



# CSA Food Navigator: FY21–FY23 Findings Report

## Intervention Background

The CSA Food Navigator program is designed to facilitate partnerships between organizations delivering nutrition education and community supported agriculture (CSA) farmers and vendors who provide boxes of fresh produce to customers with limited resources. Nutrition educators serve as Food Navigators provide nutrition education at the CSA pickup sites to help participants a) learn new ways to prepare the vegetables and fruits provided in the food box, b) learn to store the produce provided, c) taste local produce, and d) use recipes aligned with the foods they receive through the CSA.

The CSA Food Navigator program provides a Playbook with program information as well as nutrition education resources designed to feature fresh locally grown produce such as:

- Recipes
- Facts about the produce to share in conversation with participants
- Experiential activities
- Recommendations for nutrition education reinforcing items and cues to action to replicate the healthy behaviors modeled
- Healthy serving ideas
- Produce selection and storage tips
- Volumetric and weight conversions for fresh produce
- Standard social media messages

This program was initially developed for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) partnership with the Michigan Farm to Family: CSA Program, a nutrition incentive program supported by a Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program grant from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Therefore, the original playbook included language specific to partnership with the Michigan Farm to Family: CSA program. To make the program relevant beyond this specific partnership, the playbook was updated to not limit collaboration to CSAs in the Michigan Farm to Family: CSA program. This will support the sustainability and longevity of the program.

## Formative, Process, and Outcome Evaluation

Evaluation activities were conducted during formative and subsequent years to inform intervention development, technical assistance for SNAP-Ed implementers, and intervention effectiveness.

### **Formative Evaluation**

***(this work is currently under review in the Journal of Health Promotion Practice)***

A mixed-methods approach was used during the formative year (FY 2021) to specifically inform development of a program playbook and technical assistance. Surveys to identify nutrition education needs were disseminated to SNAP CSA customers; a focus group was conducted with SNAP-Ed nutrition educators and program leads; and a brainstorming session followed with Michigan Fitness Foundation (MFF) staff. SNAP customers identified recipe cards, nutrition education reinforcing items, one-time cooking classes, and nutrition education series as the best ways to meet their nutrition education needs. Findings from local SNAP-Ed and MFF staff prioritized developing a playbook with (1) flexible nutrition education activities and (2) technical assistance prompts to support educators in effective program delivery.

### **Process and Outcome Evaluation**

***(this work is currently under review in the International Journal of Environment Research in Public Health)***

The program playbook was released for the second and third years of programming (FY 2022-23) and process and outcome evaluation utilized qualitative feedback from CSA site staff, CSA program participants, and SNAP-Ed nutrition educators serving as Food Navigators in the program as well as outcome survey data from participants. Similar to the formative evaluation processes, a mixed-methods approach was utilized to synthesize findings across data sources within and across CSA sites. Subsequently, data on fruit and vegetable consumption, food security, and self-reported general health were compared to a national sample of Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program participants. Key themes from qualitative activities were: (1) multi-level relationships are effective for meaningful partnerships and changing behaviors, (2) person-centered nutrition education promotes positive behavior change (3) align food access practices to the social ecological model to change circumstances, and (4) respond to Food Navigator needs to improve overall practices. Quantitative findings showed that SNAP customers who received education from CSA Food Navigators had significantly higher fruit and vegetable consumption as well as food security compared to nutrition incentive participants nationally.

The year over year monitoring and evaluation activities have led to changes and modifications based on need and the desire to ensure the program remains community-informed. For example:

- The Playbook, initially provided as a PDF, was updated to an online platform.
- Needed resources were added, such as recipes in Spanish.
- Training was adjusted to highlight the importance of key activities and tools such as those supporting relationship development.

This includes noticing best practices from perspectives of shoppers, food navigators, and CSA site staff.

## **Best Practices for Implementation**

Evaluation findings across implementation years were utilized to develop a set of best practices for CSA Food Navigator implementation. Below is a condensed list of best practices for those looking to implement CSA Food Navigator in their community:

1. **Create community:** The informal nature of a CSA provides the potential for casual yet meaningful connection with community members and community building around shared values. Create meaningful relationships with CSA staff, nutrition educators, community partners, farmers, and participants.
2. **Connect with CSA farmers and vendors, discuss goals, and identify shared values:** The CSA Food Navigator program is designed to help participants learn about, access, and eat more fruits and vegetables. The program may also help promote the CSA to eligible audiences (expanding the reach) and keep CSA members coming back, thereby enhancing food access and providing a new customer base for farmers.
3. **Display vulnerability with CSA participants and build trusted relationships.**
  - **Be a connector:** Collaborating with CSAs provides Food Navigators the opportunity to get to know individual CSA farmers and vendors, the CSA participants, and other community resources.
  - **Prioritize timely and straightforward communication:** Create pathways for communication and relationship building among CSA staff, Food navigators, community partners, farmers, and participants.
  - **Meet people where they are and tailor programming to participant needs and interests:** Use a collaborative, co-designed community engagement approach.
4. **Tailor programming to the area's growing season and the produce being distributed:** Adapt nutrition education to unique geographies, seasonality within geographies, and crop rotation.
  - Engage in ongoing communication with the farmers and/or vendors.
  - Find out a few days before CSA pickup what will be provided in the CSA box.
  - Plan nutrition education activities, demonstrations, and tastings based on what will be included in the CSA boxes from week to week.
  - Highlight the produce items that may be less familiar to the CSA participants or items they may receive in abundance.
  - Provide aligned recipes to participants in person, in produce boxes, or in digital communications.
5. **Build in flexibility and ease:** Create a clear nutrition education plan aligned with program goals to structure activities while allowing flexibility to adjust in response to participant needs and produce provided.
  - Use a resource like the CSA Food Navigator Playbook that includes guidance and tools to plan nutrition education as well as a menu of resources for featured produce (including

recipes, discussion points for interacting with participants, and social media messaging) to support planning and implementing nutrition education.

- Engage with participants in person in a flexible, casual, and informational way.
- Incorporate flexibility and variety in nutrition education activities. Pair Food Navigator discussions with participants alongside food demonstrations, tastings, and recipe handouts.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The CSA Food Navigator program demonstrates a scalable and adaptable model for integrating nutrition education into community-supported agriculture efforts alongside low-income populations. Its foundation in strong cross-sector partnerships and person-centered educational strategies effectively promotes both behavior change and increased food security. The use of a comprehensive playbook, informed by iterative evaluation and direct feedback from educators, CSA site staff, and SNAP-eligible CSA participants, has strengthened the program's implementation and relevance. Evaluation findings highlight the power of community interactions—especially at CSA pickup sites—to facilitate learning and relationship building. Moreover, aligning nutrition education to the seasonal availability of local produce, and using flexible, culturally appropriate materials such as recipes in Spanish, has further reinforced the effectiveness of this place-based approach. These elements collectively support improved dietary behaviors, particularly increased fruit and vegetable consumption among SNAP-eligible participants, compared to national counterparts in similar programs.

## Implications

The CSA Food Navigator model presents a promising intervention for organizations seeking to improve health promoting behaviors and systems through food access and education. Its adaptability allows for replication beyond the Michigan Farm to Family: CSA program, offering a pathway for sustained community engagement and impact across various geographic and organizational contexts. By embedding nutrition educators as food navigators in CSA distribution points, the program fosters trust, reinforces health messages at the point of food access, and addresses barriers such as unfamiliarity with produce or preparation techniques. The Playbook serves not only as an implementation guide but as a living toolkit that evolves with stakeholder input, making it a model for participatory program development. Public health practitioners and SNAP-Ed implementers alongside folks with practical allied health or community champions with lived experience can draw from these findings to integrate similar models within food systems work, especially when prioritizing behavioral outcomes in nutrition education.

## Conclusions

The CSA Food Navigator program illustrates how intentional partnerships, responsive tools, and community-informed practices can enhance the reach and effectiveness of nutrition education for underserved populations. Its integration within existing food access systems and focus on flexibility, relationship-building, and participant-centered design provides a replicable framework with demonstrated outcomes in dietary behavior and food security. As the program expands beyond its initial scope, continued evaluation and adaptation will be key to maintaining its relevance and

efficacy. The success of this initiative reinforces the importance of co-designed, locally responsive interventions in addressing structural nutrition inequities and promoting sustainable health improvements in communities with limited resources.