statement and 41% agreed. (n=1,398)

Multiple survey respondents shared specific health gains they (and/or their doctors) have noticed:



- *“Eating more fruits and veg is assisting with keeping my A1c lower and stabilizing my CKD 111 diagnosis. My MD is also pleased with these results. Thank you Produce Plus!”*
- *“I’ve invested in a Vitamix blender, so even if I’m not particularly fond of a certain vegetable, I can include it in a combo fruit/green smoothie. This has helped me with weight reduction. ps. My doctor is pleased!”*
- *“This Produce Plus program helped me lower my A1C. Got rid of sugar diabetes and lost weight.”*
- *“... I am new to PP program. I just started in Spring 2023. Since then, I’ve been eating cleaner and healthier. I feel better and look better. I have more energy and am more satisfied after meals when I eat fresh fruits and vegetables from the PP program. Since I began in spring, my health has improved to the point that my doctor was able to reduce the amount of prescription drugs I had been taking prior.”*

Most respondents (93%) report that they have learned more about healthy eating because they participate in Produce Plus. 55% strongly agreed with this statement and 38% agreed. (n=1,424)

One survey respondent wrote, “[I] discovered how much I don’t know about veg[etable] varieties. Experimented with great success. Readjusted to the real value to fresh is timing; best eaten immediately for max health benefits and non-preservatives.”



Another shared, “Due to rising food costs in general, I buy both staple veg[etables] and fruit (onions, peaches, potatoes) as well as things I have no clue about. I have a great time using Google and YouTube university and discovered new recipes and methods of cooking/processing foods. I pickled vegetables for the first time solely due to having this program.”

A third said, “I was introduced to, and able to buy, fruits and veggies I had never heard of, or had never tasted (like fresh callilou, mustard greens, etc.) - that was a big plus because I sometimes get tired of the same old greens and fruit all the time and lose interest in food, and then I don’t eat well. Being able to try new things was an incentive.”

Successes, Challenges, and Recommendations

The following successes, challenges, and recommendations are grounded in the data presented in this report as well as conversations with the FRESHFARM and DC Health teams.

Successes

Participants described positive ways that their health has improved and/or that their fruit and vegetable consumption has increased due to their participation in Produce Plus. Nearly all survey respondents (98%) reported that, because they participate in Produce Plus, they eat more fruits and vegetables. One interview participant stated that *“if it wasn’t for Produce Plus, I wouldn’t eat any [fruits and vegetables] at all.”* Further, most survey respondents (96%) agreed that they feel healthier because they participate in Produce Plus. When asked what they like best about the program, one survey respondent wrote, *“Eating more fruits and veg is assisting with keeping my A1c lower and stabilizing my CKD 111 diagnosis. My MD is also pleased with these results.”* Another respondent added, *“It has improved my health. Controlling my blood sugars is far easier when I add fruit and vegetables to my diet.”* These findings may help to set the stage for future FRESHFARM work in the “food as medicine” space.

Participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the Produce Plus program. In both the survey and in interviews, a large proportion of respondents shared positive feedback. Nearly all (99%) of survey respondents would like to participate again next year, and nearly all (97%) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they are treated with respect when using the Produce Plus card. Enrollment, activation, and use of the Produce Plus card was easy for most survey respondents (93%-97%). One survey respondent noted, *“At every location, the folks were very pleasant and helpful!”* When asked what suggestions they have for improvement, 25% of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with the program. One respondent said, *“I think FRESHFARM has done a great job, I think it is as good as it gets! I am a REAL veggie lover now!”*

FRESHFARM worked to make Produce Plus as accessible as possible to reach customers with highest need. Farmers markets and Produce Plus participants are distributed across the city, with representation in all eight Wards. Market supply is well-aligned with participant locations: 68% of participants live in Wards 5-8 and 60% of the markets are located in these same Wards. In addition, FRESHFARM increased on-site language support across markets to support participants who speak a variety of languages. Further, data show that a large proportion of Produce Plus participants experience food insecurity at least sometimes and/or have at least one health condition (e.g., hypertension), indicating that Produce Plus is reaching those in need of increased food access. Finally, working with partners that serve residents of Wards 5, 7, and 8 increases enrollment of participants from these Wards.

The local food economy benefited from the Produce Plus program, with \$875,132 in incentives leading to an economic impact of \$1,487,724. This means Produce Plus freed up financial resources for low-income residents and led to additional profit for local farmers and businesses.

The information available through the digital Produce Plus card enables FRESHFARM to respond to trends and allocate resources where needed based on real-time data. This is the second year that FRESHFARM is able to link comprehensive demographic, enrollment, and usage data, an improvement on the previous system, based on paper checks. The linkage of this rich data through digital cards allows FRESHFARM to better understand, and respond to, customer behavior.

Challenges

While the vast majority of participants were satisfied with the program, some operational challenges were noted by survey respondents and interview participants, as well as FRESHFARM staff.

Participants identified areas where improved communication might enhance the Produce Plus experience. To increase participant satisfaction, it might be helpful to clarify the purpose of the program and other specifics about its operation. This might include providing participants with lists of markets and vendors that accept Produce Plus and/or a list of the types of products that are – and are not – included in the Produce Plus program along with the rationale (e.g., eggs and meat are not produce, bananas and oranges are not grown locally). Vendor recruitment efforts have been comprehensive and most eligible vendors have signed up to participate. Increasing communications about which vendors participate in Produce Plus may be helpful. In addition, increased clarity around activating the card after enrollment might also be helpful in terms of managing expectations and helping participants know how to access their funds. Similarly, increased transparency around the waitlist (e.g., how many people are on it, how likely it is that they will be enrolled in the program) might increase understanding among those accepted into the program and those on the waitlist.

Some participants described specific challenges with vendors. Vendor operations issues included behavior, technology, and signage. One interviewee stated, *“Some farmer stands are less excited about Produce Plus. And some have outright refused to take it even though they have been told to and that can be embarrassing, and incentivize me not to go because there are some producers that I would really like to spend my money with, even though it’s a different kind of money.”* A second survey respondent described their experience, noting that *“Some of the vendors have a tendency to announce that you are using Produce Plus. But when people use a debit card or cash there is no announcement.”* Related to technology, one survey respondent wrote, *“Some of the market vendors are familiar with how to use the technology and others are not so it is not uniformly easy to make purchases.”* Related to signage, another survey respondent commented, *“... Not all vendors have identifying signs (at least not where I can view them).”*

Although the survey response rate was high, respondents may not reflect the full range of experiences of Produce Plus participants. Surveys were distributed in four written languages (English, Spanish, and traditional and simplified Chinese), but the majority of responses (94%) were in English; 81% of participants indicated that their preferred language is English, indicating that the survey may over-represent the experiences of English speakers and under-represent the experiences of those who speak other languages. In addition, there were languages not represented in the survey (Amharic, Vietnamese, Russian) meaning that speakers of those languages would have had to choose to take the survey in English, Spanish, or Chinese. Finally, the survey was administered to the full list of Produce Plus participants, without any way for a respondent to indicate whether they had enrolled or activated their card. There was not an intentional effort made to survey individuals on the waitlist.

Demand for Produce Plus exceeded the supply of funding, resulting in 33% of applicants not being able to participate. One-third (33%) of those who applied for Produce Plus were never able to enroll in the program. In addition, high inflation during the season reduced the real spending power of the incentives.

Recommendations

Consider ways to get vendors to serve as ambassadors for the program. DC Health has actively enrolled a large number of vendors in the Produce Plus program. It may be helpful to recruit some champions of the program from this pool of vendors, similar to FRESHFARM's existing Market Champion program, so they can support increased communication efforts. For example, they could tell other vendors about the financial benefits associated with accepting incentives, increasing interest in and commitment to participating. They may also be able to work with the FRESHFARM team to provide additional training for vendors who participate and reduce some of the barriers that may be preventing them from fully participating (e.g., technology challenges, lack of signage). They may even be able to help coach other vendors to increase positive interactions between vendors and participants.

Consider ways to increase representation in future evaluation efforts. The Produce Plus program serves a diverse range of DC residents and FRESHFARM has focused on increasing language support for market shoppers. Expanding this focus to survey recruitment in the future may help the respondent population more closely reflect the participant population. In addition, it may be helpful to expand evaluation efforts to include vendors and/or program partners to gain a greater understanding of a range of experiences with the program.

Consider ways to mitigate rising food costs within the Produce Plus program. Where possible, increasing the benefit amount can help provide a buffer for increased costs due to inflation. In addition, FRESHFARM may want to consider letting participants rollover their unspent Produce Plus funds month-to-month so the money is not lost if it is not spent within a calendar month.

Continue using the data from Produce Plus cards, as well as this report, to make recommendations to policymakers for continued program support and expansion. As mentioned above, the cards provide a wealth of demographic and enrollment data to accompany spending data. This information can be used to identify shopping patterns and pinpoint areas where increased investments (e.g., language support, home delivery) would make the biggest difference in participants' lives.

Future Evaluation Considerations

The 2023 Produce Plus program was robust, with multiple data sources and two years' worth of electronic enrollment and transaction data to analyze. The following are presented as possibilities for expanding program evaluation even further in the future.

- Given the importance of market vendors to the success of the Produce Plus program, FRESHFARM may want to consider a deeper dive into **vendor** data next year (e.g., sales data) and/or a vendor survey or interview series.
- FRESHFARM may want to consider **revising some of the evaluation tools** for the 2024 season. For example, the information provided through interviews was aligned with the information provided through surveys. Replacing participant interviews with a different data focus (e.g., vendor data) might allow for a broader understanding of the program. Reviewing the results of DC Health's monitoring visits might also unlock new insights. Similarly, given the high response rate for the Produce Plus survey, limiting open-ended responses to 2-3 questions at the end (rather than after every multiple choice question) might reduce survey burden while also allowing the evaluation team to focus on the most essential information provided in participants' own words.
- Given the more robust analyses made possible by the Produce Plus card, FRESHFARM may want to consider looking at activation rates and redemption rates by **activation date** to see if there are patterns among those who join the program and activate their card early versus later.
- Given that Produce Plus participants are able to choose which market(s) they want to visit to redeem their incentives, FRESHFARM may want to consider asking participants how they **decide where to shop** and how much time and/or money they spend on transportation to those markets.