

Increasing Healthy Food Access: Lessons Learned

Results of the first three years of the Healthy Food Fund Initiative*

Christa Drew, [DAISA Enterprises](#)

Catherine Sands, [Fertile Ground](#)

Introduction

In 2015, the Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation* (“Foundation”) set out to examine the impact of relatively small but highly strategic investments in local fresh food organizations on improving access to healthy food for low- and middle-income households. This three-year initiative, called the Healthy Food Fund (HFF), demonstrated a successful, marked increase in the distribution of healthy local food to target communities, a primary goal of the HFF through the 25 organizations it supported.

Through a competitive application process, the Foundation selected 25 programs from across Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Those selected for funding represented a strategic mix of programs intended to test the possibilities, identify most effective tactics, and share newfound knowledge and best practices. To that end, participating programs were encouraged to be creative in their offerings, e.g. cooking and nutrition classes or sales via co-ops.

DAISA Enterprises, along with Fertile Ground (“DAISA”) worked closely with Foundation staff and the programs to ensure “cross-fertilization” through ready exchange of ideas, techniques and actionable lessons learned.

The following report provides greater details, highlights and key lessons learned of our healthy food mission.

*[The Healthy Food Fund](#) — a three-year local grants program to improve access to fresh, local food —is funded by the Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation.

The Healthy Food Fund Initiative 2015 - 2018

In 2015 the Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation (“Foundation”) launched its Healthy Food Fund (HFF), a three-year initiative providing grants in the \$30,000 - \$60,000 range to 25 nonprofit organizations in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine and New Hampshire. The goal of this initiative was to make fresh, local food more easily accessible and affordable to low-and middle-income families. Organizations selected were already working to expand access and affordability where commercial markets had often failed or were non-existent. The initiative included work to build community food infrastructure as well as innovative programs such as farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), mobile markets, town and urban farms, food banks, and gleaning (collecting and diverting excess fresh food from sources like farms, CSAs and farmers markets to better serve those in need).

Also, several projects began or expanded related skill building programs for customers of their food activities: family gardening classes, cooking lessons, grocery store tours, and nutrition education classes. The HFF initiative intentionally included a variety of projects with diverse strategies, to reflect the range of activities in communities, as well as to inform the Foundation as to which local strategies are most effective. The strategies of the 25 projects were generally divided into sales (cash and/or SNAP/WIC/other incentives) or free/at no-cost-to-recipients.



HFF included a three-year evaluation by DAISA to record, analyze and report the efforts and outcomes of the initiative. In addition to grant funds, HFF provided the projects with monthly and often more frequent learning opportunities, such as:

- Online discussions and trainings
- Assistance with data reporting
- Fundraising training events
- Assistance with media relations and tracking
- Speaking and financial support at fundraising events
- Troubleshooting project strategies during annual visits by Foundation staff

Finally, every year, the Foundation hosted a conference for project staff and board members to share successes and get advice from their peers to improve their programs.

Funding for the first group of HFF group projects ended in 2018, leaving a series of lessons learned as well as some leading food access strategies that continue to be funded by the Foundation at the time of this review (summer 2019).

Creating Goals for Strong Outcomes

HFF’s Theory of Change was to improve the food environment in households in target communities through local nonprofit direct-to-consumer food access strategies, as well as consumer/household skill-building. This initiative was not focused on measurable changes in consumer health status nor was it focused on changes in the larger food systems or building a multi-sector movement for changing the larger food system.

To assess progress across the four HFF goals, DAISA launched the *Good Food Tracker*, their online platform to gather and report the quantitative and qualitative data from each project.

Indicators were adjusted annually to include feedback from grantee project staff on usefulness and project priorities. Ongoing conversations and visits to the organizations and their communities also informed the overall evaluation strategy.

Healthy Food Fund Goals

- Measurable impact on community food environment
- Increase distribution of healthy local food in target communities
- Capture & share learnings amongst cohort & beyond
- Increase Foundation visibility

DAISA engaged project staff in a robust learning community to make timely use of the data, as it became available, that complemented the data collection. This made it possible to continually develop skills and share best practices to gain the most timely and positive effect throughout all groups. Driven also by the needs and interests of the project teams, DAISA also offered additional learning opportunities through trainings, expert presentations and video discussions. Other resources and tools included an online toolkit, email listserv, and in-person coaching.

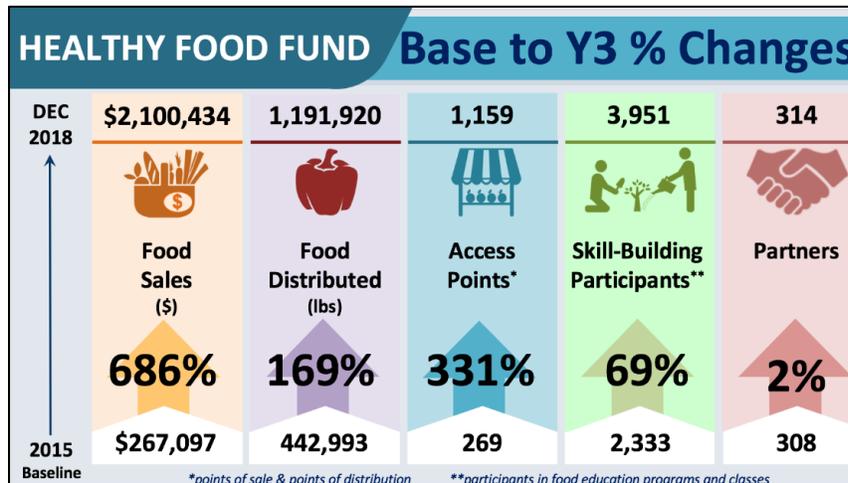
Outcomes

HFF’s efforts yielded important insights and innovations. Beyond achieving the immediate goals, positive outcomes and lasting improvements benefited the entire HFF community. Organizations were able to achieve greater program efficacy, invest in inclusive, diverse staff and infrastructure, and leverage their experiences to boost community engagement.

Combined outcomes of the 25 HFF projects demonstrate a successful, marked increase in the distribution of healthy local food to target communities, a primary goal of the HFF.

- 4.6 million pounds of fresh, local food sold/distributed to 50 New England communities
- The number of places to buy/receive healthy food increased four times (compared to baseline)
- 4,000 people participated in growing, selecting, cooking healthier foods

The chart below shows the actual and percentage increases of the five major data points from the December 2015 baseline to the December 2018 conclusion.



Key Takeaways

- **Putting fresh food “on the road” wins the day.** Mobile Markets proved to be a leading food access strategy, with nimble responsiveness to customer requirements¹. Across their communities, HFF’s five Mobile Markets were also able to transcend cultural barriers in their respective communities by providing more ethnic produce options, having multi-lingual staff and developing relevant local partnerships. Also, they were able to report an annual increase in total food sales, the total pounds of food sold/distributed and the overall number of points of sale in their respective communities².



Mill City Grows Mobile Market, Lowell, MA & Good Food Bus, Lewiston, ME (left to right)

- **Multi-year funding is essential** for experimentation, longer term project success, and growth. The value of this model of support provided consistently over time was emphasized repeatedly by project leaders:

“Due to Harvard Pilgrim’s support over the last three years, Growing Places has been able to build capacity to expand from one focus - gardening - to becoming a fresh, healthy food access connector in North Central MA.” - Ayn Yeagle, Executive Director, Growing Places, Leominster, MA; 2019

“Long term support ensured program stability and allowed us to grow and to be responsive to the growing demand for fresh local food in our community.” – Steve Fischer, Executive Director, Regional Environmental Council, Worcester, MA; 2017

- **It’s not just the money.** The time and resources devoted to enrich and engage a learning community while building their own skills and capacity of their specific projects and staff results in more solid and sustainable leadership and services to customers. A learning community provides invaluable connections with peers to share strategies and contribute to a sense of change and a movement. Throughout the Foundation’s annual conferences and roundtable discussions, the growing bond between the various grantee partners was evident in the warm energy of conversations and frequent offers to share strategies, curricula, and resources with one another. The DAISA team was a consistent key player in these conversations, working to not only build connection for deeper understanding, but also to be responsive in terms of learning approaches and support.
- **Size does matter.** When grant investments are relatively small, it is best for projects to stick with their core organizational strengths – and not try to do too much that is new or outside their ‘wheelhouse’. Two examples:
 - One organization challenged itself to add skill-building to its food distribution program, by providing guided hands-on food preparation in order to expand members’ interest in trying new produce they were receiving.

¹ For example, Lewiston and Auburn (LA), Maine have significant household food insecurity rates combined with high rates of diet related illness. Struggling to expand their reach to diverse neighborhoods and populations, St. Mary’s Nutrition Center received HFF funding to initiate the Good Food Bus, a Mobile Market that delivers healthy food to neighborhoods and work places like the Goodwill store headquarters. Weekly, Goodwill’s employees and customers purchase vegetables and sample new recipes from the Bus.

² The Foundation was an early adopter and supporter of Mobile Markets, starting in 2012, via financial resources for capital and operational expenses.

However, although they recognized the combination of new vegetables with hands-on learning of new recipes was more effective for uptake, the organization lacked adequate equipment and staffing to implement cooking education effectively over the long term.

- A project focused on gleaning food identified an opportunity gap for value-added lightly processed gleaned food. Yet when they tried to process the food themselves discovered they really needed an experienced processing-focused partner instead.

- **Objectivity is critical, but “speaking the language” counts just as much.** The DAISA team had the skills to design and conduct data gathering activities to measure HFF’s success against its goals, but in addition, they had the deep knowledge and experience of local New England food organizations that the Foundation lacked. Thus, along with measurement, evaluation supported the HFF projects to surface narratives that accurately described the struggles and realities of peoples’ lived experiences while building community food resiliency³. The DAISA team developed open-ended narrative data reporting; led a workshop on telling and writing stories at the funding launch; created an online resource “toolbox”; and featured asset-focused stories of the work during presentations to Foundation staff and Board members. At the culmination of the three years, a member of the Foundation’s Program Committee, which has served in an ongoing advisory capacity, commented:

“This report demonstrates the synergies between the evaluators and the organizations themselves. It demonstrates that the evaluation was hands-on, give and take, ongoing, and that it helped the organizations improve and deliver their programs.” - Joseph O’Donnell, MD, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation Program Committee

- **If it’s hard to count, tell the story.** Increasing the knowledge and skills of customers about healthy food was a key part of the HFF initiative, yet the results of the classes and trainings were difficult to measure and demonstrate. As such, after several approaches which did not fully serve the projects or the Foundation, the DAISA team created a case study approach. This team conducted visits and interviews to Brass City Harvest in Waterbury, Connecticut, and Healthy Communities of the Capitol Area in Augusta, Maine.

Overall, the case studies demonstrated that behavior change from participation in skill-building activities is most successful when:

- It is combined with direct access to fresh, healthy food
- The activity has direct and strong support from the larger community and the skill-building, partner organizations and
- The skill building delivery is flexible since participants have many relevant needs and preferences

- **Racial equity and inclusion work cannot be ignored.** 80% of HFF project leaders actively worked on efforts to increase racial equity and diversity within their organizations, through strategies, and via their offering to their customers.

“This (Racial Equity & Diversity) is now a priority for Boston Area Gleaners... Shani Dowd (former Foundation Health Equity trainer)’s expertise lent immeasurably to this effort. We now have a diversity statement, and a deeper understanding of how we will approach the challenge, given our location and our stakeholder base (farmers, donors, agencies, recipients).”

- Duck Caldwell, Executive Director, Boston Area Gleaners, Waltham, MA; 2019

³ Ammons, Shorlette. Shining a Light in Dark Places. 2014. The Center for Social Inclusion.

- **Investment in (the right!) evaluation pays off.** For the HFF, the investment in DAISA’s data collection and quantitative and qualitative tools was worthwhile. They not only allowed the Foundation to assess the quality of its philanthropic activities, but also contributed to the projects’ own learning and sustainability. On a recent Foundation survey, 80% of the HFF project leaders who responded said they effectively used the data that was collected and shared with them for program improvements, and more effective communication and fundraising efforts.

“Over the course of three years, the evaluation helped strengthen our programming and how we talk about our work. The formal data requests forced us to build good tracking methods, quantify our reach, and annually review each program which identified their valuable aspects and in a variety of ways.”

- Kailey Burke, Program Coordinator, Nourishing the North Shore, Newburyport, MA; 2019

Conclusion

The Healthy Food Fund — a diverse group of organizations with varied strategies for increasing distribution and access to healthy, local foods — was agile and effective. A well-supported and fully engaged community that optimized opportunities to share effective strategies and guided by ongoing and adaptive, all HFF participants achieved powerful outcomes. Although there were marked increases in total food sales, points of sales and distribution, meaningful partnerships evolved that fostered and sustained this higher level of access to fresh food and ensure continued progress. Broader achievements include an expanded, collective sense of belonging and greater health equity — both within their own organizations and communities and extending to the larger health equity movement. Throughout it all, the grantees embraced numerous strategies to advance racial and health equity in their communities. And they each found, and reminded us all, that this work and truly meaningful change takes time and that supportive, multiyear funding is essential.

“Our experience with HFF data affirmed our existing data collection strategies, but it also enlightened as to how other organizations doing related work are evaluating those efforts. Through HFF, we’ve made connections with other cohort members that have helped us assess the sustainability of strategies like mobile markets in our own region”.

- Janet Edwards, Director of Program Development and Education, Growing Places, Leominster, MA; 2019