

# Fighting Food Insecurity

*The Produce Box Project for Seniors*



## Inside the Produce Box Project

Are seniors in Iowa getting enough fresh fruits and vegetables in their diet? According to the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH), the answer is no.

That's why IDPH, with the help of food banks and Iowa Department on Aging and area agencies on aging across the state, introduced the Produce Box Project to distribute and deliver fresh fruits and vegetables to seniors who need it most.

While no two distribution methods are identical, the program has been tested in different parts of Iowa, with significant results. Even among seniors who can afford fresh produce, fruits and vegetables sometimes are not readily available, particularly if they live in food deserts where grocery stores are few and far between.

Why does fresh produce for seniors matter? "It affects how people feel day to day, as well as promoting long-term health and reducing the risk of chronic disease," says Jennifer Colyer, former community health consultant for the Iowa Department of Public Health.



**The Produce Box Project distributes fresh fruits and vegetables to Iowa seniors.**

"We want people to stay independent. For seniors who are food insecure, we can provide produce that will contribute to their quality of life and longevity."

Through the Produce Box Project, fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables are delivered to congregate meal sites and senior centers, then divvied up among those who need it and will use it. In some cases, the boxes are delivered to homebound seniors as well.

For instance, in Lee County, two congregate meal sites and five senior living facilities received fresh produce donated by farmers markets, individuals and community gardens. "We had an abundance last year," says Emily Biddenstadt, Lee County Health Department community outreach coordinator. "Congregate meal sites are always open to having extra produce. They could use it in meal deliveries."

Of the 4,400 cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, squash and other vegetables donated, Biddenstadt says few went to waste. “From what I tracked, we only threw out 129 pieces of produce. That’s a pretty good percentage,”

This experience is echoed in other parts of Iowa where the Produce Box Project has been equally well received. According to Sandi Iwen, a nutrition/healthy aging specialist at Elderbridge Agency on Aging in northwest Iowa, 363 boxes of produce were distributed to seniors in her area in 2018.

The 1,946 pounds of produce included beans, peas, squash, potatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, strawberries and cabbage. Despite a rainy start to the garden season, “We had a little bit of everything,” Iwen says.

The Produce Box Project provides seniors with foods they might not otherwise have, says Doris Montgomery, state coordinator of the Iowa Nutrition Network at the Iowa Department of Public Health. “One woman was excited about getting butternut squash because she couldn’t afford them,” she says. “Her food budget was maxed out.”

The program also allows seniors to take what they need and leave the rest—an important feature for a generation averse to waste.

“They don’t want to take more than they would use,” says Janet Buls, program coordinator for the Northeast Iowa Area Agency on Aging. “If we have a five-pound bag of potatoes, seniors will take it apart because they might use three potatoes. They really like having the produce, but they don’t want to waste it.”

Is the Produce Box Project making a difference? Yes, says Iwen, who hears comments from seniors and the volunteers who distribute and deliver the produce. “One lady was so appreciative of the fruit brought to her, it made the volunteer delivering it warm and happy inside. It’s a two-way street. The lady got the food, and the volunteer knew she was doing good delivering it.”

Biddenstadt agrees. “One person wrote a little thank you on the tracking form every time she took something. It was rewarding when people came out of their apartments, and they were excited to see what we had. It was like a kid reaching for a piece of candy.”

For communities that hope to continue the Produce Box Project, one of the biggest challenges is manpower, says Biddenstadt. “We’ll continue produce boxes for as long as we can, but we’re trying to create more of a volunteer base. My boss and I did a lot of the delivery, so we’re going to try to get a couple of volunteers. That would help tremendously.”

As the Produce Box Project evolves across the state, it will continue focusing on preventing chronic disease through proper nutrition.

“Sometimes people wonder why we’re focusing on seniors,” Colyer says. “They ask, ‘Isn’t it getting to be a little late for them?’ It’s not.”

“It doesn’t matter what age someone is; food is fuel. Seniors are living longer and longer. The more we can focus on providing healthy fuel, it’s going to make things better in the long run.”

Buls agrees. “Changing someone’s eating habits at age 65 can make their 80s and 90s much better.”



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