



STATE OF NEW MEXICO
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September 18, 2020

New Mexico Grown Fruits and Vegetables for Senior Meals Program Pilot Succeeds

NEW MEXICO- In a time when New Mexican's are challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, and seniors and students are no longer able to participate in meals at senior centers and schools, New Mexico seniors are benefiting from a new state initiative called the **New Mexico Grown Fruits and Vegetables for Senior Meals Program**.

Through a new pilot program from the New Mexico Aging and Long-Term Services Department (ALTSD), seniors who generally participate in congregate and home delivered meals at the 15 senior centers located in Sandoval, Socorro and San Juan counties have been enjoying the bounties of New Mexico grown produce in the winter and spring. The pilot program is a partnership between the ALTSD, Farm to Table a New Mexico non-profit organization, the New Mexico Farmers' Marketing Association, the three county senior services departments, Agricultura Cooperative Network, and New Mexico farmers. The program was inspired by Senator Liz Stefanics and Representative Gail Armstrong, avid supporters of senior and school nutrition programs. The 2019 State Legislature approved \$50,000 for the pilot program.

Within seven months, and despite the coronavirus, the three counties were able to purchase and provide \$50,000 of New Mexico grown fruits and vegetables through their meal programs. Since the beginning of February, the three counties have served 101,800 meals including New Mexico produce. The program was in its sixth week when the COVID-19 shut down senior centers. At that point, the three counties were serving an average of just over 2,900 congregate meals at their 15 centers, and approximately 1,750 home delivered meals weekly. Once the COVID-19 shut down public meal programs, senior centers across the state had to move to curbside pick-up by seniors and home delivery. Home deliveries almost doubled across the three counties. Curbside pick-up, though not every day still served almost 2,900 meals weekly.

The three county Senior Center Directors and partners continued to champion the NM Grown Fruits and Vegetables for Senior Meals Program and were determined to make the program a success. The program worked due to a strong partnership between Farm to Table and the New Mexico Farmers Marketing Association, Value Chain Coordinate, Michael Vintecinque. The two non-profit organizations coordinated between the ALTSD, the three counties, and farmers. The pilot program was further supported by agency partners at the NM Department of Health's Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities Program, and the NM Department of Agriculture and Public Education Department Farm to School Program.

Meals prepared by the senior services included beautiful lettuce for Silverleaf Farm (Corrales), tomatoes from Growing Opportunities (Velarde), apples from Wagner Farms (Corrales) and Curby Orchards (Farmington), onions from Rancho La Joya (Velarde), blue corn atole from Santa Cruz Farm (Espanola), chile and beans from the Rosales Farm (Socorro), a variety of vegetables from Agricultura Cooperative Network (South Valley Albuquerque), winter squash, carrots, and black beans from the Schwebach Farm (Moriarty), pinto beans from Graves Farm (Roswell) and more.

Donald Ravizza, Sandoval County Senior Services Food and Nutrition Manager stated, "The seniors love the program and can't get enough of the beautiful lettuces and tomatoes".

As food insecurity is prevalent in New Mexico and the state's senior population is the second fastest growing in the country, this is the most important time to make sure our seniors get the best meals they can. At the same time, it is expanding business opportunities for New Mexico farmers of all sizes and from across the state. The program proves that even under the most difficult constraints, with strong partners, and good coordination, New Mexico farmers can provide produce year-round.

The ALTSD and partners have committed to expansion of the New Mexico Grown Fruits and Vegetables for Senior Meals Program statewide the New Mexico Grown Fruits and Vegetables for Senior Meals Program and began coordination and outreach in July.

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