

Ohio CAN Program (Ohio's LFPA)

Community, Agriculture & Nutrition

Ohio's Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA) – known as Ohio CAN (Community + Agriculture + Nutrition) – has a clear mission: to provide food to those in need from historically underrepresented regional producers. Funded through the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service and implemented through a partnership between the state's Department of Agriculture (ODA), the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (OJFS), and the Ohio Association of Food Banks (OAF), Ohio CAN is bridging the gap between food producers and communities in need.

Through this innovative public-private partnership, the Ohio Association of Foodbanks (OAF) purchases produce and other products from farmers, growers, and producers recruited by the ODA. Together, they work with Ohio's 12 Feeding America food banks, five regional food hubs, and 3,600 member charities to make locally produced food available year-round to more than 2 million Ohioans in all 88 counties across the state.

By the Numbers

\$26.5 million total LFPA allocation to support local farmers and producers in Ohio

164 individual farmers, growers, and suppliers – 59% of whom qualify as socially disadvantaged – sold food to the program in the first year

5 partner food hubs provide fresh produce, seafood, meat, dairy, and poultry to Ohio's 12 regional food banks serving individuals that fall at or below 200% of the federal poverty line



Ohio Department of Agriculture

Marketing, outreach support, and onboarding to new suppliers

Ongoing technical assistance, trainings, and supportive services for suppliers



Ohio Association of Foodbanks

Procurement and contract management

Forecasting and distribution with suppliers and foodbanks

Technical assistance and budget management



Food hubs & aggregators

Forecasting and aggregating

Packing, packaging, delivery

Technical assistance



Local growers, producers, & suppliers

Forecasting, planning, and production

Delivery and transport to foodbanks/food pantries



Regional Foodbanks

Inventory management, storage, and distribution

Partnership models to supply food to vulnerable populations



“The Ohio CAN program is crucial to invest not only in our local and regional food systems, but also to prioritize the underserved producers and next generation of farmers within our state. Ohio CAN opens a world of opportunities to producers by offering them the capital to scale up their business, at the same time giving fresh products to their neighbors. With this program, we can invest in our local food systems and fulfill a need we all share of accessing healthy food.” -Ainsley Lightcap, Former Ohio CAN Program Manager, Ohio Department of Agriculture

Supporting Ohio's Diverse Farmers & Producers

Recognizing that socially disadvantaged farmers often don't have the same market access as other farmers due to longstanding inequities and the legacy of discrimination, Ohio CAN prioritizes purchasing high-demand, local food at fair market price from primarily historically underserved and socially disadvantaged farmers and vendors – including women, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, veterans, small, and beginning and disabled farmers, as well as those whose income is derived from a public assistance program.

In the first year, Ohio's LFPA program partners spent \$9.8 million to purchase food from 164 individual suppliers, farmers, and growers – 59% of whom identified as socially disadvantaged. A defining characteristic of the program is forward contracting - participating producers are provided up to 50% of the value of the purchasing contracts upon signature. This arrangement helps farmers purchase the seeds and supplies necessary to produce the product, manage their cash flow, and create realistic production plans. Through a partnership with the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA), participating farmers can receive technical assistance to help them with crop planning, scale up production, strengthen their business plans, and get support accessing USDA programs. The Ohio Department of Agriculture has also worked to increase access to educational opportunities for participating farmers, including a Conference Co-op Program, webinars focused on marketing, and an Ohio CAN Summit in the fall.

Through these strategies, Ohio CAN is an accelerator program to help socially disadvantaged farmers access institutional and wholesale markets and business opportunities like Farm to School. It also enables them to invest in improvements and expand their operations, leading to job creation and improved wages.

“So, when we first found out about it, it was a big deal for us. It increased our revenue by 12 percent and increased the amount of [product] that we were [selling] from our Ohio family farm by 43 percent... it aligned so much with what it is that we are trying to do of enriching our community.” - Grower [from report]



Building Resilient Supply Chains Through Partnership

“One of the biggest strengths in Ohio's LFPA program is how farmers have worked together in a really meaningful way. We have signed contracts with 3 brand-new food hubs and farmer collectives because of this program. Our smaller farms are going to have a better opportunity of being competitive with our larger farms if they work together.” - [from questionnaire]

The Ohio CAN program offers three main ways for producers to sell to the Ohio Association of Food Banks: directly to a foodbank, directly to a food pantry, or to a food hub or aggregator. These options—clearly laid out in a Producer Onboarding Packet—enable producers to choose a marketing channel and delivery route that best suits their unique business needs. This approach also ensures fresh, locally produced food reaches all communities across the state.

Based on the farmers' interest and product forecasts, Ohio CAN staff facilitate connections with participating food hubs, food banks, and food pantries. They also work with these partners to identify which foods (e.g., dairy, meat, produce, legumes) are in high demand and communicate that information to producers and food hubs so that they can plan accordingly. The partners prioritize purchasing culturally reinforcing foods, foods in the green and yellow categories of their Healthy Eating Research guidelines, and food specifically needed to mitigate diet-related diseases.



“When Ohio CAN came along, this was putting the two things I love together. One is growing chickens, and the second one is producing food that will stay in our community to feed people that might not have this source of protein that I am sending out. The reason why Ohio CAN is a great source for us and for us financially is one, we can sell a lot of chickens at one time which brings us in a little bit more financial support and a stream of revenue... Because of CAN, I was able to grow my operation. We started off with raising 30 meat chickens a year...and this year we're up to 400 at any given time.” – Sharifa Tomlinson, Arrowrock Farm

The five food hubs that help onboard vendors and provide additional market opportunities to participating producers include:

- **Oberlin Food Hub** is a network of 25 farmers who grow summer and fall produce. Oberlin works with OAF to forward contract with participating farmers, which provides additional financial stability and peace of mind. It also runs mentorship and support programs for growers who want to scale their businesses.
- **Yellowbird Foodshed, What Chefs Want, and DNO Produce** are aggregators working with farmers in different areas of the state. They help farmers deliver mixed produce boxes directly to food banks or pantries.
- **Regenerative Farming Collective** is a group of 10 Black, Indigenous, and People of Color farmers in the Dayton area. OAF contracts with them to provide poultry and produce boxes.

CAN program partners initially required that foods be purchased from producers with GAP certification. (Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification verifies that fruits and vegetables are produced, packed, handled, and

stored to minimize food safety risks.) The partners quickly realized that GAP certification would be a large barrier to entry and that for farmers to meet their demand (and to build trust), they needed to provide an upfront investment. This led to a tailored process to support farmers growing for the farm-to-food assistance market. ODA also worked with vendors to simplify program requirements by aggregating audits and streamlining inspections.

Looking Ahead

The Ohio CAN program—made possible with LFPA funds—has been transformative. However, given its short time frame, it has only scratched the surface of its potential. Creating a permanent program would certainly expand its impact, effectiveness, and reach. A key priority for all involved is to secure permanent funding so that this program can continue strengthening long-term community agriculture resiliency and equitable food access for all Ohioans.

“The Ohio CAN program has enabled us to demonstrate that our effective partnership with food banks for redirecting commodities and specialty crops in surplus can also make us strong partners for smaller farmers and businesses seeking to scale. We are able to strategically partner with smaller farms and regional and statewide aggregators to offer a flexible and tiered approach at scaling capacity and diversifying sales channels, which not only allows us to provide more healthful, wholesome foods to our neighbors in need today but allows us to invest in the future of a resilient local food supply chain for Ohioans for years to come.” – Carrie Harshbarger, Senior Director Food Supply Chain, Ohio Association of Foodbanks

Additional Resources

For information about the program, please visit <https://agri.ohio.gov/divisions/markets/resources/Ohio-CAN>

An independent assessment of Ohio's LFPA and CAN programs is available at https://ohiofoodbanks.org/site/assets/files/2917/lfpa_report_4.pdf

About LFPA

The USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement (LFPA) is a transformative federal initiative that empowers state agencies, tribal governments, and community partners to collaboratively source and distribute food, benefiting local socially disadvantaged producers and underserved communities. With a budget of \$900M, LFPA, led by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service's Commodity Procurement Program, aims to strengthen regional food systems, support local and regional farms, and address hunger and food insecurity through partnerships with food assistance programs. This groundbreaking program has demonstrated its potential as a powerful investment in farms and communities in a short time since its inception in 2021.

