

VERMONT AGENCY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND MARKETS

State of Vermont Workplace CSA Program

Program Review

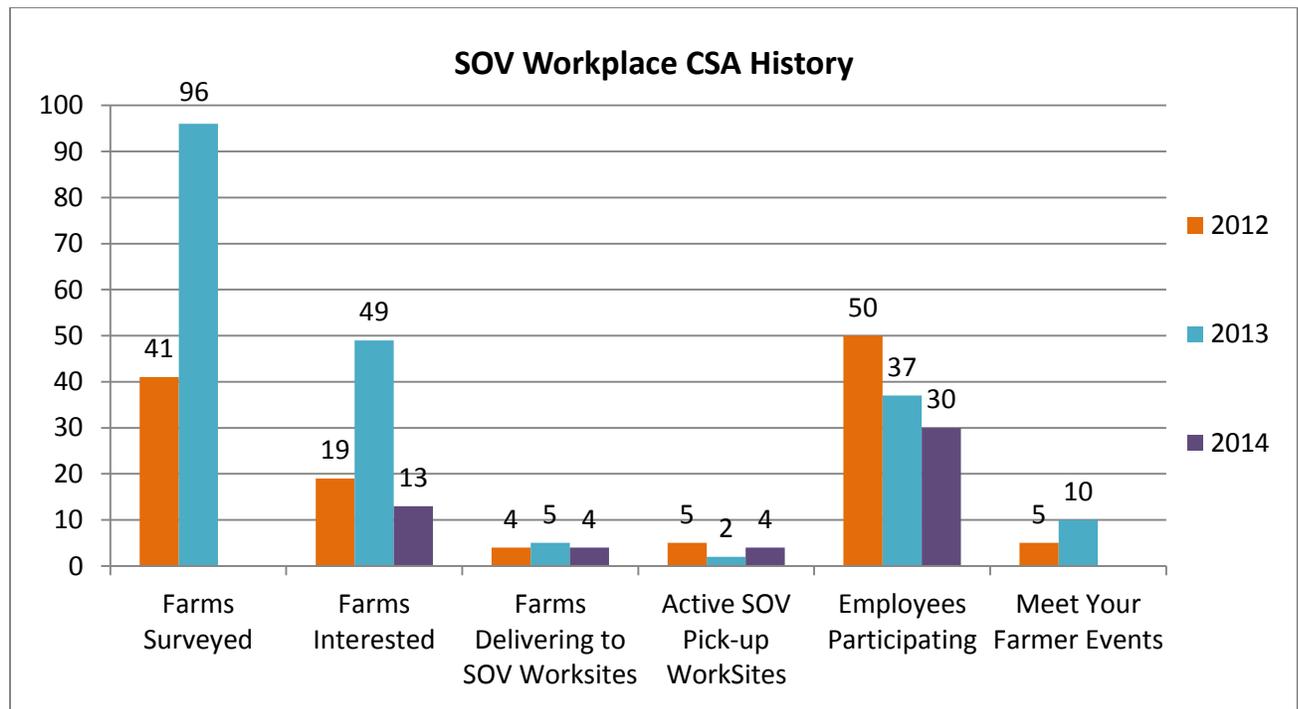
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The State of Vermont (SOV) Workplace Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Program began as a pilot in 2012 to expose farmers to SOV employees as a new market to sell product, increase SOV employees' access to local food, improve workplace wellness, engage state employees in learning about Vermont's food system, and facilitate awareness opportunities. The program is coordinated by the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFAM) with support from the State Employees Wellness Program.

Program Background

CSA is a type of direct marketing relationship between farmers and consumers where a customer enrolls in a seasonal share from a local farm and receives a certain amount of local food products on a regular basis. While the specific terms of membership differ from farm to farm, CSA shares are usually purchased at a set price early in the season in exchange for weekly boxes of mixed produce and other agricultural products.

The State of Vermont Workplace CSA Program provides space and opportunities for State of VT Employees to access healthy and local foods offered through VT CSA farms. Weekly CSA shares are delivered to designated state building drop sites approved by Building and General Services (BGS). Payments must be arranged individually between each State of Vermont Employee and the CSA Farm directly. The State of Vermont is not involved in any exchange of payment or responsible for any un-received payments.

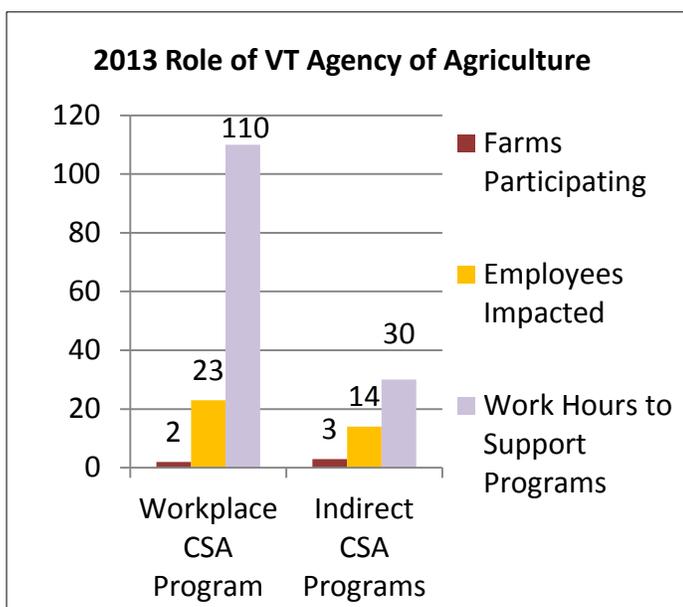


The role of VAAFM, as the program coordinator, is to advertise the program at approved locations and through HR Wellness emails, assist farmers in delivery to buildings, address concerns between farmers and SOV employees, address employee misconduct as a customer, and survey farmers, employees and onsite coordinators regarding program participation.

Since 2012, VAAFM’s coordination of the program has transformed from an intensive hands-on approach, requiring significant staff and intern capacity, to a more indirect hands-off approach focused on promoting the program opportunity to SOV employees. The goal of this indirect model is to leverage the momentum of already successful CSA pick-up locations, whether they are on a state worksite or elsewhere, to increase the consumption of fresh, local food.

Even with the less intensive model, the program requires a significant amount of staff and intern time and volunteer support. Furthermore, with the indirect model, we have found it difficult to track employee participation, making program evaluation a challenge.

Throughout the three-years of the program, several marketing techniques have been used to promote and maintain the program: “Meet your Farmer” events have been held at state worksites; a Sharepoint webpage was created for SOV employees to learn about program details – including CSA Farm offerings; a VAAFM webpage was added to the Agency website; flyers have been created for each worksite to post promoting the program; a worksite coordinator process was established allowing a single employee to coordinate their Workplace CSA program for their particular worksite.



Based on survey results, most employees who use the program are new to CSAs (75% in 2012 and 57% in 2014), and the vast majority (90% in 2012 and 80% in 2014) would sign-up for the SOV Workplace CSA Program again. Most SOV CSA participants surveyed like the quality, volume, variety, and the value of the food they got in their CSA shares. Convenience was a significant factor in participant satisfaction, as well.

Combined 2013-2014 Employee Preferences:

Program Variables	Agreed
Convenient	96%
High Quality	93%
Liked the Food Volume	71%
Liked the Food Variety	85%
Food Variety was a fun challenge	61%
Liked choosing among several CSA farms	59%
Liked meeting the local producer	44%
Appropriate Value	67%
Overall positive experience	81%

We estimate approximately 100 SOV employees have participated in the program but since it has proven difficult to track what employees are involved, there may be overlap from season to season. Based on surveys done in 2012 and 2013, nearly 100 farms expressed interest in accessing the SOV workplace as a market to sell their product. In 2012, the first year of the program, deliveries were piloted at 5 different workplaces in three counties, and served over 50 employees, giving 5 local CSA farms market access to SOV employees. In 2013, during the second year of the program, we opened up to the entire state, featuring CSA share delivery to 2 worksites, for 37 employees, giving 5 farms market access to SOV employees. In 2014, 4 farms delivered to 30 employees at 4 worksites. There is a trend of declining employee enrollment and consequently low-impact to the overall SOV employee population. Furthermore, due to low enrollment, the local producers that are interested in selling to the SOV are missing out on an expanded market opportunity within the largest employer in the state, the State of Vermont.

Program Challenges

There are various challenges that have limited the success of the SOV Workplace CSA program:

- Farm established minimum number of CSA sign-ups in order to get delivery to a location, which translates to lost opportunities for sites that do not have enough interested employees
- Tracking of program participants is very difficult in the indirect model, making collection of program metrics and overall evaluation more difficult
- The program requires more staff capacity than VAAF and other state partners are able to provide
- There is no way to reach all SOV employees to market the program, other than through the HR Wellness Program. This results in limited awareness among SOV employees about the program
- The cost of a CSA share is often too expensive and requires up-front payment which doesn't appeal to all SOV employees
- State building locations are locked at 4:30 pm, preventing easy access to CSA share pick-up for employees who work in different buildings than their drop-off site location

- Interest in traditional CSAs have either become saturated or are waning, and preference for other direct market connections to local food has increased

The issue of declined enrollment is not isolated to the SOV Workplace CSA Program- it is shared with other workplace CSA or local food delivery programs throughout Vermont. Generally speaking, VAAFMM and the non-profit organizations that have coordinated these programs find that consumers prefer the flexibility of purchasing local food through other venues, like buying clubs, food co-ops and farmers' markets. It has also been observed that employees who are interested in CSAs are more likely to pick up at a convenient community location, rather than a worksite that is not their own.

In order to address the conclusions of the program evaluation, we are prepared to share several alternative options for promoting local food consumption among SOV employees.

Program Alternatives

VAAFMM is committed to exposing farmers to SOV employees as a new market to sell product, increasing SOV employees' access to local food, improving workplace wellness, and engaging state employees in learning about Vermont's food system and facilitate awareness opportunities. Although the SOV Workplace CSA Program has not reached the level of success hoped for, there are alternative strategies that the State of Vermont can consider, in order to reach these goals.

CONTINUE THE PROGRAM

- Promote CSAs and farmers' markets to SOV employees through state websites, HR Wellness emails and events
- Track program participants more thoroughly by requiring farmers to collect and share SOV employee contact information
- Explore Financial incentives for SOV employees
 - Payroll deductions
 - Cash incentives through BC/BS (this requires union buy-in)
 - CSA gift card raffles through HR Wellness Program

PROMOTE CSA FARMS AND FARMERS' MARKETS

- Annually survey CSA farms for interest and availability in delivering shares to SOV buildings, and VAAFMM would post interested list on state websites
- Further promote the VT Farmers Market Association listing of Vermont Farmers' Market on state website
- Allow CSA farms to promote their share through posters/flyers in state buildings
- Allow CSA farmers to continue to drop off at state buildings.

PROMOTE BUYING CLUBS

- Promote available buying club participation opportunities to SOV employees through state websites, HR Wellness emails and events.
- Allow buying clubs to drop off at state buildings or other convenient community locations. Buying clubs are more appealing to people who prefer to have choice in the contents of their order.
- Explore possibility of buying clubs delivery of food to state buildings, if not member of SOV Workplace CSA Program.

WEEKDAY FARMERS' MARKET IN DOWNTOWN MONTPELIER

- Downtown Montpelier lacks a location for SOV employees to purchase fresh local food during the work week.
- Host a mid-week Farmers Market in downtown Montpelier (3x per summer) allowing SOV employees to pick up local food and give farmers access to employees that work in Montpelier but live elsewhere.
 - VAAFM likely act as facilitator with local organization managing
- Eventually replicate model in other communities with high SOV employee concentrations and lacking mid-week market access.