New farmers market aims to fill void in City Heights
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It's no secret that fresh fruits and vegetables are key to good nutrition. For people who live and work in lower-income communities, it's also clear that access to healthy, affordable produce can be difficult.

For more than a year, volunteers and activists have worked to lure a farmers market to City Heights, a diverse central San Diego community where immigrants relocate from all over the world and schools educate a group of students that speaks more than 30 languages.

Their efforts will pay off Saturday, when the neighborhood's first certified farmers market opens for business on Wightman Street in the heart of Urban Village.

Not only that, the City Heights Farmers Market will be the first farmers market in the county to accept food stamps -- a critical development for nutrition advocates and hunger-relief workers.

"We really hope this is going to increase food-stamp participation and reduce hunger," said Blanca Melendrez, the local director of the Network for a Healthy California, a state health program run through University of California San Diego. "We hope this will serve as a model for other farmers markets."

San Diego County has the lowest food-stamp enrollment in the country by far, with less than 1 in 3 eligible residents signing up for the benefit, one recent study found. The second-lowest performing city was Las Vegas, with 44 percent enrollment.

Under a special program worked out by Melendrez and others, City Heights Farmers Market customers who use food stamps or Women, Infants and Children coupons will get a dollar-for-dollar match up to $10, allowing them to buy even more fruits and vegetables.

More than 25 farmers markets are in San Diego County, including tiny Borrego Springs, which opens between November and June. Farmers markets in other parts of California have been accepting food stamps for several years.

County Supervisor Ron Roberts and a nonprofit called Price Charities each contributed startup money for the City Heights Farmers Market. It will open from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Saturday and be managed by the San Diego County Farm Bureau -- another first for this region.

"We, like everybody else, are recognizing this link between local-grown and the local
population," said Eric Larson, the farm bureau's executive director. "We want to facilitate that. We want to see an expansion of farmers markets in San Diego County."

Organizers have 11 vendors signed up for the initial weekend, but they expect the market to grow. Eventually, they want it to become a neighborhood tradition that matches families to healthy, locally grown foods and products, and provides nutrition education, health screenings and food demonstrations.

"One of the goals of this market is not to just be about selling vegetables but to teach people about healthy lives," Melendrez said.

Amina Sheik, a health educator from Somalia who works in City Heights, said many immigrants are reluctant to shop at supermarkets such as Albertsons, which is one of the centerpieces of the Urban Village project, in part because such stores offer a limited variety of cultural staples.

She and others say the new market will be welcomed not so much because of cost issues, but because of the types of products and atmosphere its offers.

"In the East African community, we're used to open markets, so this will be great," Sheik said of the new farmers market. "The community has been waiting for it."

Researchers have known for years that inner-city residents generally have above-average rates of diabetes, heart disease and other illnesses that stem from poor eating habits.

At the same time, urban cores typically have fewer places to buy healthful foods and produce.

In the 1990s, when Lisa Vandervort of the City Heights Wellness Center sought to boost her clients' access to locally grown foods, she helped start a pilot project allowing participants in the federal Women, Infants and Children program to spend their benefits on fresh produce.

Until then, WIC coupons could not be spent on such items.

But the program didn't have as much impact as Vandervort expected. Many of her clients had no way to get to a farmers market, and the neighborhood had far more convenience stores and fast-food restaurants than supermarkets.

"Out of the 5,000 people they served, redemption was less than 50 percent," Vandervort said. "The closest farmers market we had was in Hillcrest."

In January, The American Journal of Public Health reported that consumption of fruits and vegetables rose sharply when women in the WIC program were given vouchers for fresh produce.
After six months, families given produce vouchers were eating almost three more servings of fruits and vegetables a day than members of a control group that did not receive vouchers.

U-T Multimedia: For videos of farmers markets, go to uniontrib.com/more/farmers

Online: For a list of certified farmers markets, go to uniontrib.com/more/markets

Caption: 1 MAP
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