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Local Food Coordinators

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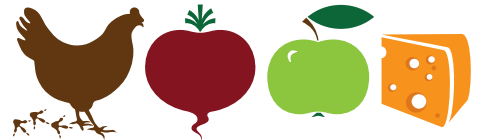
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Local Food Coordinators

Who are they, and why are they important?



IOWA FOOD SYSTEM
working group

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Extension and Outreach



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What is a Local Food Coordinator?

Many groups and organizations can play a role in initiating a local food system. However, experience suggests the most efficient way to build a sustainable and effective local food system is to have a person serve in a leadership role to orchestrate and coordinate its evolution. The creation of a resilient local food system requires the participation of many different community stakeholders: producers, consumers, institutions, businesses, and government agencies. Because of the number of participants with varied agendas, different geographic areas need to employ their own local food coordinators. Among the coordinator's main responsibilities are to:

- bring participants together
- connect and create efficient working groups that succeed in reaching common goals, and
- raise community awareness, providing the foundation for a stable local food system.



Why local, why now?

Local food systems are a priority for ISU Extension and Outreach. They offer new options for Iowa farmers and consumers by:

- strengthening local economies,
- creating opportunities for beginning farmers,
- broadening and diversifying opportunities for established farmers,
- revitalizing urban and rural communities,
- reconnecting farmers and consumers,
- promoting healthier eating habits, and
- producing food in a sustainable way.

The table on the opposite page illustrates the variety and scope of responsibilities of local food coordinators around the state of Iowa.

"Rainmakers" needed

As Cathann Kress, ISU Extension and Outreach Vice President, has advised, Iowa needs rainmakers: "A person who through his or her skills and abilities can bring people and resources together to meet the challenges facing extension, now and in the future." As we look at the different regions of Iowa, we note that the regions with the most effective local food systems have a coordinator. These local food coordinator positions were created because there was a demand. Once in place, these positions have become essential to the community that hosts them, helping to build a regional supply and demand for local food. "I get a dozen calls a day from people wanting to convene meetings about why local foods are important, from local farmers wanting to sell products, and from institutions wanting to know how they can source local produce" said one local foods coordinator.

ISU Extension Region 4 institutions in Northeast Iowa have spent \$1.2 million in 2012 on locally-grown food. That is almost \$1 million more invested in the local economy than was spent in 2005.*

The demand for local food is such that there is often a gap between the local products available and the consumer demand. This gap hinges on a lack of producers, but springs mainly from weak local food distribution networks.

Creating business opportunities

The problem of weak distribution systems can be solved by a business development specialist who has the expertise to provide solutions to bridge the gap between producers and consumers. Such a specialist can help develop systems for aggregation, distribution, and small-scale processing. The business specialist's work will be more efficient once demand and partnerships are established, hence the need for initial groundwork by a local food coordinator.

Once a business specialist is in place, the need for other kinds of specialists (food safety, nutritionist, etc.) might appear. Ideally, there would be a local food coordinator for each region, and several "shared" specialized positions around the state.

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES

Local food coordinators in the eight surveyed regions who have this responsibility

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Facilitation	Build coalitions and partnerships								
	Create / update and maintain a newsletter								
	Work with advisory boards and lead meetings								
	RFSWG member/coordinator/steering committee								
	Facilitate the development of (community) gardens								
	Buy Fresh Buy Local chapter coordinator								
	Assist local farmer's market								
	Other local organization member/leader								
	Technical assistance/resource for institutional buyers								
	Facilitate development of a food hub								
Education	Educational programs for farmers								
	Educational programs for consumers								
	Public information on local food systems for communities (Conferences, conventions, county fairs...)								
	Farm to School program								
Data / Evaluation	Local food database								
	Plan and implement appropriate impact evaluations and reports								
	Collect and analyze data and metrics to measure strength of local food systems								
Funding	Research funding and grants (for position and projects)								
Marketing	Organize public meetings for outreach (farm tours, farm crawl, bike n bite...)								
	Promotional marketing (fliers, branding campaign, logos, videos...)								
	Media use (tv, radio, newspaper, social media)								
	Website								
Business Development	Find opportunities for young farmers								
	Opportunities for "farmer in the middle"								
	Local food business model for region (aggregation and distribution)								
	Develop ag-based economic development strategies. Link them to local foods for schools and vulnerable communities.								

Survey conducted in June 2014

Sustainable position funding

Many of the current local food coordinator positions have been funded by temporary grants. Positions that rely on such grants for support lack stability. This has consequences on the success and longevity of regional food system efforts; coordinators may only be able to commit time to projects for which grants are received, regions may be forced to engage in 'money chasing' that can take a coordinator away from mission-related work, or coordinators may be unable to build long-term programs that meet the needs of residents and stakeholders in the community and region. The importance of stable, reliable funding as a baseline for the local food coordinator's position is clear. This baseline funding can be supplemented by additional grant funding that can provide extra resources for specific projects. "The development of local foods can happen organically, but to see a real impact, there has to be a committed person, a coordinator, focusing on the economic development of the area" says one local food coordinator.

Regional funding

Of the eight local food coordinators surveyed, two positions were grant funded, four were paid by their region's extension councils, and two had supplemental bridge funding provided by a Vice President Extension and Outreach Strategic Initiative.

County Extension councils were able to rearrange their budgets to create or sustain the coordinators' positions. By combining different county council budgets into a regional fund, regions were able to hire employees for a smaller individual investment. For instance, in Region 4 (six counties): each county could spend \$60,000 in wages and benefits to hire one full-time employee for their county, or they could pool their money and hire four full-time people and two part-time people for \$47,000 per county. In some cases, the councils' baseline funding was used to encourage other regional partners (RC&D, University of Northern Iowa, county boards of supervisors, corporate entities, etc.) to participate in funding the positions.

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Tied to the region

A critical component of a local food coordinator's position is to be anchored in a community-based organization. County Extension offices are an ideal base for a coordinator. The location allows coordinators to be in touch with the community they serve, facilitate coalitions with a broad group of people, and serve as a science-based, non-biased resource.

Further resources

Extension and Outreach Local Food Hubs
www.extension.iastate.edu/topic/local-foods

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture
www.leopold.iastate.edu

Iowa - Buy Fresh Buy Local
sites.google.com/site/bfbl Iowa/home

Appendix: Position description for local food coordinators or equivalent.

References

*Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness, 2012 Evaluation summary. www.iowafoodandfitness.org/uploads/PDF_File_19661193.pdf

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The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture seeks to identify and reduce adverse socio-economic and environmental impacts of farming practices, develop profitable farming systems that conserve natural resources, and create educational programs with ISU Extension and Outreach. It was founded by the 1987 Iowa Groundwater Protection Act. The Center is located at 209 Curtiss Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011-1050; (515) 294-3711.

Local Food Coordinator

Position Description



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Goals

- ↖ Create / maintain a regional identity that promotes the local food system in the region.
- ↖ Increase community awareness through educational and promotional marketing.
- ↖ Economic / community development.

Qualifications

- ↖ Bachelor's degree or equivalent experience in relevant field preferred.
- ↖ Strong communications skills.
- ↖ Ability to interact with a wide range of people, experience in facilitating coalitions.
- ↖ Interest in and knowledge of local food systems (farming, food distribution, marketing, nutrition and wellness, food retail, etc.).
- ↖ Ability to assemble a strategic plan and carry out the plan.

Major Responsibilities

Responsibilities fall into five main areas: Facilitation, Education, Marketing and Outreach, Funding, Data and Evaluation.

Facilitation

- ↖ Build coalitions and partnerships.
 - Meet with (potential) producers, and other local stakeholders: Economic Development groups, food service directors, farmers market managers, Chamber of Commerce, county officials, food retail outlets, businesses.
 - Be a member of different interest groups to facilitate networking and access to resources (i.e., Regional Food System Working Group, Buy Fresh Buy Local, local organizations).
- ↖ **Identify, map and assess all local food system assets.**
 - Create a database of producers, institutional buyers (schools, hospitals, restaurants and governmental entities), distribution points, available infrastructure.
 - Regularly update database.
- ↖ Connect wholesale buyers (such as institutions, restaurants, or distributors) who are looking to buy local with producers who want a local market.
- ↖ Assist in development and coordination of area farmers markets to share resources.
- ↖ Facilitate the development of community and school gardens.
- ↖ Initiate / participate in the development of an aggregation / distribution infrastructure (food hub).

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Education

- ↩ Provide educational programs / workshops for farmers (host and / or teach).
 - GAP certification, Scaling-up, Marketing, etc.
- ↩ Provide educational programs / workshops for consumers (host and / or teach).
 - Local food bidding and procurement, seasonal menu planning and cooking, etc.
- ↩ Serve as an educator and resource for schools wishing to start a Farm to School chapter.
- ↩ Public intervention for community outreach and awareness.
 - Community speaker, present at county fairs, TV cooking show, etc.

Marketing and Outreach

- ↩ Organize public meetings and promotional tours.
 - Culinary tours, farm tours, farm to fork dinners, Bike n Bite, Farm Crawl, etc.
- ↩ Promote regional identity.
 - Branding campaign, fliers, logos, etc.
- ↩ Use media (social, newspaper, TV, radio) to promote local foods.
- ↩ Create, update and employ an electronic mailing list of interested persons.
- ↩ Create and maintain website.

Funding

- ↩ Research and write grant proposals.
- ↩ Convene partners to access funding opportunities.

Data / Evaluation

- ↩ Plan and implement appropriate impact evaluations and reports to measure the strength and development of the local food system.

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