

Healthier Every Week

Workers get a benefit they can sink their teeth into

By Sarah Fritschner

Sarah Fritschner is a local-food consultant and writer in Louisville.

IT WAS THE LETTUCE that floored Rebecca Coates. Greens freshly picked from an organic farm in Oldham County, delivered directly to her workplace at the Louisville Metro Department of Public Health and Wellness last spring. “It was just next-level lettuce,” says Rebecca, a health education specialist. “I’ve been eating lettuce all my life and it’s never tasted like this.”

Coates received the first of the lettuce in a June produce delivery that Rootbound Farm made to her and many of her colleagues at the health department. Earlier in the season, she’d attended a “lunch-and-learn” and discovered she could subscribe to weekly produce delivery that would come right to her workplace and her employer would help pay for. She heard Rootbound farmer Bree Pearsall describe how they grow produce organically, how produce changes through the season and how customers paying in advance helps the farmer.

Coates signed up for a “partial share,” a reference to how much produce she would receive each week. “Share” refers to the part of the harvest she commits to buying. Full shares are for larger

families. Partial shares, says farmer Pearsall, are about 60% of full. Coates liked that the produce was from “just a few miles away so [we’d] really be eating fresh” and that subscribers were encouraged to visit the farm.

For 22 weeks, Coates and other employees took their canvas bags to the conference room where the produce was delivered. “We would all go up there together,” she says. “Sometimes we would trade items. It gives you a nice sense of community because your co-workers are doing it.”

Coates admits that early on the amount of produce was overwhelming. But she and her husband, Chris, quickly adapted by planning weekly menus and freezing extras.

This produce delivery program—called Workplace Wellness CSA—is modeled after a 25-year-old project in Madison, Wisconsin, through which participants get incentives from health insurance companies to buy certified organic produce. Back in 1993, budding partnerships between consumers and farmers—called “community-supported agriculture” (CSA)—were a new

phenomenon. Consumers pay for an entire season of produce before the season starts, which ensures the farmer has a purchase commitment and working capital. In return, the farmer delivers a seasonal variety of produce to pre-selected locations where consumers can pick them up.

For the last few years in Kentucky, a similar program has been helping Kentucky employers incentivize their employees to eat more produce in order to improve their health. In Coates’s case, the health department paid \$200 of the total \$462 required for her partial share.

“I’m always looking for ways to make my employees healthier so we can set a good example for the community,” says Dr. Sarah Moyer, DPHW director. Moyer committed health department funds to the effort because she believed that the produce-delivery program, paid in full before the first delivery, wouldn’t allow participants to opt out. They’d keep receiving produce for 22 weeks, enough time to help her employees “shift habits” so they might continue to eat healthier food even after the program has ended.

Moyer’s intuition is reasonable. Researchers studying



Photo: Bree Pearsall

participants in the Kentucky program have found dramatic positive results, both on self-reported behavior change and actual dollars paid for medical visits.

Even when participants start off pretty healthy, like Rebecca Coates, they often form better habits. Coates says she and her husband “undoubtedly eat more vegetables” now, and she packs healthier snacks. “We loved the little lunchbox peppers,” she says. “I would bring a bag of those [to work] and eat them.” Even in the dead of winter without produce delivery, she says, they’re still eating salads.

This wellness incentive program started four years ago when Tim Woods, an agriculture economist at the University of Kentucky, received a grant to study outcomes of participants. He approached Jody Ensmann, who manages programming at UK Health & Wellness, a health-benefits division of Human Resources.

Ensmann committed to a pilot study that required more than \$18,000 to subsidize 93 participants. “It was an innovative strategy,” says Ensmann, explaining the rationale for offering the benefit. “It makes perfect sense. This is exactly what we’re trying to do here: increase the

consumption of fruits and vegetables.”

Researchers asked these first participants to report their behavior changes. Compared to “normal” populations, these first reports showed people reacting like Coates: They ate more salad, they cooked more at home, they reported eating more fruits and vegetables, spending less at restaurants. Most important, they indicated spending less on doctor visits and medications.

That data caused some bells to go off. “A lot of what we do here is try to control health care claims,” says Ensmann. Seeing insurance claims drop is of significant interest to employers. UK funded vouchers for 199 participants in 2016, then 251 in 2017.

Since then, other Kentucky employers have adopted the program.

Researcher Jairus Rossi has combed insurance claims to compare diet-related expenses. In 2015 data, Rossi found that less-healthy participants—those who make more claims—reduced their claims an average of \$900 per year in physician costs, \$180 per year in pharmacy costs. In 2016, the change was more dramatic: Medical expenses went down \$1,300; pharmacy, \$230.

For more information about the Kentucky Farm Share Coalition’s Workplace Wellness CSA Program, visit to www.kyfarmshare.org.

“That speaks volumes to CEOs and CFOs,” says Ensmann, who is offering 444 shares for the 2019 season.

“Decreasing insurance payouts is especially important now,” says researcher Woods, because health care costs in the U.S. and in Kentucky are rising much faster than similar expenses in other countries. He thinks that, with time, additional findings will be even more impressive. “These results don’t include family members” who likely will also show improved health, he says.

Only 6.3% of Kentucky’s adults eat the recommended amount of vegetables daily. More than 60% of Kentucky adults are overweight or obese. Diet-related diseases cost Kentucky an estimated \$147 billion per year, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

With the help of employers, Kentucky farms may offer a solution. ☀

About the produce

The Workplace Wellness CSA program works with four certified organic farmers in Eastern and Central Kentucky who provide “shares” to employees weekly throughout the growing season.

In some cases, employers choose to work with a single farmer; in others, employees choose among all the farms.

Each farm chooses the length of time the produce is delivered (usually 20 to 22 weeks) and when deliveries start and end. Each farm determines the size of shares, the price range of those shares and what’s in them. All farms offer at least two portion sizes.

The produce will change over the season. Early spring starts with lots of greens, radishes and onions. As the weather warms you begin to see beans and squash, cabbage and corn, potatoes and beets, tomatoes and peppers.

Many farms offer a way to personalize your share. To forego the bok choy, perhaps, in favor of more green beans.

Most people new to weekly vegetable deliveries express dismay at the large amount they receive. The farmers deliver their produce with recipes and hints about storing and using the produce; their websites have additional guidance.

At the heart of all these CSA farmers is the interest in having their customers come to the farm and learn more about how their food is grown. They all offer specific reasons for families to visit, from strawberry you-picks to harvest potlucks.