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Building a food system framework to advance the health of Iowans - A blueprint for action

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Building a food system framework to advance the health of Iowans - A blueprint for action

Abstract

A working group that united a multitude of stakeholders with broad interests in food and health issues was formed to enhance all elements of Iowa's food system.

Keywords

Community-based food systems

Disciplines

International and Community Nutrition



Building a food system framework to advance food access and the health of Iowans – a blueprint for action

Abstract: A working group that united a multitude of stakeholders with broad interests in food and health issues was formed to enhance all elements of Iowa's food system.

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Budget:
\$27,300 for year one
\$28,847 for year two

Q What are the impact and value of the establishment of a statewide network focused on cultivating an Iowa-based food system that eliminates hunger, increases access to nutritious food and advances the health of all Iowans?

A The impact and value of this new community of practice was evaluated by growth in partners, number of gatherings, establishment of a leadership team, completion of a comprehensive food access and health assessment, leveraged funding and resources and the responses from a FAHWG partner survey.



MARKETING

Background

The purposes of this project were to: a) convene a statewide community of practice, or work group, composed of individuals and organizations focused on cultivating an Iowa-based food system that eliminates hunger, increases access to nutritious food and advances the health of all Iowans; and b) conduct a comprehensive assessment of food security, public health and agriculture indicators to form the foundation for addressing research, program and policy recommendations for a food system that supports healthy Iowans, farms and communities.

The original project objectives were:

1. By May 2010, assemble a statewide Food Access and Health Work Group (FAHWG).
2. By December 2010, complete a comprehensive assessment and analysis of Iowans access to fresh, nutritious and affordable local food.
3. By July 2011, develop research, program and policy strategies that increase access to fresh, nutritious and affordable local food.
4. By October 2011, develop and disseminate the report "Building a Food System Framework that Advances Food Access and the Health of Iowans - A Blueprint for Action."
5. By January 2012, the FAHWG will evaluate the functionality and value of the FAHWG and plans for moving forward; process and produce a comprehensive food access and health assessment; marketing and dissemination of the "Blueprint for Action;" feedback by stakeholders and policymakers.
6. By January 2012, the FAHWG will generate a sustainability plan to support continued work and networking.

Two objectives were added in the mid-term project report:

7. By December 2011, FAHWG partners will have met at least three times to review progress, network, learn about partner programs, and build knowledge of the connections between food access, health and food systems.
8. By February 2012, publish a minimum of 10 monthly e-newsletters.



Results and discussion

A Food Access and Health Work Group (FAHWG) was formed and began operations. The FAHWG is a statewide network of food and nutrition assistance program providers, health professionals, NGOs and food system stakeholders. They are focused on cultivating a just and diverse food system that eliminates hunger, increases access to nutritious food and advances the health of all Iowans. More than 100 partners met 11 times between March 2010 and January 2012. Gatherings included guest speakers, leadership development and networking activities. A seven-member leadership team guides the FAHWG and serves as a liaison to the Iowa Food Systems Council.

FAHWG partners completed a comprehensive assessment and analysis of more than 40 food access and health indicators. Using defined criteria, they identified five indicators that were integrated into a broader food system assessment matrix. Partners then identified 11 strategies that support the production of safe and nutritious food for all Iowans and that strengthen food access and self-reliance among Iowa's citizens and communities. The indicators and recommendations appear in a comprehensive food system report on *Cultivating Resilience: A Food System Blueprint that Advances the Health of Iowans, Farms and Communities*.

Partners were surveyed to determine the impact and value of the FAHWG on their organizations and stakeholders and 25 percent responded:

- o 96 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that participation in FAHWG has given them a greater understanding of Iowa food access and health issues.
- o 95.9 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that FAHWG is an important support network that connects them to people and organizations doing work in food access and health arenas.
- o 91.3 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that FAHWG participation helped build capacity within their organizations to access a broader spectrum of people with knowledge valuable to their organizations' work.
- o 86.9 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that FAHWG participation helped build capacity within their organizations for stronger relationships with other organizations, agencies and institutions that provide better, more coordinated support to food access and health initiatives.
- o 83.3 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that FAHWG helped them communicate more effectively about food access and health issues.
- o 68.2 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that FAHWG participation prompted them to talk with colleagues/co-workers about policy changes needed to support food access and health initiatives.
- o More than \$3.2 million in added funding was leveraged by FAHWG partners as a result of their relationship to the FAHWG.

A sustainability plan was developed to support ongoing statewide food access and health initiatives and networking. Several key supports are in place for the FAHWG to continue: ongoing funding provided by The Wellmark Foundation; a shared leadership structure that guides FAHWG decision-making and direction; two part-time paid consultants added stability and broader infrastructure by integrating FAHWG into the



Iowa Food Systems Council; and greater momentum as demonstrated by the FAHWG partner survey, new partners and additional funding.

Conclusions

The primary goal of this project was to establish a community of practice or network of individuals and organizations that shares the common interest of eliminating food insecurity and hunger while improving food environments and health of Iowans. Investigators also completed a food access and health assessment and prepared recommendations using a broad food systems approach. The evolution of the Food Access and Health Work Group began with identifying the audience, purpose, goals and vision. Activities, communication and group processes were tested in 2010 and gradually formalized through 2011. During this time FAHWG partners shaped strategies, expanded partnerships and recognized the value of engagement, networking and addressing food access and health issues. Funding and new networks were leveraged and FAHWG gained more partners and greater visibility and credibility. Stability to support continued growth came from a shared leadership model, new grant funding and the institutionalization of FAHWG into the Iowa Food Systems Council, a non-profit organization.

Impact of results

The results of this project have created a new platform for analyzing Iowa's food and agriculture system from a food access and health perspective. FAHWG partners will continue to focus on the intersection of federal food and nutrition assistance programs with community-based food systems and how to spend more of the \$700 million in food assistance on Iowa-grown fruits and vegetables. Strengthening the ties between the federal food and nutrition assistance programs and farmers' markets, community supported agriculture farms, u-pick farms and Iowa-grown produce in grocery stores will enable more low-resource Iowans to purchase fresh produce, put more money in the pockets of Iowa farmers and potentially increase the demand for beginning and existing specialty crop farmers.

Federal programs such as the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program, Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program and SNAP Electronic Benefits Transfer currently contribute about \$1 million to Iowa's food economy. If any of these federal food and nutrition assistance programs were to be reduced or eliminated at the federal level, it would have a direct economic effect on Iowa farmers.

Education and outreach

Two scholarly publications were generated by the project: 1) Tagtow A., Roberts S., *Cultivating Resilience: A Food System Blueprint for Advancing the Health of Iowans, Farms and Communities*. (<http://www.iowafoodscouncil.org/cultivating-resilience>) and 2) Tagtow A., Danforth E., *Growing Solutions: Food Gardening Cultivating Positive Change for Iowa* (in press).

FAHWG was featured in numerous presentations including the Farm to Church Discussion Group; 2010 and 2011 Iowa Hunger Summit/World Food Prize; 2010 and 2011 Hope for the Hungry Conference; Community Food Security Coalition Annual Conference, New Orleans; University of North Carolina Obesity Prevention Course/ Food System Workshops, Chapel Hill; EPA Brownfields webinar on food access and food systems; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Food Policy Council webinar; Drake University Food Policy and Sustainable Food System conference, and several lectures at ISU.

The FAHWG organized a panel presentation at the 2011 Iowa Hunger Summit on “Intersecting Food Assistance with Local Food Systems – Building Food Security and Health in Iowa.” It featured innovative programs that nourish low-resource Iowans but also connect with local food producers and local economies and 300 attended. The group also prepared a brochure (<http://www.iowafoodsystemscouncil.org/storage/FAHWG%20Brochure.Final.Sept2010.pdf>) and established a FAHWG webpage (<http://www.iowafoodsystemscouncil.org/food-access-health/>)

Leveraged funds

Additional funding was directly leveraged as a result of this project:

- o W.K. Kellogg Foundation (\$150,000): to establish a food access and health work group, establish a statewide food policy council and to conduct a comprehensive food system assessment and plan for Iowa.
- o The Wellmark Foundation (\$130,000): to support the Food Access and Health Work Group and develop and implement two food gardening messaging campaigns.

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