

**FOOD SYSTEMS
LEADERSHIP NETWORK**



Wallace Center
AT WINROCK INTERNATIONAL



FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE

A Model for Values-Based, Equity-Centered Approaches to Transforming the Food System

A Wallace Center Report, Produced in partnership with Alison Cohen and Rachel Dannefer

SEPTEMBER 2024



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction and Methodology	5
The Transformative Potential of Farm to Food Assistance	8
Farm to Food Assistance in Action: Core Values and Model Strategies	16
Challenges, Roadblocks, and Recommendations	29
Conclusion	46
Appendix: F2FA Resource List	47

LEARNING LAB TEAM PROFILES

[Arizona Community Hub](#)

[Change Today, Change Tomorrow](#)

[El Departamento de la Comida](#)

[Healthy Food For All](#)

[Mandela Partners](#)

[Metro Caring](#)

[Northwest Tribal Emergency Management Council](#)

[OKC Food Hub](#)

[Transplanting Traditions Community Farm](#)

[Sustainable Molokai](#)

Funding for this publication was made possible through the support of The Rockefeller Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service through grant 21LFPPAR1027.

Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of USDA or reflect the positions or policies of The Rockefeller Foundation.





About the Wallace Center and the Food Systems Leadership Network

The Wallace Center at Winrock International is a national nonprofit that brings together diverse people and ideas to co-create solutions that build healthy farms, equitable economies, and resilient food systems. Wallace has been a leader in the development of healthy regional food and farming systems for 40 years, working to scale up the supply and positive environmental, social, and economic benefits of regional, sustainably produced food. We seek to affect systems change to bring benefits to the environment, to communities, and to the farmers and food businesses that are the building blocks of a healthy and equitable food system.

The Wallace Center is the backbone organization for the Food Systems Leadership Network, a national peer learning community that connects current and emerging leaders, strengthens individual and collective leadership capacity, and fosters collaboration across communities. The Farm to Food Assistance Learning Lab and Community of Practice are two of many strategies within the FSLN to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, resources, innovations and support among food systems leaders.

For more information please visit wallacecenter.org and foodsystemsleadershipnetwork.org

Wallace Center's Racial Equity Commitment

The Wallace Center commits to centering anti-racism, racial equity, and inclusion in our programs, operations, and culture. Indigenous, Black, and Brown communities have been violently displaced, enslaved, and disenfranchised to build the foundation of modern farming, fishing, and food systems. [Many of these same communities continue to face interpersonal and systemic discrimination resulting in cycles of land loss, exclusion and economic and health disparities.](#) The Wallace Center recognizes that by not being explicitly anti-racist in our approach over the past 40 years, our complacency has reinforced racism and racial inequity. As an organization striving to enact systems change, we recognize the role that race and racism play in the modern food system and are therefore making a [public commitment](#) to dismantling racism through our work.

Throughout the research process for this report, we strived to center equity and invest in collaboration by compensating partners for sharing their time and expertise, seeking feedback on core research findings from practitioners participating in the Farm to Food Assistance Community of Practice and the Farm to Food Assistance Learning Lab, engaging reviewers to conduct an initial review of this report with a racial equity lens, and hearing from a diverse constellation of Farm to Food Assistance partners across the United States. We hope that our commitment to equity and collaboration is evident throughout this report and we invite your feedback. Please feel free to contact us with your questions, ideas, and input anonymously through [this form](#).

Acknowledgements

We want to acknowledge, honor, and celebrate the wisdom and expertise of all of those who contributed to this report – including survey respondents, focus group participants, members of the national Farm to Food Assistance Community of Practice and Learning Lab, and other partners who are engaged in the exciting and evolving field of values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance.

This report is based on the input of over 50 individuals working in Farm to Food Assistance. We are grateful to these individuals for sharing their experience, input, and guidance so this report could reflect a snapshot of the field of Farm to Food Assistance and the pathway to the realization of healthy farms, healthy food and healthy people.

Eva Agudelo, Full Bloom Fundraising
Aitalohi (Aita) Amaize, OurSpace World Inc
Nina Arrocena, Mandela Partners
Elizabeth Atwell, Seed Change Strategies
Christina Barkel, Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities
Ellie Bomstein, Seed Change Strategies
Patrice Brown, Eastern Market Community
Giselle Bruskwitz, Iowa Valley Resource Conservation & Development
Andrew Carberry, Wallace Center at Winrock International
Renee Catacalos, FRESHFARM
Heidi Coe, Second Harvest Heartland
Alison Cohen, National Right to Food Community of Practice
Sara Cross, Oregon Food Bank
Jen Dalton, Kitchen Table Consulting
Rachel Dannefer, Rachel Dannefer Consulting, LLC
Jessica Diamond, Arizona Community Hub
Sarah Ecolano, Copper River Fish
Melony Edwards, National Urban Fellow
Joshua Faller, Just Roots
Andy Fisher, ISED Solutions
Gretchen Gilbert, New Mexico Department of Agriculture
Miles Gordon, Kitchen Table Consulting
Samiha Hamdi, Fresh Approach
Pakou Hang, Hmong American Farmers Association
Molly Harris, Lulus Local Food / MWH Solutions LLC
Carrie Harshbarger, Ohio Association of Foodbanks
Niels James, Sustainable Molokai
Haile Johnston, Common Market
Buck Jones, Columbia River Inter Tribal Fish Commission
Larissa Lopez, Revolution by Design
Iya Mahan, Del Norte and Tribal Lands Community Food Council
Myra Marcellin, Financial Advisor for Small Businesses
Julie E. Mercado, El Departamento de la Comida
Kana Miller, Carolina Farm Stewardship Association
Katherine Miller, Table 81
Lechandre Mix, Healthy Food For All - Center For Transformative Action
Jenna Moore, OKC Food Hub
Andy Ollove, Fresh Approach
Erin Parker, Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative
Zsofia Pasztor, Northwest Tribal Emergency Management Council
Erin Pirro, Agribusiness ESP, LLC
Hannah Quigley, National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Jamie Ronzello, Sustainable Molokai
Taylor Ryan, Change Today, Change Tomorrow
Jesse Rye, Farm Fresh Rhode Island
Marielisa Sabat, El Departamento de la Comida

Susan Lightfoot Schempf, Wallace Center at Winrock International
Cory Scrivner, Metro Caring
Emily Settleowski, Metro Caring
Gizem Templeton, Food Systems Impact Fellow
Thanh Tran, OKC Food Hub
Dionne Washington, Arizona Community Hub
Ree Ree Wei, Transplanting Traditions Community Farm
Lynda Zambrano, Northwest Tribal Emergency Management Council



Suggested Citation:

Cohen, A., Dannefer, R., Carberry, A., and Schempf, S. (2024). Farm to Food Assistance: A Model for Values-Based, Equity-Centered Approaches to Transforming the Food System. The Wallace Center at Winrock International.

Graphic Design provided by Gabrielle Guevara,
[Wright Consultant, LLC](#)



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic blatantly revealed the depths of the current food system crisis. For the first time since the Great Depression, the issue of hunger in the United States became visible to all. News stories across the country showed shocking lines of people and cars snaking around sidewalks and parking lots, waiting to receive food. Food insecurity was front and center in the public dialogue as growing numbers of “newly hungry” people found themselves accessing emergency assistance as a result of job loss, delayed stimulus checks, and other disruptions. At the same time, the breakdown of the food supply chain – made visible as farmers dumped milk on their land and plowed vegetables back into the soil, as grocery store shelves sat empty and restaurants closed – resulted in significant economic losses coupled with a rise in anxiety for food producers, especially small farmers.¹ Those that did not have storage facilities or

multiple points of sale were forced to abandon crops and some left farming altogether. Those that were more adept at pivoting, already selling direct to consumer or able to do home delivery, fared better.

The pandemic also laid bare the devastating consequences of structural racism² in the U.S., as deep inequities by race and ethnicity were visible in the higher rates of infection, hospitalization, and death due to COVID-19 experienced by communities of color. The murder of George Floyd at the hands of police in 2020,



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

¹ “Despite rising demand for local food during the pandemic, the closure of farmers’ markets, schools and other critical outlets had dramatic impacts not only on local farmers’ income, but on their costs. One economic analysis estimated a decline of up to \$688.7 million in sales across key local and regional markets from March to May 2020, leading to up to \$1.32 billion in total loss to the economy from March to May 2020. This particularly harms smaller, socially disadvantaged, and beginning farms and the markets they serve. Unfortunately, federal relief programs have tended to leave out these growers, delivering the lion’s share of support to the very largest farms.” <https://www.farmaid.org/blog/fact-sheet/understanding-economic-crisis-family-farms-are-facing/>

² Structural racism “refers to the totality of ways in which societies foster racial discrimination through mutually reinforcing systems of housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care, and criminal justice. These patterns and practices in turn reinforce discriminatory beliefs, values, and distribution of resources.”

Bailey ZD, Krieger N, Agénor M, Graves J, Linos N, Bassett MT. Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: evidence and interventions. *Lancet* 2017;389:1453-1463.



PHOTO CREDIT: EASTERN MARKET

food insecurity through local food supply chains, as well as new federal funding through programs like the USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA), catalyzed the expansion of these programs. Farm to Food Assistance has emerged as a strategy that can play a key role in the renewal of local and regional food and farm economies and increase food access for our 44 million food insecure neighbors.

In its simplest form, Farm to Food Assistance describes a value chain through which food assistance programs procure food from local farmers and producers for distribution to people experiencing food insecurity. Farm to Food Assistance programs that are values-based and equity-centered leverage this value chain to provide a pathway to strengthen local farm economies and community food security by paying farmers a fair market price for high-quality, culturally important foods that are distributed to people experiencing food insecurity at no cost. They prioritize purchasing from farmers that have been historically disenfranchised and unfairly discriminated against due to race, gender, or other characteristics. These programs treat food access recipients and farmers – particularly those that have been excluded from opportunities to access land, markets, and other resources – with dignity, strengthen relationships and networks throughout the food system, produce and distribute nourishing and culturally important food, and align goals and values across sectors that have historically been disconnected. These value chains include farmers, ranchers, fishers and other food producers, food industry leaders, processors, cooperatives, food hubs, food banks, pantries, and community-based organizations working in partnership to guarantee that fresh, local, and nutritious food reaches those who need it the most.

the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement,³ and the rise of Anti-Asian hate crimes⁴ during COVID served to further underscore racially-based injustices and the urgency of addressing systemic racism.

The turmoil and failures during this time highlighted the need to forge new paths for our food system that center racial equity; to find models for value chains that produce food with high nutritional value, to invest in socially disadvantaged producers who have experienced discrimination in market opportunities, to keep money circulating in the local economy where it can create a multiplier effect, and to have greater resiliency than the brittle globalized corporate food system.

Farm to Food Assistance has emerged as one promising approach for strengthening local food value chains by paying food producers a fair price for their product and then channeling it into food banks, food pantries, and other food access sites. Localized efforts to address

FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE VALUE CHAINS (F₂FA)

Farm to food assistance value chains connect regional farms with food assistance programs, such as food banks, food pantries, and grassroots programs that provide food to people experiencing hunger and food insecurity. These value chains typically include farmers, food hubs, food banks and community organizations working together to ensure that food reaches those who need it most, while paying farmers fair prices for their products.

³ [Black Lives Matter](#)

⁴ Gover AR, Harper SB, Langton L. Anti-Asian Hate Crime During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Reproduction of Inequality. *Am J Crim Justice*. 2020;45(4):647-667. doi: 10.1007/s12103-020-09545-1. Epub 2020 Jul 7. PMID: 32837171; PMCID: PMC7364747



PHOTO CREDIT: WALLACE CENTER

The Wallace Center has been working to better understand and support the people and organizations implementing values-based and equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance programs across the United States since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This report brings together findings and insights from these efforts, which have engaged hundreds of people who are part of Farm to Food Assistance programs—including producers, aggregators, and food assistance providers—across the country over the past four years. Data sources for this report include:

- **A national survey** of over 300 Farm to Food Assistance practitioners conducted in 2022 in partnership with the Duke University World Food Policy Center to capture quantitative and qualitative data from the field. Respondents included farmers, food access organizations, food hubs, value chain coordinators, and state/tribal agencies.
- **Focus groups** conducted in 2024 with more than 20 people engaged in implementing Farm to Food Assistance programs across the United States, from Hawaii to Massachusetts to North Carolina to Alaska to Puerto Rico. Focus groups explored how Farm to Food Assistance programs are values-based and equity-centered, how organizations measure their program's success, and how Farm to Food Assistance programs can be a lever for food systems transformation. Focus group participants were diverse across many characteristics - geography, race/ethnicity, communities of focus, organizational size, and program reach.
- Information and insights generated through the national [Farm to Food Assistance Community of Practice](#), a group of over 600 people and organizations who participate in monthly virtual learning sessions. The purpose of the Community of Practice is to build relationships between program implementers, provide a space for peer learning and problem solving, and lift up effective models.
- Data produced by the **Farm to Food Assistance Learning Lab**, a group of 10 Farm to Food Assistance teams that came together monthly with the Wallace Center and an Advisory Team, for one year starting in 2023. The Learning Lab offered a space for shared learning and mutual support. This included virtual shared learning sessions, an in-person retreat with participatory research activities, interviews with each team to produce a case study, and one-on-one meetings and mentoring with members of the Advisory Team. The Learning Lab included individuals who identify as Asian, Black, Latina, Native American, Pacific Islander, and White.
- **Previous Wallace Center reports and publications**, notably the initial report on the [USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Program](#) and the [Preliminary Report on the National Farm to Food Assistance Survey](#).

In bringing together findings from a diverse array of sources we aim to lift up both the remarkable potential presented by these programs as well as the roadblocks they are navigating. We have organized this report as follows:

- In the first section we make the case for how Farm to Food Assistance can contribute to the transformation of a food system from one that produces commodities and derives wealth for a few, to one that produces food, health, and well being for everyone. We explore how a values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance model reveals and works to overcome the contradictions inherent in our current food banking economy where hunger is on the rise even while food banks emerge as some of the most well-funded and influential charities. We explore the contemporary parallels in racial disparities in food security and farming rooted in our nation's history of theft of Indigenous lands and enslavement as primary drivers in creating and consolidating agricultural wealth.
- In the second section we delineate the core values and strategies that emerged from our research on values-based, equity centered Farm to Food Assistance programs. These reflect values that practitioners lifted up, as well as approaches for implementing these efforts in a manner that reflects core values.
- In the final section, we enumerate the most pressing challenges and roadblocks to realizing the potential of values-based, equity centered Farm to Food Assistance programs in serving as a lever for food systems transformation. We also explore recommendations for practitioners and supporters to advance the goals and outcomes of Farm to Food Assistance efforts across the country.

This publication, and the values-based, equity-centered models it highlights, is meant to serve as an inspiration for farmers and food producers, food hubs and food systems-focused organizations, and food access organizations looking for courage to stand at the crossroads and choose a new path. We also hope it encourages local and state governments, policy makers, the USDA, and philanthropy to direct more resources to the promising field of Farm to Food Assistance.



PHOTO CREDIT: SUSTAINABLE MOLOKAI



PHOTO CREDIT: MANDELA PARTNERS

VISION FOR A TRANSFORMED FOOD SYSTEM

A food system that produces food, health, and well-being for people while regenerating and protecting the planet.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE

While there is no exact count, hundreds of Farm to Food Assistance programs exist across the United States, with programs in every state as well as in U.S. territories and tribal nations. To date, USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) and LFPA Plus cooperative agreements alone number 134 across 54 states/territories and 80 tribes. With an investment of close to \$900 million in Farm to Food Assistance value chains, an estimated \$1.5 billion in local economic impact will be generated through LFPA purchases from local producers. To date, over \$134 million in LFPA funds have been spent to purchase products from 4,920 socially-disadvantaged farmers/producers. In aggregate, respondents to our 2022 survey reported purchasing from approximately 5,000 farms, with a focus on small and beginning farmers, and Black, Indigenous, and other farmers of color.

Notably, while many Farm to Food Assistance programs sprang up during the COVID-19 pandemic to address skyrocketing food insecurity rates, more than half of respondents to our survey had Farm to Food Assistance programs in place prior to March 2020—showing that this approach is not new. Indeed, efforts to get surplus farm products to people facing hunger were the seed of the modern-day Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.⁵

By creating local, resilient, and mutually accountable value chains, Farm to Food Assistance efforts can build common ground among people who haven't traditionally worked together. They can allow for exploration and co-creation of

⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/19/what-the-data-says-about-food-stamps-in-the-u-s/>



PHOTO CREDIT: HEALTHY FOOD FOR ALL

shifting power, resources, and decision-making to the farmers, producers, and eaters who are most impacted by the value chain. They can provide meaningful income for farmers and lead to the development of infrastructure that enables farmers to access additional retail and wholesale market channels. These efforts also have deeply impactful benefits for communities experiencing food insecurity by providing fresh, high-quality and culturally important local foods in a manner that centers dignity and affirms the right to good food for all. Farm to Food Assistance can create a pathway to more systemic, radical food systems change - a change that produces connections, health, wealth, and resiliency within communities.



“A vision of a transformed food system looks like land back. It also looks like folks understanding the importance of farm to table, of where our food comes from, that our Mother Earth is our relative. It looks like us having control over things like refrigerated trucks, warehouse space, processing facilities, the means and the people power. To be able to do all of these things without relying on large corporations, because that’s what happened in this pandemic and it feels like we learned nothing. We’re still operating on those same systems, trying to do these Band-Aid fixes. And we just need to do something different. We need a new system.”
- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

HOW FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS LINK FOOD SECURITY TO SMALL FARMER VIABILITY

For decades, the food assistance and food production sectors have been largely siloed from one another, resulting in the lack of a shared vision and strategy for a food system that produces food, health and well-being for all people while protecting the planet. A multi-sectoral and coordinated approach to tackling the root causes of hunger and poverty, which includes reweaving the ever-unraveling tapestry of local farmers producing nutritious food for local consumption, is needed.

Farm to Food Assistance programs offer a mechanism to bridge the anti-hunger and local and regional food systems sectors in a way that allows food producers and food access organizations to align their respective goals – economic viability and an end to hunger. Key to this outcome is the focus on values, equity and community, so that Farm to Food Assistance becomes an intentional channel toward root-cause intervention rather than simply mitigating its symptoms.

It’s critical that Farm to Food Assistance be understood within its limitations to transform the food system from the current globalized profit-seeking framework – where food is defined primarily as a commodity – to an interconnected patchwork of local and regional food and farm economies where food is understood primarily as a source of life and, therefore, a human right. However, the models, practices and underlying values that have emerged from Farm to Food Assistance demonstrate its potential to serve as one lever for food system transformation. A values-based, community-driven and equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance program is not the panacea for all that ails our current food system, but it can create a practical model that moves us along the continuum from charity to justice where the following outcomes are mutually inclusive:

- ✔ Farmers are paid a fair market value for their products.
- ✔ Community members experiencing food insecurity have access to farm fresh food.
- ✔ Healthy food access and agroecology/regenerative farming and fishing are interdependent.
- ✔ Local and regional food and farm economies are revitalized and economic benefits are multiplied as dollars recirculate in the local economy.
- ✔ Farmers and food insecure neighbors come to know each other as members of the same community.
- ✔ Racial oppression that displaces Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities from their land and waterways is dismantled.
- ✔ People have agency to determine their own community food system.
- ✔ Food systems are designed to heal the earth and nourish people.



“I truly believe in the importance of paying farmers from my community to grow the food they know best how to grow as a key solution to reducing food insecurity within my community. I do this work to ensure that my own family and friends have access to healthy, fresh traditional food in hopes that in the future more farmers can be a part of this solution. Transplanting Traditions’ food access program not only provides the direct service needed; it also preserves the food legacy and traditions of the refugee community.”
- REE REE WEI, TRANSPLANTING TRADITIONS COMMUNITY FARM, LEARNING LAB PARTNER



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

FOOD INSECURITY AND THE CONTRADICTIONS INHERENT IN THE FOOD BANKING ECONOMY

Food insecurity in the United States has not dipped below 10% during the last thirty years⁶-- a sobering reminder that hunger is a pressing paradoxical challenge in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. While we know that food banking will never end hunger, we are reliant on the services food access organizations provide in the face of the ongoing and staggering increase of food insecurity. At 47 million people with 100% of counties reporting food insecurity,⁷ food and nutrition insecurity are at the highest levels ever recorded in this country.

A recent Gallup survey found that among the wealthiest countries in the world, the US had the highest rate of people struggling to afford enough food.⁸ Instead of re-examining factors such as stagnant wages, the demise of local economies (especially in rural areas), and the persistence of race as a key determinant in poor health and early death, we continue to support and celebrate capturing food waste and giving it to the poor as a win-win solution to hunger and climate change. We ignore the realities of people's lived experience of food insecurity: working families making the choice between purchasing enough nutritious food or paying for medicine, or farmers choosing between farming the land or taking a job that covers health insurance. People of color are more likely to be faced with these choices than white populations. Zeroing in on food insecurity and food waste as the problems have yielded approaches – such as increasing agricultural yields and scaling up charitable access to capture food waste destined for landfills – that have yet to make a meaningful dent in the hunger rate.

6 Rabbitt, M. P., Reed-Jones, M., Hales, L. J., & Burke, M. P. (2024). Household food security in the United States in 2023 (Report No. ERR-337). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <https://doi.org/10.32747/2024.8583175.ers>

7 <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america>

8 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/643598/leader-loser.aspx>

HUNGER IN THE US

- ▶ 47 million people are currently food insecure
- ▶ 100% of counties and congressional districts are home to people facing hunger
- ▶ Child food insecurity exists in every community, and rates reach nearly 50% in some counties
- ▶ 9 out of 10 high food insecurity counties are rural
- ▶ Nearly 50% of people facing hunger are unlikely to qualify for SNAP
- ▶ 1 in 5 Black people and Latino people face food insecurity

Source: Map the Meal Gap Reports | Feeding America, 2022

“

“The days when [our mom] was out working one of her various jobs to make sure we had a roof over our heads, I would be left to feed myself and my younger sister. It was never on purpose, but sometimes the cupboards held only bread and the fridge contained only condiments. And so as the older sister with no way to contribute financially until I was 14, ketchup sandwiches and cereal with sink water were my lunch specials. I participate in Farm to Food Assistance because access to food is a human right. I want to work with families throughout the Finger Lakes who haven't previously had the option to replace their “ketchup sandwiches” with beautiful veggies grown on our neighbors' farms and the knowledge they need to prepare nutritious meals with those ingredients.”

- LECHANDRE MIX, HEALTHY FOOD FOR ALL, LEARNING LAB PARTNER

Though mitigating food insecurity by capturing and distributing surplus and donated food is still at the heart of food banking, change is afoot. Many organizations have expanded their strategies to include nutrition education, medically tailored meals, client choice, access to government nutrition programs, food production and preservation classes, and advocacy to improve federal nutrition programs. A smaller but growing subset are beginning to address root causes of food insecurity as part of their strategy to end hunger. They are recognizing that industrial agriculture is not a solution, but rather a cause of food insecurity. They are using their food purchasing budgets to invest in BIPOC producers and small to midsize farms, and working to bring dignity to all aspects of the food system. They are building collaborations with social justice oriented community-based organizations, or hiring staff to advocate for policy solutions hand in hand with clients and to push the envelope of the role of food access organizations in ending hunger at its roots. These forward-thinking programs are building a new road while walking it – a new road that begins at the intersection of food access and small farm viability.



“What we are learning is that food is the connection. F2FA can only exist with this unification quality when we use it to bring people together and not to divide. And also when food sovereignty is really the main goal. Food assistance on its own is a dead end road. We cannot food-assist our way out of hunger. It’s important that farmers participate and that they are valued and they get a good return, but at the same time, farm to food assistance can only be a stepping stone to a real solution.”

- ZSOFIA PASZTOR, PARTNER TO NORTHWEST TRIBAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL, LEARNING LAB PARTNER

REALITIES UNDERNEATH THE CHARITABLE FOOD SYSTEM:

Poverty is the primary root cause of hunger. Since 1979 wages have remained stagnant while the cost of living has skyrocketed. Even in households with working adults, basic needs are unaffordable. For many, poverty is a closed-loop circuit with little room for upward mobility.

The corporate food system is a leading cause of food insecurity and food waste. A corporate-controlled food system produces profit at the expense of health, community resilience and stability, and climate, while masking the true cost of food.

Charity has replaced human rights. Reliance on philanthropy and charitable food distracts non-profits from examining the root causes and advocating for the political will that could end hunger for good. Corporations donate food and receive a tax credit and kudos for keeping waste out of landfills. Food charities measure the number of meals served and pounds of food distributed. Absent from accountability is nutrition, dignity, and community self-determination.

Source: www.righttofoodus.org



PHOTO CREDIT: LULUS LOCAL FOOD

NO FARMS, NO WATERWAYS, NO MARKETS, NO FOOD

Over decades, U.S. farm policy has created industrial-scale farms and consolidated control of the food supply chain into a handful of corporations that grow, distribute and export more fuel than food, while polluting the water and eroding the soil. The current farm safety net – crop insurance, commodity and disaster assistance programs – disproportionately benefit large agricultural operations and private companies. The federal crop insurance program is the only farm subsidy program without any means test or payment limit. The top 10% of crop insurance premium subsidy recipients have an average adjusted gross income of \$1.5 million and possess an average household wealth of \$15.7 million – far above the

household wealth of the average American household.⁹ These agricultural businesses are mostly producing beef and crops that primarily feed animals, most notably corn.¹⁰ This translates to a system that rewards a small number of large farms that produce vast quantities of non-perishable commodities primarily used as inputs or international exports – including grains and seeds used to feed livestock and to produce fuel such as ethanol.

Meanwhile, small farms account for 88% of total farm businesses and operate on almost half of all farmland in the U.S., while generating almost 19% the value of production. Mid-sized farms represent 5.8% of farms and operate on 21.4% of farmland. Both groups of farmers – which are mostly diversified specialty crop farmers – experience difficulty in accessing the farm safety net. Crop diversity and soil health practices are often adopted as a way to mitigate risk in the face of inaccessibility to the farm safety net. And yet these practices do not protect against sudden natural disasters such as flooding or wildfires.¹¹ Today's farm policy fails most US producers, but especially small to mid-size family farms.



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

STATE OF FARMING IN THE UNITED STATES

- ▶ Farmers account for 1% of the population. Over 60% of these farmers are above the age of 55
- ▶ Large-scale family farms and industrial nonfamily farms account for only 5% of farms, but 63.8% of production (in \$\$). Small-scale family farms represent 89% of U.S. farms, but only 17.8% of production.
- ▶ Just 14.5¢ of every dollar spent on food in 2021 went back to the farm; in 1975, it was 40¢.
- ▶ Agriculture was responsible for 10% of total U.S. greenhouse gas (GHGs) emissions in 2021. Methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), and carbon dioxide (CO₂) are the main GHGs emitted by agricultural activities. Livestock and soil management are major contributors

Source: Center for Sustainable Systems, University of Michigan. 2023. "U.S. Food System Fact Sheet." Pub. No. CSS01-06.

A similar story can be told about small-scale fisheries.¹² The North American Marine Alliance (NAMA), a network of 400,000 family fisheries, underscores how aquaculture is going the way of Big Agriculture. Current U.S. policies promote privatization and consolidation, concentrating fishing rights in the hands of fewer and fewer people

⁹ [State of the Farm Safety Net](#)

¹⁰ Ninety percent of our avocados and broccoli also come from Mexico. Half of our blueberries come from Peru. Nearly half of our grapes are imported, mostly from Peru and Chile. At the same time, domestic production has declined. Over the last 25 years, total U.S. production of oranges, for example, has fallen by 80 percent. [Technology can help reduce food waste on the farm, but it's only part of the solution.](#)

¹¹ NSAC, Unsustainable: State of the Farm Safety Net, February 2024, www.sustainableagriculture.net

¹² According to the AMC Commodity Procurement Program, LFPA has 33 recipients that purchase from socially disadvantaged fishers for a total of \$2,591,467. In addition, 19 State agencies and 14 tribes have purchased from socially-disadvantaged fishers for a total of \$1,866,404 and \$725,062, respectively. (E-mail communication from Elizabeth Lober, Assistant to the Deputy Administrator, AMS Commodity Procurement Program to Susan Schempf, Wallace Center, August 15, 2024).



PHOTO CREDIT: FARM FRESH RHODE ISLAND

and companies. As NAMA says: "Coastal communities around the world have farmed seafood sustainably for millennia. But over the past few decades, Big Aquaculture corporations have been using political clout to secure their iron grip on the market and operate with little oversight. Industrial seafood farming follows the dirty formula of high extraction, high pollution, high profits, and rock-bottom quality. This is aquaculture at its worst. It upsets ecosystems, displaces communities, and undermines local economies." A values-based approach to establishing new community-based markets for family fisheries in service to creating resilient local economies is needed.

RACIAL INEQUITIES IN THE FOOD SYSTEM: FOOD INSECURITY, WEALTH, AND LAND ACCESS

The racial wealth gap can arguably be traced to significant land loss among Black, Indigenous and People of Color through theft, hoarding, gentrification, and legal loopholes.¹³ Since colonization, Indigenous communities across the country have suffered significantly in terms of poor health and limited access to land for hunting, fishing, gathering, and agricultural production. The history of food production and Indigenous communities, as it relates to U.S. policy throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, shows how Indigenous people, including nations that were not traditionally farmers, were forced to farm marginal and unproductive lands. The Dawes Act of 1887 – the first of many federal policies of forced integration – resulted in Native American tribal communal landholdings being confiscated and turned into family-held or individual allotments, effectively enforcing a system of private property. U.S. farm policies which have prompted the loss of topsoil, the clearing of forests and the polluting of waterways – coupled with energy policies that included systematic damming of rivers and mining practices – has resulted in the loss of the most arable and traditionally significant lands for Indigenous people. The reservation era further eroded food sovereignty, disconnecting whole generations who were sent to boarding schools for assimilation into the "American way of life" from access to traditional meats, vegetables, and fruits, while reinforcing diets high in starches and dairy.¹⁴

Through the 1999 Pigford v. Glickman settlement,¹⁵ the US government was found guilty of discriminating against Black farmers over many decades, resulting in many farm foreclosures and business failures. The USDA recently reported that Black farmers lost \$326 billion dollars worth of land in the 20th century due to Heirs' Property laws, which passed land down through generations to multiple heirs without a clear legal title, leading to land loss among Black farm families.¹⁶ The percentage of Black farmers in the United States has dropped from 14% in 1920 to just 1.3% today. While all small and family-sized farms are underrepresented in subsidies that are allocated through the farm safety net, Black farmers receive a mere fraction (.06%) of what white farmers receive.

AN ABBREVIATED TIMELINE OF BLACK FARMING FROM 1920-2022

- 1920:** USDA records 925,708 Black farm operators – 14 percent of all U.S. farmers.
- 1933:** Many Black farmers are displaced by the New Deal legislation to address low crop prices by reducing acres of farmland in production.
- 1964:** Share of Black farm operators falls to 5.8 percent.
- 1965:** U.S. Commission on Civil Rights finds USDA discriminated against Black farmers when providing loans and conservation payments.
- 1982:** Share of Black farm operators falls to 2 percent.
- 1983:** Reagan administration dismantles USDA Office of Civil Rights.
- 1997:** Black farmers file historic discrimination complaint against USDA.
- 1998:** USDA report cites the role of the agency's discrimination in the decline of Black farmers.
- 2016:** Share of USDA lending to Black farmers falls to 0.8 percent.
- 2017:** Black farmers receive \$59.4 million in farm subsidies; white farmers receive \$9.7 billion.
- 2022:** Black farmers make up 1.4 percent of total U.S. farmers.

Source: Timeline: Black Farmers and the USDA, 1920 to Present | Environmental Working Group

¹³ [Land Theft: The Alarming Racial Wealth Gap in America Today](#) | Literary Hub

¹⁴ [Who We Are](#) | NISN Indigenous Farm Hub

¹⁵ [The Pigford Cases: USDA Settlement of Discrimination Suits by Black Farmers](#)

¹⁶ [Lost Inheritance](#) | Union of Concerned Scientists



PHOTO CREDIT: OREGON FOOD BANK

Japanese Americans also experienced significant land loss when they were forced to relocate to internment camps during World War II. Many families sold their homes, businesses, and other assets at a fraction of their value not knowing if they would ever be able to return. If they couldn't sell their property or make arrangements for its care within a few days, they lost it permanently. The U.S. government also confiscated Japanese farms and leased or sold them to non-Japanese owners. In total, Japanese Americans lost around \$400 million in property during their incarceration.¹⁷

Inequity is a core characteristic of every sector of the modern day food supply chain. The social groups that suffer disproportionately from chronic food insecurity and poverty are the same ones that have experienced high levels of discrimination in accessing land, loans, technical assistance, and equipment for farming or fishing. Food chain workers throughout the food system - farmworkers, meatpacking workers, truckers, restaurant workers - suffer disproportionately from hunger and poverty, earning low wages. They use SNAP or food stamps at a rate more than 50% higher than the average US worker.¹⁸ The USDA does not collect data on how many farmworker families are affected by food insecurity, however, independent studies focusing on a handful of states reported that between 47 and 82 farmworker households experience food insecurity.¹⁹

ADDRESSING RACIAL DISPARITIES THROUGH F2FA - AN EXAMPLE

A Farm to Food Assistance partnership between one of the largest hunger relief agencies in the U.S., [Second Harvest Heartland in Minnesota](#), and the state's largest food hub called Good Acre, intentionally sought to support farmers of color to address structural racism in the food system by identifying farmers of color in the region and prioritizing purchasing from them. Second Harvest Heartland explains: *"Stable, multi-season opportunities like this are needed to address the historic and structural inaccessibility of land, credit and markets for farmers of color. By strengthening the economic power of farmers of color, this partnership also addresses hunger as it exists today while building generational wealth for longer-term stability."*²⁰

Racial disparities in hunger and racial disparities in access to land and waterways for food production are two sides of the same coin. A values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance program recognizes the parallels in the root causes of these two artificially differentiated issues, and sees the transformative potential for the food system in their convergence.

¹⁷ [Japanese-American Incarceration During World War II | National Archives](#).

¹⁸ [Mapping the Restaurant High-Value Supply Chain](#) and [The Hands That Feed Us - Food Chain Workers Alliance](#)

¹⁹ How Many Farmworkers Are Food Insecure? It's Hard to Tell - Union of Concerned Scientists

²⁰ [How a Produce Partnership with The Good Acre Changed One Farmer's Life | 2harvest.org](#)

DEMOGRAPHIC DISPARITIES IN FOOD INSECURITY AND FARM VIABILITY

Social Group	Rates of Food Insecurity	% Of Total Farmers	% Of Total Farmers With Less Than 50k In Sales
All	12%	3.2 million farmers in the U.S.	18.9%
Women-headed households ²¹	33%	30%	15.4%
Black	22.4%	1.4%	15.6%
Hispanic	20.8%	3.3%	17.1%
LGBTQ+	27%	No definitive figures measure how many LGBTQ people farm in the U.S.	
Indigenous	25%	6.5%	14.3%
Pacific Islanders	19% (Pacific Islanders)	.07% (Asian)	22.3%

Sources: Household Food Security in the United States in 2022; National Estimates of Food Insecurity - Williams Institute; Facts about Asian American Hunger | Feeding America; Measuring Access to Healthful, Affordable Food in American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal Areas



PHOTO CREDIT: OREGON FOOD BANK

²¹ Data consistently show that women are especially vulnerable to food insecurity and its health consequences. Research from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reveals that household food-insecurity rates for households with children headed by a single mother (30.3 percent) and for women living alone (14.7 percent) are particularly high. ([The Impact of Food Insecurity on Women's Health - Food Research & Action Center](#)).

FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE IN ACTION: CORE VALUES AND MODEL STRATEGIES



PART A. MOVING BEYOND PROFIT AND EXTRACTION: THE VALUES THAT UNDERPIN FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE

Across the country, Farm to Food Assistance initiatives are grounding their efforts in core values that extend beyond economic efficiency. Instead of focusing narrowly on securing the most food for the cheapest price, these values present a holistic set of principles to guide decision-making and allocation of money and other resources. This values-based approach is integral to the potential presented by Farm to Food Assistance for food systems transformation, and to shift from charity to justice in our efforts to address hunger and inequity. Notably, other sectors of the food system have also moved towards values-aligned food purchasing, for example the Good Food Purchasing Program offers a framework to encourage large institutions to direct their food spending in a manner that advances a set values beyond prices (e.g., environmental sustainability and valued workforce).²²

“We care about how the food is grown, we care about if the farmers are socially disadvantaged, if they’re new farmers. They’re using growing practices that are in alignment with caring well for animals and caring for the environment. We care about what food we’re purchasing in terms of if it’s culturally relevant, if it’s useful, if it’s desired by the people who are ultimately receiving the food. So, there’s all of these different values besides just price that go into the decisions that we make.”
- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

There is no singular set of values for Farm to Food Assistance, but our research has identified five interrelated values that are common touchstones for values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance programs. These common values serve to bring sectors of the food system into alignment around goals—which is key to the transformative power of these efforts.

²² Center for Food Food Purchasing, Good Food Purchasing Program. (n.d.) Accessed August 2024 at <https://goodfoodpurchasing.org/program-overview/>

“

“With nearly half a million dollars in food procurement funding, we really have felt like it’s quite a responsibility to be investing that money back into our local economy with our local farmers. It’s a different mindset—it’s not just us trying to get the shelves stocked with the most things that we can possibly get for the cheapest amount of money.”

- CORY SCRIVNER, METRO CARING, LEARNING LAB PARTNER

Value 1: Building Generative Relationships Across the Value Chain

Values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance programs strengthen value chains by creating nurturing, reciprocal relationships between producers, farmer-focused organizations, aggregators and processors, food access providers, food access clients and others.

Relationships are the glue that holds a transformed food system together. They create points of connection that fuel collaboration, mutual understanding, and innovation. Relationships are a vehicle for building mutual understanding between different sectors of the food system—sectors that typically are invisible to each other and might even be working at odds with each other. These relationships can build consumers’ awareness about how farmers are often at the mercy of the weather or pests, and build farmers’ understanding that certain crops – while they might be harder to grow and less abundant than others – are meaningful parts of community members’ diets. By valuing relationships in and of themselves, Farm to Food Assistance programs create fertile ground for long-term, sustainable partnerships that knit partners together into an interconnected web, creating a sense of belonging in the food system for all people in the community.

Strong, relationship-based networks are essential for greater food system resiliency. This was evident in responses to COVID-19, as local and regional food systems that were rich in relationships were able to jump into action more quickly than the conventional, global food system. For example, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in the small town of Elgin, Texas, with a population 10,000 and a poverty rate of 19%, the Texas Center for Local Food (TCLF) – known for its market development support for local food producers – teamed up with The Common Market Texas and Elgin Independent School District (ISD) to distribute Farm Fresh Veggie Boxes to families. With



PHOTO CREDIT: HEALTHY FOOD FOR ALL

no grant funds in the beginning, they leveraged their farmer-customer relationships and sold boxes to those who could afford them and used those funds to donate boxes to children with diet-related illness through the Family Health Center at Elgin ISD.²³ This kind of rapid response was made possible by mobilizing the trusting relationships these organizations had been developing in the years prior to the pandemic.

“

“One of the things I love most is seeing and experiencing how much farmers, volunteers, staff, shareholders – they put their hearts into [Farm to Food Assistance]. It’s heart driven. It’s not just about the micro and macro nutrients in the produce... I do think that people can taste and nourish themselves with the genuine love and care that the food is grown, shared and prepared with. It’s about connecting all of the community members with each other. At the core of it, people put their hearts into this work to make it happen.”

- LIZ KARABINAKIS, HEALTHY FOOD FOR ALL, LEARNING LAB PARTNER

²³ Texas Farm Veggie Boxes – Pilot Project Response to Crisis



PHOTO CREDIT: SUSTAINABLE MOLOKAI

Value 2: Centering Equity

There is a long history of communities of color providing for their own food security needs and centering equity in their work. For example, [Transplanting Traditions Community Farm](#) in Chapel Hill, North Carolina was founded in 2009 to connect refugee communities with land to grow their own food, improving their food security. Since 2015, they have partnered with a local food pantry that purchases Southeast Asian produce from farmers affiliated with the farm for distribution to immigrant and refugee community members experiencing food insecurity.

A number of Farm to Food Assistance programs took root or expanded during a time when the Black Lives Matter movement and the highly visible racial inequities seen in the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic brought the harsh impacts of structural racism to the fore. As people around the country mobilized to address long-standing, racially-based injustices, organizations that focus on food systems and food access sought ways to address racial equity and intersecting forms of oppression.

In many cases, Farm to Food Assistance programs center racial equity by prioritizing procurement—at a fair price—from producers of color, including Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Asian farmers. Farm to Food Assistance programs are also often explicit in their inclusion of other historically marginalized groups including LGBTQ+ people, women, and immigrants and refugees. The commitment to equity goes hand in hand with paying a fair market value and ensuring that Farm to Food Assistance represents a viable market channel for producers who have experienced structural racism and other forms of discrimination.

A participant in one of our focus groups shared that increased unrestricted donations received at the Food Bank during COVID allowed them to pilot a local purchasing program. They shaped it to focus entirely on BIPOC communities and farmers, and paid the producers upfront. When they received USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance funding, they built on this model and continued to prioritize Black and Indigenous producers. The work has intersected with the organization's efforts to address root causes of hunger, and to build awareness about the history of racial injustice and discrimination in their predominantly white state. The Focus Group participant shared: "There's been sort of an unraveling and a relearning of what the history was and why it's taken so long just to get to where we are now. Through this and through facilitating another conversation with other food banks across the country about their experiences with local purchasing from BIPOC producers, it's now leading me to have conversations internally [at my food bank] about what local purchasing looks and what investment in that long term looks, especially with LFPA potentially going away."



PHOTO CREDIT: EL DEPARTAMENTO DE LA COMIDA



PHOTO CREDIT: EL DEPARTAMENTO DE LA COMIDA

Racial equity shows up in other ways as well. Many Farm to Food Assistance programs are led by people of color, women, and people who reflect the communities being served. These programs are ensuring that culturally important foods are available through food pantries and other food access points. Farm to Food Assistance programs are also incorporating language justice for farmers and food access recipients – a practice that values interpretation and translation as critical tools for opening communication and empowering all voices. Others are also spending time unraveling and relearning the history of racial inequities in food and farming in this country.



“We just brought on another farmer at the hub who speaks 100% Spanish. And so we hired an interpreter to make sure we understood his pricing, how he does his everything, including food safety plans. And it took time... But he was just so grateful that we took the time to really understand what it was that he wanted to offer us this summer.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



“Our focus is purchasing from BIPOC farmers and, hopefully, helping to build some generational wealth and just provide markets. We’re working with another organization to also help the newest farmers with, like, food safety and wholesale readiness and those sorts of things, you know, so that if other markets open up, they’re prepared for that.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Value 3: Dignity in Food Production and Food Access

Values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance programs strive to ensure dignity within food access and food production for all involved. Dignity means paying farmers a fair price that supports a tenable livelihood and reflects the value of what they are providing. Dignity means that the same high-quality, local foods that are available at farmers' markets are also available at food pantries and other food access sites. It means choice for food access clients in what foods they get, as well as choice and agency for food access organizations to use their budgets to invest in local, regenerative agriculture.

Farm to Food Assistance programs offer dignity through choice in other ways, like seeking client input on what agricultural practices they want food access organizations to invest in, and offering producers choice about what communities their products go to. Creating opportunities for farmers and clients to have agency in these areas supports self-determination and affirms the humanity in each individual. This approach means that the people who make up all parts of the food system are seen and valued by each other.



PHOTO CREDIT: WALLACE CENTER

“

“Our partners emphasized the importance of keeping close communication with the clients to reflect what they like to eat. The feedback has been that clients are feeling ‘seen’ as the quality of food they receive is great and they are not getting expired or near-expiration food, or foods that they aren’t familiar with. This also reduces waste.” - SURVEY RESPONDENT

“

Having local food in food pantries and meal sites just sets the expectation that this food is not a luxury, that it is a right and people deserve it, no matter how much money they can pay or no matter where they’re getting their food. They can get the same beautiful local produce, you know, at their food pantry for free. And it looks just like the beautiful grocery store display at our very fancy local food co-op.” - FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“

“The program boosts morale, rapport and support for our patients... We feel it improves their quality of life and trust/engagement in their health & care. We allow patients to select which produce/ recipes they want and how frequently they’d like to come (rather than prescribing a predetermined box of food), as we feel this is important for a dignified experience.” - SURVEY RESPONDENT

“

“Folks that are in reentry [post-incarceration] tell us how this food is changing the way they’re eating and the choices they’re making overall. Diet isn’t a magic pill but knowing that you’re important enough and valued enough to have access to this food and experience – that is.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Value 4: A Seat at the Table - Valuing Community Expertise and Lived Experience

Farm to Food Assistance programs are creating avenues for those closest to and most impacted by current systems to be at the leadership table and have a say in how these initiatives are shaped. Power dynamics exist in this work, but community governance and inclusive decision-making are ways to move towards distributive power. This means valuing lived experience and creating meaningful ways for community members to be in leadership roles and shape decision-making. Many Farm to Food Assistance programs are guided by Community Advisory Councils or other decision-making bodies that

comprise farmers, food access recipients, and other community members. For example, the board of directors of [Metro Caring](#) in Denver, Colorado includes people with lived experience of food insecurity who have experience using the organization’s food access services.

Taylor Ryan, Founder and Executive Director of [Change Today, Change Tomorrow](#) in Louisville, Kentucky, notes that being part of the community they serve is key to building trust and being effective. “At the heart of Change Today, Change Tomorrow is the unwavering belief in the power and potential of Black women to effect significant, lasting change. As a Black woman myself, my lived experiences and insights inform the leadership of our organization and ensure that we approach our work with authenticity and understanding. Throughout history, Black women have demonstrated resilience, creativity, and leadership, often in the face of tremendous adversity. These qualities, combined with their unique perspectives as individuals who have navigated intersections of racial and gender oppression, make them invaluable leaders and changemakers. In our organization, we prioritize the leadership of Black women not just because it’s equitable, but because it’s effective. Black women bring a nuanced understanding of the community’s needs, resulting in initiatives that are relevant, compassionate,



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING



PHOTO CREDIT: EL DEPARTAMENTO DE LA COMIDA

and transformative. By allowing Black women to lead, we are also providing powerful role models for younger generations, signaling that their voices matter and they, too, can influence their communities and the world."

“

“Our participants are a wealth of wisdom, experience, knowledge, [and] resources on how to thrive and survive and be resilient... Because of our relationships with them, [we] are able to see all of these skills and contributions that they’re able to offer. And we want to be able to funnel right back into that. So, we have participants who are staff. We have participants who are mushroom producers or lettuce producers. We have participants who started making tortillas for us to redistribute. All of this is paid work, of course. And so, the idea being we all have something to offer, we have enough for everyone, and you have enough for us...coming from a place of abundance.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“

“Agroecology is not only the way you grow food, it’s also the political, social, and ecological impact that it can have in a community. It’s having diversity and thinking about decentralizing and giving power back to smaller communities and family farms.”

- MARIELISA SABAT LAFONTAINE, EL DEPARTAMENTO DE LA COMIDA, LEARNING LAB PARTNER

Value 5: Caring for the Earth through Sustainable and Regenerative Agriculture

Purchasing from producers who are using agroecological practices – even if they are not organically certified – is a commitment across many Farm to Food Assistance programs. Important aspects of valued agricultural practices included treating animals humanely, growing a diversity of crops, and stewarding natural resources. Caring for the earth is part and parcel of caring for the broader community; farmers using these practices are protecting communities’ waterways and contributing to the long-term fertility of the soil, ensuring that the land will be able to produce for future generations. Indeed, [Sustainable Molokai](#), based in Hawaii, defines sustainability as restoring āina momona, which reflects a covenant between the people and the land, where earth’s bounty goes hand in hand with good stewardship.



PHOTO CREDIT: OKC FOOD HUB



PART B.

VALUES-BASED, EQUITY-CENTERED FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE IN ACTION

The flexibility and adaptability of Farm to Food Assistance programs is remarkable. Farm to Food Assistance programs are diverse in who they serve, how they manage distribution and logistics, the variety of food they offer, and the composition of core partners. Though every effort is unique and shaped by local contexts, there are common threads across these programs – including how programs are finding ways to put their values into practice. In this section we describe the range of approaches used in the implementation of values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance programs.

Common Core Partners for Farm to Food Assistance

With hundreds of Farm to Food Assistance programs, there are myriad models for how partners work together to make these programs happen. To get food from producers to people experiencing food insecurity, Farm to Food Assistance programs need aggregators, distributors, and food access partners. However, there is a tremendous diversity in the types of organizations playing these roles.

On average, our survey respondents partner with six different types of organizations for Farm to Food Assistance activities. Some programs bring over 10 types of organizations together, illustrating the opportunities for collaboration and strengthening of the networks that make up local food systems. Partnerships for values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance are distinguished by their alignment around shared values.

The types of organizations that most commonly play a central role in implementing Farm to Food Assistance programs are described below.

Tribal, Local, and State Agencies: Governmental and public agencies play a variety of roles in Farm to Food Assistance programs, including receiving and administering funding. For example, in a number of states, state departments of agriculture allocate funds to one or multiple state-wide food systems networks or value chain coordinating organizations through subawards. Tribal agencies sometimes serve as the core implementation partner for Farm to Food Assistance programs or play a role in the final step of stocking food access points for people experiencing food insecurity.

Value Chain Coordination Organizations, Food Hubs, and Other Farmer-Focused Organizations: Organizations that predominantly serve farmers through activities such as value chain coordination and market channel access, technical assistance, and access to farmland are frequent partners in Farm to Food Assistance efforts. Cooperative Extension is sometimes a core partner, given their role in the farmer support ecosystem. Many food hubs and farmer-focused organizations are well-positioned to support and operate Farm to Food Assistance market channels as they generally have relationships both with local producers and other food systems nonprofits, like food access networks. With the increased funding during the pandemic, many were able to swiftly facilitate these new market relationships. Value chain coordination organizations and food hubs often support aggregation and coordination of local food systems. In some cases, they also serve as the food access point, for example, through sliding-scale CSAs that are organized on-site.

Food Access Organizations: While food access organizations – from large food banks to church-based food pantries – typically interface directly with the individuals receiving the food, they play other roles in the Farm to Food Assistance value chain. For instance, it's at these sites that are closest to the community that the demand for culturally important foods is articulated. Some food banks or food bank networks purchase directly from local farms for distribution through established food access networks. In other cases, food access organizations buy food from a food hub that manages the farmer relationships and aggregation.

Engaging Farmers and Producers

While fruit and vegetable farmers are most common to Farm to Food Assistance value chains, dairy farmers, poultry farmers, ranchers, fishers, and foragers are also among the producers accessing Farm to Food Assistance market channels. Some programs procure within a particular region or geography, while programs that focus on Native communities have prioritized purchasing from other tribal communities.

Farm to Food Assistance programs vary greatly in how many producers they purchase from. Survey results indicated that about half purchase from 15 farmers or fewer (49%), a scale which reflects the central role of relationships for these programs. A small number (7%) purchase from more than 100. Factors such as access to cold storage, farm size and distance from aggregation sites also influence the number of producers that Farm to Food Assistance programs can feasibly procure from.

In line with the value of racial equity and inclusion, many Farm to Food Assistance programs prioritize purchasing from Black and Indigenous producers, other producers of color, and other underrepresented groups. All organizations that participated in the Wallace Center's Farm to Food Assistance Learning Lab purchase from BIPOC farmers. Of the programs surveyed, which included LFPA and non-LFPA funded programs, 55% purchased from BIPOC farmers, and 47% purchased from women. More than 6 in 10 (63%) of those surveyed purchase from beginning farmers, indicating the important role Farm to Food Assistance can play in providing a market opportunity for emerging farmers who are still establishing their businesses. While not assessed with survey data, programs we have engaged have also noted that they are purchasing from LGBTQ+ farmers and focus on producers using regenerative and sustainable farming practices.

In aligning farmer relationships with being values-based and equity-centered, some Farm to Food Assistance programs aim to purchase entirely from BIPOC producers, while others have focused less on the total number of BIPOC producers and more on the percentage of their procurement dollars that are invested in BIPOC producers.

Some programs seek input from food access clients on what producer characteristics and practices are important to them as a way of bringing dignity and community control into the process of establishing farmer and producer partnerships for Farm to Food Assistance value chains.

“

“We're about to be extinct as BIPOC farmers. So, the Arizona Community Hub is going to be proud of the fact that we are supporting them as a priority. And, we want to welcome all local farmers who are struggling. I want to get to a place where we're all just humans sharing space and thriving together in our community.”

**- DIONNE WASHINGTON, ARIZONA COMMUNITY HUB,
LEARNING LAB PARTNER**



PHOTO CREDIT: TRANSPLANTING TRADITIONS COMMUNITY FARM



PHOTO CREDIT: SUSTAINABLE MOLOKAI

Procurement

Farm to Food Assistance programs are making an incredible variety of local foods available to those who need it, with a focus on procuring culturally important foods and in creating a feedback loop between farmers and eaters, so that farmers are able to design crop plans in response to consumer requests—a key way to strengthen relationships and bring dignity into the food system.

In addition to fresh fruit and vegetables, programs procure milk and yogurt, eggs, fish and other seafood, and poultry and meat—including halal meat and bison. [Metro Caring](#), an anti-hunger organization based in Denver, Colorado, contracts with ranchers to raise entire animals, which can yield substantial income and means that food access clients get special cuts of meat that are not typically available through food pantries or other hunger relief access points. Some programs distribute prepared foods. In Caguas, Puerto Rico, [El Departamento de la Comida](#) uses local produce to prepare weekly community lunches that are free and are open to all.

Ensuring that foods provided reflect recipients' preferences is a common goal across Farm to Food Assistance programs. In our survey, 67% of respondents said it was a priority to source culturally relevant food for their clients, and 63% said Farm to Food Assistance programs have allowed them to serve culturally relevant foods. Farm to Food Assistance programs are making this happen in myriad ways – in many cases, growers share cultural and ethnic identities with food access clients. Others are opening lines of communication between producers and food access clients, and even holding face-to-face meetings between farmers and clients before farmers purchase seeds to help them with their crop planning. Some Farm to Food Assistance programs contract with farmers to grow produce specifically requested by community members.

Some tribal communities are sourcing culturally significant food from other tribes when particular items are not available locally, demonstrating how the flexibility for

“tribe to tribe” procurement can be more important than a specific geography. For example, the Spirit Lake Tribe in North Dakota partnered with Tocabe Market, an Indigenous marketplace based in Denver, Colorado that procures from Indigenous producers in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota. This facilitated access to foods like bison, blue cornmeal, and wild rice, corn, turnips, beans, and squash. [The Northwest Tribal Emergency Management Council](#), based in Washington State, has procured rabbit meat for Tribal nations in eastern Washington, bison meat from native ranchers, and several types of salmon and crab from Tribal fisherman through their Farm to Food Assistance programs. These connections underscore how the concept of ‘local’ procurement has a different meaning for Indian nations.

“

“We created a “Voice your Choice” survey to garner insight on desired produce (e.g., Roma tomatoes, amaranth, etc.) from these communities. The results from the survey then help to inform our education, production, and distribution efforts.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT



PHOTO CREDIT: NORTHWEST TRIBAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Pricing and Payment

Farm to Food Assistance programs are emerging as a growing market channel for participating producers. According to the survey, on average 80% of Farm to Food Assistance funds are used to purchase food from farmers. Across values-based, equity-centered programs, there is a commitment to paying farmers a fair price and to finding payment strategies that work for small farm businesses. These approaches in particular reflect values around dignity and equity.

Our survey found that in more than half of Farm to Food Assistance programs (55%), farmers set the price for their product. The most common price point paid to farmers is wholesale (41%), followed by direct-to-consumer (26%) and retail (12%).

Price Point Paid to Farmers

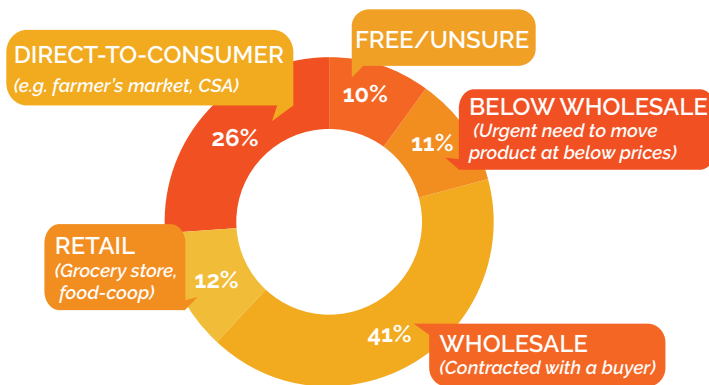


PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

“Increased funding allowed us to offer a near retail, better than wholesale price for products from farmers and to provide... capacity-building grant funds to farmers. This finally allowed a long-standing program to work with farmers' bottom lines.”
- SURVEY RESPONDENT

A common challenge for small producers is the substantial delay between when they pay for inputs, like seeds and labor, and when they receive payment for their products. Many Farm to Food Assistance programs address this by using forward contracting, through which organizations provide an upfront deposit to the farmer upon signature of a contract and make additional payments throughout the season as product is delivered. However, some note that forward contracting can limit farmers' ability to be nimble, and farmers have had the experience of contracts being broken when institutional or organizational leadership changes. Other approaches include using CSA-style models, and still other organizations, such as the [OKC Food Hub](#) in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, commit to paying farmers within seven days of receiving produce.

“If we give [farmers, producers, and fishers] this funding up front, it allows them to invest in cold storage and then it ripples from there because then maybe they can share that cold storage with, you know, the farmer down the way. And then all of a sudden, they can expand their seasonality, their markets. And so, for me, it's more of the fact that...food banks sometimes focus on the end client, and everyone in between doesn't seem to count as much. And it's the people growing the food who are sometimes the people who are also accessing the [pantry] site [for additional food]. So, if we are all just kind of able to see everyone as a whole person all along the way, would we all care a little bit more about it?”
- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Another common challenge for farmers and producers is establishing secure and reliable markets. Setting up contracts and purchasing agreements that guarantee purchase of their products before farmers even put seeds in the ground is another important way the Farm to Food Assistance programs support small farm viability. This approach ensures a secure market for farmers and helps to strengthen their economic foundations.

“

“Product was picked up directly from our farm, we were provided the boxes for the produce to be put in, and it was paid out very quickly before the end of the last pick up date in one check. It kept the bookkeeping down to a minimum, so that I didn’t have to spend a lot of time on weekly billing.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

Organizations have also created bridge loan programs to make low or no-cost loans available to farmers when they experience a crop failure or other business disruption. [Mandela Partners Distribution](#) offers its network of ten producers non-extractive financing – meaning interest-free loans that farmers can pay back in the form of produce – in the event of crop failure or some other unforeseen event. To shore up supply chain resiliency, some Farm to Food Assistance organizations identify back-up sources for farm products so that they can continue to be a reliable market source for food access organizations and clients when such disruptions happen.

Aggregation and Distribution

Across Farm to Food Assistance programs, many types of organizations play the role of collecting and aggregating farm products for distribution. This includes managing the cold chain from harvest to distribution and is facilitated by capital-intensive equipment like refrigerated trucks and cold storage. In many cases, food hubs or other farmer-focused organizations manage farmer relationships and aggregation and sell to food access organizations that create the access point for clients. In other models, food banks or their pantry affiliates purchase directly from local producers. Especially when working with small-scale farmers, aggregation is key, as a single farmer might not produce enough for broader food access distribution. Additionally, small farmers do not typically have access to the temperature controlled storage and transportation needed. Strong aggregation systems are part of what makes it possible for small-scale farmers to sell through Farm to Food Assistance market channels.

Food Access Points and Food Access Clients

Roughly three quarters of the Farm to Food Assistance programs surveyed distribute food at traditional food access points like food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and food shelves. However, there are many other models for food access points, such as community-based organizations and institutions like schools and early childhood centers, senior centers, and healthcare settings. In some cases Farm to Food Assistance approaches are integrated with Food as Medicine programs, underscoring

the important role of high-quality food in supporting health and also presenting a potential area for expansion of Farm to Food Assistance market channels. Close to half of those surveyed use farmers' markets as access points, which offers the potential for clients to use their SNAP dollars to acquire more farm fresh food and increase farmers' total sales for the day. One third distribute through churches or other religious sites. Some provide produce through weekly community meals and many offer home delivery. Other models include pop-up stands and mobile access points. The diversity of models for getting food to people is indicative of the ways in which values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance programs are responding to local contexts to make food available.

Farm to Food Assistance is also making high quality, farm fresh products available to all kinds of people, with more than a third serving over 5,000 beneficiaries monthly. At the other end of the spectrum, 21% serve fewer than 100 people on a monthly basis. These programs are making farm fresh food available to people of all ages—from children and families to college students to older adults. They reach urban and rural people, people with disabilities, and people experiencing homelessness.



PHOTO CREDIT: TRANSPLANTING TRADITIONS COMMUNITY FARM

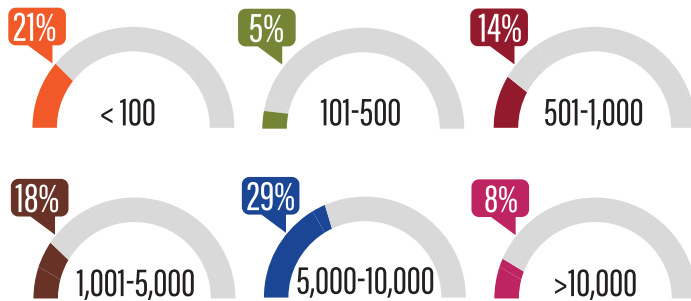
Values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance programs are intentional in weaving the value of dignity throughout food access clients' experiences. Simply providing fresh, high-quality, culturally important foods communicates that everyone is entitled to the highest quality food, regardless of their economic circumstances. Other ways of bringing dignity to this experience are offering client choice, making food available to all without screening for eligibility, and seeking client feedback both on what foods are important to provide as well as the farm and producer characteristics they want food access dollars to be put towards. In some Farm to Food Assistance programs, food access clients contribute by sharing foods that they have grown or produced, reinforcing that we all have something to offer. It reflects the fundamental right of everyone in the community to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from good food.



PHOTO CREDIT: EL DEPARTAMENTO DE LA COMIDA

Beneficiaries

Number of People Served on a Monthly Basis

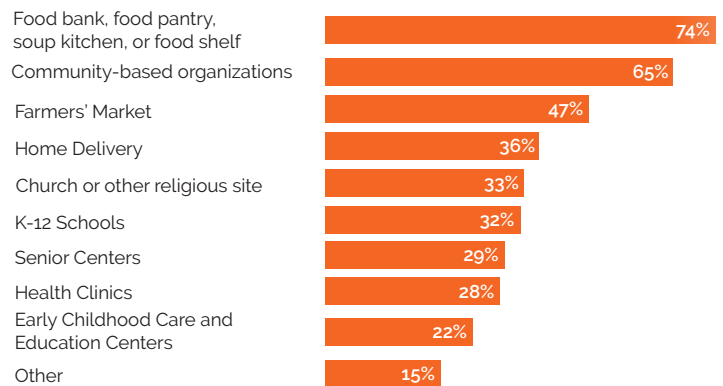


“

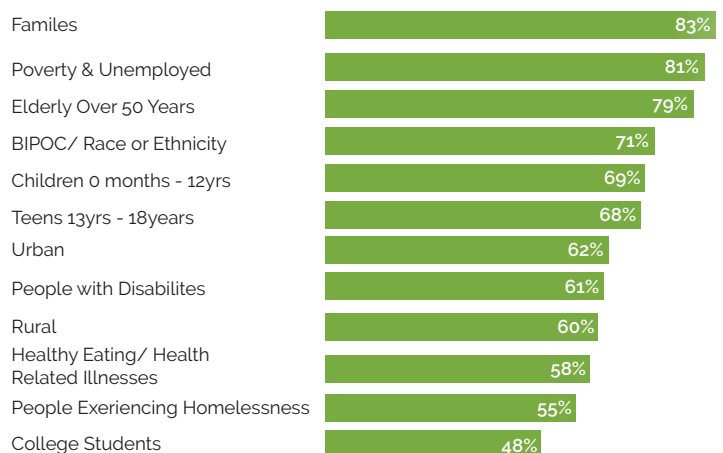
"[Dignity affirming care] translates back to how our care work shows up at someone's house. We're only going to bring you the freshest, highest quality ingredients, and we're only going to be able to get that through having relationships with our local farmers and knowing exactly where it came from, and being able to be in relationship with them to where we can offer feedback if things are not up to that level. [...] With all the trauma that folks have in having to go seek assistance in this way, and for it to not be glowing and the greatest product that I've ever seen, it's going to go against our values. And so, relationships are at the core of that. And moving at the pace of trust with all the folks that are in our food system and that is everybody, you know, at every level. And, just making sure that we're affirming the dignity of all of those players every step of the way."

-FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Farm to Food Assistance Programs Distribute Food At Many Sites



Food Access Clients Are Diverse And Include Older Adults, College Students, Children And Families, And More



Source: National Farm to Food Assistance Survey, 2022



PHOTO CREDIT: EL DEPARTAMENTO DE LA COMIDA

Avenues for Community Governance

A common thread across Farm to Food Assistance programs is the commitment to sharing power with their communities, in particular by giving communities a say in how programs operate. Many Farm to Food Assistance programs are guided by Community Advisory Councils, Accountability Councils, or other decision-making bodies that comprise farmers, food access recipients, and other community members.

These groups may be responsible for decision-making about Farm to Food Assistance activities, screening and selecting farmers and food access partners for participation, building awareness about Farm to Food Assistance and local procurement among community members, and shaping research agendas. Many organizations we've spoken with note that these are paid roles, so that people are not expected to work for free.

In addition to community governance specifically for Farm to Food Assistance initiatives, organizations involved in these initiatives are incorporating leadership from people who are most affected by the issues being addressed in the makeup of their leadership and other staff and Boards of Directors. They are also organizing youth committees and creating pathways for food access clients to be leaders in the broader movement to end hunger as another avenue for building community power.

Relationships: The Glue that Makes it Work

In focus groups, some participants shared how stating their organization's own values when establishing new partnerships served as an important foundation for aligning expectations and principles for working together. It also served as a counterpoint to traditional, white supremacist ways of operating, which are transactional and extractive rather than generative and based in mutual respect. In some cases, this focus on relationships aligns with communities' traditional cultural practices.

“

“The systems approach really necessitates that folks feel connected to their farmers and to their producers, and that they recognize that these are their neighbors. And so, it's not just their relationship with us [the mutual aid organization], but through us knowing the stories about the folks [participating in our program]: Chad who knows Paul as “your mushroom man.” [We encourage] Chad to know his whole story. ‘You're actually going to go see him on Tuesday because he's going to come to the market and pick up food with you [for his family].’ And that is so important for growing our community. Resilience is that you know your neighbors and trust your neighbors, and you know what skills everyone's bringing to the table, and you can rely on them and be honest with them and be vulnerable with them about what's really going on in your life.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

SURVEY FINDING:

93% agreed/strongly agreed that their Farm to Food Assistance program led to the creation of important relationships or strengthened important relationships.



PHOTO CREDIT: TRANSPLANTING TRADITIONS COMMUNITY FARM

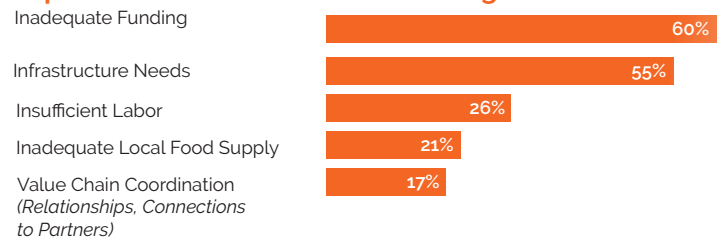
Programs are putting this into practice by truly listening to others and asking partners what they need, treating partners with empathy, and linking them directly to opportunities, rather than being gatekeepers. In working with farmers, this means facilitating connections so that they can directly tap into resources and build relationships with other Farm to Food Assistance stakeholders.

By creating and nurturing partnerships with others who are operating with the same values, Farm to Food Assistance efforts create conditions for longer term and trusting relationships, mutual support and joint problem solving.

CHALLENGES, ROADBLOCKS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Though we have only just begun to fully understand and realize the benefits of values-based, equity-driven Farm to Food Assistance programs, our research and the findings generated through shared learning spaces over the past few years demonstrate meaningful impacts for small-scale farmers and communities who rely on food access organizations to meet the food needs of their families. These findings also point to the potential of Farm to Food Assistance to transform food access strategies to center dignity and equity while helping to reinvigorate local food and farm economies. To realize Farm to Food Assistance's potential as a transformative strategy, it is critical to acknowledge its challenges and offer recommendations for how to strengthen the practices, programs, and policies that support Farm to Food Assistance.

Top Farm to Food Assistance Challenges



Source: National Farm to Food Assistance Survey, 2022



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

Challenge #1: Funding is Insufficient, Restricted, and Uncertain

Lack of adequate funding was cited by 60% of survey respondents as one of the top three challenges in implementing Farm to Food Assistance programs for long-term impact. Inconsistency and instability in funding was also frequently cited as a challenge. In particular, funding arrangements that operate on reimbursements as opposed to releasing the funds up front were reported as creating instability in market access. Establishing multi-year or even pre-season contracts with farmers or fronting the costs of large food contracts is a financial challenge for nonprofits already operating on tight budgets and limited cash flow.

“

“We’ve had a significant amount of funding but the nature of county contracts and philanthropic grants is that the funds aren’t always made available on a timeline that works with our local growing season. We’ve had to ask farmers a couple of times to front us product a month or two in advance while we waited for county contracts to be finalized. This is hard for small farmers to work with and degrades trust in the program as a reliable source of revenue for participating farms.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

Organizations implementing Farm to Food Assistance need less restrictive funding, allowing them to discern what costs are critical for their particular context such as covering costs associated with purchasing and storing food or value chain coordination, including staff. Notably, while LFPA funding accelerated the development and expansion of Farm to Food Assistance programs, fewer than half of surveyed organizations listed federal funding as one of their top two funding sources.

The limited reach of federal funds to support these programs contrasts with the enormity of federal support afforded to large-scale, industrial farm operations that receive deep federal subsidies, whose overproduction becomes a key source of food for our current food banking model. The USDA’s Agriculture and Marketing Service (AMS) budget obligations for FY24 totaled \$2.36 billion.²⁴ The Commodity Procurement Program²⁵ manages the annual purchase of over \$3 billion of domestically produced and processed agricultural products to support American agriculture and provide safe, nutritious food for a variety of federal, state and international nutrition assistance programs. At \$900 million total over several

²⁴ <https://www.usaspending.gov/agency/department-of-agriculture?fy=2024>

²⁵ https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/AMS_Fact_Sheet.pdf

²⁶ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/LFPApaymentguidance.pdf>

years, LFPA is just a drop in the bucket despite the promising economic and social multiplier effect.

“

“These big federal investments via CARES Act, American Rescue Plan, LFPA, etc. are incredibly useful, but also create ongoing issues because they are short term, not sustained investments. That makes it hard to plan for the future and can leave farmers in a precarious position when funding wanes.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

LFPA funding, while an accelerator of Farm to Food Assistance, creates particular challenges because of the way funds, once awarded, are accessed. Typically, the awards are paid as reimbursements for completed and well-documented expenses. According to the LFPA Payment Guidance fact sheet,²⁶ a grantee could request advance payments. Those advances go to the state or tribal government agency that holds the cooperative agreement with the USDA. State-level procurement laws and subawarding policies add another layer of complexity and variability. As many reported in our survey and focus groups, there is often a significant time delay between states or tribes receiving those payments and then pushing them through to the sub awardees who then pay the farmers.

Narrative responses to the survey provided insights into the experiences of those implementing Farm to Food Assistance Programs, when it comes to funding.

“

“The inconsistency of funding throughout the year, leads to gaps in funding cycles that cause disruptions in customer orders.”

“

“Invoicing process through the Department of Ag has been difficult and reimbursement-based.”

“

“State agencies lack set time frames for when reimbursements will be processed.”



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

TOP FUNDING SOURCES FOR FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS:

- ▶ 43% Philanthropy
- ▶ 43% Federal Government
- ▶ 34% State Government
- ▶ 25% Individual Donations
- ▶ 21% Direct sales into food assistance network
- ▶ 14% City/County Government
- ▶ 11% Corporate Support
- ▶ 2% Tribal Government

Challenge #2: Local Value Chains Require Reliable Infrastructure

“

“One very large problem is transportation and cold storage infrastructure, which go hand in hand. Without the ability to store product, food needs to get from farm to food assistance provider in very specific windows of time and this strains our limited transportation capacity.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Funding – its availability, adequacy, and accessibility to organizations implementing Farm to Food Assistance – is the cascading challenge that sets in motion the remaining challenges articulated by practitioners of Farm to Food Assistance. The second most commonly mentioned barriers for all Farm to Food Assistance implementers responding to our survey was lack of necessary infrastructure, such as cold storage, vehicles for transportation, and even software for logistics management. In focus groups, those operating in rural areas noted infrastructural deficiencies more frequently. The connection to inadequate and restricted funding is evident.

Grant terms for the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) do not allow for the purchase of most infrastructure if the lifespan is more than one year. Acquiring assets – such as delivery trucks (which can be rented but not purchased), refrigeration, a permanent building for food

27 https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/FY2021_GD_TermsandConditions.pdf

28 <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tefap/reach-resiliency-grant>

29 <https://www.fns.usda.gov/news-item/usda-011622>

30 <https://www.rd.usda.gov/about-rd/initiatives/healthy-food-financing-initiative>

31 https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_ProgramScopeandRequirements.pdf

32 The average grant size for HFFI is between \$146,000 and \$168,000. One refrigerated 18-foot truck averages \$50,000. And the cost of a walk-in freezer sizable enough for a food hub averages \$40,000 to \$50,000.

procurement and distribution activities – is not allowable.²⁷ Those Farm to Food Assistance programs which have strong partnerships with brick-and-mortar food banks or well-established food hubs equipped with cold storage or a fleet of trucks, or the internal capacity to apply for the TEFAP Reach and Resiliency Grant Initiative,²⁸ might fare better in this area. But in rural areas where the distance from farm to distribution center can be longer, the need for cold storage, packing facilities, and transportation is paramount to successful Farm to Food Assistance implementation.

“

“Many urban centers have options for warehousing (cold storage), refrigerated truck transportation, and labor. The minute producers and Farm to Food Assistance recipients are more rural we see issues around infrastructure, transportation, and delivery to the end recipient.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

In 2022, the USDA acknowledged the need for greater investment in food supply chain infrastructure – food production, processing, storage, transportation and marketing outlets – in order to strengthen local and regional food production and markets.²⁹ But some of those investments require applying to additional federal grants and cooperative agreements such as the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI)³⁰ or the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program, among others.³¹ Critiques of these initiatives, in addition to the necessary capacity to apply to and administer additional federal programs, are not insignificant. Required annual appropriations of a federally authorized program such as HFFI rarely reaches its recommended amount for total funding. Public-private partnerships with lending institutions are often a core strategy of these programs, limiting their accessibility to socially disadvantaged small business owners, unless technical assistance or support for navigating the loan process is available through non-profits or the lending institution itself. And loan amounts are often not enough to cover the costs of infrastructure.³²



PHOTO CREDIT: ARIZONA COMMUNITY HUB



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

Compounding these issues - and tying it back to the funding issue - is the fact that USDA funds for infrastructure investments are most often awarded to state agencies or federally recognized tribes who then administer the program. State agencies are held to general guidelines set by the federal agency providing the funding but how programs are administered on the ground varies by state. In one case, Tennessee missed several deadlines to apply for LFPA Plus, which would extend the significant impact many small farmers felt from the first round of LFPA funding in their state. Though they eventually made up for the initial loss of more than \$7 million that farmers reported felt like the rug had been pulled out from under them, it's not an unfamiliar story, according to many Farm to Food Assistance implementers.³³

Funding for investments in supply chain infrastructure through the TEFAP Reach and Resiliency Program³⁴ (also administered by the states) are only available to food banks. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) awarded over \$58 million dollars to state agencies with the goal of expanding TEFAP's reach into remote, rural, tribal and/or low-income areas. TEFAP is linked to price supports for commodity growers (not necessarily smaller-scale local growers), though the infrastructure - once in place - can help mitigate Farm to Food Assistance supply chains for food banks that have received LFPA funding.

Challenges #3 and #5: Staffing Needs, Including Value Chain Coordination

The third and fifth tier challenges are closely linked. First, producers, food hubs, and food access organizations cited inability to hire staff to fulfill a variety of roles that require specific skills in supply chain management and value chain coordination. Many respondents to the survey and in the focus groups - especially food hubs and food access organizations - cited last mile delivery as

particularly challenging when there is insufficient funding to pay warehouse workers or drivers. In many cases "free labor" - or relying on volunteers - is not an option, especially when the task calls for skilled labor, training, or certification. While other labor needs such as packing boxes for delivery could draw on volunteers, Farm to Food Assistance implementers noted that volunteers come with additional costs and demands on internal staff, such as volunteer coordination and training.



"We are going to have to move to a system that does not rely on free labor. Most of our contracts right now, they're just paying for the food. I'm not sure that maybe they think the robots are making the food and putting the boxes together and delivering, but they're not... We're doing the work. It would just be nice to be compensated for it."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

Study participants identified additional ways in which staffing support can facilitate Farm to Food Assistance implementation, including: supplemental field hands paid fair wages during peak harvest time for small farmers who operate on small margins; data management and IT support for procurement and distribution; and technical assistance for farmers who are seeking to scale up. In most cases, these labor needs could be met by additional funding that allows for these expenditures. In some cases, new or strengthened partnerships could fulfill important roles that staff in organizations implementing Farm to Food Assistance Programs typically do not play. For instance, farmer-support organizations could provide technical assistance or business acumen for farmers looking to

³³ <https://civileats.com/2024/04/10/how-tennessee-officials-lost-out-on-millions-in-funding-for-farmers-and-food-banks/>

³⁴ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tefap/reach-resiliency-grant>

increase income, grow more crops using regenerative practices, or add crops that are culturally important for the local community.

Second, Value Chain Coordination – the fifth most cited challenge – was specifically mentioned as a core role needed to successfully and sustainably implement values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance. Described as more than logistical design and management, the role of Value Chain Coordinators is about building and maintaining relationships with all of the key actors: from farmers, to drivers and packers, to food access organizations and the community receiving the food.

Value Chain Coordinators respond to emergent needs and help stakeholders adapt within a complex system: Troubleshooting when a farmer – whose entire enterprise relies on her physical labor – falls ill or is injured. Providing education to food banks and food pantries unfamiliar with the challenges faced by small farmers. Supporting farmers to grow culturally important crops that are not in their usual crop plan.

Farm to Food Assistance practitioners note the challenges of working with a large number of farmers without a supply chain expert on staff due to the complexity of logistics involved. Farm to Food Assistance implementation can benefit from a dedicated coordinator role – be it a staff position within an organization or one organization in a multi-partner project, such as a food hub. This person or entity can play an administrative role to connect the dots from field to pantry, manage supply chain logistics, and identify and resolve problems along the way, and can be an important resource for ensuring capacity to scale Farm to Food Assistance programs.

Challenge #4: Inadequate Local Food Supply

Small-scale farming has been in crisis and in decline for decades. The number of farms with more than 2,000 acres nearly doubled between 1987 and 2012, while the number of farms under 1,000 acres fell by 44 percent during that same time period.³⁵ The rising cost of farmland, lack of succession planning, shrinking rural economies, and insufficient and inequitable government support are all contributing factors. Since the infamous retort from Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz in the 1970s, repeated by Trump's Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue four decades later, "Get big or get out," American agriculture has experienced considerable consolidation, with more farmland used to grow fuel and livestock feed than food for human consumption.³⁶ Small-scale farmers producing

locally grown food for local markets is a risky venture in today's current economic climate.

However, small farms have not altogether disappeared from the agricultural landscape. According to the Local Food Marketing Practices report released by the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) in early 2022,³⁷ more than 147,000 U.S. farms produced and sold food locally through direct marketing practices, for a combined \$9 billion in revenue in 2020. Data also showed that 78% of farms sold their direct-to-market produce exclusively within 100 miles of the farm. Comparing this report to the 2015 data³⁸ on local food marketing, the figures are relatively stable with a small increase in total sales and small decrease in total number of farms making direct sales (down from 167,009 farms in 2015).



PHOTO CREDIT: OKC FOOD HUB

35 <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2018/march/examining-consolidation-in-u-s-agriculture/>

36 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jun/30/us-food-production-climate-crisis-meat-monopoly-farming>

37 <https://www.nass.usda.gov/Newsroom/archive/2022/04-28-2022.php>

38 https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2016/LocalFoodsMarketingPractices_Highlights.pdf

Compared to the total net cash income for all farms in 2022 at \$152 billion which has increased significantly year over year, the local food supply represents a staggeringly small share of the US food system, despite the body of research demonstrating the impacts of local food production and distribution on the local economy.³⁹ According to the National Institute for Food and Agriculture,⁴⁰ "local and regional foods are increasingly being recognized as an important component to efforts to create more sustainable, resilient, healthier, and equitable food systems." The contradictions inherent in how local and regional food systems contribute to values-based and equity-centered food systems and the insufficient federal and state investment in these systems is palpable. U.S. farm policy with farm safety net programs incentivizing consolidation and commodity crop production makes the economic reality for small scale farmers that are growing food for local consumption untenable. Without a significant investment in local supply chain infrastructure and market development, an insufficient local food supply will continue to frustrate Farm to Food Assistance programs.

“

“Emergency food distribution is historically centered on waste streams from corporate entities, and not local food systems. Our demand for local, fresh produce far exceeds our current capacity to meet the need.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

“

“We’d like to do more contract growing but we do run into the issue of many farms not yet having the volume of food needed nor the infrastructure to package and palletize larger quantities of foods for ease of transport.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT



PHOTO CREDIT: TRANSPLANTING TRADITIONS COMMUNITY FARM

39 Rossi, James & Johnson, Thomas & Hendrickson, Mary. (2017). The economic impacts of local and conventional food sales. *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*. 49. 1-16. 10.1017/aae.2017.14.

40 <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/topics/local-regional-food-systems>



RECOMMENDATIONS

The qualitative and quantitative data gathered over the past three years demonstrates that Farm to Food Assistance is a promising market channel for local farmers and food businesses. The availability of current funding that supports these programs and the new relationships and value chains emerging from pandemic era funding have created an opportunity for local food systems to grow and stabilize. Investment in food assistance value chains can provide meaningful income to small farmers growing for local consumption, and lead to the development of infrastructure that enables better outcomes for marginalized farmers in a range of market channels beyond food assistance. Furthermore, these efforts also have deeply impactful benefits for communities experiencing food insecurity with an increased access to healthy, often culturally important food. Food assistance markets are a powerful tool for building capacity and wealth for local farmers and increasing community food security and resilience.

We are hopeful about the growth of Farm to Food Assistance and its potential to contribute to building a more resilient and equitable food system for everyone. It is with this shared vision of a world where regional food and farm economies emerge to end chronic food insecurity and provide good food and conditions for well-being for everyone that we offer a set of recommendations to help advance this field of practice.

There are specific actions that funders can take to grow and support the farmers, organizations, businesses, and communities that implement and benefit from Farm to Food Assistance. There are specific policy shifts that stakeholders can advocate for and policy makers can champion that will ensure Farm to Food Assistance continues to grow. Some of these policies could leverage Farm to Food Assistance as an institutional market,

especially for public schools and healthcare entities. And there are specific practices that stakeholders can engage in to shift food access towards community food security by paying local farmers – especially those from groups that have been marginalized due to race, gender, or other characteristics – a fair market price for high-quality, culturally important foods that are distributed to people experiencing food insecurity.

Recommendation #1: Narrative Change: From Food Charity to Food Rights

“

“When we’re an anti-hunger organization that’s trying to make the shift to rights and not charity, there’s a lot of work that has to go alongside with our volunteers and with our donors, around [explaining that] our goal is not just to feed as many people as possible. We want to address the root causes of hunger, and end it.”

- THANH TRAN, OKC FOOD HUB

Dominant narratives have the power to shape policies, institutions, and practices that serve a particular set of interests.⁴¹ They are molded by not only the stories that are amplified, but also by the stories that are left out, and the communities and lived realities that are invisibilized. As argued by Cohen and DiPoala: “Narrative change is an important foundational strategy for whole systems transformation. If narratives are central to maintaining ideological coherence within a society over time... and power is understood as the ability to design, shape or change a society’s rules, then narratives are critical levers

⁴¹ [What is a Dominant Narrative? — Reclaim Philadelphia](#)



PHOTO CREDIT: MANDELA PARTNERS

for building power. If the rules are not changing and the culture isn't shifting, then you can bet that the dominant narrative has not changed."⁴²

For far too long, the dominant narrative about hunger and food insecurity is that "hunger will always be with us" and so "charity will always be necessary." Another persistent narrative is that we need to produce more food to feed a growing population. A more recent tweak of this narrative is that we will need to produce more food with less impact on the environment. In response to this narrative, multinational food and agriculture businesses are promoting technology for more precision in fertilizer use, nutrient-enhanced animal feed, plant-based meat alternatives, and indoor artificial-light fed growing systems.⁴³ According to the United Nations, however, "enough food is produced today to feed everyone on the planet."⁴⁴

“

It's heartbreaking to hear when we get gorgeous produce and staff or volunteers say it is too good for our clients. Some of our volunteers and producers are also clients. I want to ask them why they feel it is too good for folks? How are the clients any different from us? Sometimes we have to ask volunteers to move on if they hold this mindset. What would it look like to hold cultural agreements in a food bank about how we approach this? White savior, charity mentality is deeply ingrained. How do we shift that? Who deserves this high quality produce? Where do our beliefs about that come from?"

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Meanwhile, focus group participants were united on this idea expressed succinctly by one participant: **"Farm to food assistance is not charity; it's moving us from charity to justice."** Narrative change strategies that Farm to Food Assistance practitioners are practicing and are seeking more support for include:

- **Creating messaging for talking with donors and volunteers,** as well as food assistance recipients about the societal benefits of supporting local farmers, especially BIPOC and other socially disenfranchised farmers, to remain viable on small family-owned farms.
- **Building community awareness of the role of Farm to Food Assistance programs** in supporting the shift to an equitable food system that invests tax dollars in local farmers to grow farm fresh food for public institutions such as schools and healthcare centers and hospitals, increasing access for everyone to healthy food.
- **Creating awareness about the political power** wielded by big food and agricultural corporations to maintain the status quo, which further institutionalizes the emergency food system, incentivizes food and agriculture businesses to produce food waste, and maintains an agricultural system that contributes significantly to the United States being the second largest greenhouse gas emitter among all the world's nation-states.⁴⁵
- **Creating awareness among funders** that measuring progress in terms of an increase in the number of people fed and pounds of food distributed is counterintuitive when ending hunger is your mission.

“

"The other thing that I feel like I'm still working through is how to sustain the organization financially when donors (it's our local government, in this case) ask why our numbers are not increasing to how many people we're serving food. They see that as a bad thing. So you're like: you want us to give you more numbers, like how many people are more hungry so you can keep funding us? What about when the number is decreasing because these people are having more access to food now, or the number hasn't changed, but we're asking for the same money... I just don't get it."

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

42 Cohen, A. M., & DePoala, D. 2024. Narrative change as a strategy for exposing the root causes of hunger and spurring collective action. In Schanbacher, W. & Fung Uy, W. (Eds.), Food Insecurity: A Reference Handbook. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

43 <https://d.newsweek.com/en/file/466549/country-report-agriculture-july-2023pdf.pdf> and [The scientific narrative around new food technologies needs to change | Nature Reviews Bioengineering](#)

44 [Sustainable Development Goals Helpdesk](#)

45 [This Interactive Chart Shows Changes in the World's Top 10 Emitters](#)

Recommendation #2: Long-Term, Sustainable Funding

As expressed by all Farm to Food Assistance implementers, long-term funding commitments lead to sustainable shifts in how programs operate to benefit both farmers in need of local markets and communities in need of food assistance. Long-term, sustainable funding increases the potential for Farm to Food Assistance programs to become a lever for food systems transformation.

In addition to more secure and multi-year funding, how funding can be allocated and for what purposes should be expanded to include the following:

- Funding to increase accessibility to markets for farmers and healthy food for consumers, including support for language justice strategies (i.e. translation services, multilingual staff) and technical assistance for farmers, including wholesale readiness, access to loans and grants, and growing culturally important crops for clients
- Investment in local infrastructure, including hard costs associated with procurement and distribution (i.e. truck leases, cold storage)
- Funding for staff who serve as value chain coordinators, who conduct farmer outreach and provide technical assistance, or provide education in root cause analysis of hunger and the struggles faced by BIPOC farmers
- Investment in organizational capacity to successfully implement Farm to Food Assistance programs
- Funding with adequate administrative dollars for sub-awardees

“

“My experience with LFPA is that it has allowed us to figure out what it really costs to create the operations of tracking the projected product, working with farmers, procuring product, and then distributing it. This includes the very hard costs of truck leases, fuel, driver wages, electricity costs at the warehouse, staff to run the data platform. This is really valuable. Can we use this information [we’re gathering] to ask for the resources to cover how much money would we need to move X amount of food from smaller scale, historically underserved farmers to the food access system? And this information can be used for building market access for other channels – for example, grocery, food service, farm2school, etc.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



PHOTO CREDIT: OREGON FOOD BANK

SURVEY FINDING:

62% of survey respondents indicated that increased funding because of the pandemic contributed to their success



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

Recommendation #3: Equity in Public Funding

Because Farm to Food Assistance programs use public and charitable dollars to procure local food, Farm to Food Assistance could contribute to a re-balancing and shifting of power in the current food system from multinational corporate food and agriculture industries at the center of conventional supply chains to local and regional farmers, food hubs and their communities. Most food access organizations (food pantries and food banks) receive a bulk of the food they distribute from grocery store food waste. Food pantries use donor dollars to purchase bulk food from their local Feeding America affiliated food bank at a reduced cost. Through partnerships with major food companies, Feeding America rescued 4 billion pounds of food last year. Since the food is then shipped to food pantries, it is most often canned, boxed or processed. When food pantries shift their donor dollars towards purchasing local food from local farmers, they are keeping some of their locally-raised dollars in the local food system, and putting it in the pockets of small farmers.

According to the Wallace Center's 2023 report,⁴⁶ by investing close to \$900 million into local communities and regional agriculture value chains in just three years, the USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Program is expected to benefit thousands of farmers and bring an overall economic impact of over \$1.8 billion to communities across the United States. However, LFPA is set to expire in 2025. While many Farm to Food Assistance programs existed well before the USDA's LFPA,⁴⁷ the funding allocated through LFPA for purchasing directly from local and socially disadvantaged farmers is a critical departure from other programs to link local farms and food access through gleaning or purchasing food at discounted prices at the end of market day – strategies that support food access organizations in procuring food but do not offer a viable market channel for small producers.

⁴⁶ [Wallace Center : New Report Details Impact of USDA's Local Food Purchase Assistance Program](#)

⁴⁷ [H.R.1319 - 117th Congress \(2021-2022\): American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#)

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tefap/emergency-food-assistance-program>

The question on the minds of many Farm to Food Assistance implementers is whether redirecting TEFAP funds from purchasing commodity crop surpluses towards local food produced by socially disadvantaged farmers, the USDA would be effectively securing Farm to Food Assistance as not just a “bridge from disruptions associated with the pandemic to longer-term investments to help build back a better food system,”⁴⁸ but as a more permanent structure for food system transformation rooted in resilient regional and local food and farm economies.



“We need both the state government and the federal government to step up and carve out parts of those subsidies, to protect resilient local food systems... at every level. And we need nonprofit support for that. I think that health care plays a role as well. If we can make local food that comes from regenerative farms, that supports food insecure families and increases the health of our communities as well, I think that plays a part [in a resilient food system]”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

The Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) was first authorized in 1981 to distribute surplus commodities to households. In the 1990 Farm Bill, the word “temporary” was dropped from its name and the purpose of what is now called the Emergency Food Assistance Program, still known as TEFAP, is to provide staple foods purchased from commodity surplus to food banks who redistribute them at no cost to people facing hunger.⁴⁹ 100% of TEFAP food is “American-

grown USDA foods" which includes a variety of products. Most foods are nonperishable and ready for distribution when delivered to states, although some foods, such as some meat, dairy, and fresh produce, require refrigeration.⁵⁰ Over 20% of the food distributed through Feeding America member food banks comes from TEFAP. In fiscal year 2022, TEFAP provided \$399 million in commodity food purchases to food banks nationwide. Approximately \$471.4 million in surplus foods acquired in FY 2023 are being delivered to states in FY 2024. In order for food banks to have a reliable food source to meet the increased demand for food assistance, according to Feeding America, the current Farm Bill must strengthen TEFAP.⁵¹ Meanwhile, TEFAP's FY2022 federal spending amounted to \$1.6 billion, almost double what LFPA has spent over three years. The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's 2024 report on our nation's farm safety net concluded that it leaves many small to mid-sized, beginning, and diversified farmers behind, while functioning very well for industrial-scale farm businesses. In a nutshell, the programs are unsustainable and inequitable, prioritizing industrial farms at the expense of producers with the highest financial need and the strongest potential for building food systems resiliency and mitigating the risk of supply chain disruptions, especially during a crisis like COVID.

Equity in public funding for all farmers would mean allocating a portion of TEFAP dollars and other permanent and ad-hoc safety net programs towards values-based, equity-driven Farm to Food Assistance programs, thereby securing and strengthening, as USDA Secretary Vilsack wrote "our efforts to provide emergency food assistance and expand economic opportunity for historically underserved producers by allowing state and tribal governments to buy and distribute local and regional foods and beverages that are healthy, nutritious and unique to their geographic area... help get local and regional agricultural products into schools, food banks and other nutritional assistance programs, and organizations that reach underserved communities,... and advance our efforts to ensure that historically underserved populations gain equal access to USDA resources through a combination of grants, loans, pilot programs, technical assistance, cooperative agreements, and more."⁵²

“

“The [food] system that we have currently is not an efficient use of resources. And it’s not particularly resilient. It’s based on whether someone’s going to make a bunch of money off of it. I don’t think that’s a great way to organize a food system. Actually, we have a heavily subsidized food system that we’re choosing to just give a bunch of money to people who already get a bunch of resources.

So, in my ideal world, everyone would have enough. Everyone who wants to grow food would be able to do that and sustain themselves with dignity. Everyone who wants to eat would be able to eat as much as they want, in whatever way they want to eat it, and it wouldn’t be dependent on this narrative around this capitalist extraction of resources.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“

“Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) has a stabilizing effect on our local food system as opposed to the destabilizing effect that traditional emergency food programs have where excess product from large (not local) farms gets dumped on local communities thereby disrupting the local economy.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

50 <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45408>

51 [TEFAP in America](#)

52 <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/06/15/usda-announces-additional-aid-ag-producers-and-businesses-pandemic>



PHOTO CREDIT: FRESH APPROACH

Recommendation #4: Fair Prices for Small Farmers and Producers

Many focus group participants talked about the importance of paying farmers a fair price as a pathway towards an equitable food system. A term that is routinely invoked in Farm to Food Assistance programmatic goals and values, "fair price" remains amorphous and open to interpretation. Finding a price that is "fair" for both producers and consumers can be a difficult balance. Food banks and other food access organizations, whose purchasing budgets are tight, are accustomed to receiving donated food or purchasing commodity food from the regional food bank at a reduced price.

“

“There’s a lot of other things that go into [fair price] – fair for whom? It has to be sustainable from the growing standpoint because you have to not only replace whatever your input costs were and cover your overhead so you can then provide for yourself if you’re a sole proprietor and come back and do it again next year. And it also has to work on the eater’s side. So that often takes a lot of different inputs – whether that’s marketing assistance or some support from funding or something else to be able to get good food from the farm to where it needs to go...”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Participants also talked about the challenge some farmers face in determining how to set appropriate prices. **The Agricultural Justice Project** defines a fair price as "one that covers the farm’s "full costs of production, plus a fair margin for profit and investment and the ability to pay fair wages and other benefits for themselves, their families and workers."⁵³

Some ways of establishing a fair price that Farm to Food Assistance program implementers are beginning to use and seek more support for include:

- Benchmarking for pricing with equity-based adjustments
- Doing cost-analyses, business planning, or developing crop budgets to help farmers understand the true cost of producing food
- Developing mechanisms and agreements to pay farmers upfront, make payment systems more efficient, and apply other strategies that work for farmers’ business models

⁵³ <https://agriculturaljusticeproject.org/>

“If you want to truly produce culturally significant food, sometimes it’s more expensive. And how do you manage that – that the farmer gets a fair price, but yet your constituents get what they need in a food product?”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“Fair Price has a very context-based perspective... So depending on the food and the local food system that the farmer is working within, that fair price can be more or it can be less. If [adequate] infrastructure doesn’t exist, then it’s going to [factor into] the price. The fair price is going to be higher because you’ve got to build it. If you don’t have other organizations in your area that provide technical assistance or other... things that are needed in order to support small, mid-sized farmers, then in order for you to operate and get your...crops to the market, then your fair price is going to be different.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



PHOTO CREDIT: OKC FOOD HUB

Recommendation #5: Unpacking and Shifting Power

We have argued that values-based and equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance programs, as the 300+ practitioners that have informed this report have indicated, could be a stepping stone towards their vision of a transformed food system that sustainably produces food, health, and well-being for everyone. The values and practices that are realized through relationship building across the value chain, fair prices coupled with equitable access to markets for BIPOC and other socially disadvantaged farmers, and dignity in food access for communities support the reframing of food as a commodity to food as a critical human right. At the very center of this transformation is shifting the balance of power.

“

“One challenge is that the folks that are farming are also beneficiaries of food assistance programs. So we often have questions and discussions around how food assistance is a whole industry, and it’s solving a problem that shouldn’t exist. In an ideal world, if government support, community solidarity, mutual aid... if all these things were working right, we wouldn’t need food banks, right? We would have food as a human right. Health as a human right. But we live in a society where those things are not politically prioritized.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Farm to Food Assistance programs exist because there are millions of Americans who cannot reliably access enough healthy food for their families. These programs, therefore, cannot be cast as the silver bullet to the transformed food system that we envision that includes a world without hunger. However, Farm to Food Assistance programs that develop strategies and practices that begin to strike at the root causes of hunger and inequity in the food system could be an important lever that moves us along the continuum from hunger to food sovereignty. And that starts with acknowledging and unpacking the power differentials that bolster the current food system.

Our modern day food system is rife with power differentials. Food and agriculture is the most concentrated sector of the American economy with devastating impacts on our physical and mental health, and the health of the environment⁵⁴. It’s well-reported that a handful of mega corporations control every link of the food supply chain

⁵⁴ <https://www.ucsusa.org/food/food-justice>

⁵⁵ https://farmaction.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Hendrickson-et-al.-2020.-Concentration-and-Its-Impacts_FINAL_Addended.pdf

⁵⁶ https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/HUNGER-IS-A-RACIAL-EQUITY-ISSUE_Alliance-to-End-Hunger-1.pdf

⁵⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/11/569815331/loving-and-hating-dollar-general-in-rural-america>



PHOTO CREDIT: CHANGE TODAY, CHANGE TOMORROW

from seeds and farm inputs, to processing, to what we buy in the grocery store. Only 15 cents of every dollar we spend in the supermarket goes to farmers. Corporate food and agriculture are experiencing record profits while food insecurity is currently the highest it’s ever been in the U.S.⁵⁵ Those who are food insecure and experiencing diminishing access to land and markets are disproportionately people of color.⁵⁶ In many rural towns Dollar General has replaced the locally-owned grocery store.⁵⁷

“

It’s really creating a space to first understand who’s making the decisions that have all that funding, and how are they identifying these farmers and what is their strategic or state plan on how to do that? And I would like to see that written out in a very fair and equitable way. And I pick a lot of fights with state agencies that way... and get into a lot of good trouble because we just want to make sure that everybody is at the table when they’re making those decisions.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Farm to Food Assistance programs that start with an analysis of their local food and farming context to identify the roots of the issues tend to develop strategies that both daylight the inequity in the local food system and intervene in practical ways to disrupt the concentration of power by shifting a small part of the market share to small-scale farmers. Some functional ways that programs can begin to shift power include:

• **Telling their story and sharing their values and related analyses by:**

- Developing communication materials and narrative campaigns that highlight the rationale behind values-based and equity-driven Farm to Food Assistance programs and practices
- Educating volunteers and donors about the inequities and power differentials in the food system and the root causes of food insecurity
- Sharing their vision of a transformed food system

• **Reflecting values in resource allocation:**

- Buying from historically and socially disadvantaged farmers and producers
- Supporting these same farmers' access to land tenure, technical assistance and additional local markets
- Supporting food insecure community members to access SNAP and use EBT at local farmers markets

• **Building or joining coalitions:**

- Developing partnerships with other organizations that are addressing root causes of poverty and climate disturbance
- Forming or joining a Community of Practice to continue to learn and evolve alongside those doing similar work in other parts of your state or across the U.S.

Another way that Farm to Food Assistance programs can move us along the continuum from a food system rooted in charity to one rooted in justice is by putting the community in the driver's seat. According to Farm to Food Assistance practitioners, decision-making that puts communities in control has allowed them to employ a range of distribution models through community organizations, supporting them to be better able to meet the needs and preferences of diverse communities and meaningfully engage with producers. Farm to Food Assistance programs have the potential to foster a sense of belonging to the community which can result in greater social cohesion as more voices are amplified and joined together to determine the community's collective future. This kind of "genuine belonging in which [all community members] are seen and heard, and through which the work itself can be made something new... through their

presence" can lead to a sense of true ownership and investment in the program's sustainability.⁵⁸ A sense of belonging, social science research demonstrates, can lead to greater civic participation overall. "Engagement must both make space for new constituents' whole selves, and make them equal "co-owners" of the agenda and struggle. The former without the latter is inclusion without belonging."⁵⁹

“We do our purchasing collectively. We built a purchasing committee that is made up of the various constituents that are in the coalition of food pantries and meal sites, so that every person and every type of site has representation on the purchasing committee. So, we have large pantries that are in the center of town who are represented; we have the tiny pantry an hour away from a paved road that's in a church basement for one Saturday a month, represented. We have our tribal community represented to make sure that their values and their culturally appropriate food choices are represented. And we intentionally developed that committee and associated decision making processes so that everybody has a chance to say what they think while we're making decisions. We also have a Purchasing Committee Set of Agreements that we open every meeting with so that we intentionally center equity and remind ourselves that we do this work because food insecurity is systemic and we're supporting farmers because of their unequal access to resources and other things based on discrimination by the U.S government and private entities and banks. We vocalize these things at every meeting, so that we can remind ourselves of why we're doing this work and why it's important to center equity.”

-FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“We talk a lot about who's at the table, who's making those decisions. As we think about how far away we are from those spaces, how are we preparing folks that are going to be sitting at that table to navigate that space ... How do we get a pipeline of folks in our community that want to be in the decision making spaces also prepared and able to apply that to the process...”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

⁵⁸ <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/tools-and-resources>

⁵⁹ <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/introduction-building-power-belonging>



PHOTO CREDIT: TRANSPLANTING TRADITIONS COMMUNITY FARM

Recommendation #6: Measuring Progress – Impacts over Inputs and Outputs

“

“We do track pounds of food purchased, number of farms supported, dollars spent on local food. But it’s hard in the food access space because in an ideal world, we would not be increasing the amount of food that we need to distribute because we don’t want people to live in food insecurity or within systems that create food insecurity for them. We would like the amount of food that we distribute to go down every year because we’re making larger societal progress or systemic progress in food equity. So, I always kind of have mixed feelings about the data that we do collect for that reason.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Focus group participants were asked how they would define success for their programs and what metrics they would use to track progress if given the opportunity. The responses overwhelmingly pointed to the need for longitudinal studies that measure impact instead of inputs and outputs, and to the need for developing new and better metrics for this growing field of practice.

The gap between what Farm to Food Assistance implementers are measuring regularly – often in response

to what funders and donors ask for– and what they believe is a true measure of success is important to understand. Participants acknowledged the irony of measuring pounds of food grown and distributed and number of people served annually, especially as an indicator of how Farm to Food Assistance is contributing to ending hunger and transforming the food system. Food Banks and donors often celebrate an increase in these numbers year over year, despite the fact that an increase suggests that, while more resources are pouring into the emergency food system, the problem of chronic food insecurity is getting worse.

While some Farm to Food Assistance initiatives have the capacity to conduct more in-depth data collection, focus group participants frequently expressed the desire for the capacity to capture data that demonstrate they were operating in alignment with the organization's stated values.

“

“I wish that we could access data about health outcomes, because to me, I would love to be able to show that people who are accessing food at food pantries and meal sites, because of our farm to food assistance work, have been consuming healthier food and are experiencing less health problems and more equitable health outcomes. Or, you know, their health metrics have improved because they eat more fruits and vegetables.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

In our research on Farm to Food Assistance programs, suggestions for different metrics emerged—some of which a few vanguard organizations are measuring. These recommendations include:

Measuring Outcomes for Food Access Recipients:

- How many people no longer need food assistance?
- Is the food what the recipients desire? Is it culturally important? Do they want different products?
- Are participants changing their preferences and food shopping habits based on their experience with Farm to Food Assistance?
- Does the physical, emotional and social health of family members change as a result of consuming more farm fresh food and participating in Farm to Food Assistance programs?

“If the food that we’re able to distribute is representative of what folks actually want to be eating – it’s good quality, nutritious and all of those pieces – then what is that larger health impact that we can track?”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

“Experience of food anxiety is gigantic. So just being able to ask how ... being supported with regular, low cost or free food has changed the experience of the food anxiety of the family. It is a gigantic metric that tells us whether or not we’re doing what we set out to do. And then in addition we very openly ask for testimonials. You know, how has this changed? ... We ask a lot of questions about the contents of our boxes as well. You know, there’s what the farmer wants to grow. And then there’s what the participant wants to eat. And those things, well, one of them has more kohlrabi in it.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Tracking Procurement Shifts for Food Assistance Providers:

- How are Food Banks deciding which pantries get Farm to Food Assistance products in cases where the quantity of locally-produced food is not yet meeting demand?
- To what extent is locally sourced food shifting or displacing processed foods in the overall offerings of participating organizations?

“One of the community [food distribution] partners we’re working with, we’re paying them to purchase directly from the farmers. And because of that funding, it kickstarted them to go after more funding to continue that. So, it’s empowering the partners to do the food sourcing. And [anecdotally] it’s impacting the farmer to get more land, impacting the farmer to reach the community that they are serving because of the very specific things they are growing. And then again, the tapping into the health services and the mental health that goes into that access, it’s so beautiful.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



PHOTO CREDIT: SUSTAINABLE MOLOKAI



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

Understanding Impact for Local Farmers and Food Producers:

- Are participating farmers experiencing shifts in their business viability? Is their ability for farming to be a full-time, living wage profession increasing or improving?
- How is Farm to Food Assistance helping farmers launch into other markets?
- Is income from Farm to Food Assistance sales translating into on-farm investments, equipment purchases, or infrastructure improvements?
- How many jobs are sustained or created?

“[Let’s measure] the stress level of the job. How much does it affect people knowing that they’re going to get paid for their catch? Because we’re fishing right now and nobody knows – from their whole last week of deliveries – what they got paid for it. They don’t even know if they should be out fishing right now because the wage is so delayed and finding out what they’re getting paid for it [is unknown]. So, knowing that you have a landing spot for your catch that’s actually going to pay your bills-- that it’s there and you can sleep better ... just have some peace . I think in a lot of food production communities right now [the stress level] is just through the roof.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Measuring Impact on Local Economies:

- How does Farm to Food Assistance benefit local economies?
- What is the generative effect of “values-based procurement”?

“We also measure the impact that purchasing at full price from these farmers has. What’s the community wide impact for them? So if we spent \$1.7 million, that equates out to about \$3 million economic impact for that community. So we look at the community wide impact.”

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES OF FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE

In addition to increasing market opportunities for farmers and improving food access for people experiencing hunger, F2FA programs provide a wide range of benefits to farmers, regional food value chains, and local communities.

- ▶ 93% Strengthened Important Relationships
- ▶ 93% Created New Important Relationships
- ▶ 45% Created Jobs in the Community
- ▶ 88% Made Food Access in the Community More Equitable
- ▶ 69% Had a Positive Impact on Environmental Sustainability

Source: 2022 National Survey



PHOTO CREDIT: FARM FRESH RHODE ISLAND



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

CONCLUSION

The inherent vulnerabilities in vertically integrated, just-in-time food supply chains that benefit the few have become clear. Global trade disruptions, conflict, and climate change are fueling rising food prices even as food banks expand to resolve contradictions between food waste and hunger. Values-based, equity-centered Farm to Food Assistance programs – while not a panacea on its own – offer real-life models for bringing dignity, equity, and resiliency into the center of a food and agricultural economy that produces food for health, wealth, and well-being for all while protecting the planet.

Though we believe in the power of Farm to Food Assistance as a pathway to greater food systems resilience, we are also certain that it does not inherently address the root causes of hunger, or the challenges facing small farmers, and Black farmers, Indigenous farmers, and other farmers of color in particular. The prevailing conventional model of channeling excess food into food banks and food pantries does not solve hunger and poverty. Short term subsidies that enable food banks and food pantries to buy farmers' products at a fair price does not solve for instability and inequity in farming. Both of these systemic problems are caused by corporate consolidation and structural inequality in how wealth and power are distributed in this country. We recognize that as long as this is the case, people will still experience chronic hunger, and small farmers, particularly BIPOC farmers, will struggle to stay on their land.

However, we believe that Farm to Food Assistance programs are still very much worth doing in our current context. The experience to date we've highlighted in this report – the innovations Farm to Food Assistance has brought to ensuring dignity in food access, the roadblocks they are navigating by building unlikely partnerships, the practical ways they are working towards righting historical and racial inequities in the food system – demonstrate their capacity to be an important lever for transforming the food

system to one where communities and not corporations are defining how food moves from farm to plate such that local food and farm economies are increasingly resilient.

We encourage private philanthropy and all levels of government to fund these programs in a manner that enables them to engage in long-term planning and growth, and that significantly shifts the balance between federal support for large-scale, commodity farms and small and mid-sized producers. By adequately funding and supporting Farm to Food Assistance efforts that bring the goals of previously disconnected parts of our food system into alignment, these programs can be an important component of strengthening regional food and farm economies, while providing nourishing food to those who need it the most, in a way that builds bridges, centers racial equity, and embeds dignity and respect across the food system. Farm to Food Assistance is a critical fog light as we wend our way towards a progressive realization of healthy farms, healthy food, and healthy people.



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING

APPENDIX: F2FA RESOURCE LIST

The Food Systems Leadership Network has compiled resources in the [Farm to Food Assistance Resource Library](#), in addition to the resources below:

- **Airtable:** The App Iowa uses to track data
 - Facilitates understanding of the end to end flow of funds and product within program + greater network
 - Centralizes data across activities and allows analyses across multiple facets of the program
 - Generates USDA reporting formatted properly for submission
- **Cash Flow Resources:**
 - [Cash Flow and Budgeting Information](#), from Myra Marcellin and Erin Pirro
 - [Sample Cash Flow Budget document](#), from Myra Marcellin and Erin Pirro
- **Civil Eats Article on Impact of LFPA:** Interesting stats on the impact of LFPA and how Tennessee is working to find funding at the state level for a missed deadline for LFPA Plus.
- **Iowa's Resources page**
 - [Producer Registration Form](#), from Iowa
 - [Iowa LFPA Pricing Guidance](#), from Iowa
 - [LFPA Local Food Delivery Expectations](#), from Iowa
- **Example of State mapping of local food providers/farmers/producers** that is a result of the LFPA program, from Washington State
- **Friends of the Farm:** Arizona's farm to food bank program, started with seed money from their Governor in 2020
- **Metro Caring's Local Food Procurement Catalog** - accessible on this page: <https://metrocaring.org/universal-basic-food/>



PHOTO CREDIT: FRESH APPROACH

- **Resources from the New Mexico LFPA Program**, also available from the [F2FA Discussion Board](#)
 - [Live Approved Products List](#), from New Mexico
 - [The MANSTER \(Master List\)](#), Invoice Tracking Sheet/ Reporting Tool
 - [Pricing Sheet](#), from New Mexico
 - [Product Availability Template](#): New Mexico uses with farmers to help shape forward agreements
 - [An example of Request for Proposal/Bid request](#), from New Mexico
 - [Values Based Procurement Point Matrix](#), from New Mexico
 - [Price Check Documentation](#), from New Mexico
- **Slides from Elizabeth Lober about the LFPA program** and status as of April 2024
- **The Food Charity to Justice Continuum**
 - The Food Sovereignty Fund Implementation Guide, produced by Glynwood Center for Regional Food and Farming, documents the protocols and processes used by Glynwood's Regional Food Programs team to operate the Food Sovereignty Fund (FSF) which provides resources and support for historically marginalized farmers to partner with food access providers, and offers tools to replicate the program. For a copy of the guide, contact Megan Larmer at mlarmer@glynwood.org or Michelle Hughes at mhughes@glynwood.org.
- **Tools and Resources** | Othering & Belonging Institute (berkeley.edu)
- **USDA ERS -** The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Economy: New Estimates of the SNAP Multiplier
- **Value Chain Coordination Evaluation Framework**, a guide to develop metrics and an evaluation plan that capture impact beyond dollars and pounds, developed by the Food Systems Leadership Network



PHOTO CREDIT: METRO CARING