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CENTER FOR FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

Healthy Food, Safe Food: Farm to Table Focus Group Summary

NOVEMBER 2015



Healthy Food, Safe Food Project Farm to Table Focus Group

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Other Key Partners:

- Farmers Market Leadership Team
- Farm to School Leadership Team
- Governors' Food Safety and Defense Task Force
- Minnesota Food Charter Network
- Minnesota Food Safety Partnership
- Minnesota Local Foods Advisory Committee
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture Food and Dairy Division
- Minnesota Department of Health Food, Pools, and Lodging Program

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BACKGROUND

The Healthy Food, Safe Food (HFSF) Project is a partnership between University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development and Minnesota Department of Health's (MDH's) Office of Statewide Health Improvement Initiatives (OSHII). HFSF's goal was to conduct a formative evaluation to aid in developing a plan of action to address regulatory barriers to improve access to healthy foods, while simultaneously maintaining and enhancing food safety. Between July 2015 and July 2016, the HFSF project team conducted a listening session, key informant interviews, and focus groups, followed by analysis and planning meetings.

Summaries of the listening session, key informant interviews, and focus groups, as well as the health equity review, are available here: <http://z.umn.edu/hfsf>. This report summarizes what was learned in a focus group with six people involved in feeding others, representing distribution and service points from farm to table.

METHODS

To convene the farm to table focus group, HFSF project team collaborated with Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture's Changing the Approach to Regulation of Local Food Systems in Minnesota Project (June 2015 to June 2016), funded by Bush Foundation Community Innovation Grant (visit <https://mnlocalfoodregs.wordpress.com/>). To see the related case study, [Healthy Food Safe Food - Farm to Table Focus Group Case Study](http://misadocuments.info/Bushgrant/FarmtoTable-HealthyFoodSafeFood_final_063016.pdf), visit http://misadocuments.info/Bushgrant/FarmtoTable-HealthyFoodSafeFood_final_063016.pdf.

Participants

Six people involved in feeding others, representing distribution and service points from farm to table, comprised the focus group.

Participant backgrounds:

- Farming
- Childcare provider and trainer
- School food service director
- Food truck manager
- Community kitchen operator
- Hunger relief system administrator

HFSF Project Team

Moderator: Karen Lanthier, Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, University of Minnesota Extension

Assistant Moderators: Tim Jenkins, Minnesota Department of Health; Mary Ann Van Cura, Independent Consultant

Analyst: Mary Anne Casey, Richard Krueger and Associates, LLC

Sponsors: University of Minnesota Extension, Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), with support from the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture.

Questions

Focus group moderators posed these questions to the participants:

1. What food safety rules, regulations, or policies make it harder for your business/organization, or businesses like yours, to offer healthy foods to people?
2. What else makes it harder for your business/organization, or businesses like yours, to offer healthy foods to people?
3. Are there things that went really well when dealing with issues of food safety, rules and regulations?
4. Can you address any of the issues identified today?
5. What can be done?

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Food businesses and food providers in the farm-to-table chain have two foundational goals: 1) to make the healthy choice the easy choice for Minnesotans, and 2) to provide access the healthy, safe food for those with the greatest barriers to access.

Needs, Ideas, and Priorities to Make the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice

People who own and operate food businesses would like help in transitioning to a healthier, more equitable food business model. The following are their top needs, ideas, and priorities:

1. Grants, funding, and loans for facility equipment and start-up costs.
2. Technical assistance in marketing healthy foods.
3. Small and non-profit food operations often struggle the most with regulatory barriers while providing food to people with low incomes or with other food access challenges.
4. Food safety systems, education, and training to help ensure the food they provide is safe.
5. Food hubs or other food distribution infrastructure for small growers and food businesses. They felt the state had a role in creating that (as it does for other types of essential infrastructure.)
6. Easy to navigate regulatory and licensing process at the state and local levels
7. Re-design of the regulatory process to foster transparency and collaboration between regulator and business operator.
8. Centralized source of information for food safety and for contacting the appropriate regulatory staff to meet the needs of the business.
9. A statewide service to match local farmers to restaurants, grocery stores, food shelves, and institutions looking for local foods. (Renewing the Countryside may be a model.)

Local public health organizations, through the Minnesota Department of Health's Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) and Extension (both often collaborating), can help improve the food environment in communities to make it easier for businesses to provide healthy, safe food choices to their customers and clients. Food safety regulators can increase food safety resources and seek out partners in

public health and nutrition to collaborate and solve challenges that arise when the objectives increasing access to healthy foods meet the equally important objectives of food safety.

Recommendations for Addressing Barriers to Healthy, Safe Food Access

Focus group participants were engaged and passionate about providing healthy food. They recognized the urgency to address health issues associated with the food supply and the obligation Minnesota has to advance health equity. Participants also had extensive experience providing safe food to the public and placed high priority on food safety. They expressed a desire to meet the demand for fresher, healthier foods and the need for infrastructure improvements and resources that would help them develop business models and solutions to deliver these foods.

CATEGORY	RECOMMENDATIONS
Licensing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamline process for obtaining licenses. Make it easier to know what is required to realize their vision. • Develop resource materials that licensing agencies can give to licensees, showing where to find additional help. • Food shelves may serve as a model of how inspectors can play a supportive role during food safety inspections. <p>Participants said licensing goes well when the local licensing agency:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is forward thinking. • Is supportive of bringing in local foods. • Works with you, helps you deal with new issues, helps you figure out problems, and generally makes things work.
Certification	<p>Address the need for USDA meat certification by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studying feasibility of mobile processing facilities that would go to small farms and process on site. • Training more butchers. <p>Address challenges to organic certification:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants wondered if there another certification designation in addition to “organically grown” that the state could administer, such as “naturally grown, chemical free,” that isn’t as difficult to obtain but still provides consumers with information about the practices used to grow the product. • Find a less expensive way to certify certain farming and processing practices, perhaps through the University of Minnesota.
Food waste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide easy ways for farmers, restaurants, and stores to donate food. • Inform farmers, restaurants, and stores about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Financial benefits of donating to food shelves.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Coverage by the Good Samaritan law.
Family childcare facilities	<p>Family childcare providers need training, but it is difficult to secure attendance because training sessions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to be fun, exciting, useful, and habit changing. • Must be at convenient times. • Must be free or low cost.
Food sampling and cooking demonstrations	<p>Help food shelves partner with SHIP and Extension to offer healthier foods in a safe manner by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding a way to offer food samples and conduct cooking demonstrations in food shelves. • Creating common-sense food safety rules around food sampling. One participant said, “Do food shelves really need a three-compartment sink in order to do produce sampling?”
Improving markets for farmers	<p>Create infrastructure for moving products from farm to table by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting food hubs. • Finding ways to connect people within the food system. For example, support a Craigslist-type communication system for connecting farmers to organizations that want to support local foods — through either the food hubs or Minnesota Grown or some other organization.
Improving funding for increasing the availability of healthy, safe food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make people aware of grants. • Help people apply for grants. • Broaden eligibility for produce farmers and small businesses in the farm-to-table chain. <p>Participants said local public health agencies and Extension can support healthy, safe food by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being engaged in local food shelves and educating volunteers and clients. • Helping with Farm to Child Care training. • Bringing an outside perspective to the discussion. • Providing food tastings at food shelves. • Providing local SHIP grants. • Offering SNAP electronic debit cards and participating in the Women, Infants and Children Farmers Market Nutrition Program (more information available at http://www.fns.usda.gov/fmnp/wic-farmers-market-nutrition-program-fmnp).



Some focus group participants said that the biggest barrier to increasing the availability of healthy foods is not regulation, but persuading consumers to want healthy foods. At the same time, they said that the demand for healthy foods *is* increasing and that they need the assistance of the public sector to help provide a food infrastructure that was more conducive to making fresh, healthy foods more available and accessible.

The above paragraph expresses sentiments that appear contradictory; however, it is important to acknowledge both of these perspectives as valid in context of a complex food system and the expressed needs to both create and meet demands for healthy, safe food.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Their responses are organized into food safety and non-food safety related barriers and recommendations, with supporting quotes from participants.

Barriers Related to Licensing

Participants identified barriers related to licensing in the following categories:

- Some organizations are required to hold multiple licenses.
- The cost of multiple licenses makes it more difficult to start a business and stay in business.
- The bureaucracy is difficult to navigate; three points were offered:
 - There is no “one source” of information, so trying to figure out what a new business or new effort requires is challenging.
 - This is even more difficult in Minneapolis (and perhaps other metro areas).
 - It seems that most difficulties related to licensing occur during the start-up phase of a project.
- The licensee must cultivate a relationship with the inspector.
- Business owners and inspectors may interpret rules differently.
- Some inspectors frustrate food business operators in that they say what shouldn't be done but don't offer resources to help create a plan to correct issues.

The following section describes the points above in more detail.

Some organizations are required to hold multiple licenses. The cost of multiple licenses makes it more difficult to start a business and stay in business.

Some organizations need multiple licenses even though all licenses set the same health standards. Essentially a city requires a business to pay multiple times for the same thing. For example, food trucks need a mobile food vendor license to sell on the street. If they want to go off-street, they need a catering license. If they want to do a special event, they need a special event license. In addition, a food truck may need a license in more than one county. Here's what two participants said about licensing:

“Licensing is a big hurdle for a lot of the businesses that rent from us. An example is, there's multiple licenses needed for one business to do multiple things and you have to pay for each of those licenses. It does make it hard for businesses that are starting out. So, for example, for a food truck — [operators] need a mobile food vendor license to operate and sell on the streets. If they want to go off-street, they need a catering license to go to your house and cater your party. If they want to go to a special event, they need a special event license...They're holding the same standards, but the city is requiring them to pay multiple times to do the same thing.”

“You talk about the regulations, and the food trucks, and having different licenses. Well then, you have your county [food establishment] license, and if you want to have a food truck, you have to have a certain license in the county [for a food truck as well].”

One person had questions related to costs and seasonal licenses:

“Is there a seasonal license related to the Pickle Bill [the name of legislation, which now has been amended, that allowed limited home prepared food to be sold to the public; see note below] so you don’t have to pay for the entire year? If you have a yearlong license, do you need to lease a commercial kitchen for a year? ... For food manufacturers that are at the farmers market, there's a fine line between [operating under] the Pickle Bill and when they need a commercial kitchen. It's a steep step for a lot of people....I don't know if there's a seasonal license that could happen, so they're not having to pay for a whole year. That changes my business model [as a community kitchen operator], because I require a yearlong lease, because that matches their license. That's a deterrent for a lot of folks. And because they might be making their pickles at home but they now have bigger demand, and they need to be in a licensed kitchen space, they can't afford to do both of those steps at the same time — pay for the yearlong license from the city and pay for commercial space.”

Note: The Pickle Bill has been substantially changed through a stakeholder engagement process in which the Minnesota Departments of Health and Agriculture and the University of Minnesota participated. The new legislation is called the Minnesota Cottage Food Law. View the Cottage Food Law Fact Sheet here: <https://www.mda.state.mn.us/licensing/licensetypes/cottagefood.aspx>.

The bureaucracy is difficult to navigate.

- There is no “one source” of information, so trying to figure out what a new business or new effort requires is challenging.
- This is even more difficult in Minneapolis (and perhaps other metro areas).
- It seems that most difficulties related to licensing occur during the start-up phase of a project.

Here are comments from three participants:

“[The licensing system is] difficult to navigate. The bureaucracy is deep. There are people at the city level who are very helpful, but you have to find them. Trying to figure out what you need is a nightmare. There is no one source.”

“Trying to figure out what you need to get [and] what you want to do can also be this nightmare. You don't notice you need a license until you're getting ready for an event.”

“Finding one source [is a challenge]. Like you're a food truck [owner] and you need all these or whatever. It's difficult to navigate.”

The licensee must cultivate a relationship with the inspector.

Participants noted that each licensee is responsible for developing a relationship with his or her inspector. One savvy licensee purposefully sought out a sanitarian who was open to her vision, and then worked closely with that person in implementing the vision. Here’s what one participant said:

“When I first came to the school district, I had a sanitarian who wasn't a visionary...and I knew that I could never bring in local food. And so I asked for another health inspector. And so when we started moving forward bringing in local products, I worked very closely with the new inspector to set up guidelines and whatnot.”

Business owners and inspectors may interpret rules differently.

One participant said:

“Interpretation is key. I've butted heads with some city inspectors over lots of things. Even though it [the regulation] doesn't say [clearly what is required]. ‘Well, that's how we interpret it.’ Well, how am I supposed to know that? It's not spelled out. There's that grey area and so interpretation is everything at that point.”

Some inspectors are not as flexible, communicative, or skilled at collaborative problem solving as others.

One participant said:

“From the perspective of the farmer, we've got barriers and conflicts thrown at us all over the map... Most of us who grow vegetables are independent [producers] and it's something new and there's no support system. I'm worried about the regulations, but as long as I'm just producing raw products [there is less concern]. Because I did build a storage facility and a washing facility on my farm. I wanted to get direction from the Department of Health and the inspector about what I'd need. There was absolutely no help. I understand that because... everything is up to interpretation. And so [we implemented] the interpretation of having that hand washing station there [and felt like] “Oh, we're good to go! Nobody uses it [the hand washing station], but we're good to go!” In actuality, a lot of these policies really don't mean anything; it's just something for the lawyers to talk about when there's a problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO LICENSING

- Streamline licensing. Make it easier to know what is required and what licenses are needed to implement vision.
- Develop resource materials that licensing agencies can give to licensees. Show where they can get additional help.
- Look to the food shelves for another model of how to do food safety inspections. For food shelves, inspectors play a supportive role.

Here's what one participant said:

“This is probably putting a lot on the licensing people, like MDH, but when they go out to do an inspection or when they provide licensing, do they sit down and talk to the farmer, or the caterer, or the restaurant about, ‘Here's this list of resources? Here's this Minnesota Craig's List for networking? Here's where you can go for networking?’ There needs to be some central place that's getting this information to somebody. It seems to make sense for me. [As a food bank representative,] I monitor our partners, and when I go out and do a monitoring visit, I have this huge checklist. I don't just look for food safety issues, but I sit down and I talk to them. ‘Are you having any trouble with fundraising? Well, let me tell you about fundraising resources. Let me tell you about SHIP in your county.’ For our agency partners, the food bank [provides that] kind of that person. It's not just inspecting them, it's also saying, ‘Here are all the resources we have.’ I wonder if that's something that could come of this. To give those licenses, not just [do] your inspection and [check] food safety, but say, ‘We are here; we are going to share some resources with you.’

“And that would have to be everybody [doing this]. It would have to be the Department of Ag, the city, the licensing, the Department of Health.”



BARRIERS RELATED TO CERTIFICATION

Participants identified barriers related to certification in the following categories:

- USDA certified meat
 - Requiring a USDA stamp on meat limits organizations from purchasing meat from a local farmer who does not use a USDA certified butcher.
 - There is a lack of USDA butchering facilities.
- Organic certification
 - Being certified as an organic grower is not economically feasible for some growers.
 - The costs associated with being certified are high.
 - Local people are not willing to pay more for organic produce.
 - Consumers don't trust that things labeled organic or cage-free actually are.

Here's what one participant said:

"...Talking about the USDA [inspection] stamp that needs to be on the meat now: If you want to find a local farmer and use local meat, I can't do that because [the meat] doesn't have a stamp on it. That's a huge barrier for us. I know a lot of providers that have had that challenge — where they want to buy from a local farmer, or, Lord forbid, use whatever is in their own freezer, because that's what I grew up with. You can't use it. You have to go and buy it at Walmart because it's okay to use.

That's really big in my area with the meat because there is no USDA inspected [butchering facility]. The closest one is in South Dakota or Geneva, Minnesota, which is over 100 some miles. It's impractical for me to run over with one or two head of livestock."

Note: Two resources are available to help clarify rules and regulations regarding sale of meat raised on local farms:

- Farmer Information for Selling Meat — *Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA)* - <https://www.misa.umn.edu/resources/local-food-sales-resources/meat-and-poultry/farmer-information-selling-meat>
- Approved Sources of Meat and Poultry for Food Facilities — *Minnesota Department of Agriculture and University of Minnesota Extension* - <http://www.mda.state.mn.us/food/safety/~media/Files/food/foodsafety/meatpoultry.ashx>

Here's a discussion among 3 participants (lettered A, B, and C to help read follow discussion):

Participant A: "I don't believe that I can be a certified organic grower. My neighbors spray. They kill my weeds. I know it's not possible. The birds fly [from non-organic farms to organic farms]. My pigs get sick when the wind comes up. So I know [what] I have to have...it's not practical. I do everything organically grown as possible. But in order to be certified organic, I'd have to get the people from California to come, and it's thousands of dollars, that I'd have to do every year for my tomato crop, and then my squash crop, and then my cucumber crop. I'm broke before I even start. Just to get certification. And locally I've already had people who would like to buy organic. [But] they will not pay a premium..."

“Is there another designation [besides the organic designation] that could be certified by the state, like “naturally grown?”

Participant B: “Chemical free?”

Participant C: “It gives the right message but doesn’t have that thousand-dollar price tag associated with it that prevents a lot of farmers from doing that.

Participant B: “The issue with it in the end is, even if you can say it’s chemical-free or something, or even the organic stamp or cage-free, it gets manipulated enough where it’s still hard to judge.”

Participant A: “I think the key [point] to anything like that [is], because you are going to get dishonesty [in regard to actually following practices prescribed by certification guidelines], there’s always a way around it [meeting the requirements for certification].”

Participant C: “Here’s what happens on the other side. It gets devalued. We have to pay more for a premium product — to get organic, local produce. Yet there are some people out there who say they’re using organic and local produce and they’re not. They undercut you all the time. And the customer feels like they are getting organic food. ‘And wow! This is only \$7? It’s not \$12? Why would I go over there? Why would I buy from [X food truck] instead of [Y food truck]?’

Participant C then suggested creating a local food stamp or a designation for different size farms.

Other participants added:

“We have Minnesota Grown already. We have the stamp. That’s become widely recognized. So is there another offshoot of that? Minnesota Grown Naturally. Or, something like that.”

“Does it necessarily need to be government certified? Could it come from a trusted source like the University of Minnesota? And could that also be a way for students to learn, get them out into the communities, but it’s a defined, ‘This is what the University checks for. And yes, you get that ring of approval, and maybe there’s some sort of process for inspection for follow up.’”

RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO CERTIFICATION

Address the need for USDA meat certification.

- Study feasibility of mobile processing facility that could travel to small farms and process on site.
- Train more butchers.

Address challenges to organic certification.

- Participants wondered, is there another designation that the state could administer? Naturally grown, chemical free?
- Find a less expensive way to certify — perhaps through the University of Minnesota.

Here’s what one participant said:

“I want to address the USDA meat certification. That’s really important for the farmer. If we’re going to add value-added products to what we grow, we have to have that stamp of approval. So that we can sell to the schools and wherever we want to sell. And so I would like to see the University, because [name of nearby community] has gotten rid of their butchering courses, I would like to see [the University offer support]...there is a movement in the nation...[a] small processing movement...[For example, a] farmer in Vermont has just built a processing facility on his farm. I would like to see University or somebody check the study about mobile slaughtering, processing, farm-to-farm. Then I

would have the facility on my farm that would meet the specs with the Health Department, to where they could process my two or three sheep or 50 chickens or whatever the case may be, and see if we can move that ahead. So that the meat products can be brought from local [farmers].

BARRIERS RELATED TO FOOD WASTE

Participants identified these barriers to redistributing foods that might otherwise go to waste:

- Food truck owner said that for food safety reasons, he can't legally give leftover foods to a food shelf. This business owner doesn't know of an easy way to give the food to an organization that can use it.
- Farmers, restaurants, and stores don't know:
 - The financial benefits of donating to food shelves.
 - That the Good Samaritan law covers them.

Here's what one participant said:

"Waste. It's weird because I don't like regulation and I don't necessarily want to bend those. I don't necessarily trust everybody. You can only heat food three times. We can embrace it. We can take it out once and get two uses out of it. I'm fine; I don't want to bend regulation that way. But being a [food] truck [operator] and having to bring food to an event...if the weather's horrible and the event just doesn't turn out, I end up with a lot of waste and would like to have ways to use that. If gets really iffy, I don't know how [to determine if it can be donated]. Whether it's food shelves or something else, I can't legally give it to them. It's still healthy food. It's a cost we incur. But finding other ways to use that food without having to throw it in the garbage. It's just been heated, but it's still very edible. I take it home to my neighbors, friends, family, but I couldn't give it to anybody that needs it. It would be nice to know that if I've got 10 pounds of soup that's going to go to waste, that I could drop it off somewhere and they could use it."

Note: See Minnesota Food Code Fact Sheet for guidance on reheating foods: Temperature and Time Requirements for Foods, available at <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/food/fs/tempreq.html>.

Another participant commented:

"Even if the farmer was able to get a quarter of the price and a tax break, at least it's not just rotting in the field. That would be another way to support local farmers and get potentially usable food."

RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO FOOD WASTE:

- Provide easy ways for farmers, restaurants, and stores to donate food.
- Inform farmers, restaurants, and stores about:
 - The financial benefits of donating to food shelves.
 - That the Good Samaritan law covers them.

Three participants offered the following thoughts:

"I don't see regulations as the biggest barrier for our programs; it's letting farmers know there [are] tax incentives, [that] there is some reimbursement through Farm to Food Shelf, and hopefully the [Minnesota] Legislature will continue that. Donating meat is tricky for farmers because it has to be processed through a USDA butcher, [and] I know southwestern Minnesota is short on them. And even retailers can donate to food rescue, which is a huge donation stream for us, which is largely perishable



items...Rural independent grocery stores mostly do not participate in that with local food shelves. So letting these businesses, farmers, retailers know that there are some [opportunities for donation would help]...a lot of people who don't know about those [opportunities] or about the tax incentives, or that they are protected by the Good Samaritan law. Increasing that is part of the networking and assistance and support too.”

“Helping farmers know they can donate. Some still think they can't donate fresh [foods]. There's still some misconceptions about food shelf.”

“I'm concerned about...leaving it [produce] in the field. Where's the resources for you to pick up the phone and call someone in the state that can take that on.”

BARRIERS RELATED TO FAMILY CHILDCARE FACILITIES

Participants identified these barriers to providing healthy, safe foods in family childcare facilities:

- Family childcare providers feel bombarded with regulations related to a variety of things, including nutrition. They feel regulated without support.
- Family childcare providers dislike regulations. Even though the regulations might be good ones, childcare providers are reluctant to change and feel overwhelmed.
- CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program) is losing family childcare providers because of new regulations, confusion around those regulations, and providers not being on board with new regulations. This means the state is losing opportunities to communicate and provide training on food safety and nutrition to the 9,790 family childcare providers in the state.

Note: For the most recent data on family childcare providers in the state of Minnesota, see the Early Care & Education Consortium resource Minnesota Child Care Quick Facts, available at <http://bit.ly/2lrUXvk>.

One participant said:

“Right now, there are 9,400 family childcare providers in the state. They're all bombarded with so many different regulations kind of coming down on them. Whether it's safe sleep, supervision, increased training, those kind of things. Any sort of change, it's like, 'No more. We don't want any more changes.' They're confused. Once they get that confusion, they just throw their hands up in the air and they're like, 'Well, I'm not going to do anything.' Regulation without guidance, support. Usually [the regulations are] nutrition-related.... It's hard to explain because we don't have so much of the safety. That comes in with the regulations with CACFP. We're not so heavily regulated in family daycare because we're in a family home. It's kind of the practices in the home. Essentially, you're inviting families into your home. You're caring for children in your home. You're working off providers' habits for their own kids and their own lives. Many providers are on the Child and Adult Food Care Program. And that has changed a lot too. A couple of providers or sponsors have dropped out, and there [are] also some new regulations that are possibly coming in that are on the horizon, which creates some confusion. I've seen a lot of providers dropping out of [CACFP]. They're getting some of their information on food safety, food nutrition, coming from there, but it's constantly changing and providers aren't on board with the changes; they're dropping out so you're losing that access to them for any sort of communication and training. There was a survey sent out a while back, such as changes in the infant category going from 0-4 months, 4-8, 8-12. Just cutting that in half. Changes, which are good, but [with requirements such as] only serving yogurt that is 6 grams of sugar or less. I'm cutting out cookies altogether.”

RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO FAMILY CHILDCARE FACILITIES

Family childcare providers need training, but it is difficult get people to attend. Suggestions for attracting providers to training include:

- Training needs to be fun, exciting, useful, and habit changing.
- Need to find a time when it is convenient for them to attend training.
- Need to find support so the training and materials are free or low cost.

Here's what one participant said:

"[Lack of] education is a barrier in childcare. It is pretty easy to create but not easy to get people to come. But I've been able to shoot off a little bit because [of] the Farm to Child Care training, and create a couple of my own [trainings] that I can offer. They are in the process of being approved [by the Minnesota Center for Professional Development or MNCPD] — just to provide some other outlets of fun and exciting trainings that are going to get people on board. And get [providers] the information in a shorter period of time. Because that's four and a half hours on Saturday mornings. Where to do you want to be? [Participant is suggesting people don't want to be at training on Saturday mornings.] Something that could be done at night for a couple hours...You have to build it and hopefully they will come. That's the challenge. MNCPD is where individual trainers like myself can create training and offer it for approval. We sent them all our information and they say, 'Yep, that's good enough.' Or, 'No, you need revisions.' And then they say, 'Yah, that's all right.' So then you can offer it through like... Parent Aware and those kind of things too....It's about education and support. So providing further education that's interesting and fascinating [is important]. Also, [need] some way to provide [support], whether it's a grant or it's low cost or free materials, just be able to get that into the hands of people who are hopefully finding it exciting and useful and habit changing, which is challenging.

BARRIERS RELATED TO FOOD SAMPLING

These regulations and changes around food sampling are barriers to healthy, safe food:

- Requiring food shelves to have a three-compartment sink for food sampling.
- Farmers market rules for food sampling are cumbersome.
- Changes in SNAP-Ed priorities limits educators' ability to do food sampling. Food sampling was a hugely successful way of getting people to try foods they weren't familiar with.

Here's what two participants said:

"Before, a lot of SNAP-Ed educators would go to food shelves and distribution [settings], in particular, the Senior Commodity Box distributions, and they'd do sampling and nutrition education. When Minnesota Extension changed that program, that was a loss for our food shelves and those programs. We found that clients are much more likely to take foods if they can try them. Those sampling things that Minnesota Extension did were always really successful and helped the food shelves move different kinds of produce, dried beans, and brown rice. That's been a huge loss to our programs. I've been in numerous meetings where the food shelves pounce on the new SNAP-Ed educators, wondering why they can't do that anymore. I realize the program has changed, but [food shelf operators] ask about it, if they can do sampling themselves. They can't even cut up produce and things like that. That's a huge barrier for them. It seems to be there's little understanding of why they can't [do their own sampling], too. From the SNAP-Ed educators we hear that they can do some nutrition classes, but it has to be in with a three-compartment sink."

“What better way to get kids and families excited about fruits and vegetables than by letting them taste things? But the regulations for sampling, at the farmers markets, even if it's just an apple, there has to be a sink. So they have to make all these provisions for it and it just seems a little bit overboard. I understand if it's prepared, there's a little bit more involved and it needs to be a certain temperature and such. But even if it's fresh food?”

RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO FOOD SAMPLING

Help food shelves partner with SHIP and Extension to offer healthier foods in a safe manner.

- Find a way to offer food samples in food shelves.
- Create common sense food safety rules around food sampling. As one participant said, “Do food shelves really need a three-compartment sink in order to do produce sampling?”

Other comments from participants include:

“[With] food safety issues, see what makes sense. Have someone role model the sampling. Then how do we leverage existing organizations — SHIP, Minnesota Extension — to help our agency partners offer healthier food in a safe manner. How do we better tie in to those?”

“Look at some common sense food safety rules, like, do food shelves really need a three-compartment sink in order to do produce sampling? Maybe they do, but is there just some really simple things? That to me I see as...maybe we don't want them cooking, but can we at least get them so they are able to sample produce? Minnesota Extension can't even go in and sample produce anymore.”

NON-FOOD SAFETY BARRIERS TO PROVIDING HEALTHY, SAFE FOODS

Lack of demand

Participants said that their barrier isn't regulations; it's getting consumers to want healthy foods.

Here's what two participants said:

“A lot of what we're saying is not in regulations and barriers to healthy foods; it's just getting it to the consumer. Increasing the demand as it is...I think our barrier is a lack of regulation. Not that I want to increase them because that will freak everybody out. But honestly with people coming in to us, the only thing that we're checked for as far as food safety is, Is our refrigerator between 32 and 40 degrees? That's it...the rest is just going by your habits, your family's habits, and it's a lot of education...or lack thereof.”

“The American palate is one of the biggest hurdles.”

Hard for some farmers to make a living

It can be hard for farmers to make a living, because:

- There aren't enough subsidies for small farmers.
- People want cheap food.
- It is difficult to create markets, particularly in sparsely populated parts of the state. Therefore, farmers might grow a crop and not be able to sell it.

Here are comments from a farmer in the focus group:

“[As farmers] we don't make enough money... My goal when I started this business was to sell — between plants and produce — sell \$50,000 [worth of goods]. We finally got to that this year. But we

spent hundreds of thousands of additional debt to get to the \$50,000. [Farming] doesn't work. But I still think it's important because of the fact that I'd like to pass the land on to my children, so that perhaps they can make a living from the land. And I think that's so sad that they are able to go elsewhere and make more money. But I wouldn't wish for them what my wife and I went through trying to stay on the farm. But we need this for the local economy, with the craziness that the world is becoming... My current situation is I don't need a license. I can grow my stuff and sell. I just have to find markets. I go to three farmers markets and now I sell to the food hub in [name of community]... This is the first year that I basically sold 85-90 percent of all what I grew on my seven acres of vegetables. Last year we probably left 50 percent, maybe 60 percent, in the field because I didn't have a market, because I'm too far [away from markets].

"There's a whole issue of subsidies and where do they go? They don't go to organic farmers. They go to the giant commercial producers.

"The system is not working. We're losing more farmers. We're getting small farmers started, but they're really not farmers because of the fact they have to have an off-farm job. I have to have an off-farm job, plus my wife has an off-farm job... just to be able to stay on the farm. Now I'm trying to see if we can develop this business. I called [name of food bank] and they came out and picked up 2,700 pounds of squash and stuff... I get a tax deduction and they're going to give me a little bit of money."

A business person in the focus group said:

"If we could get more farmers that [grow] more healthy food, it would bring those prices down so I could buy them at a better rate. Just having that competition would bring [prices] down so we would make more money. For us as a business, that is the biggest thing.

These comments drew an observation from Mary Anne Van Cura, assistant moderator for the focus group:

"I find this fascinating and painful. The farmer shares with the group that he has been farming for 15 years and can't make a living raising healthy food because there isn't enough market and people won't pay for it. He grossed \$50,000 this year, which means he cleared incredibly little for all his work (and no doubt his family's work) and his investment. Then a businessperson says, almost immediately, we need more farmers — more competition — so we can pay the farmers less and we can make more. Rather than thinking, how can we make everyone's pie bigger, the thinking goes to, how do I make my pie bigger even if it makes someone else's pie smaller. It shows how difficult it is to think about this as a system and all the parts have to be healthy for it to work."

There isn't a good system for marketing and buying local

People within the food system lack information and the ability to network for buying and selling.

Participants in the group said there isn't a fast way to connect producers with potential buyers. Buyers don't have ways to network with one another to buy minimum quantities. Therefore, if one restaurant can't use 1,000 pounds of bison, maybe they can find another restaurant that would split it with them.

Here are comments from several participants:

"I go back to that Craigslist idea. I've worked in a lot of small, local restaurants as well. Being able to have access. Hey, I can buy 1,000 pounds of bison but I can't take it all. That would be a resource for smaller companies. I kind of feel like there's a start out there but it's not all encompassing. Are you guys familiar with Renewing the Countryside? I feel like they have something that's similar to that. But I don't know how far reaching it is. [The URL is Renewingthecountryside.org.] [Renewing the Countryside is] nonprofit, because there is no money in this. There is Southwest Minnesota Produce Exchange — what's it called? There's sort of a listserv. The farmers have to post what they have on there, but it's usually for buying. It's not that Craigslist exchange. It's not, 'I want to do this, does

anyone want to go in on it with me?' But to be all encompassing, I feel it has to be a state agency. There's no other way for it to cover everything.”

“Where do farmers get their information now? If you create something new, you're still going to miss people. There are some great tools out there, but not everybody knows about them. Where are the sources that farmers go [to] for information, or [where] others go so you could have a one-stop shop where it would give you all your options? If you need to donate, if you need something — here are your options.”

Here's what one participant said:

“I've just relied on the people I've worked with — and trial and error. I developed a website. I'm not happy with the people I worked with. We were trying to update. It gets to be a financial problem to keep it up. You have to have a person hired to keep that up to date.”

“Most of the time you should be able to go to your Farm Security, FSA Office, which is the Farm Security Agency [for information]. The problem is this is up and coming and so politically charged that...[People say] ‘We don't need no local food.’ That's the comment I hear. My neighbors talk about. They just don't get it. It has nothing to do with local food; it's just basically the economy. Developing the local economy again.”

Two other participants said:

“Is there a grant that the state can contract with an agency that might already be doing it, like Renewing the Countryside? So that it's not creating a whole new thing. It's just enhancing it and giving them the ability and incentive to do it with payment.”

“It all comes down to accessibility. Do restaurants, caterers, and food businesses have access to farmers? Do farmers have access to meat processing facilities? Do consumers have access to local, healthy, safe food? And do we have access to creating something, having that organic designation that would allow that to go out to the world? So consumers have access to that and they know what they are getting.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING MARKETS

To create infrastructure for moving products from farm to table, do the following:

- Support food hubs.
- Find ways to connect people in the food system. Support a Craigslist type communication system for connecting farmers (with products) to organizations that want to support local foods — through either the food hubs or Minnesota Grown or some other organization.

Here are comments from two participants:

“Try to find a way to connect the people. So farmers can work together, or businesses can connect to farmers. I could probably use some of your food, but I don't know that, or you might give it to me cheaper. I think finding a way to find that middleman, whether it's some kind of website or some kind of communication [needed] to bridge that gap.”

“My vision is having a hub... where the farmer can take it [produce] to the food hub and get a good price for it.”

CHALLENGES WITHIN SCHOOLS

Besides external challenges, schools face internal challenges, including:

- Providing healthier food in a school requires a more expensive kitchen and more well-trained staff.
- USDA commodities are more processed foods, with very little raw protein.
- It is difficult to implement serving regulations and stay within budget; as a result, schools see the following:
 - Students have to take a half cup of fruit or vegetables to make it a reimbursable meal.
 - Some kids will not take fruits or vegetables, so the school has to charge á la carte.
 - Some kids take fruits and vegetables, but do not eat them — increasing waste.

Here are comments from three participants:

“I work in a very regulated industry. We're actually a federal program, [but] we're state funded, too. Under federal guidelines, a student has to take a half a cup of fruits of vegetables to make it a reimbursable meal. And although it sounds good on paper, and although it sounds very good that we're pushing [this], if you have a free and reduced [lunch] student [who] stands there with her tray and says, 'I don't like fruits and vegetables, and my dad says I don't have to eat them. I don't have to take them,' under the guidelines, I'm required to charge á la carte prices. I love the concept of increasing fruits and vegetables in the breakfast programs. I'm not happy with mandatory taking them.”

“We've gotten to point where — we used to have beef crumbles; are you familiar with that? — [but] we're doing all ground beef now. We're doing hormone-free chicken legs. But there's the staffing issue then. You can use unqualified staff for beef crumbles, [but] you need more qualified staff, culinary training and whatnot, to use [all-ground beef or hormone-free chicken legs]...So many schools, as in Minneapolis and in Rochester, they don't have three-compartment sinks in their kitchens. They are just a heat-and-serve [facility]...And then we have commodities through USDA and unfortunately the protein commodities are more of your processed foods. Very little raw protein products — turkey roast and pork roast and things like that. It would be nice to have more raw protein.”

“I buy commercial, antibiotic-free chicken. But the kids still want chicken nuggets. Bottom line. A few years ago, I was at the elementary school gradually doing more scratch cooking. And one year I thought, ‘This is it. This is my next step.’ And removed things like chicken nuggets and breaded chicken patties on buns. I lost participation. And everyone kept saying, ‘Keep going. Keep going [with the scratch cooking]. Three months — it'll turn around.’ Well, come February, it didn't turn around. So I'm looking at cutting a staff person at that point. We are self-funding. So I took a chance and I put it back on [the menu items that had been removed]. I gained over half that back. So who's making the decisions?”

ORGANIZATIONS LACK FUNDING TO IMPLEMENT PROJECTS

Grants are not available for all organizations working within the food system. Participants said family childcare providers and wealthier school districts often do not qualify for grants. Sometimes there is money for a project, but not money to pay someone to implement the project.

Here's what one participant said:

“I tried to start a project with the Department of Health and Nobles, Cottonwood, and Jackson [counties]. We're in the very initial part of it, but I don't think it's going to be able to get off the ground because I would be like the contractor that would put together the CSAs on my farm. For all products. There would be no cutting or topping. It would be all raw products. You buy a box and it's delivered to cities in our three counties. And I asked about being paid for that because of the fact that this is a big project. Evidently, incentive is not there for salaries.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVED FUNDING OF HEALTHY, SAFE FOOD

- Make people aware of grants.
- Help people apply for grants.
- Broaden eligibility for grants.

Here's what three participants said:

“I'm thinking about opportunities that are available right now. One is the [Minnesota Department of Agriculture, or MDA] grants for bringing in local foods. The grant- there's no stipulation on free-reduced [that is, no requirement that a certain percentage students are enrolled in the free or reduced lunch program]. There [are] also grants out there for the farmers. Problem is when I talk to a farmer about [grants], they're not...they don't even know how to turn on a computer sometimes. And they're busy people. [But, the grant application process for the MDA grant] was a good process. I've encouraged a lot of school districts to apply for [this grant] because it was a very comfortable grant. I'm not a professional grant writer. It was [from] the [Agriculture Department] and matching funds from Blue Cross Blue Shield.”

“The barrier is that [the MDA grant is] not offered to the 9,400 family providers [in Minnesota, only child care centers]...”

Note: For more information about the Minnesota Department of Agriculture Farm to School Grant Program, visit <https://www.mda.state.mn.us/grants/grants/mnfarmtoschool.aspx>.

“Most barriers when it comes to grants that are offered to schools is [that] it [the school] has to be a very high free and reduced [lunch] percentage [of student enrollment]. [Grant providers] usually require [that] 70 [to] 80 percent [of students receive] free and reduced [lunches]. That's great for [name of large urban city], but I fall through the cracks. I [my school] will never, ever qualify for those grants.

ARE THERE THINGS THAT WENT REALLY WELL WHEN DEALING WITH ISSUES OF FOOD SAFETY, RULES, AND REGULATION?

Things go well when the local licensing agency:

- Is forward thinking.
- Is supportive of bringing in local foods.
- Works with you, helps you deal with new issues, helps you figure out problems, and makes things work.

Here are comments from two participants:

“[Name of county] is [all about] '[name of an initiative].' They supported our initiatives and bringing in local foods, and guided us through the process. You handle local vegetables differently than you do



coming through your vendor. Covered with dirt [referring to how local produce is sometimes delivered].... So they [the county] helped us through all that.”

“As much as I've said I've come up against roadblocks with the [name of city], they've been more than willing to work with us on something that didn't exist before. Yes, innovative models. They are willing to take a look at that and they are very progressive in that way...Five years ago when I opened this business, it was a shared commercial cooking space with a cooking school and a little bit of retail, and we do catering. They [the city] didn't know what to do with us. Where are we going to put you? Does anybody want to guess what my license is? Grocery. They didn't have anywhere to put me, right. I didn't fault them for that. They figured it out and made it work. But I also feel like there are more shared commercial kitchen spaces [now]. There probably could be a designation so that everybody is following the same guidelines, or the inspectors know what to look for when they come in. [Name of city] is very innovative in trying to get things to work. The drawback is...it's harder to maneuver quickly. Thus a grocery license. They figure it out.”

Things that the local public health agency and Extension do to support local foods:

- Being engaged in the food shelves, doing education with volunteers and clients.
- Helping with Farm to Childcare training.
- Bringing an outside perspective to the table.
- Providing food tastings at food shelves.
- Providing local SHIP grants.
- Accepting SNAP and WIC at farmers markets.

Here's what four participants said:

“The biggest success I've seen is where SHIP has been engaged with food shelves. Carver County is a really good example. Like I said before, regulatory is not the biggest issue for food shelves. It's limited resources. Volunteers run about half the food shelves in Minnesota, and they're limited on space, they're limited on equipment, they don't have a lot of funds. A lot of them do get fresh foods, either donated locally or from retailers, but then they have nowhere to store it. The education piece. We all [are] maybe not that educated about nutrition, so having to share that with clients [is good]...and SHIP has been able to engage and help [food shelf volunteers] access those resources and education. I've seen some big changes. I've seen food shelves expand hours in order to meet client needs — being open in the evening, and...even though that's something Second Harvest has advocated for, it took SHIP to bring that outside perspective in. ‘Oh, yeah, maybe I should expand hours.’ A lot of things they've brought to the table. That's one of the biggest successes I've seen. Advances in healthier eating and acceptance in clients. Seeing that also related to clients, hearing food shelves say in the past, ‘They won't even take that stuff.’ Now they are.”

“[Name of county] has really benefited from the SHIP grant. Our school district and multiple community gardens have been set up through it, safe streets and sidewalks have been installed. SHIP has changed policies in our county. I applaud SHIP 100 percent. I'm a little irritated this year though. They set up high free and reduced [percentage thresholds for SHIP participation]. They're going to those schools. But we've been very fortunate.”

“That's another great thing that's happened — SNAP and WIC at the farmers market. So that they can buy more fresh and local food.”



“Our Farm to Child Care training...It's been a great success. There's a lot of great information, information about CSAs, sourcing, purchasing and preparing local foods — all within the 4½-hour training providers can take. I don't know if any of you have heard of Minnesota Center for Professional Development [MNCPD] — all of the training that childcare providers take has to be certified or has to be approved through that. That's jumping through hoops. Make sure this is an MNCPD-approved training and that... SHIP has helped with some of the cost — deferring some of the cost. Not so much in rural areas. But that training in particular has been huge for just getting childcare providers, both center and family [childcare providers], on board. And part of it is going to the farmers market. There's a field trip — fun, exciting training for family childcare providers and Center providers. It has to be fun, practical, hands on type of things that they can do. But part of it was going to the farmers market, taking an hour and a half walking around the farmers market, purchasing local foods, coming back, making a snack with it, and I needed a new recipe, so it was very good. Maybe try a new one! Getting to also show Center providers and family [childcare] providers how the SNAP and EBT cards work there so they could pass the information along to their families. That was awesome. Great.”

CAN YOU ADDRESS ANY OF THE ISSUES IDENTIFIED TODAY?

Participants said, as people who provide food in the farm to table chain, they are trying to break down barriers while also doing their best to make money or run efficiently and save costs. They try to let the public know what they are doing. They try to make noise and share success.

Here's what one participant said:

“As far as breaking down those barriers, it just sort of slogging through it, doing your best to make money with the higher costs that are incurred [while still] trying to do the right things. I don't know other than just sort of plowing ahead and trying to make noise about it and making the rest of the public know — I think that's the best that we can do. [The participant spoke of employment at a restaurant that uses sustainable practices.] ‘Try to do your best to do local, organic.’ We couldn't always do everything, but the last four years of my life have been working with people who are trying to push the barrier.”

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Local public health (including SHIP and Extension), with partners and food businesses and organization that provide food from farm to table, can help improve the food environment in Minnesota communities by contributing strengths and capacities in collaboration toward making the healthy and safe choice the easiest choice for their customers and clients. Food safety regulators can clarify and consolidate food safety resources as well as seek out partners in public health and nutrition. Other state, regional, and local agencies and organization can help improve and build infrastructure that fosters and promotes providing healthy, safe food to meet consumer demand and to help eliminate health disparities related to food access barriers. Together, all these partners can work to solve the challenges that arise when the objectives of increasing access to healthy foods clash with the equally important objectives of food safety.



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