

FOOD CO-OPS & HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS PROJECT

Co-ops Collaborate to Launch Affordability Programs

Shared Community Need, Shared Co-operative Response

As food security has emerged as an urgent issue in our region, the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA), a regional network of over 30 food co-ops and start-up initiatives, has been working to develop solutions that make healthy food and co-op member-ownership more affordable and accessible to all community members.

The “Food Co-ops & Healthy Food Access” project blossomed in partnership with the Cooperative Fund of New England (CFNE) in 2010 with the idea that, by working together, Neighboring Food Co-ops could be more innovative and effective in serving low-income communities in New England by making healthy food and co-op ownership more accessible. Four years later, this collaboration has expanded to include Hunger Free Vermont and the New England Farmers Union. The project successfully supports member food co-ops by facilitating information exchanges and peer support among food co-ops planning new “affordability” programs, and by connecting co-ops to state and regional partners to create new approaches to address hunger and malnutrition in our communities.

Making Food Co-ops More Accessible to All

For the first two years, the Food Co-ops & Healthy Food Access project focused on building partnerships, designing resources (i.e. case studies, toolboxes with lessons learned, and planning timelines) and gathering information on how to support food co-ops to collaborate and create successful programs. An important part of this project’s work has been strengthening partnerships with statewide anti-hunger advocacy organizations. For example, Hunger Free Vermont has played a vital role in educating co-op staff and boards about regional hunger and malnutrition, effective communication with low-income community members, and customer service training.

With this strong foundational knowledge in place, the project has been gaining momentum with some exciting new programs. A particularly impressive outcome of this technical assistance and support is the growth in the number of co-ops with healthy food access programs from 4 to 13 between the Summer 2013 and Spring 2014, with another 5 co-ops planning to implement needs-based discount programs called “*Food For All*” (*FFA*).

During the research phase, project coordinators noted the *FFA* program had great potential for expansion, replication, and overall impact. Launched in 2008 by City Market/Onion River Co-op in Burlington, VT, this program assists individuals currently receiving SNAP, WIC, or disability benefits by offering them a 10% discount on most purchases and empowers them by improving access to co-op member-ownership over time. *FFA* introduces the co-op model to more community members, providing benefits that are unique to co-ops, such as access to business ownership, food-related education, and saving by shopping in bulk, while also helping people stretch their food budgets. A key element of success for City Market was partnering with anti-hunger agencies to promote their program and better understand the needs of low-income community members. During the first two years of the *FFA* program, WIC and SNAP sales increased by 80% at City Market. The co-op now has about 1,150 enrolled participants, and over 250 of them have joined the co-op as full member-owners through their participation in the program.



“Food for All” Program Sign, Putney Food Co-op

Food For All at Neighboring Food Co-ops

One highlight of the Food Co-ops & Healthy Food Access project was coordinating the roll-out of *Food For All* programs among three diverse co-ops near the borders of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, including a recently opened midsize co-op, a small established co-op, and a larger established co-op. The NFCA has hosted monthly planning calls to discuss program development and marketing strategies, share lessons learned, and coordinate messaging. By aligning the coordination and implementation of the programs, these three NFCA food co-ops were able to streamline their material design, staff training, community partnerships, and outreach in this corner of New England, leveraging the reach of these programs.

The **Monadnock Food Co-op** (Keene, NH) was open for less than a year when they launched their *Healthy Food For All* needs-based discount program. As a new co-op, they realized the program would be an effective response to member concerns about affordability. As part of the launch of the program, the co-op hosted a screening and community discussion of the documentary, “A Place at the Table,” linking their effort with the wider anti-hunger movement and encouraging other food co-ops to do the same. As a result, over a dozen co-ops held joint screenings and community dialogues across New England.

In planning their new *Food For All* program, the **Brattleboro Food Co-op** (Brattleboro, VT) created new partnerships with community organizations, including the local food shelf and community action agency, to learn more about community needs and to help spread the word about the program. They also worked with Hunger Free Vermont to design program brochures with clear, welcoming language and signage reminding shoppers they can use SNAP benefits to purchase fruit and vegetable seeds and plants.

Designing and implementing the *Food For All* program at **Putney Food Co-op** (Putney, VT) led marketing and outreach staff to change the way the co-op does all of its communications. With support of other co-ops and community partners, they have transformed their strategy to focus on making their communications simpler, clearer, and more accessible to people of all literacy levels.

Next Steps: Keeping Up the Momentum

The Food Co-ops & Healthy Food Access project has demonstrated how networked associations, peer-to-peer collaboration, and organizational partnership can help food co-ops innovate, collaborate, and better serve their communities. Successful strategies to date include producing co-branded healthy food access marketing materials, promoting these programs regionally, and facilitating ongoing collaboration with community and government organizations already serving low-income families. The next stage will focus on evaluating and improving these programs, including expanding the use of a Peer Audit program.

Looking forward, we are excited to continue building on the success of this initiative and exploring how we can support our member food co-ops to further develop, implement and improve healthy food access programs through collective approaches, making food co-ops a more relevant cornerstone of community food security in our region.

This profile was developed with the support of Jane’s Trust as part of “Food Co-ops & Healthy Food Access,” a joint project of the Neighboring Food Co-op Association, Cooperative Fund of New England, New England Farmers Union, and Hunger Free Vermont. The goals of the project are to increase access to healthy, regionally-sourced food and food co-op member-ownership & participation; to support information sharing on low-income access programs among food co-ops; and to raise the profile of food co-ops as a solution to the challenge of healthy food access in our region.

For more info visit: www.nfca.coop/healthyfoodaccess.