

SNAP Program Offering Double Dose of Food at Public Market



Natasha Alford (<http://www.rochesterhomepage.net/bios>)

Rochester, NY (WROC)- Aqueelah Abdullah is a faithful shopper at Rochester's Public Market.

"I believe in spending my money here," says Abdullah.

With a family that includes eight children, every dollar has to count.

"I get more for my money here than if I go to the grocery store and all my money is gone within a matters of seconds," she says.

But a new program at the Public Market makes her dollars count- times two.

It's called "Double Up" and it gives those receiving SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits up to \$20 extra per visit. That could amount to forty dollars worth of food.

"My guess is people couldn't even carry forty dollars worth of market food home in bags," says Margaret O'Neil, Program Manager for the Public Market's Wooden Token Program

Tokens give freedom to SNAP benefit holders to shop at the Public Market without the burden of swiping their EBT cards, something vendors previously weren't equipped to handle. The tokens never expire.

"We know we have a large base of customers who come with their SNAP benefits," says O'Neil. "We'd like to expand that so even more people can take advantage of it."

The wooden token program is the largest program of its kind in the country and served more than 9,000 customers in 2014. The market also sold \$555,000 worth of food last year.

"Here you can use the tokens to buy not just fruits and vegetables but also any of the baked goods, cheese, fish, honey, meat, pasta, perogies- any of the wonderful market food," says O'Neil.

The money for the Double Up program came through a \$100,000 grant from the Greater Rochester Health Foundation (<http://www.thegrhf.org/>). While many food markets close in the winter, Rochester's market is open year-round and will also be undergoing renovations to expand (http://nyupstateplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Rochester-Public-Market-%E2%80%93-Master-Plan_Small.pdf) in 2015.

Aqueelah says, not even a particularly cold Rochester day could keep her from ensuring her family gets the benefit of quality local food.

"Seeing the people out in the cold- they're really dedicated and so I have to be dedicated coming out here to support them."