



Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee

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62nd Montana Legislature

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TO: Directors of Montana Farmers' Markets

FROM: Sen. Jason Priest, Presiding Officer
Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee

DATE: March 23, 2012

RE: Accepting SNAP Benefits at Farmers' Markets

On behalf of the Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee, I'm writing to encourage your market to begin accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits if you don't already do so.

Our legislative committee agreed to make this request after spending several months studying issues related to childhood hunger. The 2011 Legislature approved the study through passage of House Joint Resolution 8. Among other things, the study resolution asked the committee to:

- examine ways to improve access to nutritious foods; and
- encourage the use of Montana farm products in programs that serve children.

During the course of the study, the committee heard from a number of speakers, including representatives of the Department of Agriculture, farm-to-school programs, and food banks. Much of the discussion focused on ways to improve access to healthy foods and to do more to incorporate Montana farm products into the various programs that provide food to children at school, in day-care settings, and in their homes.

SNAP is a federally funded program that currently helps almost 127,400 Montanans buy food each month, including more than 50,000 children in February of this year. In February, SNAP benefits for the month totaled \$16.4 million in Montana.

SNAP recipients use Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, similar to debit cards, to make purchases from certified SNAP retailers. The benefits may be used to buy any food item other than alcohol, tobacco, or prepared foods that are ready for consumption.

Some study participants suggested that increasing the use of SNAP benefits at farmers' markets would help meet the study's goals of improving access to nutritious foods and using healthy, Montana-produced foods in programs that serve children. As a result, the committee reviewed information about what has been done to date to accept SNAP benefits at farmers' markets.

The committee subsequently agreed that both SNAP recipients and Montana producers would benefit if more farmers' markets accepted SNAP benefits. SNAP recipients would gain a new shopping option and better access to fresh foods. Meanwhile, Montana producers may gain a broader customer base.

We're sending this letter to encourage you to consider accepting EBT cards at your market. We're also enclosing a manual that was written as part of a pilot project that tested the use of SNAP benefits at several farmers' markets from 2007 to 2009. The manual details the steps that a market must take to be certified as a SNAP retailer and to set up a system for accepting EBT cards.

The rapid changes in technology that have occurred since the manual was published may make it even easier for your market or for individual producers to accept SNAP benefits. For example, wireless Internet service is more widely available, meaning a land line may not be necessary to operate machines in some areas.

We wanted to send this information now in order to give your market time to put the necessary pieces into place before this summer. We hope you'll give serious consideration to this request. We believe it provides a win-win situation for all involved.

Enc: *Montana Farmers Market Electronic Benefits Transfer Manual*

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