



**Brief—January 2016**

# FoodShare Columbia:

## *A Case Study of a Produce Box Program with a SNAP Healthy Incentives Component*

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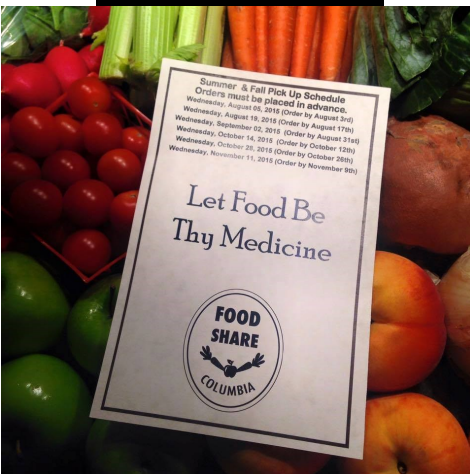
### Executive Summary:

FoodShare Columbia uses a partnership and community-based approach to ensure “Good Healthy Food for All” in an area of Columbia, South Carolina that lacks healthy food retail options. Every two weeks, community members are able to purchase a produce box (i.e., *Fresh Food Boxes*) and participate in food demonstration and enrichment activities at a city parks and recreation department community center. Since the program’s launch in April 2015, over 1700 Fresh Food Boxes have been purchased by community members; 45% have been purchased with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) dollars. FoodShare Columbia is a replicable model for effectively increasing access to produce in low-income communities. This brief describes the program and lessons learned, and provides recommendations for program replication.

**FoodShare Columbia uses a partnership and community-based approach to ensure “Good Healthy Food for All” in Columbia, South Carolina.** The program is situated in a part of the city that lacks healthy food retail outlets, has a median household income of less than \$20,000 (see Figure 1), and has a high rate of health conditions related to consuming a diet low in nutrient dense foods.

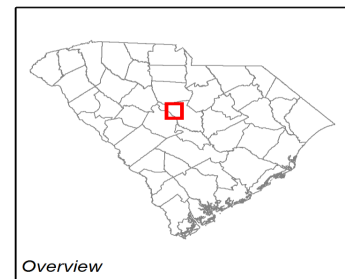
Five community organizations, with ties to this geographic area, initially formed a partnership to create a program that would include a bulk produce box component coupled with food demonstrations and literacy programming geared toward individuals and families living in public housing. These organizations included the University of South Carolina’s School of Medicine and Center for Research in Nutrition and Health Disparities (*who were interested in creating a produce box program accessible to SNAP recipients*), Columbia Housing Authority (*who were interested in their residents gaining greater access to produce*), Richland Library (*who were already doing literacy programming for families living in public housing*), and EdVenture Children’s Museum (*who wanted to expand their culinary skills outreach programming to this area*).

Prior to creating the program, interest among community residents for participating in a bulk produce box program was assessed through a community meeting and surveys. Both strategies demonstrated a high level of interest in this



**Figure 1: Food Retail Outlets in Geographic Area of Interest for FoodShare Columbia**

**ZIP Codes 29204 and 29203**



Overview

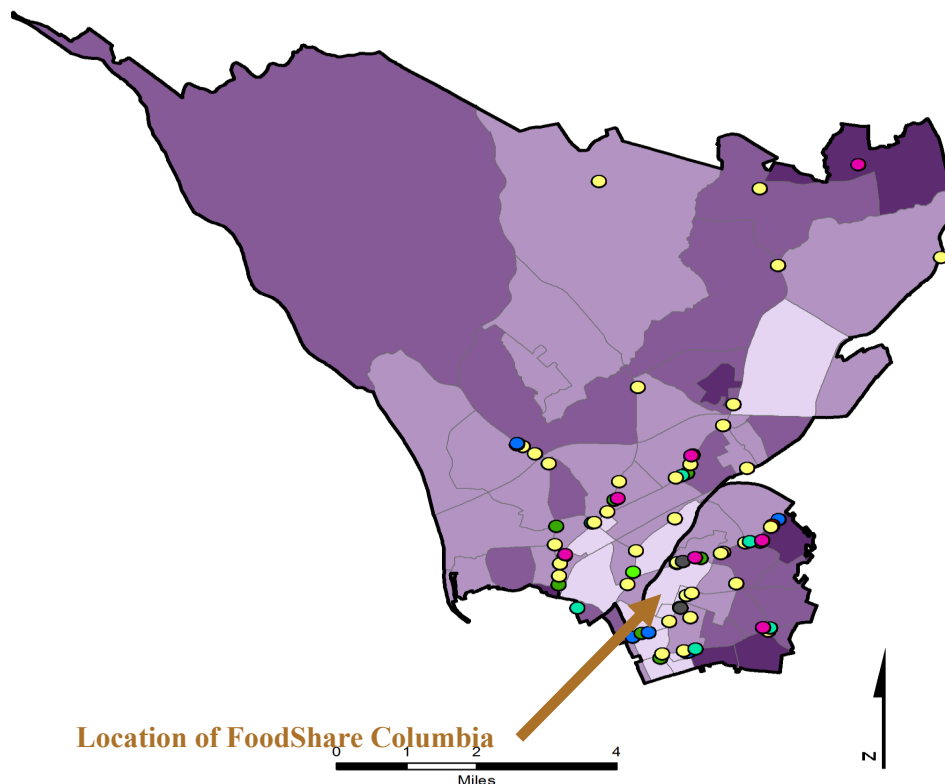
**Food Outlets By Type**

- Convenience Store
- Dollar Store
- Green Grocer
- Grocery Store
- Meat Market
- Pharmacy
- Seafood Market
- Supermarket

**Block Groups (Census 2010)**

**Median Household Income (ACS 2012)**

- 0 - 20000
- 20001 - 40000
- 40001 - 60000
- 60001 - 116364



Location of FoodShare Columbia

approach to increasing access to produce. More specifically, a community meeting with more than 30 residents of public housing in attendance was held in the summer of 2013; everyone who came expressed interest in further exploring starting a produce buying club. Surveys were also conducted with 94 residents who visited a low-income clinic in the area in October 2014. Of those surveyed, 95% responded that they would be *very interested* or *possibly be interested* in purchasing a wholesale box of produce if such a program were developed. In November 2014, families participating in a library outreach department school readiness program within public housing also completed interest surveys. All but one of the respondents said they were *very interested* in being able to purchase produce at a discounted rate and the other respondent said they were *possibly interested*.

Ultimately, two challenges had to be overcome before FoodShare Columbia could become operational: 1) getting an entity set-up to accept SNAP as a method of payment for produce box purchases, and 2) finding a location in the area of interest for taking orders, sorting, and distributing the boxes. The now director of FoodShare Columbia took the steps necessary for the University of South Carolina School of Medicine to become a SNAP retailer\*. Then the partnership got connected to the Kathryn M. Bellfield Cultural Arts Center—a City of Columbia Parks and Recreation Department community center. The director there saw FoodShare Columbia as a way to further fulfill the mission of the Center, and agreed to not only open up space for sorting and distributing produce boxes every two weeks and offering programming, but to also have the Center staff take produce box orders five days a week. FoodShare Columbia launched in April 2015, marked by the program’s first *Fresh Food Box* order.

***\*Insights on Getting Set-Up to Accept SNAP as a University Entity:***

Getting set-up as a SNAP retailer was a more lengthy process internally than anticipated. Because the program was administered through a university setting, it took some time to understand how the finances would flow as well as under which department the financial account would be set up. The administrative director of the department of internal medicine was identified as a champion who could better communicate goals and needs to executive leadership who ultimately gave approval to move forward with the retailer application. Once these internal hurdles were crossed, the SNAP retailer process itself was straight forward and processed in a timely manner. It is helpful to make phone contact with a representative from the Food and Nutrition Service who is willing to help with questions that may arise. To complete an application online to accept SNAP, visit here: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers-0>.

## How It Works:

### Ordering and Picking Up Fresh Food Boxes

Every two weeks, people can order a Fresh Food Box for either \$20 in cash or \$10 in SNAP/EBT; the program is a SNAP Healthy Bucks site\*, which allows SNAP recipients to receive a \$10 healthy incentive to go towards the cost of their box. Orders have to be placed in person at least two days prior to a Fresh Food Box pick up day, either at the main site, the Kathryn M. Bellfield Cultural Arts Center, or at a satellite site (described on the next page). Orders can be placed at the Center Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm, and then picked up every other Wednesday at the same location from 12 to 6pm; most people tend to come between 4 to 6pm. Customers are encouraged to place their order for the next Fresh Food Box day when they pick up their current week's box, to cut down on the number of trips they have to make to the Center.



### Ordering and Sorting the Produce

The produce is ordered in bulk from Senn Brothers, a family owned wholesale produce distributor located at the South Carolina State Farmers Market. FoodShare Columbia's program director places the order over the phone the day prior to Fresh Food Box pick up days. About 15% of the price of the box is reserved for program expenses (e.g., paying an outreach worker, purchasing more boxes). Senn Brothers then delivers the produce to the Center between 8:30 to 9am the following morning, where volunteers sort it into individual boxes. For every 200 boxes, about 7 to 10 volunteers are needed to help with the unloading and sorting processes, which for 200 boxes takes about two and a half to three hours. The boxes are lined up on tables, and one volunteer takes responsibility for putting one type of produce at a time into each box, which has been found to help eliminate mistakes of missing or duplicating the produce put in boxes. Push carts were purchased to help make this process more efficient.

### Contents of the Fresh Food Boxes

Each Fresh Food Box contains 12 to 14 varieties of fruits and vegetables, always with a mix of more staple items (e.g., apples, romaine lettuce) and less common items (e.g., radishes, beets). A recipe card is also included, which is created once the produce order has been placed to ensure that it is based on items in the box. On the back of the card is the list of upcoming order by and pick up dates.

### Accompanying Programming

During alternating weeks, Richland Library and EdVenture Children's Museum provide either literacy programming and enrichment activities or cooking demonstrations on site. Further, FoodShare Columbia has hosted special events for the community (described in another section).



\*The **SNAP Healthy Bucks Program** is a state-wide SNAP healthy incentives program, administered by the South Carolina Department of Social Services. At participating sites, when someone spends at least \$5 of their own SNAP dollars on produce, they can receive \$10 in *Healthy Bucks* to go towards more fruits and vegetables. Currently, the program is offered at some farmers markets and through several direct selling farmers around the state; FoodShare Columbia is the first produce box program to participate. To learn more about the SNAP Healthy Bucks program and SNAP healthy incentives (or *double bucks* programs), in general, visit our Policy and Practice Brief page at <http://www.sc.edu/nutrition/policy.shtml>.

## Expanding Geographic Accessibility Through Satellite Sites:

In addition to the main site where people can place and pick up their Fresh Food Boxes, FoodShare Columbia has partners who serve as satellite sites, which helps expand the geographic accessibility of the program. These sites are responsible for collecting orders and then picking up their share of boxes from the main site on Fresh Food Box pick up days to then distribute at their locations. FoodShare Columbia's community outreach worker visits the satellite sites to collect order forms and money on the Monday before Fresh Food Box pick up days. Currently, a free medical clinic, a county parks and recreation facility, a county First Steps program location, a church, a low-income senior high rise apartment building, and a hospital run clinic serve as satellite sites. Satellite sites find the process of partnering with FoodShare Columbia in this way to be **"simple"** and have found ways to seamlessly integrate it into their particular setting: **"We want to make sure our families have no roadblocks to healthy eating. So, each of our Family Service Coordinators take orders from parents throughout the week."**

### Outreach Strategies:

Numerous strategies have been used to spread the word about FoodShare Columbia. A community outreach worker who lives in public housing and had previous experience working on a wellness program in the community was hired to work approximately 20 hours a week. She goes door-to-door to people's homes, churches, and schools and speaks at community meetings to let people know about the Fresh Food Boxes, taking laminated pictures of past boxes and flyers with her. During the week prior to the most recent Fresh Food Box pick up day, she called everyone who had ordered a box in the past to remind them to place their order; after using this personal telephone call reminder strategy, 221 boxes were purchased—the largest

order the program has had to date. FoodShare Columbia representatives also regularly speak on a local radio show about the program; especially when the program was in its earliest weeks, this was one of the main ways people who came to pick up their Fresh Food Boxes said they found out about them. Flyers have also been sent via mail to everyone who lives within public housing, and FoodShare Columbia has been featured on a few local news stations and in written news publications.

*"This program makes it easy and affordable for our patients to access fresh fruits and vegetable. This is another way that we can conveniently assist the patient with access beyond our scope."*

- Satellite Site Leader

*"This food is alive, okay. This is not processed food. This food has come out of the ground or off the tree. This is alive. This is what'll save you. That processed stuff y'all are getting is clogging you.' And I have to tell them that. That's how I get them."*

- Community Outreach Worker



## Since FoodShare Columbia Launched in April 2015:

### Fresh Food Box Orders

Since FoodShare Columbia’s first Fresh Food Box pick up day, April 28, 2015, a total of 1734 Fresh Food Boxes have been purchased and distributed to community members; 45% of these boxes were purchased with SNAP. Additionally, SNAP sales have significantly increased over time, where in the beginning, about 25% of total boxes on a given pick up day were purchased with SNAP, versus in more recent weeks, over 50% of orders are being bought with food assistance dollars (see table below). Approximately 764 unique customers have bought Fresh Food Box, with 223 of these having been repeat customers.

Pick Up Date	4/28	5/12	5/27	6/9	6/24	7/8	7/22	8/5	8/19	9/2	9/16	9/30	10/14	10/28	11/11	11/24
# of Fresh Food Boxes Purchased	48	54	72	102	60	73	94	87	117	108	166	126	101	148	157	221
# of Fresh Food Boxes Purchased with SNAP	3	12	17	28	23	18	51	27	54	38	73	41	59	79	106	158
% of Fresh Food Boxes Purchased with SNAP	6%	22%	24%	27%	38%	25%	54%	31%	46%	35%	44%	33%	58%	53%	68%	72%

### Special Events and Partnerships

In addition to regular Fresh Food Box pick up days, FoodShare Columbia has spearheaded and participated in multiple community events and partnerships since its launch. An Open House was held during the summer as a strategy to officially announce the program. Community members and city leaders attended to celebrate and learn more about the program. Next, recognizing that South Carolina currently ranks as the eighth highest state in prevalence of senior hunger<sup>1</sup>, FoodShare Columbia partnered with the AARP South Carolina State Office for their “day of service” this fall. Bulk produce and empty boxes were delivered to six AARP county chapters, where members then sorted and delivered 375 Fresh Food Boxes to homebound seniors\*. FoodShare Columbia also participated in End Childhood Hunger SC Week; a week dedicated to building awareness and highlighting current efforts underway to end childhood hunger in the area during the last week of October. A Healthy Halloween Fall Festival was held in conjunction with a Fresh Food Box pick up day that week, and the local chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) Sorority—an international sorority that has Childhood Hunger Initiatives as a part of their program platform—partnered with the program to purchase and distribute 54 produce boxes to low-income families\*.



\*These Fresh Food Boxes are not included in the numbers shown in the table above.

## “It’s Like Opening Up a Box at Christmas!”

### Customer Perspectives:

Nine people who purchase Fresh Food Boxes, six with SNAP, were interviewed to gain customer perspectives of FoodShare Columbia.

Customers spoke of liking and purchasing Fresh Food Boxes because of the freshness, quality, variety, and cost savings: **“It’s like opening up a box at Christmas. I really, really like it.... There’s a variety. And I don’t have to jump to 25 stores to get the sale items and it looks like really good produce. It isn’t like you get it home and the potatoes are rotten or something like that. It’s fresh, decent fruit and vegetables.”** In addition to being able to get their produce all in one location versus going to multiple stores, they also spoke of not being able to get **“half the amount of produce at a store for the same price.”** Customers liked the variety in a single box and also enjoyed that there are different types of produce in the box from week to week; one customer talked about the **“fun factor”** of **“not knowing what I’m going to get. It’s kind of exciting. My daughter and I make a game of it, if you will, like, ‘Oh, it’s produce day. Let’s see what we’re going to get today.’”** Some customers spoke of being able to purchase boxes with SNAP as the deciding factor for participating. Finally, a few customers said they started participating because of health reasons; one person found out she had high cholesterol and needed to eat more produce, and, therefore, was told about FoodShare Columbia at the doctor’s office.

Customers found the recipe cards that are included in the Fresh Food Boxes to be valuable: **“And I really like that part that they give you the recipe card. I think that’s really nice. I really like that because one box I opened it up and I thought, ‘What am I going to do with all these radishes?’. Well, there was a recipe, and the recipes go exactly with whatever you’re getting in that box. So I thought that was really nice. I really liked that.”**

When asked what they do with the produce in the box and what kind of difference FoodShare Columbia is making in their lives, customers spoke of cooking more, trying different types of produce that they

would not normally purchase in a store, eating more fruits and vegetables, in general, and eating more fresh versus pre-packaged or canned foods. Customers also spoke of cutting up some of the produce to freeze in order for it to last and not go to waste, and sharing the contents with friends and family. One customer responded, **“It helps me maintain the lifestyle that I want to live. We try and eat clean and non-processed food, and it’s expensive to eat like that. So having a program like this where it is \$20 every two weeks makes a huge difference for being able to maintain the lifestyle that I want to maintain and to be able to feed my children the way I want to feed them because there have definitely been points since having kids where I had to sacrifice what I wanted for what we could just afford for right now because we are on one income.”**



**“It’s like opening up a box at Christmas! I really, really like it... There’s a variety. And I don’t have to jump to 25 stores to get the sale items and it looks like really good produce. It isn’t like you get it home and the potatoes are rotten or something like that. It’s fresh, decent fruit and vegetables.”**

- FoodShare Columbia customer who shops with SNAP

## **“It’s Fitting with Our Mission to Advance Our Community.”**

### **Partner Perspectives:**

Representatives from the six partner organizations of FoodShare Columbia were interviewed to explore motivations for partnering, high points, low points, visions for program growth, and advice for other groups wanting to replicate the model.

Partners were motivated to participate in FoodShare Columbia largely based on the alignment between the purpose of the program and the mission or strategic plan of their organization. Partners spoke of this work fitting with **“advancing our community”**, **“being a voice for those persons who are low income who live in our communities”**, **“health and wellness initiatives”**, and **“addressing any and all disparities within a family unit.”**

Program high points included the excitement of seeing the increase in the number of Fresh Food Boxes purchased each week, especially SNAP purchases, and the positive reactions from customers and getting to hear their stories when they come pick up their box. Main low points were money (e.g., difficult to find funding with a partnership-based model versus being a stand alone 501(c)(3) organization) and staffing (e.g., difficult to not have designated staff who are paid to just work on this program).



***“And we all thought we had a piece of that puzzle that could work for families in our community and start something that would be sustainable but also impactful.”***

Partners had similar visions for program growth. One partner’s response encompassed most of these goals: **“When I think, in a year or two, we might have a center that not only allows better access to fresh food but might be also a place where people could come and get their literacy needs addressed, and we could have people who are actually building businesses using our kitchen for their own entrepreneurship or an apprentice program for people wanting to get into culinary arts... I can see all of that happening and then I think it’s only going to get bigger...”** Adding gardens, hosting a farmers market, developing a delivery system for Fresh Food Boxes, and having a network of paid neighborhood ambassadors of the program were also discussed.

When asked about what advice partners would give another group wanting to replicate FoodShare Columbia, starting small and letting the program grow naturally and over time was mentioned most. Partners also found it to be especially important to start by talking to the program’s potential customer base: **“Start by talking to the people who ultimately will be the ones who are your stakeholders... not just your partners but really those who are going to be your potential customers and really get their idea on as far as how they see it benefitting their lives, some of the barriers that they may have for them participating... start with a focus on surveying the consumers first and then create the partnership base.”**

## Recommendations for Replicability:

- ⇒ Connect with a wholesale produce distributor in your area. Contact your state's Department of Agriculture to obtain a list, if you are not familiar with companies available. Some bulk buying clubs travel to pick up the produce from a wholesaler (e.g., a large farmers market); however, connecting with a distributor who can drop the produce off at your sorting location could save your program time and money.
- ⇒ Identify partners who can serve roles within the program that align with the roles their organization already serves within the larger community. For example, you might not have a children's museum close by that offers cooking demonstrations as a part of their community outreach programming; however, all states have a SNAP-Education program, and many of these programs now offer Cooking Matters at community centers and other sites. You can find out which organizations implement SNAP-Education in your state here: <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/state-contacts>.
- ⇒ Identify which organization is going to get set-up to accept SNAP and manage the financial aspects of the produce boxes. Having this entity be a smaller nonprofit or business versus a larger agency with layers of bureaucracy could speed up this process.
- ⇒ Identify a location for collecting orders, and sorting and distributing the boxes. If your organization does not have this capacity itself, try to identify an existing center or organization that fits with their mission in order to avoid having to rent space and staff a location throughout the week just for the purpose of collecting orders. Work to identify satellite sites that have the capacity to take orders and pick up boxes and that could reach people who cannot reach the main location.



**Recommendation for the United States Department of Agriculture:** Expand opportunities for healthy food access programs like FoodShare Columbia to be able to accept SNAP purchases online, as it could increase participation among people who lack transportation.

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### References:

Ziliak J and Gunderson C (2015). The State of Senior Hunger in America 2013: An Annual Report. Found here: <http://www.nfesh.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/State-of-Senior-Hunger-in-America-2013.pdf>.

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