



**PACIFIC COAST
FARMERS' MARKET
ASSOCIATION**

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CONNECT AT THE FARMERS MARKET



In early May, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy spoke out about what he called an “epidemic of loneliness,” saying that loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our country have created a public health crisis. He blames loneliness for degrading physical health – increasing chances of heart disease and stroke – as well as leading to mental health challenges. These problems are especially acute among the elderly for whom the lack of connections and social interactions lead to an increased risk of developing dementia.

It's ironic that in a society in which we all carry devices capable of connecting us instantly with everyone we know, as well as to total strangers, that so many people are experiencing loneliness. Perhaps there is something about direct, person-to-person engagement that fills a need in a way that no amount of electronic communication can.

The Surgeon General's report makes recommendations of strategies for individuals, governments, workplaces, health systems, and community organizations to shift from perpetuating loneliness to fostering connections. For PCFMA and other community-based organizations, the Surgeon General's recommendations state: “Regardless of whether the mission of a community-based organization is focused on social connection, every organization can promote stronger social connection.” One strategy Dr. Murthy recommends is “Create opportunities and spaces for inclusive social connection.”

Farmers markets are open to all, but it is a different question as to whether they are welcoming to all. I hope that all of PCFMA's shoppers find our farmers markets to be the kinds of inclusive spaces that Dr. Murthy advocates. I know that I often strike up conversations with or overhear exchanges among farmers market shoppers. A question asked of a farmer, like "what is that?" or "what do you do with that?" can often elicit input from passionate home chefs shopping nearby. But I also realize that my farmers market experiences, given my role at PCFMA, are very different than those of most farmers market shoppers.

One strategy that PCFMA uses to make its farmers markets welcoming is to try to remove the financial barriers faced by many in our communities. Every PCFMA farmers market accepts CalFresh, matching CalFresh spending through the Market Match program, accepts Farmers Market Nutrition Program vouchers, and matches those vouchers through a new grant through the California Nutrition Incentive Program. Unfortunately, federal law does not allow PCFMA to accept WIC benefits so that is the one large-scale nutrition program that cannot be used at our farmers markets.

Another strategy PCFMA employs to make its markets welcoming is in the selection of farmers, vendors, and products. While some products, like strawberries, are nearly universal, this customization allows farmers markets in different communities to stand out for their unique offerings. The incredible diversity of the Bay Area brings with it an incredible mix of cultures and food traditions. We try to understand those food traditions and invite farmers and vendors whose products will be sought after by the local residents who will be the market's shoppers. This can be challenging, especially during cold and wet winters such as the one we just experienced when warm weather crops are slow to return to markets, but the quality and freshness make them worth the wait.

Those of us who work in and for farmers markets love them for many reasons but especially for the sense of community and camaraderie that develops over time. We share this love by inviting others into our community. And like all communities, sustaining that spirit requires the contributions of all community members. The next time you are in a farmers market, share a wave, a greeting or a smile. We promise to give you one in return.



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