

# The Homegrown Baltimore Employee Wellness CSA: A Model for Citywide Community Supported Agriculture Programs



## INNOVATION

Baltimore City was the first city in the country to financially incentivize participation in a community supported agriculture (CSA) program. In 2014, Baltimore's Managerial and Professional Society (MAPS) amended its Health and Welfare Reimbursement policy to allow CSAs as a reimbursable activity. As more unions offer wellness incentives, this will become a viable option for cities across the nation to link local food to wellness.

## RATIONALE

### Employee Wellness:

Workplaces and municipalities around the country are emphasizing wellness. One recent trend in workplace wellness is weekly produce box deliveries, generally known as CSA shares, to promote fruit and vegetable consumption among employees.

CSA shares make a healthy diet **easier and more convenient**: a 2003 study of a 221-member California CSA program found that 79% of participants increased their vegetable consumption over the course of the season.<sup>1</sup>

CSA shares can make a healthy diet **more affordable**: 60% of participating MAPS employees in Baltimore said that the reimbursement for the CSA program was the primary factor in their participation.

### Local Farms:

In Baltimore, the CSA supports the City's Homegrown Baltimore urban agriculture strategy by **increasing demand** for products from urban farms.

Even in areas where urban farming is less prevalent, CSAs help local and regional farms to build a loyal customer base.

## POLICY

It is important to note that labor unions may already have wellness incentives that allocate funds for everything from eyeglasses to gym memberships. Baltimore was able to take advantage of the existing incentive to include CSA shares as an allowable expense without creating an entirely new mechanism.

For unions that offer incentives, encourage leadership to include CSA as an acceptable reimbursable

“wellness activity.” In Baltimore's first year of the CSA program, MAPS added an MOU to its Health Reimbursement policy, a relatively simple process. By the second year, it became a fully approved use.

MAPS employees can now be reimbursed up to \$250, meaning that they pay only \$50 for approximately 24 weeks of produce delivered directly to City offices. This provides maximum convenience at minimal cost.



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## OUTCOMES

### Wellness Impact:

- 85% of survey respondents said that they ate more vegetables and fruits while participating in the CSA program in 2014.
- 96% of survey respondents said that as a result of the CSA program, they tried vegetables or fruits that they had never eaten before.
- 60% said that during the CSA program, most of the produce they ate was grown locally, up from 30% in the pre-survey.

### Participation:

- An average of 120 city employees participated in Baltimore CSA's program in 2014 and 2015.
- In 2015, 7 drop-off sites are in operation at workplaces across the city with two site coordinators managing each site.
- 80% of 2014 participants were first-time CSA members.
- 60% of MAPS employees used the wellness reimbursement.

### Convenience:

- Produce is delivered weekly directly to the workplace, making fresh food easily accessible for all employees in the program.

## OTHER MODELS

**Madison, WI:** The nonprofit FairShare coordinates CSA rebates provided by several small regional HMOs for local employees. Some employers cover the difference of the cost of an HMO provider rebate, making the CSA share free.

**Austin, TX:** The Texas Department of State Health Services created the Farm to Work program in response to a state workplace wellness law. A local nonprofit helps to match farmers to workplaces at nearly 30 sites statewide.

## OPERATIONS

In Baltimore, the intention was to create an effective, sustainable model that requires few inputs and operates in a decentralized manner using the following program elements:

**Volunteer site coordinators:** While there is one paid employee of the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative who serves as the citywide CSA coordinator on a part-time basis, the program is dependent on volunteer site coordinators to recruit members, manage each site, and communicate regularly with the citywide coordinator. One program element that is critical to this volunteer structure is that farms provide free CSA shares to each volunteer site coordinator.

**Sign-up:** In Baltimore, members sign up directly through each farm (currently, two farms participate) and receive a pre-determined share of vegetables and fruit each week. Each site is required to have a minimum of ten full shares to have a dedicated delivery. Many participants split shares with a colleague.

**Payment:** Members pay through the farm in advance of the season, and MAPS employees submit their payment receipt for the \$250 Health Reimbursement individually. Any employee may participate, but only MAPS employees have a reimbursement option.

**Delivery:** Farms deliver on the same day weekly at fixed locations.

**Seasonal timeline:** The program runs for approximately 24 weeks from June through November, although participants may sign up after the start of a season at a pro-rated price.

**Inter-agency partnerships:** Partners include the Office of the Labor Commissioner of Baltimore City, Baltimore City Department of Human Resources, and the Baltimore Office of Sustainability.