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

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 responses from a FAHWG partner survey.

What was done and why?

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.

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. A seven-member leadership team guides the FAHWG and serves as a liaison to the Iowa Food Systems Council.

What did we learn?

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 now 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, it would have a direct economic effect on Iowa farmers.