

How Healthy Helping supported North Carolinians: Key preliminary findings

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Overview

Reinvestment Partners leveraged CARES Act funds to provide healthy food funds to 30,716 North Carolinians during the pandemic. Participants in the fruit and vegetable prescription program, called Healthy Helping, experienced improved food security (+11%) and nearly doubled their purchases of fruits and vegetables (+95%). Healthy Helping proved that the produce prescription model can be scaled and impactful, even in short-term emergency situations.

Background

In 2020, Reinvestment Partners (RP) was awarded \$3.3 million from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to implement Healthy Helping (HH), a fruit and vegetable prescription program. Healthy Helping operated from July to December 2020. Participants received \$40 a month to purchase fruits and vegetables at Food Lion. Healthy Helping participation was limited to three months. HH participants redeemed their \$40 electronically each month, using Food Lion's MVP card. Eligible fruits and vegetables meet WIC nutritional standards and are easy for Food Lion to identify in their inventory systems. A team from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) conducted an initial outcome evaluation of HH to assess its impacts on participants, particularly around supporting healthy food access, use of and satisfaction with the program. The brief presents the key preliminary findings to date.

Helping address food and nutritional security

A total of 37,290 households enrolled in HH between July and October 2020 and 30,716 (82%) utilized the program through December 2020. Key findings on purchasing behavior include:

- Before enrolling in Healthy Helping:
 - 85% of HH shoppers had either low or very low food security despite being on SNAP
 - 18% of HH shoppers had participated in WIC
 - HH shoppers spent \$40/month or 12% of their overall food and beverage expenditure on fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes (FVNL).
- While participating in Healthy Helping, HH shoppers:
 - Spent an average of \$34 (85%) of the \$40 incentives per month
 - Purchased an additional ~1.75 servings of fruits and vegetables per person per day (+95%)
 - Purchased 1.5% fewer unhealthy items, including sugar-sweetened beverages, as a percentage of total food and beverage expenditure
 - Decreased purchases of sugar-sweetened beverages by 9% per month.
 - Had an increase in FVNL from 9.6% to 20.5% of total calories purchased at Food Lion.
- Among a subset of HH participants (N=440) who completed a follow-up survey after HH ended,
 - Percentage of respondents reporting low or very low food security fell from 78% to 67%.



Table I. Changes in Household Spending on Key Food Categories Among Healthy Helping Participants

	Pre-HH	During HH	Difference	% Change	P-value
Total FVNL Volume (oz/month)	634.67	1,239.19	604.52	+95.25	<0.0001
Total SSB Volume (oz/month)	958.52	869.66	-88.86	-9.27	<0.0001
Share of FVNL Spending (% of Total Spending)	13.52	27.89	14.37	+106.29	<0.0001
Carbohydrate to Fiber Ratio (lower is better)	58.99	26.72	-32.27	-54.70	<0.0001

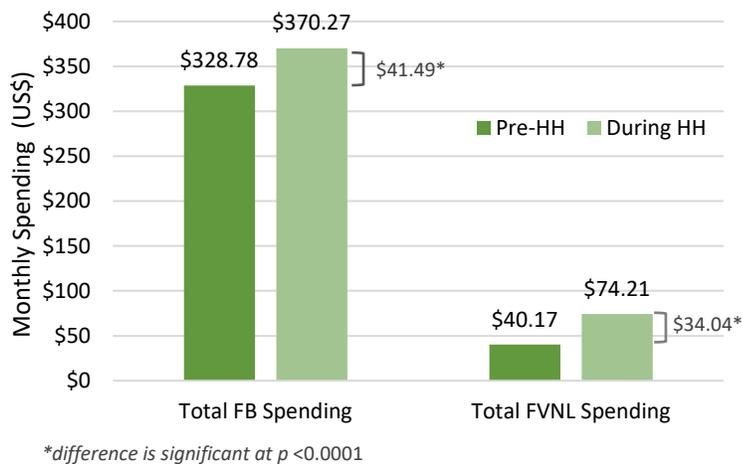


Figure 1. Changes in Household Spending at Food Lion Among Healthy Helping Participants



Figure 2. HH Households Purchased an additional 604 oz/month on FVNL, which translates to ~1.75 servings/person/day increase[‡]
[‡] servings/person/day was calculated using the following assumptions: 5oz/serving; 30 days/month & 2.3 person per SNAP households in NC).

In their own words

UNC collected additional data to better understand the experiences of HH participants. 200 HH participants completed a Qualtrics survey assessing household food security status, dietary intake, and related life situations after enrolling in HH. UNC conducted ten individual interviews to delve deeper into how HH participation impacted household spending behaviors and explore if these experiences were shaped by participation in other pandemic-related food access programs. Interviewees shared that HH helped them purchase and consume more fruits and vegetables, and some acknowledged the importance of fruits and vegetables for their physical health. They appreciated being able to choose their purchases with HH, compared to other food assistance programs that limited choice. Few interviewees reported difficulties operating the program and most recommended extending the program length past 3 months and in more stores.

Selected quotes from HH participants follow:

“I lost my job during the pandemic, so we were all one income... those last couple of months were kinda tight, so I definitely leaned on being able to buy the fruits and vegetables from Food Lion. Well, through the program.”

39-year-old mother of 1 child from New Hanover County

“It was never a complication in using it. When I went into the stores, it was just like buying anything else.”

55-year-old mother of 1 child from Guilford County

“I wish they would, you know, do it again. Not just for three months, you know, maybe six or twelve.”

50-year-old mother of 10 children from Wilson County

“Partner with additional grocery stores because while I am fortunate to own a vehicle...So, maybe that would help people to have access [to Healthy Helping] that don't have cars to use the program.”

43-year-old mother of 2 children from Durham County

Helping meet North Carolinians' needs

From June to December 2020, all Food Lion store locations in NC accepted HH benefits, which totaled over \$3.1 million. In other words, 96% of the allotted funds went directly to beneficiaries. Food Lion has 498 store locations across NC in many lower-income neighborhoods, serving as an important and accessible source of food and nutrition for millions. With 74% of HH participants already shopping at Food Lion, the program allowed participants to shop where they wanted, when they wanted. At the same time, HH brought in over 7,500 new customers to Food Lion over the 6 months of the program. Therefore, the HH program supported economic development in NC by increasing access to Food Lion stores and products, while also freeing up money in HH participants' households to purchase other necessities. Participants' satisfaction was high, with 94% reporting they would highly recommend the program to family or friends.

Conclusion

Based on findings from the Healthy Helping Program, 82% of enrollees redeemed their benefits and those shoppers used an average of \$34 of their \$40 monthly benefits. While on Healthy Helping, the prevalence of food insecurity fell (by 11% points) and participants' shares of total food and beverage spending on fruits, vegetables nuts and legumes nearly doubled (+1.75 servings per person per day). Preliminary data from qualitative interviews suggest that Healthy Helping participants found the program easy to use, beneficial for managing their food spending budgets, and desired that the program be continued or extended. Healthy Helping offers an exemplary model for distributing healthy food assistance quickly, efficiently, and at scale.

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