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LEAH
LITWAK

UW Environment's Leah Litwak champions better food assistance integration at local farmers markets

Leah Litwak grew up around agriculture in her northern Maryland hometown of Jarrettsville. Her high school celebrated Bring Your Tractor to School Day and farmers markets were a community staple in the region long before it became trendy.

As a child, Litwak spent her time in the family garden. She recognized early on what the fruits (and veggies) of her labor meant: delicious supper, valuable nutrients, and time spent together.

In addition to health and sustenance, for Litwak, food is a gateway to shared experiences with the people she cares about most. Today, as a market vendor for Tonnemaker Hill Farm, food has also given Litwak an avenue to connect with her new surroundings in Seattle.

"It's cultural, community-building, it brings people to the table," the senior in Environmental Studies said.

But Litwak understands that being able to look at food through this lens is a luxury.

48.1 million people in the United States live in food-insecure households. Washington state is the 23rd hungriest state in the country, where one in five children live without adequate food.

Through her capstone project at UW's College of the Environment, Litwak took a deeper look at food access and security in King County. She wanted to identify opportunities for better integration of nutrition assistance programs at local farmers markets.

The number of farmers markets in the United States that accept food assistance currencies has skyrocketed in recent years,

making it easier for more people to choose nutrient-packed local goods over grocery stores' cheaper, more calorie-dense offerings.

In Washington, it's even more advantageous to use SNAP benefits (formerly Food Stamps) at farmers markets, where purchases are matched by the Fresh Bucks initiative.

Litwak's research suggests that there's a barrier to more successful implementation: vendors at farmers markets aren't always sure on how to interact with the food assistance currencies. Each has its own expiration date, denomination, processing guidelines, and specifications for what can and can't be purchased.

When asked which kinds of products can be purchased with SNAP/EBT but not with Fresh Bucks, nearly three-quarters of vendors answered incorrectly or couldn't answer at all.

Litwak determined that better and more alignment between nutrition assistance organizations is an important step to wider implementation and created a Market Currency Guide for vendors.

She suggests more educational opportunities and training sessions for vendors and better communication between markets' stakeholders.

"Food assistance programs at farmers markets really have the potential to create this huge positive change on our food system. A big part of that depends on whether these programs are used correctly and effectively," Litwak said.