

I would like to start with a heartfelt thanks to Senator Stabenow for her ongoing support of the Flint Farmers' Market and to the entire Agricultural Committee for the opportunity to speak today. Our market is located in the heart of downtown Flint and has been a fixture in the Genesee County community since 1905. We serve over half a million customers a year and have about 75 vendors, 45 of whom are year-round. The market provides work opportunities for nearly 300 individuals from our area annually. We have been designated as one of the top Public Spaces in America and have consistently appeared in top 10 public markets in the US!

Many people are surprised to learn of the accomplishments Senator Stabenow mentioned because we are located in Flint. Our community has taken many hits over the years and the toll on families struggling to survive is not getting any easier. The SNAP/EBT program, which is funded through the farm bill, is a consistent source of opportunity for communities like ours. Making good food affordable and available for families is crucial to try to help people lift themselves out of poverty. Our market is extremely diverse both in terms of our vendors and our customer base. Almost all our eligible vendors accept EBT/SNAP benefits and participate in the Fair Food Network's Double Up Food Bucks Program which Senator Stabenow helped take nationwide in the Farm Bill by establishing the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentives Program. Our market's participation in these programs has not only benefited the people of Genesee County, but it has kept our farmers in business during particularly trying times such as covid, natural disasters and economic downturns.

Some people may be surprised to learn what kinds of people are aided by food assistance. Over the years, EBT has been widely associated with low-income single parent households, but that is not necessarily the case in 2022. We do see single parents, but we also see people with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, senior citizens, college students and displaced veterans. There is no one face of EBT – it reflects a broader community of people who are struggling to make ends meet and survive. It is also a changing population based on circumstance – what I mean to say is that people benefitting from food assistance by in large are not looking to be lifetime members of this group. We see so many people at our market who have fallen on hard times for a variety of reasons, most of whom it is visibly a harsh blow to their pride to accept assistance. But it becomes for their family, not a matter of choice but a matter of survival. I have personally witnessed customers in tears upon understanding that by shopping at our market with SNAP and Double Up Bucks they can double the amount of good food (grown by farmers) for their families. It has been a humbling experience for many.

I have also witnessed the evolution of food education because of programs like Double Up Bucks that support Michigan agriculture. In 2021 there were more than 150 farmers' markets in Michigan, 72,856 transactions occurred at those markets and accounted for \$1.6 million in SNAP/EBT sales for the state much of which goes directly to our farmers and producers. It is a happy occasion to pass a customer having a conversation with a farmer or vendor about when Michigan produce is in season so that they can utilize the funds they have saved on their card. Part of this food evolution relies on the funds to continue to promote and educate our community that these types of programs are available and how they can best use them to benefit their families. The importance of marketing funds for farms and markets cannot be understated nor can assistance from healthy food financing incentive programs which helped make it possible for our market to expand.

It is also important that we talk about technology and the integral part it plays in the advancement of food assistance. Our market was a pilot over a decade ago for the Double Up Bucks program. Most other farmers markets TODAY are still using tokens to accept food assistance funds from customers. Our market, I am very proud to say, has always been a digital shopping experience beginning with EBT. No tokens here! When Double Up Bucks came along, we insisted on continuing that

tradition and partnered with a creative local technology company (Epic Technology, Eric and Paul Knific) that created a digital option for us. This was not only for the ease of use and less burdensome system on farmers and vendors but for a larger reason.

I mentioned earlier the emotional side of using food assistance – our market developed a reward card system for shoppers to utilize Double Up Bucks. This decision shaped the face of food assistance for at our market. People in our community who were already struggling did not have to wait in line longer, hold up transactions for farmers to count tokens and feel uncomfortable using their benefits. Now having an EBT card and getting and using a Double Up Bucks card is a positive experience and the stigma of their struggle, at least for the time they are in our market, is eased. Technology leveled the playing field. This practice should become a reality all over the country for EBT recipients with regard to interactions at farmers markets and with local food producers. Once the Double Up Bucks program was created and shoppers realized that shopping at farmers markets gives them more bang for their buck our farmers and vendors saw a huge increase in sales. Consistently each year, the Double Up Bucks Program pays out \$110,000 to our farmers and produce sellers at our market alone on top of the SNAP/EBT, credit and cash sales. It is a win-win-win; people are comfortable coming in and learning about the food that is being grown, using their benefits to purchase it for their families, thereby increasing our farmers' stream of income.

Programs like SNAP/EBT and Double Up Bucks being available at farmers markets and for farmers more broadly is a huge part of HELPING EVERYONE in our to society grow stronger and HEALTHIER TOGETHER.

Karianne Martus
Flint Farmers' Market