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Universal LINK Match Program Launches at Champaign-Urbana Farmers Markets

Program Supports Year-Round Food Access Initiatives in the C-U Community

(Champaign, Illinois) Beginning January 30, 2021, Champaign-Urbana farmers markets will launch a Universal LINK Match Program as part of the LINK Up Illinois network, a SNAP incentive program administered by Experimental Station in Chicago and funded in part by the USDA.

The Land Connection, the local non-profit that operates the Champaign-Urbana Winter Farmers Market and the Champaign Farmers Market, is partnering with the City of Urbana, which operates Urbana's Market at the Square, and Common Ground Food Co-op on the program. The Universal LINK Match Program in Champaign-Urbana provides SNAP shoppers that use LINK benefits at our farmers markets increased food budgets and year-round access to healthy, fresh, local food. In addition to helping our food-insecure community members, the program supports local farmers and food producers and greatly benefits our local economy.

"Farmers Market LINK Match programs are a win-win-win," said Traci Barkley of Sola Gratia Farm in Urbana. "Our low-income community members are able to stretch their food dollars to purchase more local, fresh food items. Plus, as farmers, we are able to sell more of our products to more people. Then, when more people attend and shop, it furthers all of the community-building benefits of farmers markets. A Universal LINK Match Program allows coupons and tokens to be spent year-round and community-wide by our patrons and allows for greater efficiencies in marketing and tracking by our Market Managers."

The program is particularly important to our community because 1 in 7 people in Champaign County are food insecure.¹ Combined, the Champaign Farmers Market, Urbana's Market at the Square, and the Champaign-Urbana Winter Farmers Market distribute over \$25,000 in matching benefits annually. Plus, for every dollar that is spent at a farmers market, approximately \$0.62 goes back into the local economy, as opposed to only \$0.25 that goes back into the local economy for every dollar spent at a chain grocery store.² In short, farmers markets and LINK Match programs are essential and beneficial to our community and local food economy.

"Increasing food budgets for SNAP shoppers is our number one goal right now and we believe that by joining forces with other local food sellers we will have an opportunity to impact more families," said Cay Diamond, the Farmers Market & Outreach Manager at The Land Connection. "If COVID has taught us anything it is that working together is imperative for the health of our community. This Universal LINK Match Program will make local food purchasing less confusing for LINK cardholders."

¹ <https://www.cu-citizenaccess.org/2020/12/07/food-insecurity-projected-to-soar-in-eastern-illinois-and-champaign-county/>

² <https://cefs.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/research-based-support-for-local-food-systems.pdf>

Now, when a shopper swipes their LINK card at one of the farmers markets, they will receive market tokens to spend on any SNAP-eligible products at any of the three markets, plus, match vouchers that they can use to purchase local fruits and vegetables at any of the local markets and at Common Ground Food Co-op.

As part of the Universal LINK Match Program, each market will offer Double LINK incentives up to \$20 on regular market days. Shoppers can bring their LINK card to the market information tables where they can swipe for any amount. They will receive the value of their swipe in Market tokens that they can use to purchase any SNAP-eligible items at the markets, and they'll receive up to \$20 in LINK Match vouchers that they can use to purchase local, fresh fruits and vegetables from vendors at any of the markets or Common Ground Food Co-op. For example, if a shopper swiped for \$10, they'd receive \$10 in tokens and \$10 in vouchers, whereas if they swiped for \$30, they'd receive \$30 in tokens and \$20 in vouchers.

On the third market of each month, all three farmers markets offer Triple LINK incentives up to \$20. That means a shopper that swiped \$20 at the market table would receive \$20 in tokens and \$40 in vouchers to use, effectively tripling the value of their food dollar. The Triple LINK days have been a part of the Champaign Farmers Market's LINK Match program for several years and recently became part of the Champaign-Urbana Winter Farmers Market in November when The Land Connection took over operations of the Market. Now Triple LINK will be available at both of those markets, as well as Urbana's Market at the Square.

This collaborative program is hopefully just one of many to come in the coming years as the Champaign-Urbana community works to build a resilient local food system that serves and addresses the needs of everyone.