

# Sowing the Seeds of Food Justice

A Guide for Farmers Who Want to Supply Low-Income Communities  
While Maintaining Financial Sustainability

[www.soulfirefarm.org](http://www.soulfirefarm.org)



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Communities While Maintaining Financial Sustainability**

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## Introduction

“How can we contribute to economic and social justice?”

If you're an emerging or experienced farmer, you've probably asked some version of this question before. Many of us cultivate the land to fight against the food injustices plaguing low-income communities, to create local and healthy alternatives to toxic agribusiness, and to revitalize longstanding traditions of food-based communal care. But as you know well, farming is hard, time-consuming work, often with limited financial rewards; aligning our social justice principles with the day-to-day grind of the farm is a constant struggle. This challenge is only greater in low wealth communities, where people are often without the means to afford and access healthy, sustainably grown food.

As much as farmers want to support the community, the community needs our solidarity. About 50 million Americans are food insecure, with half of those individuals living in food deserts, where it's difficult or impossible to access affordable, healthy food. This lack of access to life-giving food has dire consequences for people. The incidence of diabetes, obesity, and heart disease are on the rise in all populations, but the greatest increases have occurred among people of color, especially African-Americans and Native Americans. These illnesses are fueled by diets high in unhealthy fats, cholesterol, and refined sugars, and low in fresh fruits, vegetables, and legumes. In our communities, children are being raised on processed foods, and now over one-third of children are overweight or obese, a fourfold increase over the past 30 years. This puts the next generation at risk for lifelong chronic health conditions, including several types of cancer. Good food is a basic human right, not a privilege reserved for the few. It is incumbent upon us to do our small part in the movement for food justice.

This manual offers strategies and insights to help you run a small farm business that supports the needs of low-income communities. This manual is drawn from: (1) our experience growing Soul Fire Farm, a family farm working to end racial and economic injustice in the food system; (2) the experiences of our allied farms in the struggle for food justice; and (3) extensive research on resources and best practices for serving low-income communities in the local food and agricultural sector.

This manual is broken up into five sections. The first section provides an overview of the Soul Fire Farm food distribution model. The second section explains the main barriers to accessing fresh food in low-income communities. The third section will introduce you to several strategies and best practices for serving low-income communities, offering concrete approaches to overcoming the barriers that we identify. The fourth section discusses government resources for affordably meeting the nutritional needs of low-income communities, laying out a range of funding opportunities that you can take advantage of. The final section presents three case studies to illustrate the ways in which farmers across the country have worked with other organizations in their community to make their produce accessible to their low-income neighbors while keeping their farms financially stable.

This manual is predominantly focused on community supported agriculture (CSA) and farmers markets. (We assume that you are at least generally familiar with CSAs and farmers markets, however if you would like some introductory information you can learn more about each [here](#) and [here](#), respectively.)

## **Section 1: Ujaama Farm Share at Soul Fire Farm**

Soul Fire Farm was born in response to the South End community's yearning for life-giving food and our family's passion for connecting land stewardship and social justice. We believed that to free ourselves collectively, we must feed ourselves.

In 2005, Soul Fire Farm's founders, Leah Penniman and Jonah Vitale-Wolff, moved to Albany, NY with their young children. On their new block, there was no access to supermarkets via public transportation and no open plots in the community garden. Without a car, their only option to access fresh vegetables was to join a pricey CSA and walk the 2.2 miles to the pickup point with children in tow. The toddler rode in the stroller all the way home with bags of heavy squash and potatoes strapped to her lap. The CSA did not accept their WIC or SNAP benefits, so they needed to make sacrifices in order to pay the cost of the fresh food necessary for the healthy development of their children. Approximately 13.5 million Americans also live under food apartheid, a system of segregation that prevents mostly poor and non-white people from accessing affordable food because of their geography. This first-hand experience with food apartheid was part of what motivated the founders to create Soul Fire Farm's Ujaama Farm Share. They acquired land 35 minutes east of their South End neighborhood and put their farming experience to work.

Rooted in the principle of Ujaama, cooperative economics, Soul Fire Farm runs a subscription-based farmshare model that reduces access barriers of transportation and cost, while providing the farm with guaranteed income. In 2011, the first year of the Ujaama farmshare CSA, Soul Fire Farm welcomed 20 families to sign up, almost all of them former neighbors from the South End. They did most of the growing in the evenings and delivered vegetables and eggs on Sundays, working around full time public school science teaching and natural building jobs. From the first day, Soul Fire Farm accepted SNAP/EBT (formerly food stamps) and charged a sliding scale based on self-reported income. The bushel boxes were stuffed full with a rainbow of mineral-rich bounty and were brought right to people's doorsteps, addressing the transportation barrier. Each year they grew the program, expanding beyond the South End to other neighborhoods impacted by food apartheid - West Hill, Arbor Hill, and South and North Troy. Over time, they transitioned out of their off-farm jobs and welcomed additional staff. Currently, there are 80-100 families in the program who affectionately term it "Netflix for vegetables."

The farm team at Soul Fire Farm is recognized nationally as a leader in food justice - getting fresh food and farming opportunities to those who are usually left out. After years of practice, we are now ready to refine our model and share it with the wider farming community. It is possible for farmers to have a viable business and at the same time, share affordable food with those who are most in need.

The five components that make Soul Fire Farm's food distribution model both financially viable and social responsible are affordability, delivery, cultural relevance, neighborhood relationships, and social justice marketing.

## Strategy #1: Affordability

At Soul Fire Farm, we ask that people with more wealth and income pay more for their CSA share subscription to subsidize shares for those with less wealth and income. We empower people to decide for themselves what contribution level makes sense and offer coaching to support that determination. For example, people are encouraged to pay less if they are supporting children, have high medical expenses or immigration costs, or receive public assistance. People are encouraged to pay more if they own their home, have inheritance, work less by choice, or have high earning power based on their demographic position. We reserve at least 1/3 of our shares for low income people, though often far exceed that minimum. The goal is that all members pay approximately the same percentage of their income toward their food, practicing economic solidarity.

### Soul Fire Farm Ujaama CSA Farm Share Sliding Scale

Membership Category	Weekly Cost	20-Week Season Cost
“Solidarity Share” for immigrants, refugees, and those impacted by state violence	\$0	\$0
EBT/SNAP Users	\$23	\$460
Low Income/Wealth	\$25	\$500
Middle Income/Wealth	Up-front payment expected	\$560
Upper Income/Wealth	Up-front payment expected	\$660
“Soul on Fire!” Contributor Share	Up-front payment expected	\$800-\$1000

Additionally, Soul Fire Farm accepts SNAP/EBT benefits as well as WIC Farmers Market Coupons. Rather than paying the full cost of the share up-front, as is required in the original CSA model, low income members sign a contract committing to regular monthly payments. Members sign their SNAP vouchers in advance and we redeem them through our EBT terminal at the farm. Even for members who do not use government benefits, we allow flexible payment plans and never cut off food delivery for nonpayment. We do absorb around \$1000 in losses through non-collection and consider that part of our obligation as members of the community.

Finally, we recently implemented a “Solidarity Shares” program, where people can buy an Ujaama Farm Share for a neighbor so that there is no cost at all to the recipient of the food. We focus this program on refugees, immigrants, and families of incarcerated people. Currently, we have around 13 families receiving a Solidarity Share. Note that this program is not grant funded. Rather, it is supported by neighbors committed to food justice.

## Strategy #2: Doorstep Delivery

Since transportation is a major barrier for people living under food apartheid, we offer doorstep delivery within certain neighborhoods in nearby Albany and Troy, NY. We pack up the delivery truck Wednesday after lunch and make around 35 stops to get 80 boxes of food out to the community. For a practiced farmer, the entire route takes 4-5 hours. This is about the same time commitment to run a farmers market and a reasonable investment to increase food access.



On this map, the neighborhoods in “red” are eligible for doorstep delivery in the Ujaama farmshare. Note that Zillow.com (the source for this map) indicates that they are “poor neighborhoods” on the map description on their website - continuing a legacy of redlining and underinvestment in communities of color. We do have members who live outside of our priority neighborhoods, and these members are required to come to bulk drop offs within the boundaries of our priority area. While some members protest that we “drive right through” their neighborhood on our delivery route, we feel that

it is important for wealthier members to take the nominal time out to travel to poorer neighborhoods and retrieve their vegetables.

## Strategy #3: Cultural Relevance

Over 60% of the members of Soul Fire Farm’s Ujaama program are people of color, including African-American, Latinx, Asian, Trinidadian, Karen, Nepali, Persian, Urdu, Burmese, and Jamaican people.

While we are limited in terms of what we can grow by our cold climate, we do our best to grow culturally relevant vegetables as requested by our members. We gather data on what vegetables people desire through in-person interview and online surveys.

**Vegetables Requested by Soul Fire Farm Members**

<b>African-American</b>	<b>Latinx-American</b>	<b>Asian-American</b>
Tomatoes Hot peppers Collard greens Melons Okra Turnip greens Black eyed peas	Tomatoes Aji Dulce pepper Culantro Cilantro Tomatillos Chiles Sorrell	Japanese sweet potato Napa cabbage Tatsoi Burdock Daikon radish Eggplant Edamame

We include culturally relevant recipes in our weekly newsletter, including substitution suggestions for using cold-weather vegetables in tropical dishes. Additionally, we are working on a visual guide to our crops that is translated into several languages. We also refer to our program using terms that are familiar to our members. The concept of a CSA might not resonate with people, so we refer to the program as “Netflix for vegetables” or “Ujaama box” as a way of clarifying the structure and intention of the model.

**Strategy #4: Neighborhood Relationships**

At Soul Fire Farm, we decided to build our customer base using a grassroots organizing model. Certainly, if we wanted to sell all of our food to suburbanites connected to the so-called good food movement, we would be sold out with a waiting list. Our vision is different. Seeing food as a basic human right and not a privilege compels us to do the hard work of getting our harvest to those marginalized by food apartheid. Every winter, we offer free lectures and workshops in the community on food justice topics, including self-determined health, structural racism in the food system, and reconnecting to land. Through these workshops, we connect with public school children, neighborhood association members, Little League parents, church deacons, and other powerful community leaders. We listen too, asking what barriers stand between people and food and how a farm like ours can deepen our solidarity work with community. Through our operating ethos, Ujaama (or cooperative economics), we imagine a non-extractive relationship between producer and consumer, rooted in authentic relationships rather than the casual exchange of the market. This is what we believe we cultivate in our farm share. We make a long-term commitment to nourish each member with the bounty of the land and they, in turn, make a commitment that Soul Fire Farm will be their source of produce for the season. We nourish and honor these relationships by welcoming feedback, sharing thoughtful newsletters with recipes and updates, hosting monthly community days on the land, and saying “thank you” to those who volunteered with a bonus box of food in mid-November. It is important to us that we have a personal relationship with every member of the Ujaama Farm Share program.

## Section 2: Barriers to Accessing Fresh Food in Low-Income Communities

Low-income communities face many barriers to accessing fresh food. Understanding these barriers is essential to developing a business that effectively meets low-income people's needs. Toward this end, this section will provide an overview of these barriers and lay the foundation for the following sections, which identify strategies to address such barriers.

### Barrier #1: Lack of Transportation

Access to fresh food in low-income communities is deeply constrained by their severe transportation needs. While supermarkets, supercenters, and large grocery stores sell a range of healthy foods at affordable prices, a growing share of people who reside in low-income communities live over half a mile from these food providers - in many cases, *several* miles from these food providers - and lack a personal vehicle. As residents of census tracts classified by social scientists as “low-income low access,” or “LILA,” these people have limited to no reliable means of regularly traveling to quality food providers; public transportation options are few and far between, and in many instances non-existent. Food access research has found that “most low-income households attempt to use cars for food shopping, even though more than half cannot rely on a car that they own.”<sup>1</sup> These transportation challenges constrain not only poor car-dependent communities in rural and suburban areas, but also denser poor urban communities where personal vehicles are not as prevalent, especially urban communities of color. For instance, “1/3 of all predominantly black census tracts in New York City lack walking or subway access to supermarkets.”<sup>2</sup>



*Soul Fire Farm doorstep delivery, dismantling transportation barriers*

At the same time, farms and other local food retailers lack the resources to effectively distribute their produce to low-income communities and meet market demand. Transporting food is costly, and serving consumers in communities that lack centralized food retail and distribution centers is both resource intensive and complicated. Farmers often simply do not have the transportation capacity to get their produce to low-income communities.

## **Barrier #2: Lack of Local Fresh Food Retailers**

The transportation challenges that low-income people face are part of a broader food access problem: the lack of supermarkets and grocery stores in their communities. Many low-income communities, especially those in rural areas, simply lack any stores or markets that sell fresh food<sup>3</sup>, and studies have found that there has actually been a decrease in grocery stores in many marginalized communities in recent years.<sup>4</sup> A group of public health researchers aptly summarized the harrowing data on poor people's food options, reporting, "25 to 30 million Americans - about 9 percent of the total population - are living in communities that do not provide adequate access to healthy food retailers... within a reasonable distance from their home."<sup>5</sup>

## **Barrier #3: Lack of Income**

While it may seem self-evident that the lack of financial resources in low-income communities is a barrier to accessing fresh food, many still believe, instead, that low-income people don't eat well primarily because of their poor choices or lack of knowledge. Research studies plainly refute such classist claims. For example, a study of low-income communities of color in Detroit found that a person's income (or lack thereof) closely determines their food purchasing behavior.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, the study found that when people in these communities got an increase in income or when the cost of food dropped, they ate more healthy food. Similarly, the Philly Food Bucks program in Philadelphia, which provides low-income SNAP recipients with extra money for food from local farmers, contributed to a dramatic spike in farmers' sales to low-income people.<sup>7</sup> Simply put, when poor people have the financial resources to purchase fresh food, they do so. This also suggests that the challenge here is not simply a matter of a lack of income but also a lack of affordability; healthy local food is often not affordable. As such, overcoming the socioeconomic divide in food access can entail both increasing income and making food more affordable.



## **Section 3: Strategies and Best Practices for Serving Low-Income Communities**

In recent years, farmers have identified a number of strategies and best practices to overcome the barriers to fresh food access in low-income communities that we discussed in the first section. This section will introduce you to these strategies and best practices so that you can expand your farm operations in a way that meets the needs of low-income communities.

### **Strategy #1: Community Partnerships**

Community partnerships can help you secure funds and expand the reach of your farm in ways that address the lack of both financial resources and food retailers in low-income communities.

For example, partnerships with social service agencies have been integral to setting up and maintaining many successful CSA programs that target low-income people. Social service agencies work to ensure the health, wellbeing, and financial security of poor, unemployed, or underemployed people by providing a host of no-cost social services often in conjunction with local governmental entities. Many social service agencies focus their efforts on helping low-income communities secure affordable healthy food or are concerned about their clients' diets and nutritional profile. In recent years, these agencies have partnered with local farms and farmers markets to either set-up or strengthen CSA programs targeting low-income communities. As CSA partners, they support these programs in several ways.

Primarily, social service agencies can directly purchase multiple CSA shares on behalf of the people they serve. Under these arrangements, social service clients receive direct weekly deliveries of fresh food from local farms for free, while the farmer gets paid from the social service agency. This helps to partially overcome the income barrier to fresh food access in low-income communities, allowing poor people to secure local fresh food on a regular basis without constraining their tight household budgets.

In connecting farmers to a group of geographically clustered CSA recipients, social service agencies can also help develop the sizable client base necessary to make CSAs financially and logistically viable. As you may already know, farmers often struggle with developing such a robust group of committed food recipients. This challenge is especially acute for farmers running CSAs that serve low-income people. Many farmers do not have long-standing relationships with the low-income communities that they seek to help, making it difficult for them to develop a base of consistent CSA recipients. Partnerships with social service agencies can address these challenges, ensuring that CSA programs that include low-income communities benefit not only their recipients but also the farmers that make these programs possible. If you have a sizable crop output and the capacity to deliver to a broad base of CSA recipients, we recommend that you partner with multiple agencies to aggregate their different bases of clients into a sizable and steady CSA recipient base.

Finally, social service agencies can help farmers secure external philanthropic and government funding for low-income CSA programs, providing a level of financial stability that many farmer-run food justice initiatives lack. As tax-exempt non-profit organizations often with long-standing histories of working on contracts with local government, social service agencies have access to grants from private foundations and public agencies for which most farmers are ineligible. As partners in CSAs or other local food access initiatives, social service agencies can help farmers tap into these resources, creating a pool of funds to cover outreach, marketing, transportation, logistics, and subsidies to defer the cost of CSA shares. We recommend that you use the online database of organizations on [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org) to find non-profits in your area. We also recommend that you connect with your regional food bank and local United Way chapter, both of which are very likely connected to all of the local service agencies focused on food distribution. We further discuss partnerships with social service agencies in the case studies in the next section.



*Meeting with community members about healthy food needs.  
Photo courtesy of Jamel Mosely*

Of course, social service agencies aren't the only community organizations that farmers can partner with to launch a local food access initiative. Food pantries, houses of worship, and community activist organizations can serve many of the functions described above, such as developing a local base of food recipients for a CSA in addition to other crucial roles limited to non-profit organizations with a 501(c)(3) tax exempt status. Specifically, non-profit organizations can apply to accept SNAP benefits on behalf of a CSA.

Furthermore, the USDA grants waivers to non-profits to accept SNAP benefits 14 days before a CSA pickup. For this reason, partnerships with non-profits can be instrumental in utilizing food benefit programs for CSAs because they can enable you to accept SNAP benefits in a way that is more compatible with the CSA approach to payment than if you ran a CSA independent of a non-profit. Non-profits can also leverage funding from local and State government programs to cover CSA costs. For instance, Just Food NYC (a non-profit organization) uses funds from New York State's Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program to purchase CSA boxes and bring them to a food hub through their Fresh Food for All program.

Finally, community-based non-profits can utilize their community organizing skills and deep relationships with community members to organize low-income residents to take part in local food access initiatives. Many farmers often have limited or no experience organizing communities and don't know how best to build trust with people who have been systematically marginalized from the food system. Partnering with experienced community organizing groups can address this challenge, as these groups can leverage their trusted relationships and experience conducting door knocking and canvassing in their

home communities to generate local interest in farmers markets, CSAs, and other local food access initiatives.

If you have not yet formally financialized your farming operations, non-profits can also oversee and expedite the CSA payment process through their bank accounts, which are necessary to process SNAP benefits. Finally, partnerships can give your farm and operations a level of visibility that is tough to cultivate when so much of your time is committed to the land and your crops. Local non-profits can disseminate information about your farm and any road stands or farmers markets you participate in, sell your produce directly, and help you hire for open positions, among other things.

## Strategy #2: Food Hubs

In addition to collaborating with non-farming entities, you can also forge mission-driven partnerships with local and regional farmers that collectively enhance your capacity to deliver fresh food to low-income communities. Regional food hubs represent a notable farm-to-farm approach to partnership toward this end. The USDA defines a regional food hub as “a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demands.”<sup>20</sup> As a channel for pooling resources and linking farmers, food hubs can help you achieve economies of scale, reducing costs and strengthening distribution channels in the process. This, in turn, can help address the transportation and income barriers to fresh food access, making it easier for farmers to move their produce to more marginalized areas and to reduce prices for low-income communities.

One potential starting place for your food hub is to identify a market that would be difficult for you to satisfy on your own, but possible with the aggregated growing power of several farmers. For example, Soul Fire Farm was approached by a prison requesting hundreds of pounds of dried spices. This request presented a serious ethical conundrum; while we stand opposed to the prison industrial complex, we stand proudly for providing fresh, affordable, local food to poor, marginalized people - people who overwhelmingly comprise the prison population. However, the quantity required by the potential wholesale market exceeded our growing capacity. Instead of declining to provide food to local people, we could coordinate with other farmers to meet the demand through a regional food hub. Consider that there are several potential wholesale markets in your community, including schools, universities, grocery stores, hospitals, elder care facilities, and food processing companies. It is important to note that all of the participating farmers need to decide upon a consistent variety, growing method, and harvesting technique so that the finished product has the uniformity demanded by the wholesale customer. We also want to emphasize that many food hubs do not currently have a social justice mission and do not put a premium on serving low-income communities. As such, if you choose to partner with a food hub you may want to engage in advocacy to better align the hub’s mission and work with the imperative of food justice. One example of a food hub that actively works in service of social justice is the [Capital Roots’ food hub](#), which serves New York’s Capital Region.

Another potential starting place for your food hub is to gather your farming community and work together to find a market for your existing crops. [Corbin Hill Food Project](#), founded by Black social entrepreneur

Dennis Derryck in 2010, combines the produce of 30 family-owned New York farms to provide fresh food to over 47,000 vulnerable individuals in greater New York City. Derryck observed that Schoharie County, NY farmers had limited markets while the majority of NYC residents were ignored as customers by the so called “good food movement.” Leveraging funds from institutional partners and foundations, Derryck created a food hub to aggregate produce and distribute it to NYC individuals at an affordable price. Further, he is working to create micro food hubs to aggregate the products of Bronx community gardeners and turn them into value add products like hot sauce.<sup>21</sup>

### Strategy #3: Payment Options

You can adopt a number of strategies to ensure a steady source of income for your farm while providing affordable food for the neediest communities, especially through CSAs.

**Government Benefit Programs** – First, you can apply to become an approved vendor for government benefit programs that help low-income people pay for food. Government benefits programs can support your efforts to serve low-income communities by providing a source of revenue to the farm while simultaneously addressing the affordability issues that are barriers to food access. We discuss these programs in more detail in the next section, which includes links to online applications. If you participate in a farmers market, we recommend that your market provides free SNAP eligibility screenings to encourage more local residents to take advantage of SNAP benefits; growing the local community of SNAP recipients can build your capacity to serve low-income people. Contact your market operator or administrator to encourage them to conduct SNAP eligibility screenings if your market doesn’t already do so.

**Revolving Loan Payments** – Around the country, many farmers have set-up revolving loan payment systems to cover the upfront costs of operating a CSA in low-income communities where people can’t afford to pay the full cost of a share prior to the CSA season. For instance, [The Chelsea CSA Project](#) in Chelsea, NY obtained a \$4,000 grant from Hunger Action Network (HAN) to help pay the upfront costs of CSA shares for its low-income members at the beginning of the season. Members then pay for their shares on a bi-weekly basis, replenishing the fund. [Canticle Farm](#) CSA in Allegany, NY also received funds from HAN for a similar program. Canticle Farm CSA uses funds from the HAN to cover farm inputs at the beginning of the season, and then replenishes this fund throughout the season as CSA members pay for their shares every week. “In addition to flexible payment options, Canticle farms also offers members with annual income below \$25,000, those on Medicaid, those on Social Security, those on SNAP, or those who live in public housing to participate in a work share program. For every hour a low income member works on the farm, they receive a \$6 discount from their share price.”<sup>22</sup> While this approach has its benefits and can be implemented with the intention of empowering the community, we want to note that making poor people work for their food in this way could undermine the equity objectives of a local food justice initiative and could reinforce power structures that have long made food access precarious in low-income communities. If you can avoid work requirements, we strongly recommend that you do so. If you opt for a work requirement model, we recommend that you work with the food recipients to identify leadership and skill development objectives to ensure that their labor empowers them to achieve their own self-defined ends.

In covering upfront costs, a revolving loan fund can also enable you to leverage SNAP in support of CSAs, in spite of the restrictions on when SNAP payments can be disbursed. For instance, the farmers of [Uprising Organics](#) in Bellingham, WA raised a literal and figurative seed fund through their sales of organic seeds to pay for early season planting for eight shares. They replenished this fund through weekly member payments (\$10 per week for an individual; \$15 per week for couples or a small family; and \$20 per week for a full family share).

**Shareholder and Farm Subsidized Payments** – You can equitably structure your CSA payment system to ensure that low-income community members can participate. For instance, [El South Bronx CSA](#) in New York offers a sliding scale option for CSA members so that higher-income people in the community are charged prices that are higher than the actual cost of the CSA while low-income members are charged prices that are less than the actual cost. Restaurants are also charged slightly higher prices. The [Groundwork Lawrence Share-a-Share](#) program in Lawrence, MA financed low-income farm shares by giving higher-income members the option to make tax-deductible donations towards a fund that provides shares for people at a reduced price. The program raised at least \$10,000 annually over multiple years. Similarly, the [Healthy Food For All](#) collaborative in Ithaca New York holds “Harvest Dinners” once a month, which are “nights of farm-to-table meals, local spirits, and community fun with all proceeds going to the subsidy of CSA shares for low income families.”<sup>23</sup> Four tickets to the dinners cover the cost of one family CSA share. Harvest Dinners have been remarkably effective in leveraging the community’s resources to ensure that low-income community members have access to healthy local food.

Other local food initiatives rely upon sales from one area of their operations to partially subsidize food for local low-income people. For instance, the Rochester Roots School-Community Garden Project in Rochester, NY gives local students the hands-on opportunity to learn how to garden, sells this fresh local food to local residents and restaurants, and then uses the proceeds from these sales to cover the costs of CSA shares. Following this model, you can explore using sales from one component of your business to partially subsidize a local effort to distribute fresh food to low-income communities.

**Subsidized Shares for Seniors and People with Diet Related Illness** – You can also adopt strategies to subsidize payments for people in particular need of healthy food, notably seniors and people with diet related illnesses. Increasingly across the country, doctors are working with non-profits, hospitals, and local farmers markets to prescribe local healthy food, often in the form of a CSA share, to people plagued by a range of nutritional and diet-related diseases. For instance, Wholesome Wave’s Fruit and Veggies Prescription Program (FVRx) empowers doctors to prescribe locally grown food in marginalized communities throughout the country, bringing down the cost of local purchasing for people in need. Several cities and hospitals in various states also run similar programs. Connecting with farmers markets that participate in these prescription programs can strengthen your efforts to get fresh food to marginalized people. You can also work to connect the farmers markets that you already participate in with local food prescription initiatives to develop new streams of revenue to help poor people purchase food. You may also want to connect with local government-run programs that pay for CSA shares for older residents, such as the Senior Farm Share Vermont and Senior Farm Share Maine programs. We do want to note, though, that these programs rely on robust fundraising efforts and, for this reason, may not be suitable for smaller food access initiatives or coalitions that don’t have the same fundraising capacities.

If there aren't existing government programs or non-governmental organizations that link the healthcare system with fresh food in your area, you can explore working with local healthcare practitioners to start your own initiative. At Soul Fire, we've launched such an effort. We have the good fortune of having our family doctor on our board of directors. She noticed that her patients, who recently immigrated to the area through a refugee resettlement program, were quickly relinquishing their healthy, vegetable-rich cultural foods due to the lack of affordable and accessible fresh food options in their area. If we could provide a reliable, affordable supply of vegetables to these neighbors, they could continue to cook their traditional foods and maintain their health. This doctor leveraged institutional money from the community health clinic to help subsidize the farm shares and to provide translation services.

Similarly, [Rock Steady Farm](#) in Millerton, NY partners with the [North East Community Center](#) (NECC) to distribute over seventy CSA shares at three emergency food shelters throughout Dutchess County. NECC raised the money through a grant from the Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley and pays the farmers the full price of the CSA share. This supports the financial viability of the farm while ensuring food access for the most vulnerable members of the community. (We further discuss this partnership in the next section.) Nonprofit organizations, schools, daycares, medical facilities, elder care facilities, and residential facilities are potential institutional partners who may be able to leverage funding sources to purchase farm fresh food for their clientele.

You can also develop approaches to pricing that distribute your revenue in ways that support people in particular need of healthy food. [Phat Beets Produce](#), a food justice collective in Oakland, CA that operates farmers markets and CSAs, has effectively spearheaded this sort of equitable approach to pricing through their Beet Bux initiative. Beet Bux is subsidized by their CSA program; for each full CSA share purchased, Phat Beets provides a \$2 Beet Bux voucher for a family fighting a diet-related illness for use at the Phat Beets Produce farmers market. In this way, the program strategically distributes revenues to help people in need purchase life-sustaining fruits and vegetables.

**Matching Government Funds** – We highly recommend that you connect with farmers markets in your area that participate in matching government funding programs, especially those funded through FINI. These programs dramatically improve the food purchasing power of poor communities and can considerably bolster your farm's revenues. For example, the University of Southern California's Ecology Center pilot program [Market Match](#) used FINI's matching funds to double the value of SNAP dollars at farmers markets and other "farm-direct" settings in California. In one year, Market Match had served over 105,000 customers and "more than 80 percent of farmers reported increased sales...and nearly 40 percent indicated that this demand was leading them to increase the scope of their operations."<sup>24</sup>

If you participate in a farmers market that is not funded through FINI or a matching program, we recommend that you consider coordinating with the market administrator and other local entities, including local philanthropic foundations, to create a plan and apply for matching funds. Public and private funders prefer to fund projects where their support leverages other resources. In other words, a government agency (especially the USDA) and private foundations are more likely to fund your food access initiative if they know you have a plan in place to secure funds from another agency or foundation.

## Strategy #4: Accessible Location

While it may be intuitive, we cannot stress enough that identifying an accessible and visible location for farmers markets and farm stands is key to reaching low-income people who are disproportionately isolated from food retailers, as we discussed in Section 1. Surveys conducted by the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) consistently cited location and convenience as factors contributing to whether or not people shopped at farmers markets. PPS recommends that to be truly sustainable, a market needs to be integrated into “the fabric of the surrounding community.”<sup>25</sup> Toward this end, we recommend talking with community leaders and organizations, local municipal planning agencies, your local chamber of commerce, and your friends and neighbors to identify places where your target consumer base - and low-income people in particular - shop, congregate, and travel. This can inform your efforts to identify CSA distribution centers and zones, farmers market locations, and roads and streets for farm stands. Following PPS, we also recommend that you locate your market by community institutions that community members frequently attend or pass by, such as banks, schools, and houses of worship.

Furthermore, accessibility is not simply a matter of minimizing the distance that one has to travel or situating your operations in places that people frequent. It’s also a matter of creating spaces that people want to travel to and take pride in or spaces that people connect to or see themselves in. For instance, the transformation of vacant land into urban farms and farmers markets in Cleveland gave spaces that were once looked down upon a new vibrant character, changing people’s perceptions and therefore their willingness to spend time in these spaces. Furthermore, a report put out by the [Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition](#) found that this sort of transformation “has a contagious effect as it inspires others to plant their own gardens and create green spaces.”<sup>26</sup> Along these lines, connecting your consumer operations with a community revitalization effort can do more than simply make your food accessible to low-income people. It can also cultivate an ecosystem of farmers and growers, creating a social environment that better values local fresh food in the process.

## Strategy #5: Marketing and Community Engagement

Developing equitable pricing, finding accessible locations, and forging local partnerships are all central to a successful food access initiative, but these actions by themselves will not attract low-income community members if your community doesn’t know you’re around. For this reason, effective marketing and community engagement are integral to a successful farm operation that works toward food justice. We want to emphasize here that marketing and community engagement are two separate but mutually reinforcing promotional practices. Whereas many small businesses focus most of their promotional efforts on traditional marketing, our efforts to redress food injustice necessitate that we go beyond building a brand and disseminating information to a potential consumer base; we must also actively and directly engage the marginalized communities that we strive to empower.

**Outreach** – PPS has found that effective farmers markets must regularly conduct “marketing and outreach to local consumers about the location, time and acceptance of SNAP and WIC benefits.”<sup>27</sup> While

it may seem tedious and even unnecessary to constantly reiterate the basic characteristics of your farmers market, the consistent dissemination of this sort of information to the general public can enable you to successfully target low-income consumers. You should also highlight the seasonal foods that you have for sale and other unique attributes of your operation - what makes your market special.

**Marketing** – Research has found that the more media outlets you can use to disseminate this information, the better. If possible, utilize radio, blogs, social media, and community organizations to get your message out there. In addition to publicizing the basic facets of your operation, you may want to explicitly market yourself as a farmer who seeks to address local community needs and to ensure greater local access to healthy foods so that your brand focuses on overcoming the barriers to food access that we discussed above. We have always publicized our social justice mission in promoting our community food and farming operations and in building our brand, centering our marketing on meeting the needs of our community. Soul Fire Farm’s [LOVE NOTES](#) newsletter is one such example of social justice marketing.

**Listening** – Successful community engagement largely involves taking the pulse of your community and identifying how you can best serve them. At the core of this is the “design thinking” approach to communication. This approach acknowledges both our own ability to listen and to engage the community in defining what they see as their needs and how best to meet them. Toward this end, several effective farmers markets conduct consumer surveys to identify what foods and food services their communities need most. Surveys are a strong tool for both eliciting helpful feedback and cultivating a deeper connection with your community, ensuring you’re most responsive to their needs.

**Relationship Building** – At Soul Fire Farm, almost all of the members of the Ujaama farm share joined because of a personal connection with one of our farmers. There is no short cut to building relationships. The first step is to “show up.” During the winter season, we recommend that you spend as much time as possible attending community meetings, getting involved in neighborhood associations, and lending your skills and time to projects that are important to members of the community. When you tangibly demonstrate your commitment to the community, people are more likely to show interest in your farm and its products.

**Engaging the Youth** – We recommend that you make an effort to explicitly engage with the young people in your community. Youth are stereotypically disinterested in healthy food, are seldom the breadwinners in their home, and don’t have access to EBT cards, so it’s easy to overlook them. However, many successful farming operations and farmers markets carve out a space for young people from low-income backgrounds, recruiting them to run market stands and to help with community outreach while also providing opportunities for them to learn to cultivate the land. Young people who work with farmers in these ways often serve as a conduit between their families and the farm, encouraging their parents to purchase fresh food locally, directly delivering free produce that they grow and sell to their homes, and infusing market spaces with the sense of vibrancy and collective ownership that often emerges organically from intergenerational spaces. Put simply, you can cultivate greater community interest and involvement



in your farming operations when you make a concerted effort to work with young people. Furthermore, working with young people from low-income communities can ensure that the next generation is supportive of and actively engaged in local food access efforts, making our collective work for a local food system all the more sustainable in the future. If you plan to recruit young people to help with your operations, we recommend that you explore partnering with local schools or youth organizations which can provide teenagers and adolescents with a stipend, community service credit, or other forms of compensation.



*Youth food justice leaders are experts at promoting healthy food in their own communities.*

## Section 4: Government Resources for Serving Low-income Communities

There are a number of strategies, best practices, and resources to overcome the barriers to fresh food access that we identified in the previous sections. This section will focus specifically on overcoming the income barrier through government programs that offset the cost of food for poor people. We provide an overview of these programs and how you can benefit from them.

### Program #1: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

If you want to serve low-income communities, we highly recommend that you apply to become an approved vendor for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). As the most widely used food assistance program in the U.S., SNAP is essential to overcoming the income barrier to fresh food in poorer communities. It provides participating households with benefits based on their income, resources, employment, and immigration status, among other considerations. Recipients are given assistance based on a predetermined formula focused on gross and net monthly income. These benefits are given in the form of debit cards, known as EBT (electronic benefit transfer) cards that can be used in stores, markets, and other participating food vendors. In addition to EBT, you can collect paper vouchers from SNAP recipients, which may be necessary if you do not have direct interaction with recipients in a place with a wired phone connection, such as a recipient's doorstep (if you're running a mobile operation). At Soul Fire Farm, we collect these paper vouchers and redeem them at our EBT terminal back at the office.

SNAP-authorized vendors are generally defined as entities that sell “food for home preparation and consumption” and meets at least one of two criteria:

- Vendors must “Offer for sale, on a continuous basis, at least three varieties of qualifying foods in each of the following four staple food groups, with perishable foods in at least two of the categories: meat, poultry or fish, bread or cereal, vegetables or fruits, dairy products  
OR
- More than one half (50%) of the total dollar amount of all retail sales (food, nonfood, gas and services) sold in the store must be from the sale of eligible staple foods.”<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, to be eligible to accept EBT as a farmer, you must be involved in either of the following two SNAP vendor-approved models:

- *Farmers Market*, which the USDA defines as: “Two or more farmer-producers that sell their own agricultural products directly to the general public at a fixed location, which includes fruits and vegetables, meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, and grains.”<sup>29</sup>  
OR

- *Direct Marketing Farmers*, which the USDA defines as: “Farmer-producers that sell their own agricultural products directly to the general public, which includes fruits and vegetables, meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, and grains.”<sup>30</sup>

While CSAs cannot be verified as SNAP-authorized retailers, SNAP benefits can be used to pay for a CSA as long as it’s not more than 14 days prior to the delivery of food (depending on correlating state laws). This time constraint can complicate the payment operations of CSAs that serve low-income communities, but several CSAs have developed resourceful approaches to access EBT in spite of it. We will discuss these approaches in the next two sections of the guide.

If you meet the eligibility requirements, you can apply online to become a SNAP-authorized vendor (even if you plan to access EBT through CSAs). The application takes approximately 15 minutes and it has three steps:

- Step 1: [Register for a USDA Authentication account](#)
- Step 2: [Complete an online application](#). Make sure that you have your estimated sales data on hand before you begin the application. Also, make sure to submit the various supporting documents that the application requires.
- Step 3: Check application status after it’s submitted at the same link from step 2.

It usually takes up to 45 days for applications to be approved. For more details on participating in the SNAP program as a retailer, please reference the [Retailer Training Guide](#) with the accompanying [video](#) (both can be found in English and Spanish).



*Leveraging government benefits can help insure that ALL people have access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food. This is a typical late summer share for members of Soul Fire Farm’s Ujaama program.*

## **Program #2: Women, Infants and Children (WIC)**

WIC is a grant program serving pregnant and postpartum women, infants (up to their 1st birthday) and children (up to their 5th birthday). It is run by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), but state and tribal agencies (as opposed to federal agencies) determine the guidelines for accessing WIC funds. While WIC is primarily a voucher-based food assistance program, its services and scope vary from state to state. Participants can use their WIC benefits to purchase infant cereal, iron-fortified adult cereal, vitamin C-rich fruit or vegetable juice, eggs, milk, cheese, peanut butter, dried and canned beans/peas, canned fish, soy-based beverages, tofu, fruits and vegetables, baby foods, and whole-wheat bread. Some states allow farmers markets, farm stores, and CSAs to accept WIC benefits as payment for food, and others don't. In addition to this variability in eligibility guidelines, the process of accepting WIC benefits also varies from state to state.

WIC Farmer's Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) provides additional coupons to WIC participants that they can use to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at participating farmers markets. The administration of this program is dependent on state agencies, such as a state's agricultural or health departments, which must apply to the FNS each year to receive funding for the FMNP. These agencies then set specific guidelines for farmers who wish to participate. In addition to eligibility criteria, many states have other guidelines for participating in the FMNP. For instance, some states explicitly prohibit several items from being sold under the FMNP. If you're interested in participating in the FMNP, we recommend that you carefully review all of your state's guidelines before applying. Successful participation in the FMNP and other government programs requires that you be organized, follow instructions, and pay attention to details.

### State-Specific Requirements for the WIC FMNP: New York Case Study

If you haven't worked extensively with public agencies and bureaucracies before, participating in government programs can take some getting used to. Don't fret, however! WIC and other similar programs simply require that you follow their guidelines and timelines. To give you a sense of the sort of requirements that participating farmers must adhere to, let's quickly review the WIC FMNP guidelines for one state, New York, which currently has many participating farmers (**remember, each state has different guidelines**):

- ✓ Eligibility Definitions: The first step in adhering to government program guidelines is reviewing the program's definition for eligible participants. In New York State, to be considered a farmer who can accept WIC through FMNP you must be a "bonafide" farmer who meets the following criteria:
  - You harvest local fruits, vegetables and/or culinary herbs from land you lease or own.
  - You are "Local" meaning you are based in NY, NJ, CT, MA, VT or PA
  - 50% (by volume) of your product sold at your market stand is grown on the land you own or lease
- ✓ Application Process: After determining that you meet the eligibility requirements, you can submit an application to the program, *which includes details of your crop plan*. (A link to the application can be found [here](#).)
- ✓ Training: Go through an in-person training for your first year in the program (you will have to read a copy of the training rules for all following years)
- ✓ Promote Program Benefits: If approved, once you receive an authorization package from the program, hang a sign given to you in the package at your stand telling people that you accept farmers market checks.
- ✓ Staff Training and Bank Enrollment: You will also need to train your staff and enroll in a check program at your bank to accept benefits.
- ✓ Renewal: The State requires that you apply annually to renew participation in the program each year

More information on New York State's FMNP requirements [can be found here](#).

Outside of farmers markets, you may want to accept WIC directly through other farm entities such as a farm stand, a CSA, or a mobile market. The process of doing so varies considerably from state to state; we recommend that you visit your state's agriculture or health department website or contact the leadership of the WIC program in your state to learn the particular WIC requirements for operations other than a farmers market.

### Program #3: Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Grant Program (FINI)

The federal Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Grant Program (FINI) supports projects that incentivize fruit and vegetable consumption by SNAP participants at point of purchase. Funded projects are usually collaborative, bringing together multiple organizations and community stakeholders focused on access to fresh food in a given geographic area. FINI classifies eligible projects for funding into three categories: (1) pilot projects (up to \$100,000 over one year); (2) multi-year projects (less than \$500,000 for up to 4 years); and (3) multi-year large scale (over \$500,000 for up to 4 years). FINI was established by the 2014 U.S. Farm Bill as a collaboration between the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). While funding is variable, FINI has awarded tens of millions of dollars of grants in its first operating years. Applications are usually accepted during a roughly 6-week time period at the end of the year, between September and December.

FINI only funds projects that:

1. "Have the support of the State agency responsible for the administration of SNAP;
2. Increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables by low-income consumers participating in SNAP by providing incentives at the point of purchase;
3. Operate through authorized SNAP retailers, and in compliance with all relevant SNAP regulations and operating requirements;
4. Agree to participate in the FINI comprehensive program evaluation;
5. Ensure that the same terms and conditions apply to purchases made by individuals with SNAP benefits and with incentives under the FINI grants program as apply to purchases made by individuals who are not members of households receiving benefits as provided in 7 C.F.R. 278.2(b); and
6. Include effective and efficient technologies for benefit redemption systems that may be replicated in other states and communities."<sup>31</sup>

While FINI supports a range of food access projects in low-income communities, it presents a promising avenue of support for farmer-led projects in particular. Farmers Markets, Direct Marketing Farmers, and Non-profit Food Buying Cooperatives are all eligible to participate in FINI projects, insofar as they accept SNAP benefits. If you do not accept SNAP at the time of application, you can still [apply here](#) and be eligible for funding. Community Supported Agriculture is NOT considered a type of eligible food retailer but instead "a way of doing business." Accordingly, CSAs can be funded through a project that receives FINI support as long as the CSA is connected with a SNAP-authorized Farmers Market, Direct Marketing Farmer or Non-profit Food Buying Cooperative. In these cases, the SNAP retailers must adhere to the same guidelines for accepting EBT through CSAs, but they are not required to refund SNAP benefits.

It's important to note that FINI usually awards grants to collaborative efforts with many partners involved; FINI-funded projects are likely far larger than anything that your farm can individually spearhead. As such, we strongly encourage you to cultivate partnerships with local organizations before pursuing a FINI grant.

Before applying for a FINI grant, you should familiarize yourself with the program's guidelines. In particular, we recommend that you review the program's definition of "a FINI eligible fruit or vegetable"

to ensure that your crops and goods can be covered under the program. FINI defines a fruit or vegetable as “any variety of fresh, canned, dried, or frozen whole or cut fruits and vegetables without added sugars, fats, or oils, and salt (i.e., sodium).”<sup>32</sup> Vegetable- and fruit-based products that are *not* eligible include herbs and spices, fruit punch (less than 100% fruit juice), honey, ketchup and other condiments, and “multiple ingredient foods that are not primarily composed of qualifying fruits and vegetables (such as pastries containing fruit, frozen pizza or burritos).”<sup>33</sup>

Finally, we recommend that you familiarize yourself with the language that successful applicants use to frame their projects. Successful applications:

- focus on “incentivizing” healthy food purchases;
- explicitly state project objectives;
- include quantitative metrics; and
- lay out how exactly program funds will be spent.

Here are some notable examples of project summaries that can give you a sense of how to effectively frame and position your proposal in an application:

- *Grant Recipient:* Santa Fe Community Foundation, Santa Fe, NM  
*Grant Amount:* \$100,000  
*Program Description:* MoGro's Healthy SNAP project provides a double value price incentive (spend \$10, receive \$10 value) for weekly fresh produce boxes for each participating SNAP family.
- *Grant Recipient:* New Mexico Farmers Marketing Association, Santa Fe, NM  
*Grant Amount:* \$99,999  
*Program Description:* "Snap to Health: Double Up Food Bucks New Mexico" will increase consumption of fruits and vegetables by low-income consumers by providing SNAP incentives at farmers markets and farm stands, along with targeted, direct-to-consumer marketing that communicates the nutritional and economic benefits of consuming locally grown produce.
- *Grant Recipient:* Market Umbrella, New Orleans, LA  
*Grant Amount:* \$378,326  
*Program Description:* Increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables for low-income New Orleans residents through the initiation of SNAP incentive programs in a locally and minority-owned grocery store (Circle Foods) and year-round expansion of incentives at four Crescent City Farmers Markets.
- *Grant Recipient:* Farmers Market Fund, Portland, OR  
*Grant Amount:* \$499,172  
*Program Description:* Increase the purchase of locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables by SNAP participants by providing dollar for dollar incentives of up to \$10 at Oregon farmers markets and for CSA shares up to \$250 per household per season.
- *Grant Recipient:* Wholesome Wave Foundation Charitable Ventures, Inc., Bridgeport, CT  
*Grant Amount:* \$3,775,700  
*Program Description:* Wholesome Wave will increase purchases of fruits and vegetables by SNAP consumers by providing incentives at the point of purchase in 17 states and the District of

Columbia, reaching approximately 110,000 SNAP consumers over three years. The project will benefit 3,400 small and mid-size farm vendors, work with 364 farmers markets, 23 CSA programs, and 38 mobile markets. Many of the projects are located in underserved communities, Promise Zones, and StrikeForce communities.

- A longer list of previously funded projects can be found [here](#) and [here](#) (under Past Years Awardees).

## **Program #4: Community Food Project Competitive Grants Program (CFP)**

The federal Community Food Project Competitive Grants Program (CFP) funds nonprofit organizations, tribal organizations, and food program service providers for projects that:

- “Meet the food needs of low-income individuals through food distribution, outreach to increase participation in federally assisted nutrition programs, or improve access to food as part of a comprehensive service;
- Increase the self-reliance of communities to meet their own food needs;
- Promote comprehensive responses to local food access, farm, and nutrition issues; and
- Meet specific state, local, or neighborhood food and agricultural needs, including equipment necessary for the efficient operation of a project, planning for long-term solutions, or innovative marketing activities that mutually benefit agricultural producers and low-income consumers.”<sup>34</sup>

CFP is administered by USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), but they require matching funding from another funding source, so you should only consider applying to CFP for projects where there is a high likelihood of securing other grants or resources. CFP grants cannot be awarded to individual farmers, but you can pursue these grants in partnership with eligible organizations. (As aforementioned, partnerships are an effective way of securing governmental and private funding for your efforts to serve low-income communities, which will be discussed further in the next section of this guide.) According to the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, “examples of CFP projects include, but are not limited to: community food assessments, GIS analysis, community gardens with market stands, value chain projects, food hubs, farmers markets, farm-to-institution projects, and marketing and consumer cooperatives.”<sup>35</sup>

NIFA usually releases an annual Request for Applications (RFAs) with a submission deadline one month after the release. The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition recommends that applicants begin to prepare a proposal in advance of the RFA to ensure that their application will be in good enough shape to be competitive. Visit [NIFA’s website here](#) for more information on how to apply.

## **Program #5: Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program (FMLFPP)**

The federal Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program (FMLFPP) funds initiatives that promote and market food producers to the general public through competitive grants. FMLFPP grants can



cover a range of marketing activities from consumer research and analysis to physical infrastructure to direct customer outreach and education, and they must be used in support of venues or outlets that directly engage with consumers, such as CSAs, farmers markets, roadside stands, and even online food sales platforms. These grants must be used in support of efforts that benefit at least two farmers through a shared food distribution channel, so you cannot apply to receive funding solely for your individual operation.

The program also makes grants to “local and regional food business enterprises that act as intermediaries between producers and consumers by aggregating, storing, processing, and/or distributing locally or regionally produced food products to meet market demand.”<sup>36</sup> Intermediaries include “food hubs, aggregators, distributors, wholesalers, and processors, along with value-added production enterprises, such as shared-use kitchen or kitchen incubator operations.”<sup>37</sup> The program prioritizes funding for projects that serve low-income people or others with barriers to food access and is administered by the USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS).

## **Program #6: Other Marketing and Promotional Initiatives**

In addition to the FMLFPP, USDA AMS also runs the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP), a direct marketing initiative that aims “to increase domestic consumption of, and access to, locally and regionally produced agricultural products, and to develop new market opportunities for farm and ranch operations serving local markets by developing, improving, expanding, and providing outreach, training, and technical assistance to, or assisting in the development, improvement, and expansion of, domestic farmers markets, roadside stands, community-supported agriculture programs, agritourism activities, and other direct producer-to-consumer market opportunities.”<sup>38</sup> Grants can range between \$50,000 and \$500,000 and FMPP projects can last up to 36 months. Check out [this link here](#) to learn more and to apply for the FMPP grant. USDA AMS also runs the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP), which offers slightly smaller grants than FMPP (the minimum grant is \$25,000) for the planning or implementation of local efforts to increase consumption of local food and “develop new market opportunities for farm and ranch operations serving local markets.”<sup>39</sup> LFPP requires that applicants have secured at least 25% of the total project cost from other sources. Check out [this link here](#) to learn more and to apply for the LFPP grant.

In addition to these programs, the federal government offers similar programs that provide resources to local and small-scale farmers, many of which can be tapped to better serve low-income communities. A longer list of grant programs authorized through the U.S. Farm Bill can be found [here](#). These programs can considerably enhance your capacity to serve low-income communities and grow your business, but to successfully access these programs’ resources you will likely have to do more than simply fill out a grant application. As we suggested above, partnerships are key to leveraging government funds, and you often need to have other resources or payment structures in place to ensure that your applications for federal programs are successful.

Farmers usually do not have the type of expertise to spearhead these federal grant applications, but you can approach community nonprofits and encourage them to apply, saying something like “I can commit to

growing X dollars/pounds/boxes worth of food for low income families if we can secure a grant to cover the wholesale cost of that food.” In that way, you can focus on what you do best – grow food – and rely on your partners to do the administrative work of making that food affordable.

## Section 5: Case studies

To illustrate and further contextualize the best practices that we discussed in the previous sections, we will now close this guide with a few case studies. These case studies represent successful examples of overcoming the barriers that we discussed earlier in this guide. These case studies also offer insights on the persistent challenges in getting locally grown affordable fresh food to low-income people. Before we go into these case studies, we want to highlight a few trends that cut across these studies and through other prominent examples of successful and innovative local food access initiatives:

- Partnerships are imperative to receive funding
- Grants from private philanthropy can offset the cost barrier to fresh food in low-income communities
- Farmers need to understand the particular needs and schedules of local low-income people and plan their markets and CSAs accordingly
- Direct distribution to low-income consumers (vis-à-vis CSAs) are effective in overcoming the transportation barrier
- Distribution at places where low-income people congregate can help address the challenge of market proximity
- Participation in SNAP is key

### Case Study #1: Rock Steady Farm Partnership with Northeast Community Center, Millerton, NY

#### Overview

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Rock Steady Farm partners with Northeast Community Center (NECC) to distribute approximately seventy CSA shares at three local emergency food shelters throughout Dutchess County, NY. NECC pays the Rock Steady farmers directly on a month-to-month basis from July to February from funds allocated to them from a grant through the Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley (CFHV).

#### History

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Prior to 2013, NECC had informally fundraised and purchased produce from farmers markets and donated it to the Millerton Food Pantry. NECC had received funds through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to conduct a food security survey focusing on the barriers of food access for low-income communities in their area. However, the terms of the USDA grant prohibited NECC from using this funding for food. In 2013, NECC applied for funding from the Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley (CFHV)'s Farm Fresh Food Grant Program, which aimed to overcome barriers to food access in Hudson Valley communities. NECC won a three-year \$75,000 grant to launch the Fresh Food Pantry program (FFP). The grant was also supplemented by private donations.<sup>42</sup>

NECC worked with local farmers and analyzed the data from their food security survey to create a model that would sustain symbiotic relationships between the producers, distributors and the community. In talking with the farmers, they learned that distributing food in the CSA style would be convenient, as the farmers were already packing produce shares for their own members. Additionally, farmers noted that receiving full cost for the produce was important to sustain their business so they agreed to pay the farmers in full on a monthly or bi-weekly basis throughout the distribution period. The NECC food security surveys indicated that transportation was a barrier for low-income residents to receive their boxes, so NECC decided to bring the boxes to places where the community members would already be. With these guidelines in place, the Fresh Food Pantry Program began distributing CSA boxes on a monthly basis at three different emergency food pantries in Dutchess County in 2013.<sup>40</sup>

### **Current Scope of Program**

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Currently, the FFP brings CSA shares to two different emergency food pantries: thirty boxes to the Pine Plains Community Food Locker and thirty boxes to Vines and Branches Food Pantry in Amenia. According to their [website](#), these shares include “...a full box of assorted seasonal vegetables from Rock Steady Farm in Millerton, Milk from Hudson Valley Fresh, and fresh local eggs.” In addition, ten vegetable-only shares are brought to Dutchess County Community Action Partnership in Dover. Each share contains approximately six items of produce worth \$25, in hopes of providing for two to four people for a week. The summer share distribution runs from July to October. From November to February, the thirty shares are still brought to the same Pine Plains and Amenia locations, but the ten shares are not delivered to Dover Plains. However, “holiday boxes” are packed using produce purchased in bulk from Rock Steady and two other participating farms to offer vegetables with canned goods and other supplies; these boxes are distributed to seventy families at the Millerton Food Pantry in November and December.

Through the CFHV grant, the NECC hired a Program Coordinator for the FFP who manages the logistics of the program and holds community classes and events for participants.

### **Challenges and Impact**

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Betsey McCall, the Food and Farming Program Manager, noted two challenges faced by the program. Initially, the program was set to distribute the CSA shares from the community center, but after a trial period, they realized that bringing the food to where the community members already would be was more effective, as transportation to and from the center was difficult for recipients. They changed the distribution site to local shelters to address this issue. Second, some of the recipients note that some of the produce goes to waste because cooking can be an inconvenience to their schedules. At this point, NECC does not have access to a certified kitchen or other equipment necessary to turn the produce received from farms into prepared foods for the participants; in the future, they hope to be able to offer this option. At this point, there is no specific data that has been collected to quantify the impact of this program. However, it has been repeatedly re-allocated funds from the CFHV and hopes to collect information that will illustrate the impact of the program in the future.

## Additional Notes

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Rock Steady Farm has other partnerships in support of projects similar to the one with NECC. Specifically, they have a fiscal sponsor, The Watershed Center, which enables them to receive tax deductible donations for their annual fundraiser that they organize with Neighbors Helping Neighbors (NHN) in Ancramdale, NY to pay for CSA shares for members of the Ancramdale community.<sup>4142</sup>

## Case Study #2: CSA/Farm Share Program Through Mass in Motion New Bedford (MiM NB), New Bedford, MA

### Overview

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The Mass in Motion initiative is sponsored by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. MiM NB has been around since 2009, and in 2016 began a subsidized local farm CSA program in which it partners with two local farms to bring fresh produce right to the doorsteps of low-income community members.

### Current Scope of Program

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The subsidized CSA program is sponsored by MiM NB, in partnership with New Bedford Housing, the Department of Transitional Assistance, and two farms: [Ashley's Produce at Round Hill Bend Farm](#) and [Apponagansett Farm](#). The funding for the program has come from the [Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation](#). New Bedford is a city surrounded by rural farms, making it idea for CSAs, but low-income people have limited access to transportation, making it difficult to identify CSA pickup locations. For this reason, MiM NB chose to bring CSA shares right to people's doors. MiM NB also offers cooking classes and other community engagement opportunities through the program, and they began providing a fruit add-on to their CSA in response to community demand, which has been a success.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, as the MiM NB explains on their website, the CSA/farmshare

“...allows participants to use their SNAP benefits to pay for their share at the beginning of each month. DTA has created a system – used by many other similar projects – where they automatically deduct the payment at the beginning of each month, which allows low-income individuals to use their SNAP benefits to pay and provides participants with guaranteed fresh produce throughout the entire month – even if they run out of SNAP dollars before the end of the month.”

Community members subscribe to the subsidized shares at a reduced price; in the first year, 2016, a share cost \$80 a month. Half of the price was covered through program funding and the other half was paid by the participant either in cash or with EBT. In 2017, the program maintained this split in costs while offering two different share size options: a small share containing 4 to 6 items at \$48 a month and a large share of 8 to 10 items at \$80 a month. The program also offers a dollar-for-dollar match credited to a participant's EBT account for money spent for a CSA share, funded by the Massachusetts' [Health Incentives Program](#) (HIP). Depending on household size, a participant can receive up to \$80 credited to

their account that can be spent on “SNAP- eligible foods.” The HIP began in April 2017 and will run for a three-year trial period.

## **Challenges and Impact**

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Abigail Hevey, the communications coordinator at Mass in Motion, noted that after surveying community members, MiM NB is leaning towards shifting the model from the CSA share to mobile markets. Many of the people receiving the shares mentioned that the share size was too large for them, and that they are unfamiliar with the type of produce offered in the share. As of 2017, the program still offers the CSA option, but they may end up transitioning completely to the mobile market model in the next few years so that participants can pick their own produce while still having it brought to them directly.

## **Notes**

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Apponagansett Farm also offers two programs through which they offer half priced CSA shares that can be paid for on a weekly basis. One of the projects is funded through a grant from Healthy Shares CSA initiative of [Project Bread](#) in partnership with the [Wellness Connection](#) service at the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center, Inc. The other project is funded again through a [Harvard Pilgrim Health Care](#) grant, called Bay Village Farm Share.

## **Case Study #3: Food Bank of Delaware Community Supported Agriculture Program, Newark, Milford & Wilmington, DE**

### **Overview**

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Two service learning scholars from the University of Delaware (UD) collaborated with the Food Bank of Delaware (FBD) to distribute around 200 local vegetable shares to low-income community members, funded through both state and federal grants.

### **Program Implementation**

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With a \$300,000 USDA Community Food Project grant and a \$75,000 Department of Agriculture grant from the state of Delaware, the two students and FBD began implementing the program. In the first year, FBD bought shares from farmers and distributed them to participants at the FBD locations in Newark and Milford, as well as at the Cool Springs Farmers Market in Wilmington. The community shares for low-income participants cost \$5-10 per week, which could be paid for with EBT and were subsidized in part by sponsored shares bought by other shareholders. The sponsored shares cost \$500, with \$400 going to the actual price of the share and the remaining tax deductible \$100 donated into the funds to pay for the low-income community shares. The season lasted 20 weeks and anyone who picked up at the farmer’s market was given 5 to 10 tokens that they could spend at the farmers market. This was a particularly successful aspect of the program, partly contributing to the market’s revenue increase from \$17,000 the previous year to \$70,000.<sup>44</sup>

## Challenges and Impact

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After the first year of the program in 2013, the model switched from being exclusively sourced by local farms to buying wholesale from a variety of vendors including supermarkets as well as small- and large-scale farms. FBD made this change in response to mixed feedback about the quality and variety of vegetables that participants received in their shares. Buying produce wholesale from different vendors allowed the program manager to purchase produce that was in high demand among CSA recipients. The distribution model remained the same and the number of participants eventually peaked to about 200. By the final year of the program, the food costs (excluding material inputs like transportation and storage) covered themselves completely through the subsidized share model, and several shareholders, particularly the Latinx and working class white communities in the south of the state, noted that the program gave them access to food they had not had access to before.

The program discontinued after the end of the funding term in 2016. Daniel Reyes, one of the student designers of the program who eventually worked for FBD, notes several challenges and design flaws in the program. Retrospectively, he critiques his own approach and wishes he had asked the community what system would work best for them to increase their food access, ultimately so that it would have been designed and run by community shareholders. Daniel also would have chosen community partnerships that had invested more in the program to ensure quality control. Additionally, the FBD's infrastructure was much more catered to storing dry goods rather than fresh produce, so that continually presented obstacles for the program.<sup>45</sup>

### Additional Case Studies:

- [NOFA-VT Farm Share for limited-income Vermonter\(VT\)](#)
- [NOFA-VT Senior Farm Share for limited-income senior \(VT\)](#)
- [State of Maine's Senior Farm Share \(ME\)](#)
- [Cornell Cooperative Extension's Healthy Food For All CSA \(NY\)](#)
- [GardenShare's Bonus Bucks program that can be used towards CSA Payment \(NY\)](#)

## In Closing

We are part of an inexorable web of connection that binds our lives to those in our community, nation, and world. Even as we engage in the sacred work of tucking seeds into soil, we must also leverage our resources to change the structural conditions that keep people in bondage. The challenges before us are monumental. We are not obligated to complete the task of repair, but we are required to act at the intersection of our capability and what the world needs. To maintain silence is to cast our vote for the status quo, to passively endorse a racist and exploitative food system, and to deny ourselves agency over the destiny of our community. To the extent that our resources and physical ability permit, we too are obligated to get our hands dirty in the work of direct mutual aid. Thank you in advance for doing your part.

*With Love and Respect,*

*Soul Fire Farm*



*Thank you for being part of the movement for food justice and community self-determination. All of us at Soul Fire Farm appreciate your commitment.*



## End Notes

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