

## Community Food Projects

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Nationwide analyses look for solutions that address large segments of the population. Community food projects (CFP) are projects in which low-income communities develop their food systems. CFP are by nature small and comprehensive within geographical places, with deep roots and a broad array of impacts on individual communities. The Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program (CFPCGP) at USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service funds innovative demonstration food projects that lead to food system changes unique to the communities they serve. These small projects can reduce the negative impact of areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, thus making community the appropriate unit of analysis.

### Community Food Security

The CFPCGP was designed to address issues of "community food security." Community food security incorporates the participation of local communities in developing innovative approaches that foster local solutions for feeding low-income families. This strategy encourages a greater role for the entire food system, including local agriculture, and represents a proactive approach to fighting hunger, economic and social justice, and environmental stewardship.

Unlike the charity model, which provides emergency food as a short-term solution, the community food security concept addresses the long-term need of communities to obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice (Hamm and Bellows, 2003). Community food security projects also address the broader well-being of the community, that is, its economic, social, and environmental issues.

#### *Legislative authority*

The CFPCGP was established through Authority Section 25 of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended in 1996 and by Section 4125 of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Pub. L. No. 107-171) (7 U.S.C. 2034), and further amended by Section 4402 of the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 and the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (Public Law No. 110-234) (7 U.S.C. 2034). This law authorized a program of Federal grants to support the development of community food projects at a funding level of \$5 million annually through FY 2012.

#### *Community food projects competitive grant program*

Food is a very basic need. Seeing this need, community leaders all over the country have begun to organize their communities around food access. This is especially true in low-income communities where food sources often are most scarce. The primary goals of the CFPCGP are to:

- Meet the food needs of low-income individuals;
- Increase the food self-reliance of low-income communities;
- Promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm, and nutrition issues; and
- Meet specific State, local, or neighborhood food and agricultural needs.

Projects can address needs relating to infrastructure improvement and development, planning for long-term solutions, or the creation of innovative marketing activities that mutually benefit agricultural producers and low-income consumers

### ***Current CFPCGP status***

CFPCGP was funded for \$1 million in 1996, \$2.5 million for 1997-2001, and \$5 million beginning in 2002 (current legislation). Since 1996, 290 projects have been funded in 48 States. Currently, three types of projects are funded each year, each type for 1 to 3 years:

- Planning projects, funded at \$10,000 to \$25,000, provide seed money for communities beginning to address their community food security issues. Planning projects are a separate type of project started in 2006 and represent 20 to 30 percent of the funded projects, but only 3 to 5 percent of the funding.
- Training and technical assistance projects, averaging \$100,000 to \$300,000, assist organizations in applying for community-based or planning projects and with running grants once awarded. T&TA projects represent about 15 to 20 percent of the funded projects and approximately 10 percent of the funding.
- The community-based food projects are funded at \$10,000 to \$300,000. CFP projects represent about 50 to 60 percent of the projects funded and 85 percent of the funds.

### ***The community food projects***

Because the community food projects are designed to solve local problems, they vary considerably based on local needs. Their specificity is both a major strength and a challenge for evaluating them at a national level—and for describing how they contribute to addressing issues within areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food.

The following are examples of the types of issues that are addressed within CFP. These were extracted by Pothukuchi (2007) in a study of projects' self-reported evaluation of performance on goals and objectives. The study reflects summary data of grantee reports from 42 CFPs funded between 1999 and 2003.

### ***Issues addressed in Community Food Projects***

- **Healthy food availability:** Increase the availability of healthy, locally produced foods, especially in impoverished and underserved

neighborhoods, through food assistance programs, backyard and community gardens, grocery stores, farmers’ markets, Community Supported Agriculture shares, food buying clubs, and other resources.

- **Healthy diets:** Encourage the adoption of healthy diets by providing culturally and age-appropriate training and experiences for youth and adults in food production, preparation, and nutrition.
- **Nutrition program participation:** Enroll eligible residents in government nutrition programs such as SNAP, WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), and the Farmers’ Market Nutrition Programs.
- **Local food marketing:** Increase local markets for small- and family-scale farms, including direct marketing and purchases by local institutions and businesses.
- **Sustainable agriculture:** Support agricultural practices that protect air, water, soil, and habitats; promote biodiversity; reduce energy use; promote reuse and recycling; and treat animals humanely.
- **Food-related entrepreneurship:** Support on- and off-farm value-added and processing enterprises, especially smaller operations and those owned by women and minorities.

Table 7.1

**Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program Activities, 2006**

	Percent
Youth/school gardening or agricultural project	81
Promoting local food purchases	73
Food access and outreach	57
Entrepreneurial food and agriculture	53
Community food assessment	47
Farm to cafeteria	47
Farmers’ market	47
Food policy council/network	47
Job skills training	47
Training and technical assistance	47
Community gardens	43
Community-supported agriculture	43
Micro-enterprise/Entrepreneur skill training	43
Emergency food collection and distribution	37
Farm/Grower cooperative	37
Restoration of traditional foods/agriculture	27
Community or incubator kitchen/Value-added Production/Processing	26
Immigrant/Migrant farm project	16
Food-buying cooperative	14

Source: USDA, CSREES calculations based on Abi-nader, 2007.

- **Farm worker conditions:** Promote safe and fair working conditions for farmers, farm workers, and other food workers, such as those in processing plants and wholesale and retail operations.
- **Food heritages:** Honor and celebrate diverse food cultures and traditions in the community.
- **Local food system awareness:** Develop greater awareness and appreciation among residents of the value of local foods and food heritages to encourage more locally based eating.
- **Integration of food in community processes:** Systematically integrate food system issues into community and regional planning and other community institutions and processes to promote public health, economic vitality, social equity, and ecological sustainability.
- **Food system participatory planning:** Engage community residents and organizations in collaboratively assessing food needs, and devising and implementing actions to meet needs.
- **Food democracy:** Increase residents' awareness of and voice in food-related decisions at different levels of government.

The goal of addressing these issues is to bring communities to a higher level awareness of their community food system so that awareness leads to action, deficits and assets are assessed,; resources are examined, and potential solutions to problems are tried and tested. Community involvement can be a potent force in overcoming food access issues.

One way to see how these issues are addressed within CFP is to look at the national level output reports. The CFPCGP works with grantees to develop and implement a program-wide evaluation. Currently, grantees voluntarily report common activities (Common Output Tracking Form) across their projects. The latest analysis from 2006 enumerated 19 project-type activities reported by 51 of a possible 65 projects (table 7.1). The projects are comprehensive and have many component activities. The percentages in the table refer to the share of projects that report having managed or participated in the activity. It is hoped that the combination of these activities leads to systems change within a community and that the multi-pronged approach to getting more food into the community increases food security for the long term. The net sum of these activities is to reduce the impact of limited access to food. Here are some examples of how the combinations of different activities have been implemented:

“This kind of systems thinking guides the CFPCGP and is evident in the projects that have received funds. In places as different as Lubbock, Texas and Green Bay, Wisconsin, the CFP has played a key role in building comprehensive approaches to multiple problems. The South Plains Food Bank of Lubbock uses its 5 ½ acre farm to produce food for the food bank. The farm also serves as a demonstration site for sustainable farming practice, a youth training and job site, and a community-supported agriculture facility. In Green Bay, the Brown County Task Force on Hunger identified the region’s large Hmong population as the group most

## Examples of Community Food Projects by Type of Project

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### **Food Assessments**

*Fresno Fresh Access Project, Fresno Metropolitan Ministry, Fresno, CA,*  
[www.fresnometroministry.org](http://www.fresnometroministry.org)

*Community Tradition, Foods, and Future, Legacy Cultural Learning Center,*  
Muskogee, OK, [www.legacycultural.org/artwellness](http://www.legacycultural.org/artwellness)

### **Food Policy Councils**

*Food Access and Food Justice in New Orleans: Rising above the Waterline,*  
New Orleans Food and Farm Network, [www.noffn.org](http://www.noffn.org)

*Educating State Legislative Leaders and CFP Grantees about Policy Options  
that Support Community Food Systems, National Conference of State  
Legislatures, [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)*

### **Youth Programs**

*Healthy Harvests Initiative: Building Boston's Food Security from the Ground Up,*  
The Food Project, Lincoln, MA, [www.thefoodproject.org](http://www.thefoodproject.org)

*Food for Life, Youth Farm and Market Project, Minneapolis, MN,*  
[www.youthfarm.net](http://www.youthfarm.net)

### **Entrepreneurial Food and Agriculture Activities**

*Appalachian FoodNet Project and Rural Food Centers Project, Appalachian  
Center for Economic Networks, Athens, OH, [www.acenetworks.org](http://www.acenetworks.org)*

*Building an Integrated Sustainable Food System, Appalachian Sustainable  
Development, Abington, VA, [www.apsusdev.org](http://www.apsusdev.org)*

### **Urban Agriculture**

*Integrated Development Through Urban Agriculture, Nuestras Raices, Holyoke,  
MA, [www.nuestras-raices.org](http://www.nuestras-raices.org)*

*Neighborhood Urban Agriculture Coalition, Greensgrow, Philadelphia, PA,*  
[www.greengrow.org](http://www.greengrow.org)

### **Rural Producers**

*Tribal Fish Market Connection Project, Ecotrust and Columbia River Inter-Tribal  
Fish Commission, Portland, OR, [www.ecotrust.org](http://www.ecotrust.org)*

*Patchwork Family Farms: Value-added Processing for Community Food  
Security, Missouri Rural Crisis Center, Columbia, MO,*  
[www.inmotionmagazine.com/rural.html](http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/rural.html)

### **Community Gardens**

*Urban Detroit Agriculture and Education Project, Capuchin Soup Kitchen,  
Detroit, MI, [www.cskdetroit.org](http://www.cskdetroit.org).*

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For detailed descriptions of these projects, see appendix D.

at risk for food insecurity. The Hmong benefit from small business and enterprise mentoring that allows them to develop farm- and food-related micro-businesses. Self-sufficiency and self-help are putting people on the road to food security.” (Healthy Food Healthy Communities, 2006).

### ***Examples of community food projects***

There are many types of CFPs, including food assessments, food policy councils, youth projects, entrepreneurial food and agriculture activities, urban agriculture, rural producers, and community garden projects. This section describes the general goals and structures of these types of CFPs (see box, “Examples of Community Food Projects by Type of Project”). Detailed descriptions of these projects are given in appendix D.

#### ***Food assessments***

A community food assessment (CFA) is a way for a community to identify both its challenges and its resources around food and to use food as a tool for community development. Of 51 projects reporting on the COTF in 2006, 24 percent had conducted CFAs. An assessment of the local food system is a way to bring the whole community together around a single issue that matters to everyone—food. A CFA can motivate people to make change to improve food access. It serves the goals of the CFPCGP by involving low-income community members in becoming aware of and analyzing the food system and by making community members part of the solution. Two food assessments funded by CFPCGP are listed in the box and detailed in appendix D.

#### ***Food policy councils***

Food policy councils (FPCs) may take many forms but typically are commissioned by State or local government, with participation from diverse stakeholders engaged in food and agriculture. They foster a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to addressing food system issues by bringing together stakeholders to develop and implement solutions. FPCs play various roles, including educating officials and the public, making policy recommendations, improving coordination between existing programs, and starting new programs. FPCs help identify ways that governments can mobilize existing resources or shape policy to improve the food system (Winne, 2008).

FPCs have sometimes been the focus of applicants who see the need to address policy issues early on in their community food work. Other grantees have found that they need an FPC to address barriers confronted during the operation of their project. Projects have often run into local ordinances or legislative barriers and have formed formal and informal policy groups to deal with these issues. For example, a project in Washington State established a market garden on public land only to find that legislation disallowed marketing from the land. The amendments to the CFPCGP legislation in 2002 put an added emphasis on funding planning and policy activities within the program. Examples of Food Policy Councils projects funded by CFPCGP include a food policy council in New Orleans,

Louisiana, and a nationwide policy project funded to educate State legislators about food systems issues and CFP grantees about policy issues.

### ***Youth projects***

Some CFPs are specifically targeted toward youth. The goals of these projects are often educational—providing agricultural, nutrition, meal preparation, and culinary training to young people. A basic idea of these projects is to strengthen the connections between youth and the foods they eat. Two examples of youth-focused CFPs are the Healthy Harvests Initiative and the Food for Life program.

### ***Entrepreneurial food and agricultural activity***

The goals of these types of projects are to build the capacity of communities to develop and promote their own agricultural activities. The projects often involve entrepreneurial training, technical assistance in expanding local markets, developing and producing value-added products or infrastructure development. Examples of projects that have served rural and low-income communities include the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks in Athens, OH, and Building an Integrated Sustainable Food System in Abington, Virginia.

### ***Urban agriculture, rural producers, and community gardens***

These types of projects offer support for developing commercial gardens and food production for sale or for home consumption in underserved urban or rural areas. Funds are used for developing capacity to grow, sell, and market food for commercial enterprises or to grow and prepare food for at-home consumption. The projects cover a wide range of areas and communities.

## **Lessons Learned**

Annually, national experts are selected as peer reviewers for the CFPCGP. Reviewers select the most meritorious proposals through a competitive process for funding. The reviewers are people who run community food projects, work in academia, or do similar work and know what works in communities. Through the years, lessons have been learned about what tends to work in communities and what does not. These lessons include project development issues, challenges faced by CFPs, and general lessons about community food security work. Some of the lessons learned include the following:

### **Project Development**

- Projects must be “community-based,” not “community-placed” to be successful in the long term. A number of projects in the early years of the program represented institutions’ “good ideas” about what would bring more food into the community. These “top-down” projects tend not to work. A classic version of a top-down project is building a community garden without gaining consensus from the community. Projects must come from the community and must be a solution to their perceived needs for improving food security in their community.

- Three years is a very short time to develop a project that is going to be sustainable and economically viable. Often, more than three years is needed.
- The program requires that projects become “self-sustaining” without defining the term. Sustainability has many definitions. The sustainability of projects must be interpreted loosely. In some cases, it can be interpreted as meaning economically self-sustaining. For example, a youth farmstand would have to make enough money from selling produce to allow the project to move into the future. But another way to view sustainability of a youth education program is that the skills learned by youth will stay with them into the future and increase their ability to be self-sufficient.
- Feedback reviews from unsuccessful grant applications for CFPCGP have led to successful subsequent applications. Projects are improved considerably by acting on review comments.
- Small community organizations must build leadership within their organizations to ensure that food projects can continue beyond the guidance of one charismatic leader.

### ***Challenges***

- In several projects, securing available land for community gardens was only the first problem. Requirements to test the health of the soil and remediate soil for contaminants presented further challenges. One project turned this experience into a community outreach initiative. Youth gardeners became leaders in the community through their efforts to test neighbors’ soil so that their gardens would be free of contamination as well.
- Some projects unexpectedly encountered local ordinances that interfered with plans (see earlier Washington State example).
- Land access for food production and transportation to gardens and foodstores were major hurdles for many projects. City-owned lands could be taken after soil remediation, sending projects back to the beginning.

### ***Programmatic lessons***

- Immigrant populations are a force in the community food security movement. Many groups come from agrarian backgrounds and eagerly approach the promise of growing familiar foods and marketing to fellow immigrants. Farmers’ markets create viable local food sources for the broader community and an economic foothold for new immigrant populations. The “new” fruits and vegetables introduced by immigrants are a nutritional asset for the American diet.
- Native American and Native Hawaiian projects are stimulating interest and reviving deep connections to traditional foods among these groups, and they are offering elements of native diets that may be healthier options than alternative foods currently consumed.



- Projects employing youth in community food projects are finding that they are successfully engaging the future leaders in the community food security movement.
- Corner stores are seen as a potential tool for improving the diets of low-income residents of communities with limited food access. Corner stores tend to not have the resources to make the transition to selling more fresh foods. One project found that corner stores could not afford the refrigeration necessary, their regular suppliers did not handle fresh produce, and they lacked the expertise to handle fresh produce.
- Community food projects by nature are dynamic and change to adapt to the ever-changing environment. The CFPCGP has had to be flexible to allow projects to adapt to change.
- Community food projects frequently have unexpected outcomes. One unexpected outcome is that community gardens have been seen to reduce crime in the vicinity of gardens. A project in a public housing unit was adopted by a park service adjacent to the garden. After the garden came into existence, crime and vandalism rates dropped significantly in the park area, encouraging the park service to continue the project.
- Food can be a powerful community organizing tool. Ethnic foods can provide strong bonds between community members that help lead to unity in solving other community issues. A disintegrating infrastructure in Holyoke, Massachusetts, led community leaders to start building gardens to grow ethnic foods, which progressively led to farmstands, small farms, and ethnic festivals. Youth gardens in Boston, Massachusetts, fostered better relationships between generations and racial groups. Native American groups found power in advocacy as their awareness of traditional foods increased through community food assessments with elders and they learned how traditional foods could be restored in their communities. Community gardens can break down isolation and bring people out into the community for positive interaction, which often results in reduced crime rates.

Community food projects are small, community-driven attempts to address the problem of food access in low-income communities. CFP projects often grow from frustrations stemming from poor access to food sources. A frequent first step is assessing what exists, as well as, what is missing in the community. Knowledge of what assets exist often strengthens a community's collective confidence to tackle problem solving.

When communities come together to address their community food security issues, their solutions often go beyond food access to include social, economic, and environmental issues as well. Food is an attractive community development tool. A community food security approach to fighting food access problems is a viable way to make a difference in small, yet significant ways for those individual communities that are affected by a lack of access to food. Modest grants for communities across the Nation have given people the incentive they need to build solutions that match the needs of the community. The goal of the CFPCGP has been to build capacity in communities to achieve food security and to demonstrate model programs that may be adopted in other communities across the country.

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