



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA | EXTENSION

Health and Nutrition

# Cultivating collective action: The ecology of a statewide food network

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Presented by Noelle Harden, Jamie Bain, and Stephanie Heim



*Credit: Ohio Local Food Policy Council Network*



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# Table of Contents

**Networks as Ecosystems (infographic)** **3**

**1. Background** **4**

**2. Methods** **4**

**3. Findings** **5**

- 3.1. Emerge: Establishing the Network 5
- 3.2. Invest: Financing the Network 7
- 3.3. Trust: Cultivating Reciprocity 9
- 3.4. Navigate: Balancing Dynamic Contexts 10
- 3.5. Learn: Fostering Cross Pollination 12
- 3.6. Integrate: Spanning Network Boundaries 13
- 3.7. Equity: Valuing Network Diversity 14
- 3.8. Policy: Influencing Systems 15
- 3.9. Evaluate: Measuring Network Impact 17
- 3.10. Evolve: Transitioning the Network 18

**4. Next Steps for Minnesota** **20**

**5. Conclusion** **21**





# NETWORKS AS ECOSYSTEMS

## MINNESOTA FOOD CHARTER NETWORK

Statewide food networks like the Minnesota Food Charter Network help generate resources, mutual learning, cross-sector collaboration, collective action across local and regional food networks, and state level policy influence. Statewide food networks resemble natural ecosystems in structure and function.

### 1 EMERGE

Networks are rooted in geographic, political and other contexts of a place. Early stages focus on information gathering. Tension exists between being highly intentional and process driven, while remaining nimble and adaptive to recruit and excite members.

### 2 INVEST

Resources like diversified funding, dedicated staff, and partners are needed to support and power the growth and activities of networks.

### 3 TRUST

Network leaders are deliberate about building trust and participation, using authentic engagement strategies and ongoing communication to ensure that trust moves fluidly through the network.

### 4 NAVIGATE

Network leaders must navigate the dynamic, ever-changing context of a state's food system and many players, representing diverse perspectives and geographies.

### 5 LEARN

Network leaders facilitate rapid collaboration and cross-pollination through coordinated group learning.

### 6 INTEGRATE

Networks overlap; greatest productivity occurs at the intersections. Members play multiple roles and span network boundaries.

### 7 EQUITY

Diversity is valued. Network leaders engage traditionally underrepresented voices.

### 8 POLICY

Diverse interests converge around a common policy agenda when the conditions are right.

### 9 EVALUATE

Identifying metrics for success and measuring progress can demonstrate impact to funders. Evaluation is infused across all phases and dimensions of network development and activities.

### 10 EVOLVE

Effective networks evolve and adapt to specific challenges and opportunities. Systems and processes that can grow and change reflect a generative network.



## 1. BACKGROUND

Food networks and food policy councils have emerged rapidly across the United States and Canada in the last decade. Currently, there are more than 250 in North America, according to the [Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future's directory](#) (see page 22 for the complete URL of this and subsequent hyperlinks). These community-based, cross-sector groups of individuals and organizations work comprehensively to solve complex challenges of the food system, such as prevention of chronic diseases caused, in part, by poor diet quality. In many states, statewide food networks have formed in order to generate more support, mutual learning, collaboration, and collective action across local and regional networks, and/or to influence policy at the state level.

In Minnesota, there are more than 20 active food networks. These networks have participated in statewide initiatives such as the development of the Minnesota Food Charter, and have been supported by funding from sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Community Transformation Grant and the Statewide Health Improvement Program.

Despite the constant state of flux of food networks across Minnesota, University of Minnesota Extension Health and Nutrition educators have had some involvement with all of the 20-plus food networks in the state, and in some cases are leading networks themselves. Educators also serve as facilitators, conveners, content experts and/or members of these networks. Throughout 2014, educators engaged with food network leaders through surveys and an in-person gathering, and learned that there is a strong desire and need for statewide learning and collaboration.



*Credit: Kansas Alliance for Wellness*

In order to continue to foster and grow a sustainable partnership with food network leaders across the state, Health and Nutrition educators explored the opportunities and challenges presented by the emergence of a statewide food network in Minnesota and the role of Extension within it. This report provides a summary of the findings from interviews with leaders of other statewide and multi-state food networks, and highlights opportunities, challenges, and best practices that emerged through 10 categories that describe the different phases and key activities of a network. Additionally, the report findings are presented through an overarching concept of understanding networks as ecosystems (see infographic on page 3), because the processes at play within food networks mimic many of those found in nature.

## 2. METHODS

Building on [research](#) and outreach that had already been conducted with Minnesota food networks, researchers identified a list of statewide and multi-state food network leaders with which to request a 60-minute phone interview. An email request was also placed on the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future Food Policy Networks listserv that generated several additional contacts. The University of Minnesota's IRB process for determination of human subjects research was followed, and it was determined that IRB review was not required because the research did not meet the definition of human subjects research. Statewide networks that interact directly with local and regional food networks in their state were targeted, including as a technical assistance provider,

convener, or conduit to state level policy. A semi-structured interview format was followed, with questions about the origin, structure, membership, functions, resources, best practices, lessons learned and evaluation strategies for each network. Interviews were conducted by phone, between April and June 2015, with one designated interviewer and two notetakers who simultaneously transcribed the conversation into a Google Doc in real time. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and interviews were analyzed collaboratively in order to identify key themes.

### 3. FINDINGS

This report includes findings from interviews with leaders of 13 statewide food networks and two multi-state networks. This exploratory interview process leveraged the experiences of national leaders to reveal strategies, contexts, and theoretical foundations that have supported the development of statewide food networks around the country. This report also features common stumbling blocks and provides advice on how to avoid these pitfalls. In addition to the review of opportunities, challenges, and best practices described in 10 categories, the report also deploys a metaphor of an ecosystem as another way to understand the work of food networks.

- **A note about language:** Every person we interviewed, in some fashion, underscored the importance of communication. Words matter. Council, network, policy, roundtable, alliance, and working group are all used in this report to describe similar organizations or activities. Context, including the history and current realities of a place, influence how the work of statewide food networks is framed. In general, these words describe collective efforts by a group of individuals and/or organizations who work together for a common purpose. For simplicity's sake, we will commonly refer to networks for the remainder of the report, unless otherwise noted by the interviewee.

#### 3.1. Emerge: Establishing the Network

**Opportunities:** Networks emerge organically, and are rooted in the geographic, political, and other contexts of a particular place. In general, the first key decision when establishing a statewide food network is to determine the relationship between the network and state government. All of the networks in our study are currently led by individuals outside of the public sector. In the case of Ohio, Connecticut, Alabama, Colorado, Washington, North Carolina, Michigan, and Kansas, state legislation was an important catalyst for action in the beginning; networks in these states were either created directly through legislative action, or, more commonly, emerged after a legislated statewide food policy council became dormant. Most of the networks were formed by non-profit organizations or academic institutions to respond to the growing presence and momentum created by local and regional networks or to support collective action around statewide food policy objectives.

#### FEATURED STRATEGY:

##### Community Food Assessments

Community food assessments have been and continue to be used as tools to spur action. Most of the networks in our study either resulted from a more formal statewide food systems inventory, or conducted a statewide assessment or mapping exercise as one of their inaugural activities. Community Food Strategies of North Carolina started in 2012 after the Center for Environmental Farming Systems conducted a Farm to Fork initiative in 2008–2009 that resulted in the development of [“A Guide to Building North Carolina’s Sustainable Local Food Economy”](#). Kansas leveraged seven recommendations from a Kansas Rural Center report titled [“Feeding Kansas: Statewide Farm & Food System Assessment with a Plan for Public Action”](#) to build a case for food councils in the state.



**Challenges:** Underlying the common challenges related to the origin of statewide and multi-state food networks is tension between the need to be highly

“Balancing the tension that exists between process and action is both an art and a science.” — Michael Dimock, California Food Policy Council

intentional and process driven during the early stages of network development, and the need to be highly nimble, adaptive, and able to recruit and excite members. Because of this tension, decisions about leadership, membership, scope of the work and whether to engage in policy work are sometimes difficult to make. For example, leaders from Maine and Alabama both indicated that strategic planning and governance structure are not topics that garner much enthusiasm from most network members. According to Martin Richards in Kentucky, the origin and early leadership of a network is a critical consideration because there are advantages and disadvantages to being created by government versus a non-profit organization. While formation by legislative or other government action may provide credibility, each of the networks we interviewed experienced significant volatility with changes in administration, and for that reason most leaders recommended the network being housed outside of government.

**Best Practices:** In order to be both deliberate and adaptive, it is critical to have an accurate preliminary read on where a state is developmentally related to food systems. All network leaders engaged in extensive information gathering and assessment early in the formative process in order to determine the needs and opportunities of the state’s food system. This includes looking externally at the work in other states, as well as commonly referenced models, consultants, and theoretical frameworks from the literature (see Table 1). Network leaders stressed the importance of learning from other networks; leaders from *Vermont Farm to Plate* and *Food Solutions New England*, for example, were commonly referenced as valuable network mentors. The process of engaging with internal stakeholders looked different everywhere, as network leaders had to balance being deliberate yet nimble, while honoring the unique contexts within each state. For Maine and Ohio, development of the network was intentionally informal and adaptive, executed through a series of conversations between key individuals already invested in the work of local and regional food networks. In Colorado, staff and interns from the Colorado Food Systems Advisory Council spent one year interviewing almost 40 key stakeholder organizations in the state’s food system to determine needs and opportunities for the network.

Table 1: Useful Resources Cited by Food Network Leaders	
<a href="#">Center for Livable Future Food Policy Network</a>	National listserv for food networks
<a href="#">Collective Impact</a>	Theoretical framework for social change
<a href="#">Dynamic Governance</a>	Theoretical framework for adaptive organizational structures
<a href="#">Networks that Work</a>	Tools and conceptual frameworks for collaboration
<a href="#">Whole Measures for Community Food Systems</a>	Values based tool for evaluation
<a href="#">Rural Networks for Wealth Creation</a>	Study of the impact of rural networks
<a href="#">Advocacy Coalition Framework</a>	Policy framework for addressing “wicked” problems
<a href="#">Network Weaver Handbook</a>	Practical guide for network founders
<a href="#">Connecting to Change the World</a>	Guide for implementing collaborative solutions
<a href="#">Thinking in Systems</a>	Conceptual framework and methods for systems thinking
<a href="#">Death by Meetings</a>	Guide to make meetings more efficient and effective
<a href="#">Mark Winne from Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future</a>	Consultant
<a href="#">Curtis Ogden from the Institute for Social Interaction</a>	Consultant



### 3.2. Invest: Financing the Network

**Opportunities:** Diversified funding is critical to statewide food networks. Funding is the energy that powers networks by supporting dedicated staff time, communications, operations, evaluation, and logistical support. Table 2 describes the current and past sources of funding for food networks, including grants from both the private and public sector. Some leaders suggested that funding is readily available to support the work of food networks; it is just a matter of finding the source that is right for the network. Other network leaders indicated funding is plentiful in the health arena or other specific areas, but not necessarily to support the comprehensive, cross-sector approach that characterizes the work of food networks.

Alabama	AARP Foundation
Appalachia	USDA AFRI/NIFA
California	Public Health Institute
Chesapeake	Town Creek Foundation, Prince Charitable Trusts
Colorado	Kaiser Permanente, The Colorado Trust, LiveWell Colorado
Connecticut	State budget special fund
Iowa	USDA Rural Development, Leopold Center, Kellogg & Winrock Foundations
Kansas	Kansas Health Foundation
Kentucky	USDA NIFA Community Food Planning Grant, Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky
Maine	Foundations, local public health, and local food businesses and farmers
Michigan	Kellogg Foundation, Kresge Foundation
North Carolina	Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation
Ohio	Ohio Convergence Partnership, AmeriCorps
Washington	Philanthropists, Foundations
Wisconsin	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, University of Wisconsin Extension

**Challenges:** Network leaders universally recognized that limited financial capacity to support staff time prevents true engagement with the immense scope of food system work. In addition, making decisions about funding sources is not simple because all grant funds, public or private, come with strings attached. Michael Dimock from California described this tension as a “funding conundrum,” explaining that the network needed the right balance of public and private funding in order to fully engage in food policy work. In Ohio, the statewide food network had lost the “best coordination they had ever had” when the AmeriCorps program adopted a hunger-only focus and could no longer provide logistical support for the network. Jill Clark from Ohio also described how the network had “paradoxically missed out” on vital grant funds because they simply did not have the staff capacity to apply. These examples demonstrate that even though funding sources seem readily available for the kind of work that food networks do, there are challenges associated with accessing the right kind of funding streams, especially when grant programs are compartmentalized by focusing on hunger, health, agriculture, or economic development, rather than the comprehensive approach inherent to food networks.

*“Staffing is necessary to hold the container of the coalition....volunteerism waxes and wanes.”*  
— Vic Colman, Washington State Food Systems Roundtable

**Best Practices:** In order to truly sustain efforts, funding should be increased, diversified, and strategically aligned with the local and regional needs across the state. Leaders from the Chesapeake Foodshed Network discovered that funding is needed to support network leadership, which may include staffing from anchor institutions. Both the Wisconsin and California network leaders mentioned that they are seeking more funds from the private sector, but had to shift priorities in order to do so (from a health to economic lens, in the case of Wisconsin). Beyond direct funding, networks can also tap into existing support systems such as Cooperative Extension and USDA programs. For example, the Kentucky network leverages resources USDA Food and Nutrition Service Programs bring to the table, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed), Child Nutrition, Farmers' Markets and others, and also is supported through in-kind contributions from state agencies and universities.

*"It is important to include funders in the discussion and decision making because it helps make them intimately aware of the challenges and opportunities, plus it has been our experience that they are often strategic thinkers and they bring passion about, and commitment to, the effort." — Christy Gabbard, Chesapeake Foodshed Network*

**FEATURED STRATEGY:**  
**Dedicated Staff Time**  
Most of the networks had some dedicated staff time, but usually just part of one person's time or as an "add-on" to an already full workload. In Connecticut, Lucy Nolan's first priority is to fulfill her duties as executive director of End Hunger Connecticut!, and secondarily to provide leadership to the Connecticut Food Policy Council. In Alabama, Alice Evans is in the same boat: she acts as executive director of the Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network, and has considered passing her organization's administrative lead role of the Alabama Food Policy Council to another organization with more capacity. California was the most robustly staffed network in our study, with approximately 2.5 FTEs (full time equivalents), but network leader Michael Dimock indicated that they really need to be at about 5 FTEs.

**FEATURED STRATEGY:**  
**Bring Funders to the Table**  
At the local level, funding and capacity for food networks tends to be very limited. Thus, some of the statewide networks have leveraged connections to funders to foster relationships with local networks in order to make it easier for local and regional food networks to receive grants and other funds. We feature three examples:

- In North Carolina, the network was created through an open conversation between the network leadership and a key funder about the opportunity of a statewide network to engage with local networks and impact public health across the state, recognizing the need to start by intensively supporting local efforts. Community Food Strategies was thereby able to leverage funding and other technical assistance resources to directly support the emergence of local networks.
- The Chesapeake Foodshed Network has intentionally included funders in the network design and networking opportunities so they can become more informed about the work of local networks, and become spokespersons for the network approach within their organizations and among their grantees.
- As a result of intentional yet informal conversations initiated by Misty Lechner, the Kansas Health Foundation has expanded funding for food networks beyond assessment to include capacity building and training.



### 3.3. Trust: Cultivating Reciprocity

**Opportunities:** Trust is an essential network element; it moves fluidly through the network, providing cohesion and reciprocity across all members, even those who are not working in direct partnership. Members of the network need to trust that the time and energy they put into planning and attending meetings will yield benefits for their individual or organizational work around food systems. Members also need to be able to trust that the group processes that are used are equitable, especially when there is dissent amongst individual members. Rich Pirog from Michigan explained

*“You can’t build trust over the Internet. You need to have face to face interaction.”*  
— Rich Pirog, Michigan Center for Regional Food Systems

that networks that are “higher risk, higher trust” have the greatest potential for true collaboration and systems level change. This potential is maximized when networks foster an environment of “complex reciprocity” where a critical mass of individuals are willing to engage in reciprocal relationships chaotically across a network

rather than just with individuals through direct partnership. The concept of complex reciprocity further illustrates the fluid nature of trust in network development and function.

**Challenges:** Authentic engagement is the key to cultivate trust, and is itself no small feat because it takes time, requires great attention to processes, and bears a degree of risk. Anne Palmer noted that in this relationship-based work, “we chronically underestimate how much time network building is going to take.” Even though people have an overwhelming desire to connect, it is critical to be able to recognize when people have been stretched too thin. Several leaders alluded to meeting fatigue, member burnout, limited bandwidth, and even “death by meetings” to describe the difficulty in keeping members engaged in the network. Aside from the amount of time for network participation, inappropriate processes, that are too top down for example, can yield resistance in communities who feel that agendas are being imposed without authentic community involvement. For example, in Kentucky, some of the earlier food systems work around farmers markets in West Louisville failed because the community felt that efforts were being imposed from the outside, from an organization that did not take the time to listen and build trust within the community.

*“We don’t have an intentionally created food policy system. It takes patience to get all the sectors to learn how to work together and trust each other, to impact public and private together.”* — Vic Colman, Washington State Food Systems Roundtable

**Best Practices:** Network leaders use deliberate engagement strategies to sustain trusting participation in the network, including strategies to balance process with action and share tangible success stories. Michael Dimock from California utilizes an approach that he described as establishing a “perceived threshold of success.” This means working toward at least one concrete win each year, and taking the time to share and celebrate each success, however small it may seem. Several other network leaders also mentioned the importance of regularly celebrating successes as an essential strategy to maintain momentum. Communication is absolutely essential to trust building, and should be transparent, use a mix of technology and in-person gatherings, and emphasize the sharing of resources and success stories. Several networks pointed to the value of face-to-face interaction (often at an annual summit) as a critical way to build trust and momentum,

*“People have a limited tolerance for meetings that have nothing come out of them. It is very important to show success and keep communities connected to a bigger picture.”* — Martin Richards, Kentucky Food Policy Network

especially when it is fun and engaging, and includes healthy, local food. Patience is also essential in this process, because it takes time to build trust and establish systems and processes for collaboration.



Credit: Kentucky Food Policy Network



#### FEATURED EXAMPLE:

##### The Community Based Approach of the Community Farm Alliance and Kentucky Food Policy Network

The Community Farm Alliance has been cultivating trust among farmers and food policy advocates for over 30 years. The Kentucky Food Policy Network was formed to build on these partnerships and connections in 2013. Over his time as executive director, Martin Richards has learned the value of community ownership, and of “meeting people where they are at by engaging community and regional efforts.” He has built credibility through capacity building at the local level by providing mini-grants and technical assistance to support community food assessments and local projects. Martin also recognizes the personal stake that most people have in food systems work, and advised that “only special individuals can step outside of personal issues, think about the bigger picture, and have time to be involved at the state level.” For everyone else, it is important to help people see how personal and organizational interests align, and also to understand that sometimes they will not align because of the underlying mistrust that individuals and communities have for certain institutions. In Kentucky, one cause of this mistrust is the entrenched ideological separation between agriculture, food access, and economic development, and the negative consequences this has had for integrated food policy work in the state.

Credit: Chesapeake Foodshed Network



### 3.4. Navigate: Balancing Dynamic Contexts

**Opportunities:** The contexts facing statewide food network leaders are dynamic, ever-changing, and diverse. Statewide and multi-state food networks are intentional spaces where key stakeholders representing diverse perspectives and geographies can come together to learn and collaborate. As such, these networks are uniquely poised to bring about broad scale solutions to the complex challenges of the food system, sometimes referred to as “wicked” problems. Network leaders need to be able to navigate the dynamic contexts of a state food system, particularly related to the membership, which includes many players with different, sometimes competing interests. In Kansas, Missty Lechner is very sensitive to balancing participation from both the health and agriculture community. Currently, funding for the network is from the health community and the focus of the work is framed around local food. Missty has intentionally engaged with potential opposition to gain their support, or at the very least, their neutrality. For example, intentional yet informal conversations with the Kansas Farm Bureau resulted in a reference to “food policy committees” in their 2014 resolutions. It is significant that this resolution was included not because of the actual language per se, but because it has encouraged the involvement of the farm bureau representatives in local networks in Kansas. This example demonstrates the opportunities that arise through proactive engagement with diverse organizations and in identifying mutually beneficial win-wins.

**Challenges:** Navigating dynamism is closely related to trust, funding, and other areas of food network development. Trust can be especially difficult to cultivate across the geography of a state because the members have different goals, motivations, self-interest, backgrounds, and so on that may vary more than within one community or region. Sometimes members become polarized around certain issues. For example, in Kansas, Colorado, Ohio, and Wisconsin, there was tension between a focus on healthy food and local food. Navigating a diversity of

*“Local food is sexy right now. Healthy food is Michelle Obama.” — Misty Lechner, Kansas Alliance for Wellness*

perspectives means bringing players to the table beyond the “usual suspects.” Often a leadership structure will initially reflect the core group of people who are interested and passionate around the idea of a network. Over time, according to Anne Palmer and Christy Gabbard of the Chesapeake Foodshed Network, securing participation from a broader set of leaders will require support and often funding, which is a major challenge for networks that may be struggling to fund their day-to-day operations. Networks without broad, cross-sector representation are limited in their ability to influence policy and systems, and may struggle with sustainability. For example, in Alabama, nonprofits and university representatives entirely comprised the network, which has presented challenges related to funding and sustained participation in the network, likely because many of the members are focused on supporting their own organizations and projects.

**FEATURED EXAMPLE:  
California Food Policy Council Systems  
Dynamic Map**

In California, a systems dynamic mapping process was the pivotal tool used to assess and navigate the complex landscape of the California food system. The mapping process used participatory methods from a diverse set of 36 key stakeholders to map the entire state food system, identify 22 strategic intervention points, and determine that policy was a key intervention point to advance food systems change at the state level. Around the same time, the state issued a [Health in All Policies report](#) that included a recommendation to form a statewide food policy council. Because of this dynamic assessment process, the food policy council emerged as a key way to “connect grassroots and grasstops to impact politicians in their own districts,” according to network leader Michael Dimock.

**Best Practices:** In order to navigate the complex food system dynamics in a state, food network leaders must first be aware of them. In Iowa, Corry Bregendahl noted the importance of approaching partners when they are ready and not to be afraid to go back to them later. She noted that relationship building is costly but essential for network and organizational leaders to establish a “threshold of trust” in order to engage diverse organizations and foster open communication. Taking steps to authentically build trust in order to navigate dynamism is especially important for state agencies, academia, and other large institutions involved in networks, who must earn trust from diverse stakeholders through community buy-in, shared leadership, internal consensus, and by avoiding the perception of imposing an agenda or otherwise co-opting the process. In some cases, these institutions need to be invited to engage with communities, not the other way around, and may also have a different role in the network than other members. For example, in Iowa, agency representatives take on a role of servant leadership — they are the “support system” for the local and regional networks and do not have a decision making role.

### 3.5. Learn: Fostering Cross Pollination

**Opportunity:** Information moves throughout statewide food networks like the pollination process, spreading potential for new growth as networks have coordinated opportunities to learn together and catalyze change. Networks use a range of strategies to foster mutual learning between local and regional food networks. A few of the network leaders we interviewed described the rapid cross collaboration that occurs when networks are convened with the intention of group learning. For example, the coordinator of the Maine Network of Community Food Councils, Ken Morse, described how the dynamic process of peer-to-peer sharing embraced “non-hierarchical, horizontal” processes that produced “rapid innovation through accelerated sharing.” Ideas are readily exchanged, and have a tendency to “go viral” as they are quickly adopted by other members of the network as cross network learning, collaborative buy-in, and trust are simultaneously cultivated.

**Challenges:** Using a wide scope to think about fostering learning is both an opportunity and challenge as needs can vary greatly. While it’s true a statewide food network can play a critical role in supporting learning at a local or regional level, leaders and members of statewide networks should also be thinking about their own learning objectives, embracing the concept that this work is developmental and a focus on learning should happen continuously at all scales. As stated previously, staff time to support and design learning opportunities and funding to cover the costs associated with in-person convenings is often a limiting factor.

**Best Practices:** Networks in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Colorado focus on an annual in-person convening to bring together leaders from across the state for shared learning. While there is no substitute for in-person gatherings, network leaders acknowledged that the hefty commitment of staff time and dollars underscores the importance of virtual opportunities to foster learning, whether by webinar, video, or phone conference. A majority of network leaders learn from and are advised by an outside consultant to get work off the ground. For example, Mark Winne of Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future consulted with networks in California, Ohio, and Connecticut as they emerged, while Curtis Ogden and Ellen Kahler have supported the Chesapeake Foodshed Network with strategic guidance and coaching. In North Carolina, Community Food Strategies has focused on providing individual support to emerging networks at the “seed stage” of development, while also exploring opportunities to convene the networks such as the first summit held in December 2014.

#### FEATURED EXAMPLE:

##### Shared Gifting in Maine

The Maine Network of Community Food Councils combines technical assistance, convenings, and funding to amplify and foster learning across the local and regional networks in Maine. A key example of the process used by Maine is the concept of [Shared Gifting](#), a model of grant making that puts decisions in the hands of the grantees and creates the opportunity for deep learning about one another’s work. In Maine, ownership, distribution, and allocation authority were given to local and regional networks who met and presented their proposals to each other. Each network received a set amount to allocate to another network. While the funders loved this approach because it decreased their administrative burden, Ken Morse emphasized the true value of this process was that it leveraged momentum for ideas to spread across networks, and also moved local and regional networks toward a sense of shared leadership and ownership of the statewide network.



Other statewide networks support shared learning among local and regional networks through a combination of convening and technical assistance, and may also serve as funders for local and regional networks in the cases of Maine, Iowa, Michigan, California, Kentucky, and the Appalachian Foodshed Project.

### 3.6. Integrate: Spanning Network Boundaries

**Opportunities:** Statewide food networks are often intended to bring more integration and state level impact to the work of local and regional networks. Network leaders focus on bringing alignment to existing initiatives in part because redundancy is simply not sustainable. Many network leaders spoke of the importance of developing a shared roadmap or vision for collective action that demonstrates how food networks can play a major role in developing and implementing this collective vision at the state level. Rich Pirog of Michigan described the integrated approach at Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems as an “ecosystem of networks” — systems designed with “reinforcing feedback loops” that emphasize synergies across three networks: the Michigan Food Hub Network, the Michigan Farm to Institution Network, and the Michigan Local Food Council Network. The Good Food Charter provides core principles and a framework in which these three and other types of food networks in the state can find common ground. Network leaders in Iowa and Appalachia also described their network approach as an interconnected ecosystem of networks, or “linking circles,” weaving together various existing food networks and issue based networks (such as a food hub network, farmer’ market network, etc.). The concepts of boundary spanners and linking circles imply that the real work of statewide networks happens at the intersections of existing networks. In ecology, it is similarly the edges of ecosystems that are most productive and diverse, not the center.

**Challenges:** Geographic, political, cultural, economic, and other macro level differences across a state’s food system make integration a challenge. Several network leaders spoke directly or indirectly about the importance of balancing the varying geographical contexts within their state. Corry Bregendahl, for example, spoke of an early statewide effort in Iowa faltering because, “at least in part it was not grounded in geography. It was a community of interest but not a community of place.” This led to a new approach in Iowa of focusing on one geographically anchored network (the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition) as a catalyst to build credibility and garner funding to support the emergence of new networks across the state. In Washington, Vic Colman noted integration was a challenge early on because an executive order tasked state agencies with assessing the food system landscape to produce a report that had the unintended consequence of marginalizing external stakeholders who had already invested resources to produce similar reports.



**Best Practices:** A central piece of the ecosystem approach is to not have one organizational lead or risk moving from “collaboration to caretaking or dominance.” Networks should overlap and have members who play multiple roles. Trust and

connections across social groups (also known as bridging social capital) are foundations of the ecosystem approach. Another key strategy is to recruit individual members who serve as boundary spanners, creating intentional linkages across the ecosystem of networks. Boundary spanners are good listeners, positive, and do not dominate the group process, but instead focus on building reciprocity. Network leaders also indicated that networks should “grow organically” across several scales. Martin Richards, for example, described how the Kentucky network is “not about building the wheel, but looking at the spokes and connecting them to the wheel.” In sum, integration occurs more rapidly when network leaders and staff demonstrate expertise in network weaving, systems thinking to support complex change, communication, adaptive leadership, critical thinking, and planning.

*“A lot of work in rural areas happens by people wearing many hats” —Anne Palmer, Chesapeake Foodshed Network*

### FEATURED EXAMPLE:

**The bumpy road to integration in Washington** — The Washington State Food Systems Roundtable is overcoming challenges in order to promote balanced integration between public and private stakeholders at the state level. Network leader Vic Colman described how legislation to form a statewide food policy council was downsized to an executive order for state agencies to develop a report, a move that left external stakeholders feeling “crowded out.” However, state food policy leaders (public and private) seized the opportunity to reclaim ownership of the report, as well as buy-in from private stakeholders, and are developing a roadmap based on actionable strategies for food systems change — similar to a food charter — that network members could leverage for on-the-ground change. Branding and marketing of the network are also key lessons learned from the Washington experience. For example, a bill was introduced in the legislature with little acknowledgement of the preliminary work of the Washington State Food Systems Roundtable, perhaps in part because the network was not marketed broadly enough.

*“A big fluffy report with world peace objectives is not going to help. We need actionable strategies!” — Vic Colman, Washington State Food Systems Roundtable*

### 3.7. Equity: Valuing Network Diversity

**Opportunities:** Diversity is a valuable characteristic of statewide food networks, helping to keep them grounded in communities, and more resilient to face inevitable changes in membership, leadership, and other contexts. A majority of network leaders emphasized the importance of equitable engagement with limited-resource individuals and communities of color. These traditionally underrepresented voices bring valuable perspective to networks, especially because many networks intentionally seek to address issues such as food insecurity and social injustice in the food system. Network leaders from North Carolina, California, Iowa, and Michigan addressed the importance of bringing voices to the table that represent low-income families and communities of color, and also of the need to strengthen capacity in these communities and create more opportunities for engagement.





**Challenges:** There are many barriers to participation in food networks by limited-resource families and communities of color that are not unique to food networks, such as limited time and financial resources, lack of trust in institutions, and discomfort with the engagement processes used by networks. One network leader recalled the “very difficult conversations to overcome the issue of white privilege. People were yelling at each other in meetings.” In Iowa, creating leadership opportunities for people of color is a priority that is easier said than done. Corry Bregendahl noted that building capacity is a constant area of concern and a shift in mental models is necessary to sustain diverse participation. In at least two of the networks, the cultural and political stigma associated with the SNAP program and its participants creates barriers in addressing food security, food access, and equity issues within the network.

**FEATURED EXAMPLE:**

**Racial Equity Plan of Work in Michigan**

The Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems developed a racial equity plan of work that was informed by the work of PolicyLink and its [Equity Atlas](#). Like PolicyLink, Michigan frames equity as an economic development engine for the state. In order to grow more leaders of color, Rich Pirog talked about the importance of “walking our own talk,” pointing to the need for the University and Extension to critically review internal hiring policies and practices. This can be challenging because University and Extension are not always well connected to communities and don’t always understand the people they are trying to help. People of color want to see their own leaders emerge and to achieve self-determinism. Michigan is starting small and building structures to address this need through sensitivity and by supporting a change within internal systems. In the long term, higher paying jobs to lift people out of poverty are needed. *Note:* Since our interview, the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems developed an annotated bibliography – “[Structural Racism present in the US Food System](#)” – which reportedly has been valuable for local food advocates seeking to better understand the critical importance of equity in the food system.

**Best Practices:** Promising strategies for equitable engagement include providing stipends to support participation in the network from limited-resource communities, hosting trainings on the topic of equitable engagement, and integrating equity into all of the work of the network. The Ohio Local Food Policy Network, for example, provided a training about equitable engagement strategies at the gathering of local and regional networks in June 2015. Making sure certain people (e.g. farmers, low-income individuals) are at the table is at the core of the work in Kentucky. For example, Kentucky tracks the number of low-income and farmer participants at stakeholder meetings. In Washington, equity is woven throughout all of the work of the network, rather than compartmentalized within a task force or specific projects.



**3.8. Policy: Influencing Systems**

**Opportunities:** In order for statewide food networks to coalesce around a common policy agenda, diverse interests need to converge at a time when the conditions are right. For this reason, the work of statewide food networks on policy issues tends to be complicated. To understand how statewide food networks engage in policy, it is important

to understand the relationship between networks and statewide food policy councils. Several statewide networks, including Colorado, Ohio, Washington, and North Carolina, emerged after a statewide food policy council had been formed through state government action, then was disbanded or downsized by a shifting state political landscape. During this time, network leaders in these states have all sought to engage more with local and regional grassroots leaders in order to determine how to best build on momentum that exists in the state. As a result of this process, some networks are moving away from policy work, while others are finding new ways to engage in policy work, though not always at the state level. Despite all of this, some networks in our study have impacted food policy at the local or state level. Missty Lechner from Kansas, for example, is involved in advocacy for a statewide health policy and maintains a presence at the state capitol. In Wisconsin, network stakeholders were mobilized and became instrumental in bringing back the “Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin” initiative in the legislature.

**Challenges:** Integrated, statewide policy work is emergent, and thus very challenging for food network leaders. Several interviewees indicated that they do not directly engage in state policy, and often leave the word “policy” out of the network’s name and conversations to avoid alienating stakeholders or to spend more time developing a common policy vision. A few network leaders stressed the value of being housed outside state government because these networks are easily undermined in a changing political tide, even though non-governmental networks tend to have less political power and legitimacy. In two of the states in our study, network leaders expressed a sense of uncertainty and even tension in the relationship between the statewide food network and the state department of agriculture, whose leadership may have viewed the network as in competition or out of alignment with the mission of the agency.

*“The natural evolution of a movement should lead to policy... We need to work with foundations to change their mindset regarding policy change, to see it as part of the movement’s evolution as it achieves more and more success.” — Michael Dimock, California Food Policy Council*

**Best Practices:** Vic Colman, from Washington, emphasized the importance of intention when considering this issue of engaging in policy work: “Ultimately, coalitions need to figure out if they want to be the big tent, and in that case potentially water down critical policy work. Otherwise, be an edgier group and get the work done faster and further.” It seemed that the consensus among our interviewees was to be the big tent, and be as inclusive as possible. This inclusivity is achieved by including partners from private industry and public agencies in addition to food networks, by building relationships

**FEATURED STRATEGY:**  
**Connecting local and state policy work**  
Networks in Connecticut and Colorado have had successes and challenges in connecting local networks to statewide policy work. In Connecticut, a statewide food policy council was created by the legislature in 1996 and was instrumental in big picture policy work for years, impacting local food policy in the state and even influencing the national dialogue around local food systems. As funding and other support for the Connecticut Food Policy Council has declined in recent years, the network leaders have sought greater engagement with local networks by having a coordinator attend all of the local network meetings, and supporting the development of local policy work. In Colorado, the Colorado Food Systems Advisory Council and the Colorado Food Policy Network share a coordinator — Wendy Peters Moschetti — and the legislation to create the Council included language about partnering with local councils. The local networks would like to develop a shared policy vision, but first need to spend more time coalescing around a formal structure and common values.



Credit: Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems

with potential adversaries early in the process, and by strategically focusing on networking and technical assistance rather than jumping to statewide policy advocacy. The California Food Policy Council has used this big tent approach by not directly engaging in lobbying, but instead creating a forum at least once a year when local and regional networks can interact with state policy and agency leaders directly. In comparison, the Community Farm Alliance in Kentucky has been highly engaged in policy work, successfully advocating for at least 24 state policy initiatives since it was formed in the 1980s. Martin

Richards described how the Kentucky Food Policy Network was created to take a nuanced look beyond just the passing of legislation to the implementation of policy, by researching and adapting federal USDA nutrition programs, for example,

### 3.9. Evaluate: Measuring Network Impact

**Opportunities:** Evaluation creates opportunities to document, measure, and communicate about the work of statewide food networks, particularly if evaluators are embedded in the network ecosystem rather than being viewed as outsiders. Like policy work, impact evaluation is an area of great opportunity and challenge for networks because it is emergent and very complex. Being able to demonstrate and document impact can be the key to unlock funding, sustain participation, and engage key decision makers. For example, the [Appalachian Food Story Project](#) captures stories from people working to improve the Eastern Kentucky’s food system while promoting learning across communities. There lies great opportunity in simply starting an evaluation process. Shifting perspectives so evaluation becomes a normal part of network functions is critical.

**Challenges:** Though network leaders cited the importance of evaluation, some also expressed a general sense of frustration about implementing authentic evaluation strategies. Resources are limited for evaluation efforts, while the data collection and interpretation systems are often costly. Evaluation practices such as surveys can be perceived as unengaging or even uncomfortable for network members. Networks in Maine and North Carolina cited [Whole Measures for Community Food Systems](#) as a valuable framework for evaluation. Almost every network leader mentioned the [Collective Impact framework](#) as one they had considered for the network, but most also felt daunted by the robust strategies and resources needed to implement the framework. For example, in Michigan the three networks and the Good Food Charter have moved forward with a robust Shared Measurement Pilot Project, which came out of the Collective Impact framework.



Credit: Minnesota Food Charter

**Best Practices:** Most networks are engaged in some type of process evaluation, but very few are at the point of even attempting an impact evaluation. Several networks emphasized the importance of collecting and sharing stories; others conducted interviews with key network leaders to assess

*“We are not just evaluators but are participants in the process. We are not just coming in at the end with a yardstick.” — Corry Bregendahl, Iowa Regional Food Systems Working Group*

network processes. The Chesapeake Foodshed Network has embarked on an analysis to capture ripple effects and increased connectedness. The first level of analysis was to capture a baseline and the next level will look into how relationships became collaborations. The adoption of core principles for evaluation can ensure statewide networks

can tell their story. For example, developmental evaluation as a core principle is an approach that adapts to the emergent realities in complex environments. In developmental evaluation interacting and interdependent elements are embraced as they generate change and learning over time. Another core principle, participatory monitoring and evaluation, relies on active participant engagement in the planning, design, and/or implementation phases. Participatory approaches in evaluation foster the development of horizontal relationships among stakeholders, who in turn learn to communicate more openly and effectively, exchange information, and share in decision-making and question-making throughout the lifecycle of a network.

**FEATURED EXAMPLE:**

**Systemic, Participatory Evaluation Methods in Iowa** — Iowa was the most advanced network in terms of documenting process and impact. Corry Bregendahl described several types of evaluation surveys, interviews, and appreciative inquiry processes used to implement robust evaluation strategies related to collective impact (specifically, shared measures across the networks). Evaluators in Iowa have found that appreciative inquiry and other relational approaches to evaluation can change the way people think of evaluators and increase the level of trust network leaders and members have in the process. In Iowa, evaluators are also participants in networks with a special charge of documenting the work across local and regional networks. Evaluators in Iowa leverage this social and political capital to share relevant information happening on the ground with those who would benefit from knowing. Overall, an appreciation of evaluation has tremendous value for food networks at all levels. Iowa uses evaluation as a tool for accountability, sharing information and success stories and overall to improve ownership of the network process and work.

### 3.10. Evolve: Transitioning the Network

**Opportunities:** Dynamic equilibrium and ecological succession are two ecosystem traits that can help us understand the need to constantly adapt and evolve, sometimes with dramatic leadership transitions when the time is right. Ever evolving contexts, including shifts in priorities, new leaders, and changes in funding, influence statewide food networks. Effective statewide food networks evolve in order to accommodate the needs, opportunities, and shifting contexts of a state’s food system. Networks are able to evolve when leaders see these changes as opportunities. When networks build systems and ways of working that embrace these continual shifts, then networks become generative and increase their value. For example, Teresa Feiner of the Wisconsin Local Food Network described multiple changes to the network corresponding to change in the political climate and funding. Through the process of responding

*“Our informality has been positive because it has enabled us to adapt.” — Jill Clark, Ohio Local Food Policy Council Network*



to these changes, the network has transitioned out of the University of Wisconsin Extension and the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection in order to diversify the players involved with supporting the network.

**Challenges:** Many of the networks were in the early stages of development or in the midst of change. Continual change and constant flux are the norms of the food network landscape in any state, and therefore structures need to be in place that can adapt and withstand these shifts. This flux presented major challenges to a couple of networks that indicated they were “on life support” or that “leadership is in a holding pattern.” Most transitions for food networks are reactive and brought about by some sort of loss: funding, leadership, political mandate, or membership participation. Grappling with the change requires some combination of scaling back the workload, shifting focus, engaging new partners, no longer engaging current partners, and re-assessing the opportunities and needs amongst key partners. Transition sometimes entails a period of dormancy while leaders take time to re-group. Sometimes transitions are more intentional. For example, the Wisconsin Local Food Network has undergone a recent transition to a new anchoring institution in order to be more strategic in engaging private sector participation and to provide more focus to network objectives.

#### **FEATURED EXAMPLE:**

##### **Adapting to Change in North Carolina**

North Carolina has faced many of the challenges associated with food network transitions and has adapted to accommodate change. The North Carolina Sustainable Local Food Advisory Council created by the legislature was sunsetted, in part because of the word “sustainable,” but the key players continued to meet as the North Carolina network of local food councils. After garnering funding, establishing a new vision, and developing a [toolkit of resources](#) to support food councils, the North Carolina network is poised to expand capacity for food systems work around the state. However, the network recently faced another transition as the key leader within Community Food Strategies of North Carolina had to step down, leaving a “hole of energy” within the network. These examples from North Carolina demonstrate the importance of being aware and adaptive to political and organizational changes, and also underscore the need to spread out network leadership and accountability in order to maintain energy and impact.

**Best Practices:** Networks described how an “ad hoc,” “nimble,” or “informal” structure enabled them to adapt to change while evolving in a natural way. Ohio and Maine, by design, did not formalize too quickly. Though there is no one-size-fits-all approach, all networks intentionally build on the energy and support that exists in their state as a general strategy to garner momentum and adapt to shifting contexts. Dynamic governance was referenced as a way to balance structure and flexibility. In addition, network leaders must invest in strategic communication to ensure the work of the network is framed with thought and care.



*Credit: Community Food Strategies*



*Credit: Community Food Strategies*



#### 4. NEXT STEPS FOR MINNESOTA

Using the findings from this interview process, coupled with what we know today in Minnesota, the following is a set of actions Minnesota partners have taken or intend to take in the near future to further support a statewide food network in Minnesota. The Minnesota Food Charter Network is an emerging statewide network, rooted in Minnesota Food Charter strategies. The [Minnesota Food Charter](#) was launched at the fall Food Access Summit in 2014 and is a roadmap created with input from thousands of Minnesotans that outlines a



*Credit: Minnesota Food Charter*

plan to promote equitable access to safe, affordable, and healthy food for all Minnesotans. The idea to develop the Minnesota Food Charter Network came together when key Minnesota Food Charter funders and planners (including Extension) met in February 2015 to discuss how they could continue to provide strategic institutional support to the charter after the loss of CDC's Community Transformation Grant funds. The outcome of this meeting was a charge to develop recommendations around structure and an 18-month work plan that would be shared with institutional leadership for consideration and approval by June, 2015. The plan built out the areas of opportunities for collective action as identified and prioritized by the institutional leaders.

In June, the institutional leaders approved the structure and work plan developed by the planning team. As a result, investments are being made in the Minnesota Food Charter Network by several organizations. To date, six organizations have contributed resources, personnel and financial support, to assist with network operations. Extension is one of the six organizations that has secured resources and has sought additional financing for the network by exploring the possible connection to SNAP-Ed. Released in March 2015, the [FY 2016 SNAP Education Plan Guidance](#) identified collaboration with "Food or Nutrition Policy Councils to improve food, nutrition, and physical activity environments to facilitate the adoption of healthier eating and physical activity behaviors among the low-income population" as a strategy to move from isolated impact to collective impact. Furthermore, SNAP Education Plan Guidance encouraged states to develop and enhance partnerships, collaboration and coordination with a variety of stakeholders at the national, state, regional, and local levels.



*Credit: Minnesota Food Charter*

Trust is being cultivated across the Minnesota Food Charter Network. A range of communication strategies are being deployed to support the emergence of the Minnesota Food Charter Network at the Food Access Summit in November 2015. The Summit will be leveraged as an opportunity for in-person relationship building, networking, and shared learning for local and regional food networks and others interested in collaboration and collective action. Curtis Ogden of the Institute for Social Interaction will deliver the keynote

at the Summit, and will lead a special session with food network leaders. Additionally, the findings from this report will be shared through an educational workshop, a round-table discussion, and further explored at a post-summit gathering of network leaders where the intention is to navigate the dynamic contexts of Minnesota to determine next steps for the Minnesota Food Charter Network.

Minnesota Food Charter Network planners are exploring future action steps to promote equitable engagement strategies. Planning is also underway to secure funds for stipends and travel



*Credit: Minnesota Food Charter*

scholarships to support the engagement of local and regional food network leaders and individuals with limited resources. Planners are also working to address the complex but critical topics of evaluation and policy work. Network leaders may need to explore trainings on the distinction between policy advocacy, education, and lobbying. Leveraging the expertise of consultants such as Corry Bregendahl and her team from the Leopold Center to build the capacity for evaluation of the Minnesota Food Charter Network would be beneficial to the network, and would build on an ongoing partnership between Health and Nutrition and the Leopold Center team. Given the recent emergence of the Minnesota Food Charter Network, navigating complexity, integration through spanning network boundaries and evolving the network are areas that have yet to be encountered.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The findings from this report suggest that emerging food networks should consider approaching their network development as an ecosystem. As the Minnesota Food Charter Network continues to emerge it is essential to keep working to strengthen networks, relationships, and connections in order to create a built-in feedback loop and mechanism for ongoing assessment and planning. In sum, Minnesota's future is bright. The Minnesota Food Charter Network is positioned to become a generative, knowledge-building ecosystem of networks intended to carry out a vision that all residents will have access to healthy, affordable and safe food.

## URLs for hyperlinked resources

Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future's directory (p4): <http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/projects/FPN/Map/index.html>

Healthy Food Access research (p4): <http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/health-and-nutrition/toolkits-and-resources/healthy-food-access/#create>

A Guide to Building North Carolina's Sustainable Local Food Economy (p5): <http://www.cefs.ncsu.edu/resources/stateactionguide2010.pdf>

Feeding Kansas: Statewide Farm & Food System Assessment with a Plan for Public Action (p5): <http://kansasruralcenter.org/feeding-kansas/>

Center for Livable Future Food Policy Network (p6): <http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/projects/FPN/>

Collective Impact (p6, 17): [http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact)

Dynamic Governance (p6): <http://www.governancealive.com/dynamic-governance/>

Networks that Work (p6): <http://www.communitypartners.org/networks>

Whole Measures for Community Food Systems (p6, 17): <http://www.wholecommunities.org/pdf/WholeMeasuresCFS.pdf>

Rural Networks for Wealth Creation (p6): <http://www.ruralsupportpartners.com/docs/RuralNetworksforWealthCreation.pdf>

Advocacy Coalition Framework (p6): <https://www.crcpress.com/Handbook-of-Public-Policy-Analysis-Theory-Politics-and-Methods/Fischer-Miller/9781574445619> (Chapter 9)

Network Weaver Handbook (p6): <http://www.networkweaver.com/>

Connecting to Change the World (p6): <http://connectingtochangetheworld.net/>

Thinking in Systems (p6): <http://www.donellameadows.org/category/thinking-in-systems/>

Death by Meetings (p6): <http://www.tablegroup.com/books/dbm>

Mark Winne, Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (p6): <http://www.markwinne.com/>

Curtis Ogden, Institute for Social Interaction (p6): <http://interactioninstitute.org/people/curtis-ogden/>

Health in All Policies report (p11): [http://sgc.ca.gov/s\\_hiapplansandresources.php](http://sgc.ca.gov/s_hiapplansandresources.php)

Shared Gifting (p13): <http://rsfsocialfinance.org/shared-gifting/>

Equity Atlas (p15): <http://nationalequityatlas.org/>

An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System (p15): [http://foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/structural\\_racism\\_in\\_us\\_food\\_system](http://foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/structural_racism_in_us_food_system)

The Appalachian Food Story Project (p17): <http://cfaky.org/what-we-do/breaking-beans/>

Toolkit of resources (p19): <http://communityfoodstrategies.com/what/network/phases/>

FY 2016 SNAP Education Plan Guidance (p20): <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/snap//Guidance/FinalFY2016SNAP-EdGuidance.pdf>

The Minnesota Food Charter (p20): <http://mnfoodcharter.com/>



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