

Building on a Legacy of Food Security

Food co-ops partner to increase healthy food access

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Recently, issues of health and nutrition have gained national prominence, supported by First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move! initiative to reduce childhood obesity and increase access to healthy, affordable food. Co-ops have an opportunity to grow both their membership and sales while meeting an urgent community need. How can we best seize this opportunity? In the classic style of cooperatives: together!

Co-ops have a legacy of providing food security, dating back to the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844. More recently, food co-ops have been leaders in innovative food and social movements, including organic agriculture, fair trade, and local food production. Because food co-ops are rooted in and accountable to their local community members, they are well positioned to serve communities that cannot otherwise afford healthy food.

This is easier said than done. Co-ops often struggle to balance providing affordable, healthy food with other goals such as building local economies, protecting ecological health, and promoting fair relationships with both food system workers and producers. Working toward these goals can result in higher food prices, increasing pressure on food co-ops that already lack the economies of scale of massive grocery chains.

This reality has created the perception among some food-access advocates that food co-ops serve only wealthy communities and are irrelevant to low-income communities. No one wins in this scenario—low-income consumers lose out on access to healthy food and co-operative ownership; food co-ops miss a large potential membership and customer base; and the food justice movement loses an effective and sustainable model for community-owned and -controlled grocery stores.

In an effort to address these opportunities, the Cooperative Fund of New England (CFNE), a community loan fund serving co-ops and community-based nonprofits, and the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA), a regional network of over 30 food co-ops and startup initiatives, launched the Food Co-ops & Healthy Food Access project in 2010. The initiative has three main goals:



The Healthy Food Access—Food For All program at City Market in Burlington, Vt., is a model.

- 1) To increase access to healthy food and food co-op member-ownership and participation among low-income individuals and communities in New England;
- 2) To support information sharing among food co-ops regarding programs that expand participation of low-income individuals and communities; and
- 3) To raise the profile of food co-ops as a solution to the challenge of healthy food access.

This project blossomed after we acknowledged that by working together, the issue of increasing our access to low-income communities can be tackled more effectively.

Documenting experience

In 2011, with the support of The Cooperative Foundation, the Howard Bowers Fund, CoopMetrics, and the National Cooperative Grocers Association, CFNE and NFCA staff surveyed 29 food co-ops to identify successes and challenges regarding healthy food-access programs in food co-ops. We then developed written resources to support co-ops' expanding these efforts.

We started by examining the components needed to have a successful Healthy Food Access program, and we drafted a framework

to help co-op leaders overcome various healthy food-access barriers, including how to:

- **Collaborate with partner organizations** to help promote the co-op to low-income communities.
- **Use inclusive marketing** to create a welcoming store environment for low-income shoppers.
- **Create educational opportunities** to help improve the experience of new shoppers and provide information on how to buy healthy food on a tight budget.
- Use internal subsidies, on the product or member level, to **make healthy food affordable**.
- Create and promote **affordable ownership options**.
- **Consider other barriers**, such as language and transportation, that can prevent potential low-income members from accessing the co-op's goods and services.

With the framework in place, we documented four healthy food-access programs from New England food co-ops, and dug deeper into one to develop an in-depth toolbox that helps co-ops design, implement, and improve these programs.

Expanding food for all

One program stood out as an effective model for Healthy Food Access—Food For All (FFA): City Market in Burlington, Vt., implemented this program with great success. A key aspect of this initiative is that the host co-op partners with antihunger agencies to promote nutritious food to income-eligible people and provides relevant education and discounts on participant purchases. During FFA's first two years at City Market, Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and SNAP (food stamps) sales increased by 80 percent. The co-op now has about 1,150 enrolled participants, about 250 of whom joined the co-op as full member-owners through this program.

Promotion of this model through the Food Co-ops & Healthy Food Access project has helped expand FFA in New England from three co-ops in 2010 to 11 co-ops in some stage of implementation. With additional help from a new partner, Newman's Own Foundation, NFCA and CFNE are now exploring how leveraging economies of scale can increase the efficiency and impact of this program. Most notably, we are exploring a coordinated roll-out of the program among at least three co-ops near the Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts border, including a recently opened midsize co-op, a small established co-op, and a large established co-op. By aligning these programs, we anticipate streamlining community partnerships, marketing, and outreach in this corner of New England, easing implementation and increasing the success of this program.

Building capacity

Simultaneously, we are strengthening our partnerships with statewide antihunger advocacy organizations, starting with Hunger Free Vermont (HFVT). HFVT provided critical help to City Market during its implementation of FFA by supporting education and outreach among low-income communities and training co-op staff. While we have previously consulted HFVT on the development of our activities, we are excited to bring them more formally into the collaboration. As a first step, HFVT will offer a Cross-Class Marketing and Communication workshop at NFCA's Fall Gathering of member co-ops and partners.

As interest in healthy food access programs expands across the region, we are exploring how to increase the capacity for peer support among the NFCA's member co-ops. Building on materials from various co-op associations, NFCA is organizing a peer audit program to support information-sharing among member co-ops by using our network's combined expertise to grow together. We plan to integrate an exploration of Healthy Food Access programs into evaluations of food co-op operations, offering feedback and support in areas that can increase service to low-income members and shoppers.

The future is now

Co-ops have both a legacy of food security to build on and an obligation to make healthy food more accessible to meet our communities' needs. The potential reach of the Food Co-ops & Healthy Food Access project is enhanced by the network structure of strategically aligned members of the Neighboring Food Co-op Association. By working together and sharing expertise, we can strengthen our co-ops' abilities to be leaders around healthy food access, both individually and collectively. This project has already revealed progress in engaging low-income community members, both in offering access to healthy food and in cooperative ownership.

We are excited to take this project to the next level, helping our food co-ops to address limited access to healthy food in a more relevant, effective, and acknowledged manner. While our project is focused on New England, our evolving resources on this initiative are available online at: www.nfca.coop/healthyfoodaccess. We welcome feedback and suggestions from anyone involved in healthy food-access work. If you are near New England, please come see us in August at the NOFA Summer Conference: www.nofasummerconference.org. ■

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