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Increasing Food Access Report

 experimental station
building independent cultural infrastructure





FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friend,

2021 was a banner year for Illinois agriculture, as Illinois farmers reported record crop yields. That is, yields of corn and soy reached record highs, crops which are exported or used to produce ethanol, sweeteners, livestock feed, cooking oil, biodiesel fuel... At the same time, Illinois imported 95% of the foods we eat, adding greatly to our carbon footprint, while subtracting greatly from Illinoisans' ability to feed ourselves.

Ours is, indeed, a food-insecure state. And yet, we are glad to report on the broad awareness gained in 2020—both by the public and the government—of the devastating consequences of food insecurity when food supply chains fail, not just for those living in low-income communities, but for all Illinoisans. In 2021, this awareness translated into local, state, and federal budgets expanding their funding for Link Up Illinois so that SNAP recipients could purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers markets and grocery stores. Simultaneously, an awareness grew about the need to support the growth and expansion of Illinois' food-producing farms and distribution chains to supply those markets and stores.

With increased resources, longstanding partnerships, new collaborations, and the availability of COVID-19 vaccines in 2021, Experimental Station was able to expand, deepen, enhance, and—in some cases—simply return to some of our food access work. We are

thrilled to report on Link Up Illinois' ability to provide increased Link Match funding to our partners, extension of Link Match to corner stores, and the impacts of Link Match across the state. We are proud of our 61st Street Farmers Market's impact as we bring fresh and healthy foods as well as food education to our South Side community. And we are excited to report on Experimental Station's work bringing SNAP and healthy food access to farmers markets located in neighborhoods across Chicago.

Looking back over 15 years, we see our work to ensure affordable access to fresh fruits and vegetables for low-income Illinoisans coming to scale. On the horizon, we see great potential for a shift in Illinois' agricultural landscape, thanks to the support of our many partners and collaborators. In the coming year, we will advocate for the development of an Illinois plan to increase the production, aggregation, and distribution of fruits and vegetables here in our state. As always, we hope that you will join us in these efforts!

Connie Spreen, PhD
Executive Director
Experimental Station



Link Up Illinois provides Illinois farmers markets, mobile markets, co-ops, neighborhood stores, and grocery stores with Link Match funding, training, and technical assistance.



The 61st Street Farmers Market brings local, sustainable foods and food education to Chicago's south side.



City Farmers Market Link Access brings Link services and Link Match to 8 City of Chicago farmers markets.

GLOSSARY

SNAP

the federal **S**upplemental **N**utrition **A**ssistance **P**rogram, formerly known as food stamps. In Illinois, it is used interchangeably with 'Link.'

EBT

(**E**lectronic **B**enefits **T**ransfer) a system that enables the credit and debit of federal food assistance benefits.

LINK CARD

the debit card issued in Illinois to access SNAP/Link benefits.

LINK MATCH

the Link Up Illinois incentive earned by SNAP customers to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at Illinois farmers markets and grocery retailers.

LINK UP ILLINOIS

Link Up Illinois is a program of Experimental Station, developed in 2011 in partnership with the Illinois Farmers Market Association and Wholesome Wave.

Through Link Up Illinois, Experimental Station and its partners seek to increase the affordability and accessibility of fresh foods sold at Illinois farmers markets and other venues selling locally produced foods. Link Up Illinois was created to address food insecurity in urban and rural areas, support local small and mid-size farms, offer lasting health benefits to vulnerable Illinoisans, and advocate for policy changes on the state and national level.

Link Up Illinois achieves these aims by providing farmers markets, other direct-to-consumer venues, food co-ops, mobile markets, neighborhood stores, and grocery stores across the state with funding, training, and technical assistance to implement the Link Match incentive program. Link Match provides recipients of SNAP (Illinois 'Link') benefits with matching dollars, which increases their purchasing power when buying fresh fruit and vegetables.



The silver lining, if you can call it that, of the pandemic—and seeing all of the people who were experiencing food insecurity [in Southern Illinois]—was to be able to come to them with Link Match and to be able to say you can double your food dollar and buy food that’s healthy, and you can support your neighbors with that.”

- Jennifer Paulson, FoodWorks



In 2021, Link Up Illinois continued working with our partners to face the unprecedented challenges of food access in the pandemic era. These have been difficult times for many. Especially hard hit were the low-income and minority communities across our state that this program was created to serve. While it remains a daunting task to overcome systemic inequalities, we are making progress in the fight for food justice in Illinois with the help of our dedicated staff, committed partners, generous donors, and the thousands of resilient individuals whom we serve.

In the past year, resurgent interest from individuals and communities about where their food comes from and the renewed commitment to supporting local food producers drove an exciting expansion of Link Up Illinois. With customers able to match their Link purchases up to \$25 with each transaction, rather than each market day, our partner farmers markets saw a **245%** increase in Link and Link Match sales over 2020. The greatly increased Link Match redemption demonstrates the increasing desire and need throughout Illinois for these types of food access initiatives.

I am honored to continue this work and incredibly thankful to our partners, donors, and community members. The task at hand is urgent. Over the past year, I have met with and have been inspired by people throughout Illinois who are energized and passionate about improving their community's access to fresh, locally grown foods, with all the health and economic benefits that implies. I am confident that, together, our efforts to attain food justice will be realized.

Lauren Stern



Senior Program Manager
Link Up Illinois



FROM THE
PROGRAM MANAGER

LINK MATCH ACROSS ILLINOIS

Link Up Illinois aims to support Illinoisans receiving SNAP benefits by increasing their purchasing power to buy fresh, locally grown food by matching their SNAP dollars through the Link Match incentive program. Simultaneously, the program supports Illinois farmers growing food for local consumption to participate more fully in the local food economy. In the last year, in addition to partnering with local neighborhood grocers on the South and West-sides of Chicago, we provided funding, training, and technical assistance to farmers markets, food cooperatives, mobile markets, and neighborhood grocers, including more than **84** physical sites and **149** operating days.

Our food access work would not be possible without the support of our partners: the United States Department of Agriculture, Illinois Department of Human Services, City of Chicago, The Builders Initiative, Chicago Region Food System Fund, Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust, and individual donors.



61st Street Farmers Market
 Alton Farmers and Artisans Market
 Andersonville Farmers' Market
 Aurora's Farmers Market Downtown
 Austin Town Hall City Market
 Batavia MainStreet Farmers' Market
 Benton Farmers Market
 Black Oaks Center - Healthy Food Hub
 Bronzeville City Market
 Champaign Farmers Market
 Champaign-Urbana Winter Farmers Market
 City of Palos Heights Farmers Market
 Community Market of Carbondale - Winter
 Daley Plaza City Market
 DeKalb Farmers' Market
 Division Street City Market
 Downtown Bloomington Farmers' Market
 Downtown Evanston Farmers Market
 Dr. Grammy's Garden
 Englewood City Market
 Farm on Ogden
 Farmers Market of Carbondale

Forty Acres Fresh Market
 Fresh Moves Mobile Market
 Garfield Park Neighborhood Market
 Gary Comer Youth Center Farmers' Market
 Glenview Farmers Market
 Glenwood Sunday Market
 Green Top Grocery Co-op
 Green Youth Farm of Lake County
 Humpday Farmers Market
 Illinois Products Farmers Market
 Kankakee Farmers Market
 Land of Goshen Community Market
 Logan Square Farmers Market
 Market on the Hill
 Mi Mexico Grocery Store
 Morgan Mini Mart
 Neighborhood Co-op Grocery
 North End City Market
 Old Capitol Farmers Market
 Park Forest Main Street Market
 PCC Austin Farm Stand
 Peoria RiverFront Market

Plant Chicago Farmers Market
 Pullman City Market
 Rockford City Market
 Rockford Midtown Market
 Roseland City Market
 Skokie Farmers' Market
 South Shore Farmers Market
 Sugar Beet Food Co-op
 Terripin Farms
 The Dill Pickle Food Co-op
 Town Square Market
 Ujamaa Co-op Farmers' Market
 Uptown Farmers Market
 Urban Canopy - CSA
 Urban Canopy - Farmers Markets
 Urbana's Market at the Square
 West Frankfort Farmers Market
 West Humboldt Park City Market
 Wicker Park Farmers Market
 Woodstock Farmers Market

PARTNERSHIPS & COLLABORATIONS

Link Up Illinois greatly benefits from partnerships and collaborations with many dedicated organizations and agencies. The Illinois Farmers Market Association and Wholesome Wave (CT) have been key strategic partners, providing statewide outreach, state and federal policy advocacy, fundraising and technical support.

In 2021, our eight-year collaboration with the Illinois Public Health Institute, American Heart Association, Illinois Stewardship Alliance, CLOCC, and others has resulted in a state budget appropriation of \$500,000/year to the Healthy Local Food Incentives Fund for state fiscal years 2022 and 2023. With increased federal (USDA) funding and a new 3-year Healthy Local Food System pilot, undertaken in partnership with the Illinois Department of Human Services, Link Up Illinois was able to bring Link Match to more Illinois farmers markets and grocery retail and to increase benefits to our Link customers.

Finally, in partnership with the Chicago Department of Public Health and Department of Cultural and Special Events, Link Up Illinois was also able to support the acceptance of Link and provision of Link Match at Chicago farmers markets in 2021 and 2022.

NORTHERN IL

14

PARTNERS

CHICAGO

29

PARTNERS

CENTRAL IL

11

PARTNERS

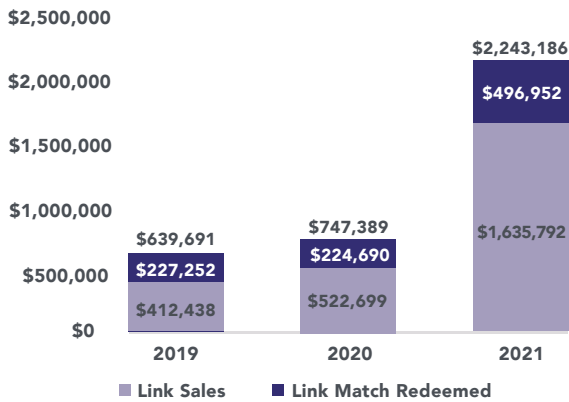
SOUTHERN IL

10

PARTNERS



LINK SALES AND LINK MATCH REDEEMED AT LINK UP ILLINOIS LOCATIONS



Growth from 2019 to 2021 is attributable to increased funding available for Link Match incentives and a surge in the number of operating days for farmers market partners, as they returned to pre-pandemic levels.

In 2021, with Link Match, SNAP recipients spent **\$496,952** additional dollars on fresh fruit and vegetables—while supporting local farm economies.

\$894,514

Total local economic impact solely from Link Match purchases of fresh produce in 2021

(\$496,952 X SNAP multiplier of 1.80)

LINK UP ILLINOIS PROGRAM SURVEY RESULTS*

In summer 2021, Link Up Illinois conducted a program evaluation led by Dr. Chelsea Singleton of Tulane University. Designed to evaluate SNAP/Link customer health, market shopping behaviors/attitudes, fruit and vegetable consumption, food security, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security, the 39-question survey (in English and Spanish) provided valuable insights into our program’s impact and those whom it serves.

206 Link Match clients completed the survey, receiving a \$10 incentive for participating. Surveys were collected at the following locations:

- 61st Street Farmers Market (Chicago)
- Austin Town Hall City Market (Chicago)
- Benton Farmers Market (Benton)
- Bronzeville Farmers Market (Chicago)
- Champaign Farmers Market (Champaign)
- Mi Mexico Grocery Store (Chicago)
- Pullman City Market (Chicago)
- Neighborhood Co-op Grocery Store (Carbondale)
- Humpday Farmers Market (Carbondale)
- Urbana Market at the Square (Urbana)
- West Frankfort Market (West Frankfort)

We learned that:

- 73.1% of respondents are female
- 48.1% are Black
- 40.8% are white
- 28.9% reported being in fair or poor health
- 41.8% reported low to very low food security in the previous 30 days
- 42.9% stated that COVID-19 made it hard for those in their household to make ends meet
- 42.6% used Link Match to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables for more than 6 months
- 20.8% used Link Match for more than 2 years.

*This evaluation was part of a national evaluation of projects funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program.



CORNER STORE EXPANSION!

The COVID-19 pandemic placed a spotlight on the extent to which issues of access to and affordability of food pervade communities of color, especially Latino, Black, and Native American.¹ With increased support in 2021, Link Up Illinois doubled our efforts to increase access and affordability of fresh produce by piloting our Link Match incentive program at individually/locally owned neighborhood grocers and corner stores.

Our pilot, launched in partnership with the Inner-city Muslim Action Network (IMAN), brought Link Match to Morgan Mini Mart and Mi Mexico Grocery Store, in Chicago's Englewood and Gage Park neighborhoods. In 2021, matching up to \$5 on any Link purchase of healthy foods, the two stores recorded over \$650,000 in Link sales and distributed more than \$60,000 in Link Match vouchers—redeemable for purchases of fresh produce.

¹https://journals.lww.com/familyandcommunityhealth/Fulltext/2018/04001/Examining_the_Impact_of_Structural_Racism_on_Food.2.aspx

With 80% Link Match redemption, Link customers bought an additional \$50,000 worth of fresh fruits and vegetables!



Fruit and vegetable sales purchased with Link benefits doubled in 2021!

—Ahmad Fanlala, owner Mi Mexico Grocery Store

“[Link Match] off-set the cost of fresh fruits and vegetables [and helped with] our goal to incentivise our customers into eating healthy foods and incorporating healthier diets and lifestyles.”

—Samir Defala, owner Morgan Mini Mart



FROM THE MARKET MANAGER



Connect with your food

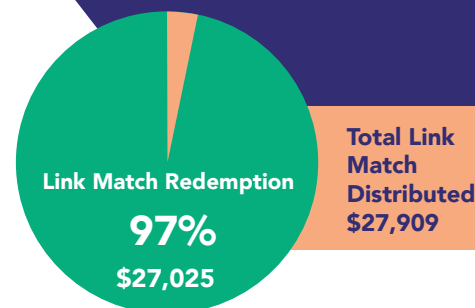
2021 was the year our 61st Street Farmers Market came back to life. We were able to relax some of the COVID restrictions and make the Market a place for community once again. As a new manager, I had the privilege of bringing our educational programs back to the Market, infusing joy into the space. With the return of our children’s Sprout Station tent, our youngest market supporters could color, play games, and try new foods. The joy from the children and the excitement of market goers were palpable for both myself and vendors. We welcomed back our fabulous chefs to share their delicious recipes with us. These moments were the highlights of the summer.

At the same time, we saw our Link participation almost double from 2019! More community members had access to funds with Pandemic EBT cards issued to Chicago Public School families, and our Link Match program increased funds available to Link customers, matching up to \$25 per transaction, rather than per Market visit. We increased our Market days from 28 to 36, allowing shoppers more opportunities to purchase locally. This translated into record Link sales for our vendors, making a substantial impact for both our Link customers and farmers.

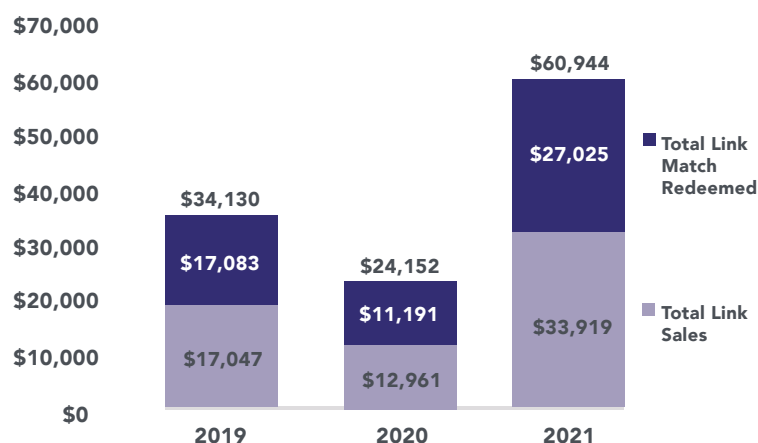
Emily Cross

Emily Cross
61st Street Farmers Market Manager

61ST STREET FARMERS MARKET LINK MATCH DISTRIBUTED AND REDEEMED 2021



61ST STREET FARMERS MARKET LINK SALES AND LINK MATCH REDEEMED



61ST ST. FARMERS MARKET 2021 SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

1,123 CUSTOMERS WEEKLY

1,272 LINK TRANSACTIONS

36 MARKET DAYS 25 FARMERS & PREPARED FOOD VENDORS 6 CHEF TASTINGS

3 MARKET SCHOOLS 4 SPROUT STATION ACTIVITIES 24 LINK ELIGIBLE VENDORS

\$33,919 IN LINK SALES \$27,909 IN LINK MATCH \$61,828 GRAND TOTAL

THE MARKET BEYOND THE MARKET

In addition to at-Market opportunities for learning how to eat healthfully, how food grows, and how to prepare it, the 61st Street Farmers Market provides robust year-round food education programming for children and adults in our community. In 2021, in partnership with Carnegie Elementary School and Jackson Park Terrace (JPT) affordable housing apartment complex,

55

1st and 2nd grade Carnegie School students learned what it means to eat healthy and how food grows

10

JPT families grew their own vegetables in free garden plots with gardening support provided by the Market

40

JPT families received 300+ bags of organic vegetables grown by the Market in the JPT hoop house June-November

PC: Bob Benenson



SPOTLIGHT ON 61ST STREET MARKET VENDORS

As we gear up for our upcoming 15th season, we have reflected on foundational relationships that have allowed the Market to thrive. These six vendors committed to selling at our South Side market early on, helping the 61st Street Farmers Market blossom into the community staple it is today.



Mick Klug Farms, St. Joseph, MI
Vendor since 2012

Ellis Family Farms, Benton Harbor, MI
Vendor since 2008



As my first year began, I got to know the people in the community and felt connected. [I] made lifetime friends there. To this day, I can't walk through Hyde Park without running into clients. It's become our second community. Some vendors have become just like family. One thing I don't think people realize [is], without them, there's no us."
– Kim Snyder, Faith's Farm



Faith's Farm, Bonfield, IL
Vendor since 2009

Mint Creek Farm, Cabery, IL
Vendor since 2008



PC: Raya Carr



The Market "foster(s) that community market feeling [with] Link programs that 61st piloted. You feel valued and taken care of, so it's natural that you want to take care of the Market as a vendor. It's been a favorite market [because of] the people. [We are] grateful for our loyal following at 61st street. This is a labor of love for us." – Raya Carr, Mint Creek Farm

Stamper Cheese, Chicago, IL
Vendor since 2008



I see the [customers who were] children... with their children now. It's crazy how fast they grow."
- Kenny Tams



The Flower Garden, Saint Anne, IL
Vendor since 2008

CITY FARMERS MARKETS LINK ACCESS

Since 2010, Experimental Station has partnered with the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) to provide SNAP/Link service at the City's farmers markets, a number of them located in food-insecure neighborhoods on Chicago's south and west sides.

This season, City of Chicago markets continued to operate under COVID-19 safety protocols—wearing masks, social distancing, and ensuring increased space between vendors.

We supported 8 City-run farmers markets: Austin Town Hall, Bronzeville, CPS Roseland, Daley Plaza, Division St, Englewood/Anchor House, West Humboldt Park, and Pullman.

We also provided market security and event management at Daley Plaza, Division Street, and Pullman City Markets.

Mid-season, Experimental Station increased the limit for Link Match from \$25 per day to \$25 per transaction, thanks to increased funding from city, state, and federal sources. Along with an increase in the number of Link customers and P-EBT recipients, 2021 saw record Link and Link Match sales!



This season has helped me to have a greater understanding of the joy one can give to a total stranger. It also helped me reflect on one's purpose and celebrate challenges that make the work beautiful and valuable."

- Raja Baptiste,
EBT Site Manager



\$14.02

average Link purchase per visit. The highest in the program's history.

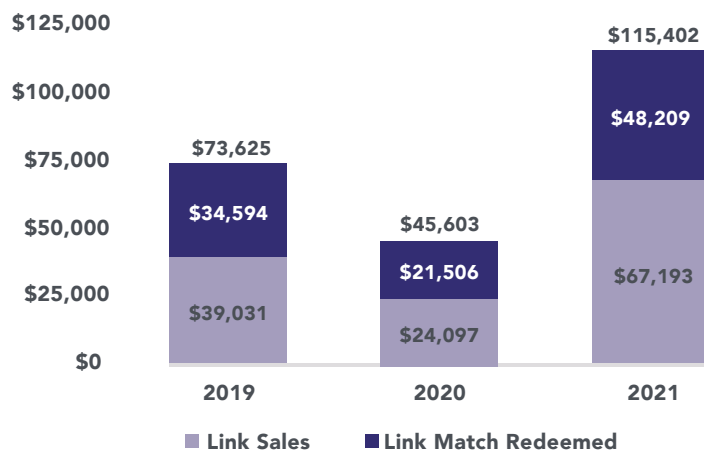
133%

increase in Link purchases at City farmers markets over previous high in 2017.

\$115,402

total Link and Link Match purchases at City markets. The highest ever—and with the second lowest number of markets served (8 in 2021 vs. 5 in 2010).

CITY EBT LINK SALES AND LINK MATCH REDEEMED



LOOKING AHEAD

Looking forward to 2022, we anticipate that increasing food prices will lead to increased food insecurity for SNAP recipients across the country. For many farmers and vendors, sharply rising costs will make it difficult to sell their products at affordable prices.

For Illinois farmers and Link recipients, the Link Up Illinois program will prove to be essential to helping alleviate these challenges in 2022. **Link Up Illinois** will pilot the Link Match incentive program in grocery stores, partnering with **Cermak Fresh Markets**, **Pete's Fresh Markets**, and **OneStop Grocery**, while bringing on new neighborhood grocery retailers, mobile markets, and farmers markets across the state. We are pleased to partner with **Top Box** to bring Link Match to their Link customers, and to pilot two market hubs in central and southern Illinois to engage farmers markets in communities across the length and breadth of our state.

For all Chicagoans, Experimental Station will again partner with the City of Chicago to provide Link acceptance at the City's farmers markets and support non-City-operated farmers markets throughout Chicago to accept Link and offer Link Match incentives.

For our local community, our **61st Street Farmers Market** foresees rebuilding and enhancing our food education programming for Carnegie Elementary School children and Jackson Park Terrace families, bringing back our Market Shuttle to provide transportation access to/from the Market for subsidized housing residents, and providing our Farmers Market Sellers Training course to create opportunities for employment for local residents. And, of course, we expect that the Market will continue to bring year-round access to fresh and healthy foods to Chicago's south side.



Thank you to all who provided support for this work in 2021.



Donate: experimentalstation.org/donate



Link Up Illinois Overview: LinkUpIL.org



And other generous donors!



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