



HEALTH & FOOD AGGREGATION AND DISTRIBUTION

If the post-pandemic landscape has revealed anything, it's that partnerships are integral to creating healthy communities.

Since March of 2020, food insecurity rates in the United States have risen to levels unprecedented in modern times (Change Lab Solutions, 2023) – a fact that's not only left large pockets of the population struggling to meet their basic needs but also at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to achieving health equity, defined as the opportunity to attain full health potential free of social and/or economic barriers. (Change Lab Solutions, 2023).

The connection between food aggregation and distribution sites such as food hubs and the overall health of the communities in which they exist must not be overlooked. Defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as any business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of food from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy demand, food hubs are an essential cog in the wheel of food access. (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2020)

In the long run, food hubs deliver far more than food. By providing participating farmers with invaluable tools – from processing facilities and delivery trucks to marketing/sales services and liability insurance – food hubs are poised not only to address, but also to remedy, the myriad health-related issues at the intersection of food, health, and equity. (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2020)

KEY CHALLENGES

Food System Strain

Across the country, Americans are increasingly disconnected from the food they consume and how it was produced. In large part, our food system hinges on factory farms and commodity crops – pervasive problems plaguing our collective health. Unhealthy food systems come at a steep economic cost as evidenced by large industry interests at the helm of many local businesses; widespread dissatisfaction among workers; and reduced productivity. The community costs – of managing health, social, and environmental harms – are equally detrimental and prone to unfairly burdening local small business owners, agricultural and restaurant workers, and people who live in areas of disinvestment – many of whom identify as low income and/or people of color. (Change Lab Solutions, 2023)



Equity

Just as systemic racism is embedded within our country and its institutions, so, too, does it permeate our food system. (MSU Center for Regional Food Systems, 2020) While the intersection of food, health and equity cannot be overlooked, barriers to market access – including affordability, convenience, and accessibility – remain rampant. When it comes to the dominant food system in America, the present model enforces structures of power as opposed to challenging them. Alternative models such as food hubs, that value labor, share profits, and steward natural resources, could nourish us all if embraced on a larger scale. (MSU Center for Regional Food Systems, 2020)

PROMISING IDEAS

Food hubs bring much more to the table than fresh, healthy, culturally relevant food: they support regional growers; keep money circulating locally; and promote sustainable, not to mention environmentally friendly, production practices (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2020) – making them a win-win when it comes to building healthy communities.

Anchor Institutions

Long-term fixtures in any given community – from universities and hospitals to large corporations and even sports teams – not only control large amounts of community capital but also stand to influence many things, including the quality of foods offered to those students, patients and employees who frequent these anchor institutions. The power and responsibility they carry – to support local food production and enhance local food culture – gives these organizations an important role in community health. (Change Lab Solutions, 2023)

Farm-to-Institution Food Sourcing

By design, food hubs bundle the collective power of small-scale growers and food producers to participate in markets otherwise inaccessible to them as individuals. (MSU Center for Regional Food Systems, 2020) In turn, large institutions tend to have the resources needed to support small businesses – such as local farms and food producers – via food hubs, which creates a win-win for all. Coupled with diversified supply chains, which play a key role in the short-term needs and long-term resilience of communities, farm-to-institution food sourcing not only supports but also reinforces healthy food choice and provides a model for healthy living in the community at large. (Change Lab Solutions, 2023)



COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

The heart of the local food economy is beating strong in Torrington where the [Northwest Connecticut Regional Food Hub](#) has been partnering with farmers to deliver their locally grown produce directly to wholesale customers who want to know where their food comes from.



Renee Giroux prepping food for distribution. Beginning in 2017, the Northwest Connecticut Regional Food Hub has worked with over 30 local farms and 20 wholesale buyers including grocery stores, restaurants, and institutions throughout the western half of CT and surrounding states. The coalition aggregates source-identified locally grown and produced food, benefiting both the community and the local farms. Photo courtesy of Renee Giroux and Janna Siller.

“It’s a huge win for [all],” said manager Renée Giroux of a model that pays farmers for their produce and gets it onto the plates of those who need it.

“[Our local farmers’] hard work is being rewarded through various different programs,” said Giroux, pointing to a trio of efforts aimed at different demographics.

Produce Rx provided a free, 16-week CSA share (with produce from 15 local farms, aggregated through the food hub) to 75 income-eligible participants with underlying health factors including Type II diabetes and childhood obesity. The pilot, led by dietitians at Charlotte Hungerford Hospital, centered on education about sourcing and preparing local food.

The *Farm-to-School* program continues to benefit the community by giving growers an avenue to sell food directly to local elementary and high schools; supporting

farmers' marketing efforts; and fueling students' learning.

The NWCT Regional Food Hub has a plan in place, through 2024, to aggregate a large amount of local produce delivered free to over 15 food pantries – which serves to directly offset their limited dollar cost of fresh produce which can, at times, be difficult to access.

“We’re slowly cutting through all the red tape,” said Giroux of ongoing conversations about the viability and affordability of programs that get produce directly to consumers via those third spaces in which they spend their time.

Giroux’s passion for ensuring our communities have access to fresh and healthy produce is equally fueled by her role as farmer and parent to school-aged children.

“It’s been really challenging and rewarding.”



Pumpkins and gourds ready for travel. Photo courtesy of Renee Giroux and Janna Siller.

COMING UP

In our next issue we’ll talk about food sovereignty – a food system in which the people who produce, distribute, and consume food also control the mechanisms and policies of its production and distribution – a model standing in stark contrast to our current system, in which corporations and market institutions control the global food system.

References

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