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New bill increases farmers market accessibility to electronic food stamps

Rising unemployment leads to higher demand for food stamps

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In an effort to increase access to fresh food, legislators are working on a bill to place electronic food stamp benefit transfer card readers (EBTs) into farmers markets throughout California.

Most farmers markets are cash-only and take place outdoors, which means there is restricted access to electricity. The bill would allow a third party organization to set up and run the EBT machines.

Rep. Juan Arambula (D-Fresno) introduced the bill in order to help combat rising poverty levels. Arambula and his legislative director, Joe Devlin, hope to see the bill on the governor's desk by this summer.

There are approximately 640 farmers markets in California. Currently 10-15 percent use EBT card readers. In the late 1990s the United States Department of Agriculture switched from a paper to an electronic food stamp system, which helped drastically reduce fraud but limited EBT card recipients only to locations with readers, Devlin said.

According to the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) web site, 3,041,650 people participated in the food stamp program in November 2009, a 25.1 percent increase from Nov. 2008.

"We would like to re-establish the link between fresh food at the market and low income people," Devlin said. "The rising demand for food stamps, especially at the lower end of the economic ladder, has resulted in the increased need for accessibility."

The USDA must approve markets, and the markets must obtain a reader, in order to accept cards. The Davis Farmers Market does not currently have an EBT card reader, because it was deemed too small to receive a free one from the state.

Davis Farmers Market Manager Randii MacNear said she would like to see people move away from the perception that farmers markets are primarily for those in the middle and upper classes.

"The food at the markets is fresh and affordable," MacNear said. "It's a great resource and we would love to see EBT participants purchase fresh food and participate in what is a community event."

The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) helped draft the bill. ALBA teaches farmers how to become independent and sell directly to individual consumers.

ALBA Food System Program Manager Deborah Yashar said the state provides free EBT machines with only a minimal cost for tokens.

"There are markets that already have a good program, and mid-sized and large markets already have the capacity to administer the program," Yashar said. "It doesn't cost a lot, it just takes a little time to utilize."

The availability of EBT readers in Arambula's district, which includes central San Joaquin Valley communities, is a major issue, according to Devlin.

"The unemployment rates are pushing 40 percent in some towns," Devlin said. "This area represents one of the top agricultural production areas in the state, so when you see the long lines at the food bank, there is a bitter irony to that."

Yashar said the bill was a win-win situation for everyone involved.

"The program allows low income families to get quality food, it allows small farmers to get more money and it strengthens the markets by expanding the customer base," Yashar said.

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