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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**Monday March 12, 2012 **Contacts:**

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**Neighboring Food Co-ops ­­­Partner to Make Healthy Food Accessible for All**

The national conversation around access to healthy food has recently gained significant attention. In the U.S., 23.5 million Americans (including 6.5 million children) live in areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly in low-income neighborhoods and communities. These areas, known as food deserts, appear across the country, including in New England. To address this challenge, New England food co-ops--member-owned, member-controlled grocery stores that operate for the benefit of their members--are collaborating to increase healthy food access for everyone. Because they are community owned, food co-ops are able to focus on meeting community needs before making profits. Though food co-ops are recognized leaders in offering healthy foods and contributing to the local economy by marketing locally grown and produced goods, some co-ops face challenges in serving and engaging community members with limited food budgets.

The Cooperative Fund of New England ([www.coopfund.coop](http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/www.coopfund.coop)) and the Neighboring Food Co-op Association ([www.nfca.coop](http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/www.nfca.coop)) are partnering to help food co-ops make wholesome, nutritious food more accessible. The "Food Co-ops and Healthy Food Access" project strives to increase access to healthy food for those with limited means; support collaboration among food co-ops to engage and serve individuals and families with limited food budgets; and demonstrate the capacity of food co-ops to increase access to healthy food and business ownership for everyone. With a programmatic focus in western New England, project partners will share materials nationally through presentations and print and electronic media.

After surveying 29 food co-ops about the challenges and successes of making their food more accessible, project partners are creating case studies that document innovative programs that increase access to healthy foods in their communities. One such program comes from the City Market/Onion River Co-op in Burlington, VT. Their *Food for All* program assists people receiving EBT, WIC, or disability benefits by offering them a 10% discount on everything they purchase, except alcohol. Since the program began in late 2008, it has been a major success. This is, in large part, because of the support of local nonprofits that promote *Food for All* to those with limited incomes. In the program’s first 12 months, 573 new members took advantage of its benefits. Today, the co-op has more than 1,140 individuals and families enrolled. In 2011, the co-op recognized that 5% of their total sales (or $1.6 million) came from participants in the *Food for All* program.

Marissa Parisi, Executive Director of *Food for All* partner Hunger Free Vermont, sees the program as “allowing people to make their money go further while providing other benefits that are unique to co-ops; such as food related education and bulk items that are culturally appropriate for diverse populations.” *Food for All* has been a successful way for City Market/ Onion River Co-op to reach a demographic that has historically not taken advantage of food co-ops. When asked what he would do differently if he was given the chance, General Manager Clem Nilan responded: “Start earlier.”

With support from The Cooperative Foundation, Howard Bowers Fund, CoopMetrics, and the National Cooperative Grocers Association, the Neighboring Food Co-op Association and the Cooperative Fund of New England will produce a Toolbox highlighting the resources needed to implement model programs, and support the application of these programs at other food co-ops. The information from this project will be shared among food co-ops, food and nutrition advocates, and community organizations. To learn more about the “Food Co-ops and Healthy Food Access” project, visit: [**www.nfca.coop/healthyfoodaccess**](http://www.nfca.coop/healthyfoodaccess)**.**

### *The Neighboring Food Co-op Association is more than 25 food co-ops in Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Connecticut working together toward a shared vision of a thriving regional economy, rooted in a healthy, just and sustainable food system and a vibrant community of co-operative enterprise.*

Website: [www.nfca.coop](http://www.nfca.coop)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/Neighboring](http://www.facebook.com/Neighboring)

*The Cooperative Fund of New England is a community development financial institution (CDFI) that facilitates individual and institutional investment in New England’s cooperatives, community oriented non-profits, and worker-owned businesses*

Website: [www.coopfund.coop](http://www.coopfund.coop)

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Cooperative-Fund-of-New-England/215793893050>

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