



# EBT WIRELESS PROJECT

## January 2010 Newsletter



DHS

### From the Editor – Jan Walters

| Total Transactions        | EBT Transactions             | Total Sales on Wireless |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>2008 Total: 27,701</b> | <b>4257 (15.4% of total)</b> | <b>\$724,703</b>        |
| <b>2009 Totals:</b>       |                              |                         |
| January 09 265            | 17 (6.4%)                    | \$14,678                |
| February 291              | 42 (14.4%)                   | \$23,494                |
| March 382                 | 39 (10.2%)                   | \$26,075                |
| April 579                 | 44 (7.6%)                    | \$28,492                |
| May 4134                  | 448 (10.8%)                  | \$145,541               |
| June 3897                 | 715 (18.3%)                  | \$92,838                |
| July 4299                 | 1217 (28.3%)                 | \$74,445                |
| August 5168               | 1541 (29.8%)                 | \$89,825                |
| September 4934            | 1242 (25.2%)                 | \$103,249               |
| October 5057              | 539 (10.6%)                  | \$130,453               |
| November 1734             | 96 (5.2%)                    | \$54,405                |
| December 1387             | 60 (4.3%)                    | \$50,787                |
| <b>2009 Total 32,508</b>  | <b>6009 (18.5%)</b>          | <b>\$834,298</b>        |

You are the best group of farmers in the entire country! Even with a cool spring and summer, snow in October and a major recession, you have still managed to produce and raise quality products, offered fresh, locally grown produce to all your customers and increased sales. From the numbers shown above, many of you are experiencing an increase in the number of EBT shoppers. DHS staff greatly appreciates your support and cooperation in our efforts to improve access to fresh, locally grown food to low income Iowans. Thank you for a job well done.

#### **December & Year End Facts:**

Total year to date sales for 2009 were \$834,298 compared to \$724,703 for 2008. This is an increase of 15%. **Total EBT sales for 2009 were \$62,078 compared to \$41,845 for 2008. This is an increase of 48.3%.** The number of EBT transactions at farmers markets has also increased dramatically. **In 2009, there were 6009 EBT transactions compared to 4257 in the previous year. This is a 40% increase in the number of EBT transactions for 2009.** In December, the average EBT purchase amount was for \$26.13. The average commercial purchase (debit, credit card) was for \$37.09.

In December 2009, there were 152,274 Food Assistance/EBT families in Iowa. \$42.6 million in benefits were issued in December to these families.

Here are other interesting facts regarding December sales:

There were 59 farmers/producers who were active during December. There were 22 who had EBT sales. There was only one vendor with 10 or more EBT sales this month: Fitkin Popcorn.

**For December, Fitkin Popcorn had the highest number of EBT transactions. Jim Fitkin is from the Cedar Falls area. Fitkin Popcorn began using wireless equipment in 2009. Congratulations Jim!**

**The farmer with the highest EBT sales was Grossman's Meats. Ives Grossman sells beef and chicken. Ives and his wife, Bonnie, live in Preston, Iowa. Ives has built up a strong EBT customer base who purchase meat from him year round. Congratulations Ives!**

## **Total Merchant Services is going green**

Effective January 31<sup>st</sup>, Total Merchant Services (TMS) will no longer be mailing out monthly paper statements. Instead, you will be provided access to your monthly statements on-line. You will need to go to [www.gotomystatement.com](http://www.gotomystatement.com) and complete the registration process, which will include obtaining a user ID and a password. You will be asked to provide your merchant ID number (if you don't know your merchant ID # you can call either Tracy or Jan) and either your Federal Tax ID number or your bank account number for security purposes. It will be very important to get the registration process completed in a timely fashion as January 31<sup>st</sup> is just around the corner.

For our farmers that do not have internet access, you can call TMS at 1-888-848-6825 and request to continue to receive a paper statement at a cost of \$2.00 each month. Because of our current budget problems, we are hopeful that all of our farmers will find a way to access the internet by December 2010. Either by purchasing a computer or exploring the possibility of having a friend or relative access your statement or go to the public library to access your monthly statement. There is no guarantee how long DHS will be able to pay the \$2.00 a month for paper statements. When you do get internet access, be sure to contact Tracy and report your email address.

## **Change on your Global statements**

There was a change on your Total Merchant Services (Global) statements in November. There was a new charge called Service Fee. The Service Fee replaces the Statement Fee and this is the new fee charged by TMS for customer service. DHS will reimburse you for this fee as we did for the statement fee. Just a reminder that there is always a lot of information on the last page of your monthly statements, please take some time to look that over each month.

## **Update for HIP (Healthy Incentive Pilot) Grant**

USDA announced this grant a few weeks ago. Only state SNAP (Food Assistance) agencies may apply for the grant which will be up to \$6.3 million. Only one state will receive the award. The purpose of the grant is to provide a financial incentive payment to 7500 SNAP households when they purchase healthy foods (fruits/vegetables). The incentive will be 30% with a monthly cap that is not known at this time. For example: Ms. Brown purchases \$10 in vegetables and \$15 for honey and meat. The total amount of the sale is \$25. But only the purchase for vegetables (\$10) will earn the 30% incentive or \$3.00. The \$3.00 incentive will immediately be credited to her account and gives her more money at the farmers market or other authorized retailer. As you can see from this example, there are lots of decisions to be made. The \$6.3 million will be used to

make EBT system changes, update software or hardware, training of retailers, etc. A separate fund will be utilized to actually pay the incentive. USDA will also hire an evaluator.

Iowa DHS has decided that we will apply for this grant. Iowa must submit their plan by May 15, 2010. USDA will announce the winner in August 2010.

This is a very unique opportunity. I am convinced that with your help and all our other partners that DHS can submit a top quality proposal and win the award. Although nothing is set in stone, DHS would like to discover if you are interested in participating in this special project. The major qualifier is that you do need to sell fruits and vegetables. DHS will need to have adequate representation for farmers markets. We want to have enough farmers participating in HIP, so SNAP families can easily locate you at the markets and earn their incentive payments. We need your help to ensure that our proposal is superior to other states.

**At this point, we are not quite sure where the pilot will be located.** DHS sent an email to many of you last week. There will probably be some changes in the area for the pilot. I don't want to specify the reasons for those changes here in this public newsletter. It will be important that our plans not be shared with other states who are applying for the same grant. After all, we do want Iowa to win the grant!

If you sell fruits or vegetables and want to participate in the pilot, please contact Jan Walters. We will need a list of markets that you think you will be selling at beginning in December 2011, which is when the pilot becomes operational. We know that this may change in the future, but it will be a starting point as we begin to write the proposal.

**If you have any questions on this issue, call or email Jan or Tracy.**

## Help Us Recruit New Farmers!

As you can see after reading the explanation on the HIP grant, it will be important for us to have many certified farmers participating in the Food Assistance/EBT project. Many of you will be attending annual market meetings the next couple of months. We may be able to get out and attend a few of those meetings if you let us know ahead of time. **If you are aware of other farmers at your market or in your community that would benefit by participating in the EBT Wireless Project, please have them give us a call or let us know and we can contact them.** Now is the time we want to start the enrollment process for May 2010.

## Update on Food Assistance

We have been asked by one of our farmers to do a little refresher course on Food Assistance. Food Assistance (formally referred to as Food Stamps) is also called SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) is the plastic card that the Food Assistance benefits are loaded on each month.

Food Assistance customers **CAN** purchase meats, honey, eggs, baked goods, fruits, vegetables, jams, jellies, seeds, and food bearing plants. **Food Assistance customers CAN NOT purchase hot prepared foods or hot drinks.** You can lose the certification with FNS by accepting EBT as payment for hot prepared foods or hot drinks. If you are no longer a FNS retailer, you will not be able to participate in the EBT Wireless Project.

## Call Us!!!

We try very hard to keep all of the farmers involved in the Wireless EBT Project informed of important issues that affect our program. So it is very important that you read the e-mails and letters that we send you and respond, if asked, in a timely manner. If we need feedback from you and you don't respond then it takes a lot of time for Tracy to follow up with all of you to get the information that is needed. Also, please make sure that we have your current e-mail address so that you are receiving our correspondence.

## Upcoming Events

**Iowa Fruit & Vegetable Growers Conference** – January 29-30<sup>th</sup> - Tracy will be attending this conference.

**Farmers Market Conference** –February 20<sup>th</sup> at First Christian Church, 25<sup>th</sup> & University, Des Moines – Jan will be attending this conference.

If you plan on attending either of these conferences and have questions or haven't met you in person, please look us up and say hello. We'd love to meet you.

## Customer Survey Results for 2009

The customer survey response so far is phenomenal! **Just a reminder, please put the cards in the sack of any customer, especially those who use a plastic card for payment.** We've had many responses from customers who paid with cash. The comments are interesting, but we really want feedback from those who are using plastic (EBT, debit or credit). If you need more cards, contact Tracy. Here are the results so far:

- Why do you like to shop at farmers markets? (Top reasons in descending order)
  - Good/fresh food (125)
  - Fresh Produce (98)
  - Buy locally grown/made items (62)
  - Support local farmers (46)
  - It's Fun/relaxed atmosphere/music (20)
  
- How often do you shop at farmers markets?
  - Every week – 53%
  - Every 2 weeks –12%
  - Once or twice a month– 12%
  - More than once a week – 9%
  - As much as I can –4%
  - 3 out of 4 weeks – 3%
  - Not often - 4%
  - Other - 3%
  
- What markets do you shop at? (Top 6 responses thus far)
  - Davenport (Northpark & Freight House) – 77
  - Iowa City/Coralville – 70
  - Unknown – 56 (Respondents failed to answer question)

- Des Moines (Downtown, Drake, Valley Junction) - 34
- Cedar Rapids – 23
- Burlington - 15
  
- What did you buy today at the market? (Top 7 in descending order)
  - Fresh produce - 235
  - Baked goods – 166
  - Honey/Jam & jelly – 38
  - Flowers – 33
  - Vegetable plants/fruit trees/bushes - 30
  - Meat – 29
  - Eggs - 10
  
- What would you like to buy but can't find at the market? (in descending order)
  - More Fruit – 11
  - Eggs - 8
  - More meat vendors - 4
  - Parsnips – 3
  - Sweet corn - 3
  - Cheese - 3
  - Lots of other things, such as (goat milk, fresh juice, shrimp, eggplant, arts & crafts, dog stuff, hot coffee, etc)
  
- If a year round market was in your area, would you shop at it during the winter months? (Apparently, the question should have specified 'an indoor' year round market. Many customers are assuming that its outside and no produce will be available.)
  - Yes – 787%
  - No – 13%
  - No answer – 6%
  - Depends or already have indoor year-round market – 3%
  
- What services could the market offer or provide that would make you shop there more often? (in descending order)
  - Restrooms - 66
  - Hand washing stations -54
  - Canning/freezing classes - 33
  - Chairs/sitting areas to relax & eat goodies – 8
  - Others (incl. shade, more variety, music, cooking demos, garbage cans, etc) - 23
  
- How did you pay for your items today?
  - Cash –62%
  - Credit – 12%
  - Debit – 10%
  - EBT – 13%
  - Other (senior checks/checks) – 3%

Additional comments from customers:

- IA City customer – Love the variety of items for sale.
- The stuff is sooo good
- IA City – Thank you! Love the FM. Strongly prefer outside venue.
- IA City – Market needs a separate area where a person can sit down, rest, sort packages, etc

- Davenport customer – Nice array of items. One can find nearly everything and then some.
- Springville – I'd like to buy hot tea. Tell vendors to make sure their plastic bags are clean.

## Help DHS Maintain Equipment/Signs

When a farmer no longer wishes to participate in the Wireless Project or DHS cancels the account, it is very important to return all state equipment to DHS. Several farmer accounts were cancelled this fall. We have been dismayed by the condition of the equipment that is returned. Some farmers have not thoroughly read the instructions sent by DHS. As a result, some state owned equipment was mailed to TMS, which we are not able to recover. A couple of farmers have lost or thrown away the signs that we provided.

With the lack of funds to purchase new signs and batteries, we have to keep our equipment in good condition. There will be many new farmers signing up for the project next spring. We want to be able to give them basic equipment such as signs and an extra battery. **We need your help.** Don't store your signs outdoors or in vehicles during the heat of the summer. Keep track of your extra battery. DHS paid for this battery, which costs approximately \$90. Follow the instructions closely when you shut down for the season or permanently. If you have questions about where to send equipment please call Tracy or Jan. With your help, we will have enough equipment to help other new farmers.

## Reminders:

1. **Since we have so many new farmers, remember that you cannot ring up a sale for another vendor. You could lose your Food Stamp certification and be terminated from the Wireless Project.**
2. **Since you are paying for the commercial transaction fees, be sure to keep track of what you are paying so you can use those expenses as a tax deduction.**
3. **You cannot set a minimum purchase amount. If an EBT household wishes to purchase \$.50 in onions, you do need to process the transaction. Same for any debit or credit transaction.**
4. **If your machine quits working, be sure to call Jan or Tracy right away! Or if need help during the weekend, you can call 1-888-848-6825 phone number on the side of your machine.**
5. **Let us know if you need any supplies such as paper rolls, power cords, or battery.**
6. **The second battery that we provide to you was purchased by DHS. If you ever need to return your wireless machine, be sure to keep one battery, carrying case and signs.**
7. **Charge your batteries before market. You should always have a charged battery, ready to go for market. If a battery is not holding a charge, contact Tracy for a replacement.**
10. **Please make sure to keep the original box that your machine came in as it contains the Sim card, which is needed to identify your machine if you have to call TMS.**

## Help Desk

**We are here to help you!**

**When you have questions about:**

- **Participating in the Wireless project or reimbursement questions? Call Tracy Penick at 515-281-5545 or Jan Walters at 515-281-3588.**
- **What you can sell to EBT customers, or being authorized to accept EBT? Call FNS at 515-284-4035.**
- **Food Assistance eligibility? Call Char Hansen at 515-281-6820.**