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## Food Buying Club facilitates better access to fresh fruits and vegetables at reasonable prices

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A Philadelphia non-profit is helping to feed the souls as well as improve the nutrition of area residents.

Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha, commonly referred to as APM, was founded as a Latino community-based health, human services, community and economic development nonprofit organization serving the Philadelphia area. Its mission is to help families achieve their greatest



potential.

A young volunteer checks orders.

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Among its lengthy list of services, the organization operates the Food Buying Club, which enables members to purchase fresh produce at affordable prices. Although they're called members, there is no membership fee, and everyone in the community is invited to participate.

The produce distributed by APM on behalf of its members is purchased from the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market.

Angel Rodriguez, vice president of economic development for APM, explained to The Produce News how the organization got its start.

"Before the creation of APM, basic social services were largely unavailable to Philadelphia's Latino residents, which was the case in most major cities that had an influx of people from Hispanic countries," said Rodriguez. "In 1970 a group of Puerto Rican social activists sought to energize the community and help bring to it a fair share of resources. The success of APM is the result of their efforts."

After more than 44 years, the organization has grown from a staff of five working out of a storefront to offering a broad network of social services offered at sites throughout Philadelphia. Today, APM employs close to 300 staff members, as well as having many volunteers. It affects thousands of people annually through direct service and outreach.

"APM services are grouped into three program areas: Behavioral Health Services; Supportive, Human and Education Services; and Community and Economic Development," Rodriguez said. "APM does not discriminate on the basis of ethnicity, race, sex, sexual preference, national origin or ability to pay. It offers community residents a full spectrum of bilingual and culturally sensitive behavioral health services, supportive and human services that cover a very wide spectrum."

Bridget Palombo is the director for community economic development, and Food Buying Club coordinator for APM. She explained how the club functions.

"The Food Buying Club is a way to help organize the purchase of food for members," she said. "We had a need for higher quality produce, but at wholesale prices. With the help of several of the companies located on the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market, we organized a system where we place bulk orders and buy at wholesale prices."

Copies of APM's order sheets, with the order date, are shared with the community by volunteer distributors. They are collected and compiled into a large bulk order every two weeks. The order is sent to its suppliers at PWPM, picked up on a Tuesday morning and taken to APM's hub site at Paseo Verde Community Room.

That day, staff and volunteers, some of which are students at Temple University and some from the Department of Labor Job Corps, help to sort and pack the bulk produce into individual orders, which are then distributed to seven satellite-spoke sites throughout Philadelphia.

"The members pay us in cash, and that cash is used to pay the suppliers at the PWPM," Palombo pointed out. "This is a win-win for everyone. The members save from 60 to 75 percent on the cost of the freshest high quality produce. In turn, the merchants at PWPM receive cash which helps them with cash flow in their operations."

Some of the merchants at the PWPM worked closely with APM to develop a system that works

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efficiently for everyone involved.

Today approximately 700 families are on the food buying club list, and about 100 of them place orders at any given time.

When the club first formed, members asked for a lot of fruit items because of the savings, but as it evolved they also started requesting commodity items like onions, potatoes, carrots and apples. They also request ethnic items. Today the orders combine a mix of nearly everything.

The companies at the PWPM are very generous and helpful to us,” stressed Palombo. “They taught us how to navigate the market in order to make produce accessible to our members. They explained how pricing sheets work, weight versus volume, and what items sell and pack best. We are very grateful. They helped to make the Food Buying Club the great success it is today.”

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