

Bringing Healthy Food & Prenatal Services to Families in Champaign, IL



To build a brighter future for babies—in part by combating high rates of obesity, food insecurity, and childhood poverty—the City of Champaign and Champaign Township partnered with Champaign-Urbana City Farms (CU City Farms) to create a Mobile Food Market.

Since its launch in September 2020, the Mobile Food Market distributed **more than 5,000 pounds of organic, locally grown produce, organic baby food, diapers and formula—free of charge—to more than 1,000 community members.**

The pay-what-you-can food market on wheels, a bus donated by Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit District and termed the “Mobile Market,” drove twice a week to neighborhoods experiencing high levels of food insecurity. The Mobile Food Market provided fresh produce from local farms, including [Sola Gratia](#) and [Prosperity Gardens](#). Produce and other items were delivered directly from a bus. During delivery, staff collected input and feedback from beneficiaries, enabling the Market to respond to customer needs and establish deeper relationships within these communities.

The effort responds to the significant economic and health challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Champaign County’s poverty rate is **18.9%, higher** than both Chicago’s Cook County and the state poverty rate. Champaign has significant geographical areas identified as food deserts, and the county has a food insecurity rate well above the national average.

Multiple studies show connections between a healthy diet and protection against toxic substances, including those that harm babies’ brain development (neurotoxins). Eating more fruits and vegetables during pregnancy may protect against reduced prenatal growth related to PAH exposures.¹ And the CDC advises parents to give children foods high in iron and vitamin C to reduce lead absorption into the body.²

BRIGHT CITY: CHAMPAIGN, IL

CONCERNS:

- Lack of pre- and post-natal support and lack of ample, organic produce for families

PROJECT OUTPUT:

- 5000+ lbs of local, organic produce and baby food delivered at no-charge
- 1,000+ community members served

KIDS POTENTIALLY IMPACTED:

- More than 9,000 kids under 5 live in Champaign



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How was the Mobile Market received?

In an innovative twist, the Mobile Market partnered with Carle Health to provide medical care and wrap around services. The Carle Mobile Health Clinic provides prenatal/postnatal services, school physicals, and flu and COVID vaccination shots. **Carle Health's Healthy Beginnings Program provides in-home support to expectant and current mothers and babies from low-income families, and this partnership allows Carle Health's program to also deliver food and supplies from the Mobile Market.**

The project partners are committed to creating systemic change by promoting urban farming more broadly in the community. The Mobile Market helped advance this mission. For example, management opportunities have been developed for food insecure residents as part of a partnership between CU City Farms and the City of Champaign Township.

Together, they are working with Central Illinois Produce's Freight Farm (a vertical hydroponic farm inside a freight container) to employ and educate individuals from underserved communities about hydroponic farming. All produce grown at the Freight Farm will be donated to the Mobile Market. Koss Farms, an aquaponic farm just outside of Champaign, is planning to train and hire individuals from underserved communities through CU City Farms and will donate produce and organically raised tilapia to the Mobile Market.

What was the biggest challenge?

Every project has challenges! Securing a contractor with qualifications to retrofit a mass transit bus and pandemic-related restrictions (e.g., not allowing clients on board the bus making operations difficult in the winter), were among the Mobile Market's biggest hurdles. Persistence and creativity helped address these challenges.

Coordinating the participation of multiple, dynamic community organizations was also one of the biggest challenges, but also one of the projects' big successes! Designating willing volunteers—**and a project lead**—greatly helped with coordination.

What were the lessons learned?

Project partners developed a unique system for client input. Shoppers filled out post-it notes describing their food needs/desires and stuck the post-it notes on the outside of the bus.

This helped organizers build client-centered solutions, differing from other local food programs that distribute food bags/boxes without being informed by what

"Since the CU City Farms initiative took shape, I have been so pleased with the positive response received from both the public and private sectors. Many community partners collaboratively joined together in a meaningful and reciprocal collaboration. This is a promising initiative for our community!"

Mayor Deb Feinen
Champaign, Illinois



"A collaborative project like this is what makes me appreciate being involved in local government. It's exciting to be part of such positive change and see so many committed to that change!"

Andy Quarnstrom
City of Champaign
Township Supervisor



the clients want or need. Most often, all of the food distributed was actually requested by clients, rather than providing what was easily available.

Staff also formed real friendships and gained a deeper understanding of the challenges facing those who live in underserved neighborhoods, enabling staff to better work within systems to advocate for change.

Two individuals who were homeless worked at the Mobile Market. These individuals taught staff a great deal about the clients served, and their life experiences helped clients to open up about their own needs and challenges. Their sage presence gave the Mobile Market credibility. And, by June of 2021, both individuals secured permanent housing.

What's next?

Building on past experience and success, staff will create more opportunities for underserved neighborhoods to benefit from the Mobile Market, and purchase additional materials to ensure clients have a welcoming experience on the bus with the fresh organic produce beautifully displayed on ample shelving and within refrigeration units.

Plans are underway for “Neighborhood PopUp Events” where the Mobile Market will join other organizations—including the Urbana Park District, Champaign Park District, CU Public Health District, and the University of Illinois—for fun and educational activities in neighborhood parks. Staff also plans to expand educational opportunities by offering cooking demonstrations utilizing the Market’s fresh organic produce.



“I was overwhelmed with the enormous gratitude expressed by those assisted by the Mobile Market. Most moving expressions of thanks were from mothers and grandmothers of newborns who came consistently not only for the fruit and vegetables, but for the organic baby food, diapers, and formula...often in tears when they talked to us about how much this helped. If I ever had a doubt about the impact of this endeavor, it was erased with these experiences. There was no doubt our impact was real.”

Rebecca McBride, CEO & Founder of Four Osprey



Three Keys to Kick-Off Your Mobile Market

1 Identify food insecure neighborhoods.

Delve into the deep knowledge of community partners—cities, health organizations, public health districts, community organizations, etc.—and consult USDA Food Desert Maps and local studies to determine areas most in need.

2 Don't assume you know what they need—find out by asking.

Ask clients to use a “post-it note” and pen to write down needed items and post in a shared space (for this project, notes were posted to the exterior of the Mobile Market). This allowed a bit more “anonymity.” Hire a trusted community liaison to help translate community needs and concerns; in Champaign, a key community champion was a man of color who previously experienced homelessness. Work through existing neighborhood networks; our relationship with a consortium of Black Churches also helped inform the Mobile Market’s plan.

3 Identify willing volunteers – and a project lead.

Volunteers helped make this project roll! Tasks ranged from contacting the local mass transit district to see if bus or vehicle donations were possible and organizing food distribution under tents and with coolers when it was not. The Project Lead was essential for coordination among staff and volunteers and keeping the project on track.

What Have Other Cities Done to Equitably Increase Food Access for Expectant Parents and Babies?

Salem, Massachusetts: The city's Mack Park Food Farm (MPFF) is a municipal project spearheaded by the City of Salem's Health Department. Located in an underused area of a city park, the MPFF is a 120'x70' vegetable farm filled with organic, high-yielding produce such as lettuces, squash, and cucumbers. Built and maintained by contracted local farmers and staff along with more than 100 community volunteers, this food farm is a true community collaboration.

Salt Lake City (SLC), Utah: SLC tackled issues of fresh and healthy food availability via a newly formed group of Resident Food Equity Advisors. SLC provided a stipend for 13 residents with diverse backgrounds to meet monthly to develop solutions that equitably increase access to healthy food. The Advisors' insights deepened the City's understanding of local food insecurity and the unequal barriers some residents face when trying to access healthy, culturally appropriate, and personally relevant food, culminating in recommendations for how the City can achieve greater food equity. The City committed **funding for implementation.**

Bright Cities Lynn, Massachusetts; **Columbia, South Carolina;** and **San Rafael, California,** also have municipal initiatives designed to increase healthy food access and lower exposures to chemicals that harm babies' brain development.

Interested in learning more about this project?

Contact Rebecca McBride, CEO of Four Osprey in Champaign, Illinois, at rebeccamcbride77@me.com.



The Bright Cities program provides up to \$35,000 in grant funding for US cities and community based partner organizations to reduce exposures — in pregnant women and children under 2 years — to the nine neurotoxins with the strongest associations to developmental delay.³ These neurotoxins are arsenic, flame retardants, lead, mercury, combustion byproducts called PAHs, banned industrial chemicals PCBs, organophosphate pesticides, a rocket fuel component and fertilizer contaminant called perchlorate, and plastic additives called phthalates.

Curious about funding and technical support to reduce neurotoxic exposures in your city?
Contact **Kyra Naumoff Shields**, Bright Cities Program Director, at knaumoff@hbbf.org



The Mayors Innovation Project is a national learning network for mayors committed to shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democratic government. Around the country, mayors are taking the lead on pressing issues— climate change, racial equity, economic revitalization, housing, and more. The Mayors Innovation Project supports mayors by providing cutting-edge thinking and concrete examples that mayors can implement.

Looking for peer networking and best practices for city leaders focused on equity, sustainability, and democracy? Contact **Katya Spear**, Mayors Innovation Project Managing Director, knspear@mayorsinnovation.org.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pedersen M et al. Bulky DNA adducts in cord blood, maternal fruit-and-vegetable consumption, and birth weight in a European mother-child study (NewGeneris). *Environ Health Perspect.* 2013 Oct;121(10):1200-6.
- 2 Centers for Disease Control <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/docs/publications/leadandpregnancy2010.pdf> (page 77), accessed August 2021.
- 3 Bennett D, Bellinger DC, Birnbaum LS, et al. Project TENDR: Targeting Environmental Neuro-Developmental Risks The TENDR Consensus Statement. *Environ Health Perspect.* 2016; 124(7):A118-A122.