

A program funded by soda tax helps low-income residents buy fruits and vegetables

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A slice of the nearly \$29 million that Boulder collected during the first six and a half years of a voter-passed soda tax has provided low-income residents with extra money to buy fresh produce from local businesses.

It's one of many ways the city has directed revenue from that unusual tax to a range of programs focused on improving health equity in the community.

Maria Fraire, one of nearly 1,500 people across 370 families now enrolled in the Fruit & Veg Boulder program, has relied on the monthly stipend to sustain her vegan diet, typically shopping at Whole Foods. She's been part of the initiative for about a year, receiving the maximum \$80 per month toward produce purchases for her family.

Fruit & Veg Boulder is part of a broader Boulder County program that also serves Longmont residents. Enrollees must meet low-income thresholds; for a family of four, the household's annual adjusted gross income should fall under \$55,500. Residents of those cities can participate if they do not otherwise qualify for two federal food aid programs that assist low-income families and women who are pregnant or have [young children](#).

The produce program fills a gap by helping, in part, undocumented immigrants and mixed immigration status families, or households with both U.S. citizens and people without legal status.

Program participants buy produce using paper coupons. Households made up of one or two people receive \$40 per month, while those with three or more people get \$80 per month.

The funding for Boulder's part of the program comes mostly from the city's sugar-sweetened beverage tax revenue, awarded by its Health Equity Fund, while Longmont draws on other funding sources. Boulder became one of the nation's few cities to tax [sugary drinks](#) after its ballot measure passed with 54% of the vote in the 2016 election. Other cities with soda taxes include Seattle, Philadelphia and San Francisco.

The tax, which took effect in July 2017, collects a 2-cent excise tax per ounce from distributors of sweetened beverages, such as soda and energy drinks. The ballot measure dictated that tax revenue would go toward health promotion, wellness programs and chronic disease prevention.

The amount of soda tax revenue dedicated to the Fruit & Veg Boulder program sometimes varies, but it is receiving \$298,000 in 2024—the same as last year, said Elizabeth Crowe, deputy director of Boulder's Housing and Human Services Department.

The program has received additional money from the city's allocations in the federal, pandemic-era American Rescue Plan Act: \$55,000 this year and \$88,000 last year. The extra money was used to help reduce the program's active waitlist, Crowe said.

'We need this access'

The overwhelming demand for the program is spurred in part by Boulder's high cost of living. To make a [living wage](#) in Boulder County, an adult with no children would need to earn \$26.36 per hour at their job, according to a living wage calculator produced by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. For a parent with two children, it's \$65.26 per hour—several times the \$14.42 minimum wage in Boulder and Longmont, though the county's minimum wage in unincorporated areas is slightly higher.

"There are many people who are struggling to get by and to make it in Boulder County," said Amelia Hulbert, who leads Boulder County Public Health's Healthy Eating, Active Living team.

In Boulder, Fruit & Veg program enrollees can frequent the Boulder Farmers Market and eight participating grocery stores, including King Soopers and Whole Foods Market.

Organizations that connect families with the program are seeing the impact on their community, though gaps in access still remain.

Elena Aranda is the co-director of El Centro Amistad, a nonprofit that supports the county's Latino community. She attended an event at the Boulder Farmers Market last week, sitting in the shade as market goers ambled along 13th Street, reusable bags on their arms.

"You don't see our community coming here," Aranda said, "because it's not affordable."

But because of the Boulder program, participants with coupons in hand are starting to feel welcome in the space, Aranda said. "We need this access, especially for children," she added.

Still, Jorge De Santiago, El Centro Amistad co-director, said the program can serve only a "very small percentage of the families who really need the support."

Because he doesn't foresee demand shrinking, De Santiago would like the program to expand throughout the rest of the county.

Hulbert also wants to see the program increase the monthly allotment for participants, noting that, "with inflation, groceries are more expensive."

Program is now 5 years old

The Fruit & Veg Boulder program kicked off in 2019, followed in 2020 by the Longmont program, which now serves more than 1,000 people across 225 families.

Besides funding its part of the program, the city of Boulder awards soda tax revenue through the Health Equity Fund to organizations working on

food and water security, health and wellness education, physical fitness and more. This year, it recommended about 50 awards, totaling \$3.8 million, according to a list of fund allocations.

Among other recipients are Clinica Campesina Family Health Services, a community health center that received \$175,180 for comprehensive primary care services for residents, and Community Food Share, a food bank that was awarded \$116,946 to gather and distribute healthy food.

Boulder Mayor Aaron Brockett praised his city's Fruit & Veg program as "a transformative initiative in our community."

He also pointed to a positive impact on [local businesses](#) where participants shop.

Emmy Bender, co-owner of Off Beet Farm, sells vegetables grown on her Boulder County farm at the Boulder Farmers Market. Now in its second year in business, Bender estimates 10%-15% of last year's sales involved some sort of low-income assistance like the Fruit & Veg Boulder program.

She described it as a "win-win for everybody."

"Local farmers are able to sell their food and support local economies and soil health," Bender said. "And then people are able to access our food that wouldn't otherwise be able to afford it."

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