



Seeding the Field:

An Evaluation of the Colorado Health Foundation's Food Access & Security Priority



illuminary
Perspectives

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Thank You

This evaluation report summarizes an exploration of the Colorado Health Foundation's five-year investment in their Food Access and Security (FAS) Priority conducted by Laura Richards of Illuminary Perspectives. Thank you to all the community partners, community members, state agencies, and staff who graciously shared your time, experience, talents, and insights throughout the process. Your participation and partnership made this work possible.





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Executive Summary



In 2019, the Colorado Health Foundation (CHF) launched a five-year Food Access and Security (FAS) priority to ensure all Coloradans could access nutritious, affordable food with dignity.

Building on momentum from the 2018 release of the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger (the Blueprint), CHF’s investments aimed to accelerate statewide progress by supporting both systems-level policy change and community-driven solutions.

The FAS priority reflected a dual commitment: **to remove structural barriers through statewide coordination and to strengthen local food ecosystems rooted in community priorities.** Major investments included establishing and supporting the Blueprint Program Office and supporting local food coalitions through the Community Food Systems (CFS) initiative. Additional funding targeted community-based innovations, public food assistance enrollment, and access to nutritious, culturally relevant food.

Over five years, CHF’s approach evolved from a focus on increasing food access to a deeper commitment to food justice, recognizing that true access must center autonomy, cultural identity, and lived experience.

In 2025, CHF engaged Illuminary Perspectives to assess the evolution and impact of the FAS priority. The evaluation was designed to address two main evaluation questions intended to support reflection and learning as CHF considers the future of its health equity work:

How did the FAS priority evolve over the investment period?

What has been the cumulative impact on the anti-hunger field of the myriad investments made by CHF over the investment period?



\$47,356,667	\$313,620	151	94
Total investment in food access and security work (2019-2024)	Average investment award amount	Total number of awards	Grantees

How did the FAS priority evolve over the investment period?

Over the five-year investment period, CHF’s FAS priority evolved from a systems optimization strategy aimed at increasing food access to a more food justice-oriented strategy focused on community power, equity, and structural change.

From Access to Justice: Strategic Evolution

At the outset, CHF’s approach reflected convention food access strategies: increasing enrollment in public food assistance programs (e.g., SNAP, WIC), expanding conventional access to affordable healthy food. These efforts were aligned with community-based collaborative efforts and the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger (the Blueprint) and sought to improve food security through existing institutional systems.

However, early investments and community feedback revealed critical gaps in this approach. Many organizations and community leaders shared that while technical solutions improved access in the short term, they did not address the structural causes of food insecurity, such as racialized poverty, disinvestment in communities of color, land loss, and lack of community control over food systems.

As a result, CHF broadened and deepened its strategy.

While continuing to support key institutional partners and enrollment-focused efforts, CHF began resourcing community-driven initiatives, culturally rooted food practices, and infrastructure that centered equity and lived experience.

CHF deepened their engagement with local food coalitions to build capacity and community power to address food insecurity. This also included investments in Indigenous food sovereignty, food co-ops, and leadership development efforts driven by communities most affected by hunger.

CHF also became more intentional about the way it partnered with grantees, shifting toward long-term, flexible funding, offering relational capacity-building, and aligning grantmaking practices with principles of trust and co-ownership.



Evolving Definitions of Success

As the strategy evolved, so did CHF's understanding of what success looked like. Instead of narrowly measuring outputs (e.g., number of new stores, enrollment rates, etc.), CHF began to prioritize deeper systemic shifts, such as:

- Strengthened community governance and self-determination
- Leadership pathways for people with lived experience of hunger
- Inclusive coalitions that integrate food justice, health, and economic equity
- Durable infrastructure for coordination, narrative change, and policy influence

These shifts reflected an expanded understanding of what it means to be an effective anti-hunger funder; not simply fixing broken systems, but resourcing communities to transform them.

Implications for Funding and Relationships

CHF's evolving strategy resulted in several notable shifts in practice:

- **Funding Priorities:** Grants moved from supporting enrollment and retail access to prioritizing and expanding funding for community coalitions and organizations, movement infrastructure, and culturally responsive models of food justice. This included increased support for Black- and Indigenous-led initiatives, regional coalitions, and cross-sector partnerships.
- **Grantee Relationships:** CHF moved away from transactional grantmaking toward deeper learning partnerships. Grantees described more open, trust-based relationships that emphasized mutual learning and responsiveness rather than compliance.
- **Technical Assistance:** CHF offered coaching and capacity-building support tailored to grantees' specific needs, especially in leadership development, storytelling, communications, and organizational development, reinforcing the value of relational infrastructure.
- **Internal Reflection:** CHF staff engaged in ongoing reflection about how to practice equity and healing internally. This included revisiting grant processes, shifting timelines, and taking a more relational approach to data collection, reporting, and accountability.

Key Lessons

- **Access is not the same as justice.** Addressing immediate food needs is important, but durable solutions require shifting who holds power to design, govern, and lead food systems work.
- **Listening enables strategy change.** Feedback from grantees, especially community leaders, was critical in surfacing blind spots and pushing CHF to expand its approach.



- **Power building takes time.** Shifting narratives, relationships, and governance structures requires long-term investment that often extends beyond conventional grant cycles.
- **Community leadership is infrastructure.** Investing in local capacity, including leadership pipelines, coalition spaces, and coordination, is essential to sustaining equitable food systems work.
- **Philanthropy must align values with practice.** Funding for equity and justice must be accompanied by grantmaking processes that embody those values, including trust, flexibility, and shared ownership.

What has been the cumulative impact on the anti-hunger field of the myriad investments made by CHF over the investment period?

Over the five-year investment period, CHF's FAS priority served as a powerful catalyst for field-wide change. The cumulative impact of these investments is best understood not solely in terms of increased food access, but in the shifting mindsets, strengthened infrastructure, and elevated leadership now shaping the future of food systems work across the state.



From Food Access to Food Justice



Building Infrastructure for Collaboration and Alignment



Elevating and Resourcing Community Power



Laying Groundwork for Systems Change



From Food Access to Food Justice

CHF played a pivotal role in shifting the dominant paradigm of hunger relief in Colorado away from charitable food distribution and toward community-driven food justice strategies rooted in racial equity, systems change, and lived experience.

- **Normalizing equity-centered language and analysis:** Prior to FAS, equity- and justice-oriented perspectives were often marginalized in the anti-hunger space. CHF's public commitment to racial equity and its investments in community-rooted organizations helped legitimize these approaches, creating space for deeper analysis and more systemic strategies.
- **Expanding the frame of solutions:** Grantees and partners reported that CHF's flexible, trust-based funding allowed them to expand beyond narrow interventions (e.g., increasing SNAP enrollment) and begin addressing root causes, such as housing instability, poverty wages, and systemic racism. This reframing helped situate hunger as a symptom of deeper structural failures rather than individual choices.
- **Elevating food justice as a credible field direction:** By funding organizations, coalitions, and leaders long excluded from traditional anti-hunger investments, CHF helped build the case for more transformative approaches. This opened doors for other funders and government agencies to follow suit.



Building Infrastructure for Collaboration and Alignment

CHF made targeted investments in the backbone infrastructure needed to align and coordinate diverse partners across the state, many of whom were previously disconnected or not working efficiently or effectively together.

- **Strengthening statewide conveners:** Strategic support for the Blueprint helped institutionalize cross-sector collaboration and align policy, program, and community strategies across organization, geographies, and sectors.
- **Supporting the conditions for trust:** In many cases, multi-year, flexible funding and a relational approach supported collaboration and reduced competition. Many partners, particularly those involved in community coalitions, described more honest relationships, less scarcity-driven tactics, and stronger field alignment because of CHF's funding and posture. However, the concentration of resources in the Blueprint also complicated trust for some partners, who perceived inequities in access and questioned whether this structure truly supported diverse, community-driven solutions.
- **Integrating local and statewide efforts:** While not every FAS-funded effort was seamlessly connected, CHF's emphasis on both state-level strategy and local community power helped build bridges between those scales. Many local coalitions and food systems leaders reported feeling more connected to, and influential in, statewide planning than in the past.



Elevating and Resourcing Community Power

CHF's Objective 1 was both a distinct strategic priority and a thread that wove throughout the entire FAS priority. CHF committed to resourcing those closest to the issues and to shifting traditional power dynamics between funders, nonprofits, and communities.

- **Resourcing community-led infrastructure:** CHF invested in community-based coalitions, collaboratives, and governance structures, including groups led by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), rural, and immigrant community leaders. This helped expand the field's definition of credible leadership and built durable community capacity.
- **Shifting roles and influence:** In many cases, these investments enabled leaders with lived experience and grassroots advocates to take on new leadership roles, whether through co-designing programs, participating in advisory boards, or shaping policy priorities at the state level.
- **Investing in process and relationship-building:** CHF recognized that building community power requires time, trust, and space to navigate conflict and difference. Its long-term support allowed communities to build the internal infrastructure and relationships needed to move toward self-determined solutions.



Laying Groundwork for Systems Change

While some elements of the FAS priority focused on direct access and participation, many investments were explicitly geared toward upstream systems change. These efforts helped position the field for continued evolution beyond the life of the initiative.

- **Influencing policy and governance:** CHF supported field partners who successfully advanced and implemented policy wins (e.g., Healthy School Meals for All, expanding WIC/SNAP access). These investments also helped shape more inclusive and community-informed state processes for designing food programs.
- **Embedding equity in narratives and strategies:** CHF encouraged partners to name and address structural inequities in their storytelling, data collection, and evaluation approaches. This contributed to a culture shift within many organizations and coalitions, normalizing an equity lens across the field.
- **Catalyzing experimentation:** While not all pilots or interventions achieved scale, CHF's funding allowed organizations to test bold ideas, such as local procurement models, culturally responsive retail strategies, or governance reform efforts, that laid the groundwork for future replication and learning.

Modeling Values-Aligned Philanthropy

CHF's role as a funder was more than transactional; it served as an example of how philanthropy can show up in service of community-driven change. Across the FAS priority, CHF was widely perceived as a values-aligned partner who respected grantee expertise and adapted its strategy based on field feedback.

- **Practicing relational grantmaking:** Grantees repeatedly emphasized CHF's deep listening, flexibility, and respect for on-the-ground realities. Rather than imposing rigid expectations, CHF was responsive to what communities said they needed and made space for emergence and adaptation.
- **Centering trust and transparency:** CHF was clear about its priorities, transparent about its power, and open to being challenged, practices that are still too rare in the philanthropic sector. This built credibility and allowed for more authentic relationships.
- **Filling Gaps in Funding:** CHF resourced efforts that were often overlooked or underfunded by public and private funders, particularly when those efforts were community-driven, explicitly focused on racial justice, or still emergent. This reflected a values-forward approach that was locally responsive and grounded in trusting communities as strategists and leaders.



Critical Reflections on CHF's Approach and Impact

While the FAS priority made meaningful contributions across Colorado's food systems landscape, partners also surfaced important critiques of both CHF's role and the broader limitations of philanthropy in addressing structural inequities.

Tension between Scale and Depth: CHF's ambition to influence systems at both local and statewide levels created powerful alignment opportunities but also stretched the capacity and grantees and intermediaries. Some partners shared that:

- CHF's desire for statewide reach sometimes came at the expense of deeper investment in specific geographies or community ecosystems, especially rural areas.
- Local organizations often lacked the time or resources to fully participate in statewide efforts, despite being key to their success.
- The pace and breadth of the work occasionally outpaced the depth of relationship needed for durable community power building.

Challenges in Shifting Traditional Power Dynamics: CHF made meaningful efforts to fund community-based organizations and leaders with lived experience, but power imbalances between funder and grantee remained a persistent dynamic.

- Several partners noted that despite a strong relational approach, CHF still held decision-making authority over what work was resourced and prioritized.
- Some grantees, especially smaller, BIPOC-led organizations, faced barriers in accessing or sustaining funding due to limited administrative capacity or unfamiliarity with philanthropic norms.
- Requests for more flexible, long-term, or capacity building support often outpaced that CHF was able to offer within the FAS structure.

Navigating Emergence and Ambiguity: CHF's openness to emergent strategies and relational learning was widely praised, but also introduced challenges in clarity and consistency:

- Several partners expressed confusion about shifting priorities or expectations within the FAS priority over time, particularly as community power work evolved.
- Without a consistent throughline or clearly defined external theory of change for all three objectives, some felt uncertain about how their work "fit" or how success would be measured.



Field Ripples and Lasting Influence

Even after the FAS priority formally ended, many of its impacts continue to ripple across Colorado's food and justice ecosystems.

- **Sustained collaboration infrastructure:** CHF's investments in coalition building, infrastructure, and convening capacity left behind stronger scaffolding for cross-sector coordination, especially among anti-hunger and food systems advocates.
- **Stronger local ecosystems:** In several communities, CHF-funded coalitions and collaboratives now serve as hubs for continued food justice efforts, new funding opportunities, and local policy change. These entities are sustaining momentum and anchoring new generations of leadership.
- **A more expansive field vision:** CHF helped shift the window of what is possible in the anti-hunger field. Today, more organizations, funders, and government agencies are embracing equity, systems thinking, and community power as essential to ending hunger, not optional add-ons.



Exiting the Priority

CHF concluded its five-year FAS priority in December 2024, marking a significant transition for both CHF and Colorado's anti-hunger field. Guided by a deep commitment to equity, community leadership, and systems change, CHF's FAS strategy catalyzed new collaborative models and investments that continue to influence the food justice movement statewide.

Intentional Exit with Mixed Outcomes

CHF approached the exit with purposeful planning, including multi-year off-ramp grants to key partners such as the Blueprint and CFS coalitions, alongside strategic support for emerging community-driven initiatives. Internally, reflection and communication efforts began well ahead of the exit to prepare both staff and partners. Despite these efforts, external communication gaps led to confusion and concern, especially among less directly engaged partners, highlighting the challenges of responsibly winding down time-bound strategies rooted in trust and equity.

Key Successes

- Significant **exit grants** provided partners critical resources to adapt
- **Strategic, phased planning** enabled CHF to reflect on its evolving role
- **Catalytic investments** in field infrastructure fostered coalition-building and collaboration
- CHF's **relational, flexible philanthropy** earned high marks from grantees for trust, responsiveness, and equity-centered engagement

Challenges and Areas for Growth

- **Communication inconsistencies** undermined trust and clarity around CHF's future role
- Capacity building for **long-term coalition sustainability** was insufficient
- The **limited duration** of the FAS priority constrained CHF's ability to fully realize systems-level change
- There were calls for **greater transparency** in decision-making and alignment between funding and equity goals
- **Rural and regional equity** considerations required more decentralized approaches and attention to diverse community contexts
- Opportunities existed for CHF to expand leadership beyond grantmaking into **policy advocacy and movement building**
- Supporting **grantee wellbeing and embedding equity accountability** across partnerships emerged as critical priorities.



Field Evolution and Legacy

CHF's investments helped advance a more mature, equity-driven anti-hunger ecosystem in Colorado, accelerating focus on food justice, power building, and systems thinking. While CHF's presence was catalytic, long-term transformation is increasingly led by community-rooted organizations building durable infrastructure and new collaborative models. CHF's experience underscores the structural limits of short-term philanthropy for systemic change and highlights the need for humility, adaptability, and sustained partnership.

Looking Forward

- Funders should **communication early, clearly, and directly** about timelines and transitions
- **Co-creation of sustainability and bridge strategies** with grantees is essential
- **Longer-term commitments and ongoing engagement** beyond grantmaking are necessary to sustain impact
- **Transparency about institutional positioning** and sharing lessons learned can build trust and sector knowledge
- Greater **investment in relationship infrastructure** and rural/regional equity can strengthen field resilience
- Philanthropic leadership should include **convening, advocacy, and amplifying community-driven solutions** to advance justice

Ultimately, CHF's FAS priority laid important groundwork toward just, community-led food systems in Colorado. Its exit offers valuable lessons on the complexities of aligning philanthropic practice with equity and systems change, while underscoring the ongoing work to realize transformative, lasting impact.

Evaluation Overview

01



The Colorado Health Foundation (CHF) believes all Coloradans should be able to access the nutritious food they want, when they want it, at a price that fits their budget, and with dignity. In 2019, CHF launched a five-year strategy to support work around food access and security (FAS) in Colorado.

CHF launched its FAS priority at a strategic moment of alignment and momentum. The launch followed CHF's investment in the development and 2018 release of the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger (the Blueprint), a statewide, multi-sector initiative aimed at addressing hunger and food insecurity with urgency and coordination. Recognizing the unique opportunity this presented, CHF designed its FAS investments to accelerate progress toward the Blueprint's goals while advancing its own strategic objectives.

The priority aimed to make a measurable impact on food access and security within a five-year timeframe by supporting both systems-level policy changes and community-led solutions.

Central to the strategy was a commitment to balance top-down and bottom-up approaches: statewide changes to remove structural barriers, alongside grassroots work rooted in the priorities and assets of local communities. At the state level, CHF committed significant support to establish the Blueprint Program Office within Trailhead Institute to lead the implementation of the Blueprint plan. At the community level, CHF invested in the Community Food Systems (CFS) initiative supporting local food coalitions to develop and implement strategies to address food insecurity in their community. In addition to these two cornerstone efforts, CHF targeted investments across public, nonprofit,



and private sectors, focusing on community solutions, increasing participation in public food assistance programs, and improving access to healthy food retail.

Between 2019 and 2024, CHF’s FAS priority evolved from a focus on quantity and availability to a more nuanced understanding of food equity, dignity, and cultural relevance, as shown in the table below. While the overarching priority – *ensuring Coloradans have enough affordable, nutritious food* – remained constant, the updated impact statement reflected a deeper commitment to autonomy and respect: that individuals should be able to access the nutritious food they *want*, *when* they want it, at a price they can *afford*, and with *dignity*. This shift, along with the evolution of the priority’s objectives, signals a move beyond simply reducing hunger, toward supporting systems that uphold choice, cultural identity, and human experience. These changes reflect a growing understanding within CHF that food access is not only a matter of supply, but of justice.

Priority Statement		Ensure Coloradans have enough affordable, nutritious food	
		2019	2024
Impact Statement	Coloradans will have healthy food and won’t go hungry		Coloradans are able to access the nutritious food they want, when they want it, at a price that fits their budget, and with dignity
Objective 1	Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of collaborative community-level efforts to reduce food insecurity		Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of collaborative community-level efforts to reduce food insecurity
Objective 2	Increase participation in public food assistance programs among Coloradans who are eligible for them		Reduce barriers to public food assistance enrollment and utilization
Objective 3	Support public-private partnerships that increase the prevalence of affordable food and beverages		Increase prevalence of affordable nutritious, culturally relevant food in communities that have historically lacked access



About the Evaluation

In 2025, CHF requested that Illuminary Perspectives evaluate their five-year investment in food access and security.

The evaluation's intent was to better understand the evolution and impact of the FAS priority. This evaluation builds from previous evaluations that CHF commissioned of their investments in the Blueprint (Illuminary Perspectives, 2024) and the CFS initiative (Bright Research Group, 2024).

The evaluation was designed around two main evaluation questions (below).¹ With these questions in mind, Illuminary Perspectives conducted a preliminary document review to determine what we already knew about each evaluation question. Following, we worked with CHF staff to identify gaps in our understanding and inform additional data collection. Interviews with external partners were conducted over two rounds to allow for scaffolding of findings and filling gaps in our understanding.

How did the FAS priority evolve over the investment period?

Previous Evaluations
Document Review (37)
CHF Staff Interviews (3)

What has been the cumulative impact on the anti-hunger field of the myriad investments made by CHF over the investment period?

Previous Evaluations
Community Partner Interviews (10)
State Partner Interviews (2)
Desk Research

¹ For more information on the evaluation questions, methodology, and process, refer to the [Methodology](#) section in the Appendix.



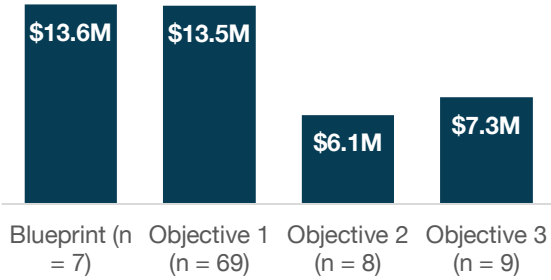
Description of the FAS Portfolio

Between 2019 – 2024, CHF made an investment² of \$47.4M in food access and security work, primarily through their FAS priority (n = 151). Investments in food access and security were also made through COVID emergency response grants (n = 2) and donations (n = 34), responsive grantmaking (n = 10), and the Locally Focused Work portfolio (n = 12).

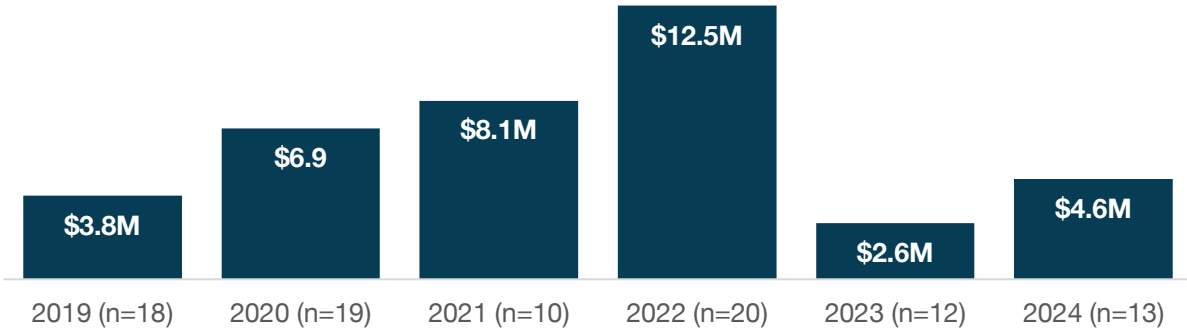
\$47,356,667	\$313,620	151	94
Total investment in food access and security work (2019-2024)	Average investment award amount	Total number of awards	Grantees

Within the FAS Portfolio, most investments were grants (n = 75) during the investment period (2019 – 2024), totaling approximately \$37 million. CHF also used other tools within their investment strategy, including sponsorships (n = 33), donations (n = 5), and one Program Related Investment (PRI).³

Total Investments by Objective between 2019 - 2024



Total Investments in FAS Portfolio by Year (n = 92).



² Investments include grants, Program-Related Investments (PRIs), donations, and sponsorships.

³ Additional PRIs were awarded outside of the investment period to support CO4F.



In 2020, CHF responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by rapidly and responsively investing in community food justice organizations to support emergency hunger response. CHF made 34 donations to food justice organizations around Colorado totaling approximately \$1.9 million (range: \$10,000 - \$375,000). Additionally, CHF also made two grants to establish statewide COVID response funds to: (1) the Blueprint (\$2.1 million) to support emergency food needs for low-income populations affected by COVID; and (2) the Colorado Farm & Food Systems Response Team (\$253,750) to support small- and mid-size farmers and ranchers in responding to changing market opportunities during COVID.

Orientation to FAS Strategy

02

High-Level FAS Timeline



Conceptualization (2015 - early 2018)

Early Childhood strategy development identified SNAP and WIC enrollment priority

Statewide listening tour with new CEO

Policy team engaged in efforts around public food assistance programs

Blueprint development process convened by CHF



Strategy Formation (2018 - 2019)

Determined appropriate infrastructure for Blueprint implementation (Program Office model)

Identified areas of the Blueprint goals CHF could impact, aligning objectives with Blueprint goals

Launched Community Food Systems initiative in 2019



Shift to Food Justice & COVID Response (2020 - 2022)

CHF explored food justice through deepening commitment to being community-informed and prioritizing racial equity

Provided COVID response donations (\$4.2M)

Shift in funding strategy to support community power, solutions, and innovations



Sunset FAS Priority (2023 - 2024)

End investment in CO4F

Start communication to grantees and key partners about the portfolio closure (Fall 2023)

Provided two- to three-year exit grants and one-time catalytic grants to key partners

Commissioned evaluations of the Blueprint and CFS initiative



Rationale for Focusing on Food Access and Security

In 2015-2016, as part of shaping its Early Childhood strategy, CHF began exploring how to better connect families with the full range of benefits they were eligible for, including Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Around the same time, CHF's new CEO conducted a statewide listening tour across all 64 counties. Hunger emerged as a nearly universal concern, cutting across geography and community type. This emphasis built upon CHF's existing investments in food access through the Colorado Fresh Food Financing Fund (CO4F), initially designed to address areas with low access to healthy food as a driver of obesity under CHF's former Healthy Communities priority.⁴

The initial seeds of the FAS priority were started through the policy team, not through investments.

A key policy window opened in 2016 with the passage of [SB16-190](#), which called for an audit of Colorado's public assistance programs, including SNAP. CHF's policy team seized this moment to deepen its engagement with federal food assistance programs, pursuing advocacy and coalition work tied to the Farm Bill and Child Nutrition Act reauthorizations. This policy priority was specifically to **"increase participation levels in federal nutrition programs and protect past advances in eligibility, funding levels, and nutrition standards."** Then, in December 2016, CHF approved their 2017 policy priority, intended to **"improve supports for Coloradans experiencing food insecurity by reducing administrative inefficiencies and barriers to participation in food assistance programs."**

⁴ For more information on CO4F, refer to the section on [Objective 3](#).



As CHF deepened their work in policy connected to public food assistance programs, they started to recognize fragmentation in the anti-hunger field.

They observed that while there were very well-run, impactful, and powerful organizations in the ecosystem, they were not working together, particularly the smaller organizations. Deep personal or organizational agendas created turf wars, competition around funding, and power struggles. As a result, CHF commissioned a landscape scan that revealed a critical need for greater alignment and coordination in the anti-hunger field, laying the groundwork for deeper investment in food systems work.

In 2017, CHF took steps to catalyze a more unified and strategic approach to addressing food insecurity across the state.

Beginning with a convening of 12 philanthropic partners, four other funders (Kaiser Permanente, Denver Foundation, Boulder Community Foundation, and Caring for Colorado) committed to co-leading a process to determine how to work collaboratively across the state to reduce hunger. This was followed by a broader convening of over 80 organizations from the anti-hunger field, generating buy-in for a collaborative, field-wide plan. A Steering Committee of more than 35 organizations was established and met throughout the latter half of 2017 to shape what became the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger (the Blueprint). To promote equity and facilitate authentic participation, CHF hired an external consultant to guide the planning process, allowing CHF to engage as a peer rather than a convener.

The process created space for deeper collaboration and strategic reflection, equipping many organizations with new tools and perspectives on how to work across differences. However, it also surfaced critical tensions. Some participants felt the process was more performative than co-creative, with goals already set in advance. Others saw the Blueprint as a challenge to established organizations and approaches. Some partners noted that food banks and large institutions held outsized influence, while the voices of those most affected by hunger were underrepresented, something CHF later acknowledged, especially considering its later adoption of a racial justice lens.

While the formal Blueprint process had its challenges, it created important ripple effects, sparking new collaborations, exposing long-standing tensions, and helping the field confront issues of equity, power, and competition. Ultimately, it marked a turning point in how Colorado's anti-hunger field began to think about shared strategy and structural change.

Strategy Formation

The CHF Board approved Food Access and Security (FAS) as a priority area of focus for the foundation in early 2018. Around the same time, CHF, in partnership with the Governor's Office, launched the Blueprint at History Colorado with more than 200 attendees.



In its early stages, the FAS strategy was closely aligned with the vision and goals outlined in the Blueprint.

CHF intentionally created the FAS priority as a five-year investment to support the Blueprint's five-year plan to end hunger in Colorado. CHF prioritized investments that would strengthen the Blueprint's infrastructure, support the work of partners aligned with its goals, and advance broader systems change, particularly within state agencies and through policy advocacy. One of the primary investments aligned with the Blueprint's goal was the Community Food Systems (CFS) initiative launched in 2019. The strategy overall focused on improving the effectiveness and coordination of existing systems, emphasizing the role of public programs like SNAP and WIC in expanding access and participation.

“

We were focused more on improving systems and not necessarily creating more equitable systems. That is how the Blueprint started as well. It was, 'let's improve these systems that we have,' instead of saying, 'wait a minute, there are things that just aren't equitable about them.'

- CHF Staff

“

Developing the strategy and bringing the strategy to bear, there was a deep focus on enrollment in public food assistance programs, into working with schools around meals that could be provided in schools and making sure that there was access and security at the school level. ... Our focus really was around increasing enrollment of Coloradans participating in public food assistance programs through all of these mechanisms and means.

- CHF Staff

At the same time, CHF incorporated its pre-existing long-standing food-related investment, CO4F, under the umbrella of the new strategy, even when those efforts were not directly connected to the Blueprint's priorities. While this allowed for continuity in funding relationships and ongoing work, it also created some ambiguity around the strategy's focus. Over time, this blending of aligned and legacy work presented challenges in clearly articulating impact and staying tightly tethered to the Blueprint's original goals.

“

There was also a lot of focus on these private-public partnerships with CHFA, in this case around the CO4F that we had pulled funds from various foundations in order to create flexible funding mechanisms for communities that wanted to build grocery stores or corner stores with a specific focus on food deserts and how we can influence communities that are part of a food desert. The focus was important, but it was different.

- CHF Staff

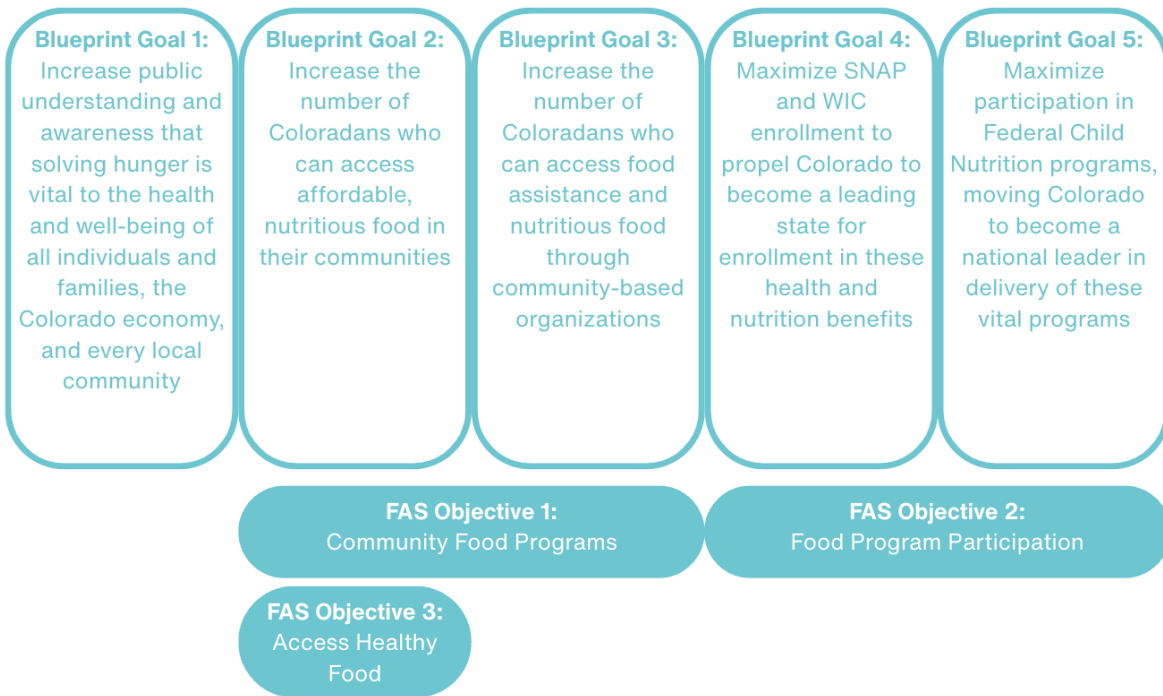


Core Objectives

The FAS priority was structured around a clear overarching goal: to build momentum around collaborative community-owned solutions to address food insecurity.

This goal was pursued through three strategic objectives that organized CHF's investments across the state. The priority was **intentionally designed to align with the goals of the Blueprint**, reinforcing a shared vision across local and state partners for a more coordinated, just, and community-centered food system.⁵ Rather than functioning as an open funding opportunity, the FAS strategy was primarily implemented through solicited grants. One important exception to this was the CFS initiative. The CFS initiative was launched with a funding opportunity for a planning grant. After that initial planning grant period, CHF solicited a subset of grantees from within that cohort to move forward into the implementation phase. This phased process allowed CHF to better understand who potential partners in this work would be as new funders in the anti-hunger field. After this initial funding opportunity, the CFS initiative functioned as a closed cohort of local food coalitions which allowed for deeper collaboration, trust-building, and strategic learning.

⁵ For more information, refer to the FAS strategy [theory of change](#) in the Appendix.



In the following pages, a high-level summary of the evolution, outcomes, and lessons learned from each of the objectives is provided. For more detail on the work and impact of each of the objectives, refer to the [Addendum](#).



Overall Objective⁶

Build momentum around collaborative community-informed solutions to address food insecurity and coordinate existing resources in the sector.

Key Investments	Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger
Total Investment	\$13,606,154
Defining Characteristic	Served as a bridge across all three FAS objectives, supporting policy wins, amplifying community voice, and strengthening statewide coordination.

CHF invested in the Blueprint as a community-led initiative from its inception, supporting its evolution from a strategically coordinated program to a trusted, community-owned convener grounded in equity and lived experience. By 2024, the Blueprint became a key vehicle for relationship building, strategy alignment, and policy influence across Colorado’s anti-hunger field.

Evolution


- CHF played a foundational role in both conceptualizing and resourcing the Blueprint, investing in the creation of a Program Office, and enabling the Blueprint’s transformation from a five-year plan into a robust, community-driven statewide network.
- At the outset, CHF believed that a centralized, multi-sector initiative could help overcome fragmentation in the food access landscape and drive policy and systems change more effectively.
- Recognizing the power dynamics inherent in philanthropy, CHF made a strategic shift in 2021 to further step back from visible roles in Blueprint workgroups and lean in to a quieter, more supportive partnership with the Program Office.

Blueprint Outcomes

CHF’s sustained investment in the Blueprint created the conditions for meaningful statewide coordination, policy advancement, and capacity building across Colorado’s anti-hunger field.

- **CHF investments opened the door for Blueprint impact:** The Blueprint’s impact included field alignment & community leadership, policy & systems change, equity-driven funding & emergency response, and public awareness & narrative shift.
- **Built state-level infrastructure:** Through its emphasis on collective impact, collaboration, and movement building, the Blueprint has brought new infrastructure and coordination, including relationship and trust building, to a previously fragmented landscape.

⁶ For more information on the evolution, outcomes, and lessons learned, refer to the [Overall Objective](#) section in the Addendum.

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- **Evolving collaboration for systems change:** CHF's investments in the Blueprint played a critical role in strengthening state-level collaboration across the anti-hunger field, yet this progress is still in process.
 - **Cost of concentrated support:** CHF's deep resourcing of the Blueprint, while well-intentioned, created a perception of codependency and raised concerns about equity in funding distribution. Community partners expressed frustration that funding was largely channeled through a single initiative, rather than being more openly available for diverse, community-driven approaches.

Lessons Learned

CHF's strategy to support the Blueprint as a central piece of Colorado's food systems infrastructure surfaced a set of promising approaches, and persistent tensions, around how to build and sustain field leadership.

- **Power and promise of a Program Office:** The Blueprint's Program Office structure allowed it to function as a trusted backbone organization, facilitating collaboration, holding space for diverse perspectives, and advancing systems change without competing for the same resources or visibility as other partners.
- **Adaptive and supportive approach to field leadership:** By prioritizing flexibility, long-term support, and trust in the Program Office, CHF enabled the Blueprint to shape its own identity, align its work with deeply held values, and evolve decision-making authority over time.
- **Barriers to authentic collaboration:** While the Blueprint made significant strides in strengthening collaboration across Colorado's anti-hunger field, persistent challenges limited the depth and effectiveness of collaboration. This included: (1) relational tensions limited trust and progress; (2) lack of shared vision fragmented the field; (3) difficult conversations were often avoided; and (4) funding models discouraged collaboration.
- **Uncertain future of field infrastructure:** Building capacity without a durable funding strategy risks losing the progress made, potentially reverting the field to pre-investment levels of coordination and effectiveness.
- **Areas of improvement** included:
 - Address urban-centric limitations
 - Balance staffing with community investment
 - Ensure deeper local integration
 - Leverage influence to unlock new resources
 - Interrogate power dynamics and funding reliance

Objective 1⁷

Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of collaborative, community-level efforts to reduce food insecurity.

Key Investments	Community Food Systems (CFS) initiative
Total Investment	\$13,523,448
Defining Characteristic	Long-term, equity-centered investment in community-led coalitions and initiatives that prioritized power building, culturally relevant food access, and systems change rooted in lived experience.

Starting in 2019, CHF advanced an equity-centered approach through the CFS initiative, evolving from coordination support to investing in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) led coalitions and community-driven food access solutions. By 2024, this work matured into a model that centered racial equity, strengthened local governance, and supported long-term coalition capacity rooted in lived experience and culturally relevant leadership.

Evolution

2019-2020	2020-2022	2022-2024
The CFS initiative began with planning and implementation grants to strengthen coordination among local food actors, align assets, and improve access to nutritious, culturally relevant food, especially for those most at risk of hunger.	Early implementation revealed gaps in trust, infrastructure, and governance. CHF shifted its strategy to prioritize coalition capacity-building, equity-centered governance, and leadership development rooted in lived experience, moving from transactional models toward transformational, community-driven solutions.	CHF narrowed its funding to coalitions that demonstrated meaningful integration of community leadership and advocacy, while continuing to offer phased, flexible funding, technical assistance, and peer learning to deepen food justice and systems change outcomes.

In addition to CFS, CHF funded innovative community-driven efforts, particularly in BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities, that advanced food sovereignty, leadership apprenticeships, mutual aid, and healing-centered spaces, reflecting a broader commitment to equity and community ownership.

⁷ For more information on the evolution, outcomes, and lessons learned, refer to the [Objective 1](#) section in the Addendum.



Objective 1 Outcomes

CHF supported communities in strengthening infrastructure, building local leadership, and improving coordination to address food insecurity in ways that were grounded in lived experience and aligned with local priorities.

- **Strengthened local food systems and increased access to food:** Coalitions funded through the CFS initiative played a central role in designing and implementing place-based, equity-driven strategies that responded to the unique food access needs in their communities.
- **Improved local coordination and relationships:** As coalitions matured and developed stronger internal structures, they deepened their external relationships, both within their immediate communities and across regions.
- **Built community capacity and leadership:** By combining long-term, flexible funding with technical assistance, peer learning, and a focus on lived experience, the CFS initiative created conditions for local leaders and organization to grow influence, strengthen coordination, and embed equity into their work.
- **Amplified lived experience:** The strategic focus on centering people with lived experience of hunger helped shift local coalitions away from traditional, charity-based models toward more inclusive, equity-centered, and community-driven approaches. This resulted in deeper trust, more responsive food programs, expanded leadership opportunities, stronger civic participation, and a broader shift in how food insecurity is understood and addressed at the community level.
- **Leveraged strategies to shift local food systems:** CHF's investments supported coalitions in adopting increasingly sophisticated, systems-oriented strategies, combining network building, narrative change, and growing policy advocacy, to drive both grassroots and structural change in local food systems.
- **Elevated awareness of hunger and equity:** Through funding and strategic guidance, CHF helped shift public and institutional narratives, moving conversations beyond food access toward deeper questions of justice, equity, and the root causes of hunger.
- **Strengthened community infrastructure:** Outside of the CFS initiative, CHF's Objective 1 investments enabled communities to acquire critical physical and organizational infrastructure, such as land, facilities, and commercial kitchens, laying a foundation for long-term, community-anchored solutions to food insecurity.

Lessons Learned

Several strategic choices, such as leveraging lived experience, supporting language justice, and offering tailored technical assistance, contributed to strong progress in many communities.

- **What helped coalitions thrive:** Local coalitions in the CFS initiative were most successful when several enabling conditions came together, particularly strong and stable leadership, organizational infrastructure, and fundraising capacity.



- **Lived experience at the center:** By requiring coalitions to meaningfully include community members with firsthand experience of food insecurity, the CFS initiative helped reshape who was included in food systems change.
- **Power of tailored support:** What set the technical assistance in the CFS initiative apart was its ability to adapt across coalitions of varying ages, capacities, and community dynamics.
- **Sustainability as a persistent challenge:** While the CFS initiative catalyzed deep community engagement and capacity building, many coalitions worry about maintaining momentum without continued financial support.
- **Strategic considerations** for future efforts included:
 - Strengthen consistent communication across the initiative
 - Establish clear shared goals and common metrics
 - Ensure learning flows both ways
 - Focus on effectiveness and continuous improvement



Objective 2⁸

Increase participation in public food assistance programs among Coloradans who are eligible for them.



Reduce barriers to public food assistance enrollment and utilization.

Key Investments	Colorado Department of Human Services, Colorado Department of Education, Bondadosa, Colorado Food Cluster
Total Investment	\$6,069,437
Defining Characteristic	Shift from top-down outreach efforts to community- and equity-driven solutions that addressed structural barriers to public food assistance through systems advocacy and lived experience leadership.

CHF's strategy evolved from a statewide systems improvements and enrollment growth to confronting structural and racial inequities in public benefit systems. Over time, it prioritized community-informed, equity-rooted approaches, centering lived experience, supporting advocacy, and using its influence to shift power, policy, and practice to better serve impacted communities.

Evolution


- Starting in 2019, CHF aimed to increase SNAP, WIC, and child nutrition program enrollment through large-scale outreach and state agency partnership, assuming improved awareness would drive uptake.
- When enrollment remained flat, CHF shifted its approach to address deeper structural barriers, such as administrative inefficiencies, language access, and cultural responsiveness, by supporting community-driven innovations and advocacy.
- Investments evolved to prioritize community-driven models and local coalition and Blueprint efforts (Objective 1) that successfully pushed for more equitable public benefit access, demonstrating greater impact than earlier state agency-focused strategies.

Objective 2 Outcomes

While CHF's investments contributed to modest improvements, such as bolstering outreach infrastructure, supporting innovations, and raising awareness, the overall outcomes were limited.

- **Strengthened SNAP outreach infrastructure:** CHF played a role in building and strengthening Colorado's SNAP outreach infrastructure, indirectly contributing to an increase in SNAP enrollment during the investment period.

⁸ For more information on the evolution, outcomes, and lessons learned, refer to the [Objective 2](#) section in the Addendum.

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- **Enhanced access to child nutrition programs:** CHF provided support to make Colorado’s child nutrition program more accessible, culturally relevant, and responsive to local needs.
 - **WIC innovations faced systemic limitations:** Despite early enthusiasm and local capacity to implement WIC online ordering and delivery pilots, critical structural issues within the WIC system proved difficult to overcome.
 - **Reduced stigma and raised awareness:** Most of the funded barrier-reduction work across public food assistance programs focused on reducing stigma and improving awareness of programs such as SNAP, WIC, and school meal initiatives.
 - **Evolved state agency practices and capacity:** Targeted grants to state agencies enabled teams to undertake projects beyond their typical compliance and regulatory functions, filling critical gaps in outreach, branding, and training that otherwise would have remained unaddressed due to limited time, staffing, and resources.

Lessons Learned

Over time, CHF refined its approach to improving access to public food assistance programs in response to the structural complexity of public systems and the mixed results of state-level investments.

- **Limits of state-led systems change:** Initial investments aimed at driving systems change from within state agencies were hampered by top-down bureaucracy, limited agility, and federal constraints that diluted equity efforts. CHF also underestimated the complexity and time intensity of systems-level innovations. Ultimately, without deeper structural and national reform or bolder alignment with equity-focused goals, the strategy struggled to deliver lasting, scalable impact.
- **Community advocacy as a catalyst:** Investments in local coalitions and field-building efforts like the Blueprint under Objective 1 emerged as more agile and effective.
- **Navigating the shift from state to community support:** As CHF shifted away from supporting state agencies, grantees faced challenges around communication, sustainability, and planning, with some noting that a lack of clear transition strategy and delayed communication hindered their ability to prepare for funding gaps or secure continued support.
- **Trade-offs of private funding in public systems:** Accepting private funding from CHF gave state agencies valuable flexibility to adapt and respond quickly, but also introduced logistical complexities, competing expectations, and emotional tensions as philanthropic support phased out.



Objective 3⁹

Support public-private partnerships that increase the prevalence of affordable healthy food and beverages.



Increase the prevalence of affordable, nutritious, culturally relevant food in communities that have historically lacked access.

Key Investments	Colorado Fresh Food Financing Fund (CO4F)
Total Investment	\$7,270,241
Defining Characteristic	Evolution from a market-driven investment approach to a community-driven, equity-centered model that prioritized food sovereignty, cultural relevance, and local ownership.

CHF shifted from a market-based approach focused on expanding healthy food retail to a community-driven, equity-centered strategy that prioritized BIPOC-led, community-owned food enterprises and wealth building. This evolution reflected a deeper commitment to racial equity and the need to shift power and resources to those most impacted by food injustice.

Evolution


- In 2012, CHF launched CO4F to expand healthy food retail in underserved areas through loans and grants, aiming to boost food access and stimulate economic development. This investment was absorbed by the FAS priority when it started in 2019.
- Over time, CHF recognized the limitations of traditional financial tools and pushed CO4F to adopt a stronger food justice lens, prioritizing culturally relevant food access, community ownership, and BIPOC-led initiatives.
- In response to persistent mismatches in capital needs, CHF ended CO4F funding in 2023 and pivoted to direct grants for grassroots, equity-centered food retail projects emphasizing food sovereignty and cooperative ownership.

Objective 2 Outcomes

CHF's Objective 3 investments yielded limited tangible progress in expanding access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally relevant food in underserved communities.

- **Expanded access in underserved communities:** CO4F expanded healthy food access in some underserved communities by funding retail projects in communities around Colorado, with CHF support helping exceed equity targets in low-income areas, though rural reach remained a challenge.

⁹ For more information on the evolution, outcomes, and lessons learned, refer to the [Objective 3](#) section in the Addendum.

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- **Job creation and technical support:** CO4F enhanced business resilience and created jobs through technical assistance, though increasing BIPOC borrower representation remained a key area for equity progress.
 - **Community ownership and leadership:** Beyond CO4F, the few CHF-funded projects advanced community ownership and culturally aligned food systems by supporting cooperative markets, infrastructure development, and initiatives that integrated local leadership, youth engagement, and health education.
 - **Infrastructure for long-term equity:** CHF investments helped build durable infrastructure (physical, organizational, and relational) for long-term community wealth.
 - **Gaps and opportunities for deeper impact:** While there was some success, limitations remained: (1) lacked concrete data on affordability, nutritional improvements, or long-term community outcomes; (2) financial sustainability with projects in early stages or dependent on ongoing operational capital; and (3) initiatives not connected to broader policy shifts or statewide supply chain infrastructure.

Lessons Learned

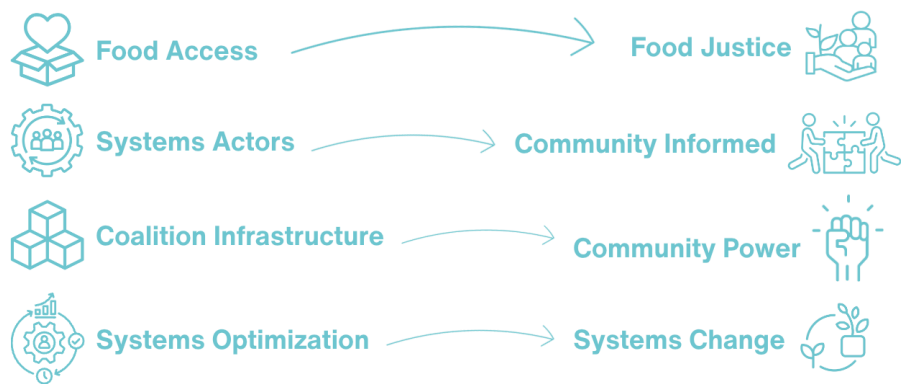
Several key lessons emerged, including the need to pair capital and technical assistance, elevate community-driven innovation, and more strategically align investments with existing infrastructure and rural realities.

- **Re-thinking retail as a solution:** Partners and CHF staff raised concerns that the Objective 3 strategy, while achieving some localized successes, fell short of transformative impact due to high costs, limited reach, and a reliance on retail models that did not fully address systemic causes of food insecurity or align with community-defined needs.
- **Capital alone isn't enough:** Technical assistance proved to be a necessary and effective complement to capital investments, particularly for community-based grocery projects supported through CO4F.
- **Community-driven innovation and equity in food retail:** By resourcing solutions already in motion within communities and supporting trusted local organizations, either directly or through field infrastructure like the Blueprint, CHF enabled more responsive and resilient food access models to take shape.
- **Overlooked leverage points in local food access:** Despite a strong conceptual foundation, CHF missed key opportunities to expand impact by underinvesting in small, community-based retailers and failing to align with complementary state efforts.
- **Navigating challenges in food retail:** Investing in healthy food retail revealed significant structural, operational, and relational challenges. This experience highlighted the need for structural redesign and a shift toward capacity-focused, community-rooted approaches.

Key Shifts in the FAS Strategy

What began as an effort to expand access to food and improve coordination within the anti-hunger sector gradually deepened into a broader, more equity-driven agenda.

Four key shifts defined this evolution: (1) becoming more community-informed; (2) elevating food justice and racial equity; (3) deepening the commitment to systems change; and (4) building community power.



These shifts reflect both external contexts, such as growing public awareness of structural inequities, and internal learning from grantees, community partners, and the lived experience of those most impacted by hunger. Together, they mark a transformation in how CHF understood its role: from supporting food access efforts to working alongside communities to challenge the root causes of hunger and build lasting, just food systems.



Elevating Food Justice & Racial Equity

CHF's evolution from a food access mindset to one rooted in food justice reshaped funding patterns and partner relationships.

This shift moved CHF beyond technical solutions like expanding SNAP and WIC enrollment toward addressing structural inequities such as racial injustice and community power.

A New Framing on Food Justice

Initially, CHF's work was focused on measurable, technical solutions to hunger. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and murder of George Floyd highlighted deeper systemic injustices, catalyzing CHF's internal reflection and learning. Starting in 2020, CHF staff began exploring what a food justice lens would mean for the FAS strategy. This included building relationships, learning from community partners, and questioning how existing strategies addressed root causes. At the same time, the Blueprint staff, Governing Council, and workgroups were also going through a transition to center racial equity in their work. This accelerated CHF's and the Blueprint's parallel learning paths, allowing them to adapt their approaches at the same time and learn from each other.

The adoption of CHF's Centering Race Framework deepened this shift. Staff began to support more culturally responsive food systems work, including funding BIPOC-led coalitions and community-driven strategies. This internal transformation coincided with leadership changes in the Senior Program Officer, reinforcing momentum toward equity-centered grantmaking.

Impacts on Funding Patterns


The pivot toward food justice redirected CHF's financial and human resources. Funding moved from large, state-level organizations to local food coalitions, especially those grounded in lived experience and racial justice.¹⁰ Community-driven solutions, such as culturally specific food programs and bilingual outreach, were increasingly



It was a lot of learning about what is food justice? What does food justice look like? What could it look like? What are other foundations doing? Let's center on our own Centering Race Framework and bring that to bear on what the next evolution of the strategy could look like.

- CHF Staff

¹⁰ For more information on these investments, refer to the section on [Objective 1](#).



prioritized. Terra Soma, CHF's technical assistance partner for the CFS initiative, helped guide this shift by coaching coalitions in culturally responsive and power-building practices.

This shift was especially evidence in Objectives 2 and 3,¹¹ where CHF moved away from investing in state agencies and began funding community-driven strategies for public food assistance and healthy food retail.

Navigating Tensions

The transition to food justice surfaced both internal and external challenges. The entire CHF team, including leadership, were going through a racial equity and racial justice learning and evaluation process. The FAS team had done deep work to understand food injustices and how racism is built into the food system. As a result, the team often found themselves ahead of leadership in applying a racial justice lens to anti-hunger work, creating friction around language, goals, and framing. Even the use of "food justice" was discouraged at times, despite its alignment with the Centering Race Framework.

Externally, the new focus on food justice disrupted existing dynamics with larger institutional partners, revealing power imbalances and requiring CHF to intentionally manage tensions while staying aligned with its evolving values.



By virtue of [CHF] naming the racist dimensions of the food system and explicitly resourcing partners working to advance, working to eradicate hunger, but also understand the race and equity dimensions, that creates space for these efforts to be funded in ways that they otherwise would not have.

- CHF Staff



[CHF leadership] weren't comfortable calling it food justice at that time because we weren't even calling our work racial justice, it was racial equity. Part of that was an evolution of the Foundation. Then we got to a place of calling it racial justice, and then we could sort of call it food justice. The food justice piece, if you really look at it, also involves food sovereignty. Having control over the food that you eat, so it moves more into food production. Some folks were thinking it's a little too far out from anti-hunger work, not seeing the connection to it. There was some resistance to that because our frame had been anti-hunger or food access and security.

- CHF Staff

The pivot toward food justice redefined who received funding, what types of work were seen as strategic, and how CHF understood its role in advancing health equity through food systems. It also surfaced important tensions around power, language, and accountability that required intentional navigation.

¹¹ For more information on these shifts, refer to the sections on [Objective 2](#) and [Objective 3](#).

What were the implications of the shift from food access to a food justice model on funding patterns and relationships, if any?

The transition from a food access frame to a food justice model marked a fundamental reorientation in how CHF approached both its investments and relationships with communities.

Shift in Funding Priorities and Patterns: Initially, funding centered on expanding physical access to healthy food, through retail infrastructure, SNAP enrollment, and distribution systems. As CHF adopted a food justice lens, investment patterns shifted to prioritize community leadership, cultural relevance, and structural change. This led to:

- Increased funding for community-led solutions, such as co-ops, kitchens, and Indigenous foodways.
- A move away from top-down programmatic goals toward strategies defined by local context and lived experience.
- More flexible grant structures.

Evolution of Relationships with Grantees: CHF's role evolved from funder to learning partner. The shift deepened trust, especially among historically marginalized groups, and opened space for more authentic collaboration. As a result:

- Technical assistance expanded beyond compliance to include leadership coaching, healing support, and capacity building.
- Grantees felt more seen, supported, and empowered to shape outcomes rather than conform to predetermined metrics.
- The definition of success broadened beyond outputs to include power building and narrative change.

Key Lessons:

- **Funding equity requires structural flexibility.** Conventional grant processes often exclude the very leadership a justice approach seeks to empower.
- **Relationships are strategy.** Deep trust and responsiveness to context enable more durable impact than transactional funding alone.
- **Philanthropy must transform alongside the field.** Justice-aligned funding demands internal adaptation, not just new grantee expectations.



Becoming Community-Informed & Supporting Community Solutions

One of the most defining evolutions of the FAS strategy was a deepened commitment to becoming community-informed and centering equity.

Over time, CHF shifted away from a top-down, systems optimization model focused on technical efficiency, and toward a strategy grounded in community leadership, racial justice, and trust-based partnership.

From State-Centered to Community-Rooted

In its early years, the FAS strategy prioritized partnerships with large, state-level organizations and systems interventions, with limited attention to community-rooted efforts. As CHF's internal equity work deepened and food justice frameworks gained traction, this approach began to feel increasingly misaligned. Staff and leadership began questioning whose needs were centered, whose voices were shaping strategy, and whether equity was truly being enacted.



The food work is not very community informed [at the start]. We're investing in state-level organizations, statewide work, state agencies, but not really community-based work. That started the learning.

- CHF Staff

This reflection culminated in a pivotal inflection point when CHF leadership invited the FAS team to consider whether to: (1) continue the current path, (2) center race and community more explicitly through a food justice lens focused on the current objectives, or (3) pivot entirely to other funding areas. The decision to stay the course and double down on racial equity reflected CHF's renewed commitment to being community-informed and community-led change. It also catalyzed tactical shifts that reshaped who was at the table and how decisions were made.



Operationalizing the Shift: Trust, Relationships, and Local Wisdom

This evolution was not only philosophical; it reshaped CHF's operational approach:

- **Community-informed strategy design** became a standard, with strategy sessions designed in response to lived experience.
- **Partnerships expanded** to include food justice organizations, grassroots coalitions, and immigrant-led initiatives that were historically underfunded.
- **Grantmaking practices adapted** to better support locally developed solutions, even when these did not conform to traditional institutional norms.



It gave us the added motivation to bring insights back in from the community, from folks who were directly engaging within our grant portfolios and from a historical research-backed, root cause-backed analysis to co-design those strategy sessions that centered on food justice and food sovereignty work.

- CHF Staff

Rather than imposing prescriptive models, CHF resourced solutions already underway on the ground. This relational, trust-based approach created space for community leaders, often people of color with deep experience navigating broken systems, to shape food systems work on their own terms. As one partner reflected, “*Thank you for the belief that we know what to do.*”

Strategic Impacts and Learning Edges

This shift significantly broadened CHF's impact and deepened its alignment with values of justice and equity. By grounding funding in local realities and lived experience, CHF supported food systems change that was both context-responsive and durable. However, the shift also surfaced critical learning edges:

- **Community-driven solutions are diverse and non-linear.** Many fall between grassroots experiments and fully institutionalized efforts, the “missing middle” that still struggles to secure funding.
- **Relationship-building is itself a critical outcome.** CHF's willingness to fund trust-building and coalition development marked a major departure from traditional grant models, but sustaining this takes long-term commitment.
- **Becoming community-informed is not a one-time pivot.** It requires ongoing internal reflection, a shift in power dynamics, and a deeper understanding of how local systems evolve over time.

This shift grounded the FAS priority more firmly in food justice, laying the foundation for future investments to be more accountable to, and reflective of, the communities most impacted by food insecurity.



Key Learnings:

- Equity must shape the strategy from the outset, not as a parallel goal.
- Shifting from community engagement to community leadership requires trust, humility, and structural change.
- Supporting local capacity and relationship infrastructure is a powerful lever for systems change.
- Investing in non-traditional, community-rooted models is essential, but requires more flexible, risk-tolerant funding structures.



Building Community Power

Over the course of the FAS investment, CHF's understanding of and approach to community power building deepened significantly.

In early implementation, power building was loosely defined and primarily focused on improving coalition operations and shifting how conventional food system partners engaged with community voices. However, as CHF engaged more deeply with grassroots coalitions and adopted a stronger food justice lens, power building emerged as a core strategic aim, centering lived experience and leadership of community and coalition members.



One of the biggest shifts in the strategy is watching our work around community power building and what can we do through a food lens in order to ensure that when we leave, that we built power, and that power can continue to be exercised in that community, whether it's to continue the food work or to leverage the other types of work that communities want to move forward.

- CHF Staff

From Coalition Management to Individual and Collective Empowerment

One major shift was in the purpose and design of technical assistance. Initially focused on administrative efficiency (“*how to run a coalition*”), support evolved into individualized leadership development, particularly for Latina immigrants and other leaders of color. Staff recognized that power building required support at both individual and collective levels: access to networks, coaching, healing spaces, and political education were all seen as essential to cultivating durable power.

As one staff member shared, “*we didn't think of technical assistance as being leadership coaching for Latina immigrants,*” but over time, this became a central feature of CHF's power building approach.



[At the beginning], we thought of [technical assistance] as effective coalition management and how do you run a coalition and how do you work effectively in partnership? Those types of things. [What we came to realize is that] what it really takes to build community power is that it has to be at that individual level. They have to have enough knowledge about the space they're working in. They have to have opportunities to learn and grow, and to speak up and share their perspective and get support, and they have to do that in a supportive environment.

Power Building¹² was Context-Specific

CHF moved away from enforcing a single definition of “power,” instead tailoring strategies based on coalition capacity, regional context, and political landscape. In some communities, building power meant winning local elections or launching food co-ops. In others, it meant speaking up at meetings or navigating racially hostile environments. CHF responded by increasing individualized technical assistance, offering alternative funding pathways, and connecting leaders to fellowships and training opportunities.

This adaptive approach surfaced internal tensions. Staff grappled with how to define and measure community power in a philanthropic context, particularly when conventional metrics like SNAP enrollment did not reflect transformational shifts in leadership or organizing. Questions also arose around philanthropy’s role (i.e., how to support without controlling) and how to align internal expectations with values of equity and community voice.

Cross-Objective Influence

While the most targeted power building strategies emerged through the CFS initiative, insights from this work influenced CHF’s broader priority. Staff shared lessons with the Blueprint Program Office and helped integrate racial equity and lived experience into other areas, including policy-focused efforts.

CHF’s evolving power building strategy marked a shift from top-down efficiency toward bottom-up empowerment, recognizing that systemic change requires not just better programs, but stronger, more confident, and more connected community leaders.

¹² For more information on the approach and impact of CHF’s power building strategy, refer to the [Community Power](#) section.

How did CHF's approach to community power building evolve over the investment period? How did this shift tactics?

Over the course of the investment period, CHF's understanding of community power building evolved from a general commitment to inclusion into a more intentional, resourced, and embedded strategy for shifting who holds influence in the food system.

From Participation to Power: Early investments framed community involvement primarily as input through gathering feedback, engaging stakeholders, and supporting community participation in predefined strategies. Over time, CHF recognized the limits of this approach and began to center power building as a strategic outcome. This shift included:

- Moving from “outreach and engagement” to funding community ownership and leadership in food system efforts.
- Supporting models that build economic power, such as co-ops, incubators, and land-based initiatives.
- Prioritizing projects that restructured local governance through community advisory groups, steering committees, and multi-sector collaboratives.

Shifting Tactics to Build Capacity and Resilience: As CHF deepened its focus on power, the tactical emphasis shifted from place-based outputs to long-term capacity development. This showed up through:

- Expanded funding for infrastructure and organizational development, including physical space, staffing, and strategy planning.
- Support for relational infrastructure, such as coalition building, shared leadership models, and healing-centered work.
- Investment in technical assistance that aligned with values of justice, cultural grounding, and community-defined success.

Philanthropic Practice as Power Strategy: CHF began to see its own practices (e.g., how it moved money, built relationships, and measured success) as part of the power building ecosystem. In response:

- CHF created more flexible funding mechanisms, including fiscal sponsorships, multi-year grants, and lighter-touch reporting.
- Staff served as thought partners and advocates, not just administrators, helping grantees navigate systemic barriers.
- Internal shifts aimed to model the values being funded externally, through deeper listening, trust-based relationships, and ongoing learning.

Key Lessons:

- **Power is built through ownership, not just participation.** Supporting structural shifts in who controls resources is essential for long-term change.
- **Relationships and capacity are foundational infrastructure.** Building power requires sustained investment in people, partnerships, and process, not just programs.
- **Philanthropy must examine its own role.** Funders must align their practices with the values of equity and justice they aim to support, or risk reinforcing existing hierarchies.



Deepening Commitment to Systems Change

A core evolution in CHF’s FAS strategy was a shift from short-term, outcome-driven improvements to long-term structural change, moving from optimizing existing systems to fundamentally transforming them in service of equity, justice, and community power.

Early efforts in the FAS strategy prioritized outcome-oriented interventions such as increasing enrollment in SNAP and WIC and expanding access to healthy food retail. These initiatives were effective for immediate hunger relief, but they were ultimately “lag measures,” addressing symptoms without changing the systems that produce food insecurity.

As staff deepened their understanding of equity and food justice, they began to see that lasting impact required addressing root causes. This meant going beyond improving how efficiently people could access services and toward reimagining systems themselves to be equitable, community responsive, and rooted in local control. One staff member described this evolution as a move toward “*permanently changing and upending the system*” to better serve local needs and support sustainable, community-based food economies.

This shift also reshaped funding patterns. While early investments were concentrated in large grants to state agencies focused on efficiency, later investments favored local, community-based partners. These community-based organizations were closer to the lived realities of food insecurity and more nimble in testing equity-centered, culturally responsive approaches aligned with systemic change.¹³

The transition, however, surfaced real tensions. Systems transformation is inherently slower, messier, and more complex than systems optimization. Building local capacity and cultivating trust took longer than expected, and the timeline for observable change extended. Still, the longer arc revealed deeper progress, not just in outcomes, but in the emergence of new community-driven models and the power communities gained to influence and reshape the food system.

Ultimately, this shift reinforced the value of working *with* communities, not just on their behalf, to co-create a more just and resilient food system.

¹³ For more information on how the FAS priority shifted systems, refer to the [Shifting the System](#) section.

How did the FAS priority evolve over the investment period?

Over the investment period, CHF's FAS priority evolved significantly, from an initial focus on increasing access to healthy food through institutional and retail channels, to a broader, more structural approach grounded in equity, community power, and food justice.

Early years of the strategy prioritized measurable, outcome-driven interventions such as expanding healthy food retail, increasing SNAP and WIC enrollment, and supporting nutrition education. These investments were largely framed around systems efficiency and optimization, improving how existing public programs and markets reached low-income communities.

As CHF and its partners listened more deeply to community voices and reflected on outcomes, the limitations of these access-based strategies became clear. While effective in relieving hunger, they did little to address the systemic drivers of food insecurity, such as economic exclusion, land access, and structural racism.

In response, CHF shifted its approach to center community-driven systems change. Investments increasingly supported community-based organizations, power building, and culturally relevant models for food justice and local food economies. The priority became less about delivering services to communities and more about resourcing communities to shape their own food systems.

This shift also influenced how success was defined. Rather than just tracking outputs (such as enrollment numbers), CHF began to value deeper forms of change, such as governance shifts, community ownership, and collective capacity to transform local food systems.

Key Lessons:

- **Access is necessary, but not sufficient.** Improving food access alone does not disrupt the root causes of food insecurity.
- **Listening transforms strategy.** Ongoing feedback from community partners surfaced blind spots in early investments and guided a more equity-centered approach.
- **Community power is a lever for systems change.** Resourcing local leadership and organizing efforts proved critical to long-term, structural impact.
- **Metrics must evolve with goals.** As the strategy shifted, so did its definitions of success, embracing power building and systemic change alongside service delivery.

What were the tension points and how did CHF navigate them?

Throughout the FAS investment period, CHF encountered several key tension points that shaped the evolution of its strategy and relationships. These moments often surfaced as the Foundation deepened its commitment to equity, food justice, and systems change, challenging conventional philanthropic approaches and prompting difficult trade-offs.

Tension Between Access and Justice: A major inflection point emerged in the shift from food access to food justice. While initial access-focused investments generated small measurable outputs, they were limited in advancing long-term systemic change. Moving toward food justice required disrupting traditional programmatic models, and some partners experienced this as a de-prioritization of their work. CHF navigated this by gradually evolving its funding approach and increasing investments in community-based organizations. This could have been supported with more transparent and ongoing communication about the strategy's direction.

Tension Between Statewide Scale and Local Impact: Early strategies leaned heavily on statewide agencies to drive efficiency at scale. Over time, CHF recognized that large-scale investments often failed to reach the most marginalized communities. Tensions surfaced when statewide partners perceived CHF's pivot toward local actors as duplicative or misaligned.

Tension Between Speed and Depth: CHF initially sought measurable progress on system outcomes but found that deep community engagement and capacity building required a slower, trust-based pace. This created internal and external frustration around expectations for pace and scale. CHF responded by shifting timelines, redefining success metrics, and acknowledging that transformation unfolds unevenly.

Tension Between Flexibility and Accountability: As CHF adopted more flexible, trust-based grantmaking approaches, it grappled with how to remain accountable to outcomes. Some grantees thrived with looser restrictions; others struggled without more structured guidance. Staff learned to differentiate supports, offer technical assistance, and rely more on relational accountability rooted in shared values and long-term vision alignment.

Key Lessons:

- **Strategic clarity requires relational care.** Transparency and trust were essential in navigating shifts in funding priorities.
- **Justice work surfaces institutional friction.** Moving from program delivery to power building revealed limitations of legacy systems and required reimagining who leads and how.
- **Transformation takes time.** Patience, flexibility, and a long-term commitment were critical to allowing deep systems work to take root.
- **Shared values anchor accountability.** In complex, emergent work, mutual trust and alignment mattered as much as formal reporting structures.

What tactics were most and least effective? What conditions facilitate or hinder success of the chosen tactics?

Most Effective Tactics:

- **Investing in trusted conveners (e.g., Blueprint):** Enabled authentic, cross-sector collaboration and sustained momentum by creating space for diverse partners, especially those with lived experience, to engage meaningfully.
- **Supporting coalition-based, relationship-centered work:** Strengthened trust, local ownership, and shared responsibility. Coalitions that centered community voice were more adaptable and better aligned with local needs.
- **Resourcing community leadership:** Funding community members as leaders, not just volunteers, and investing in community power building shifted organizational culture, deepened equity, and made solutions more responsive and grounded.
- **Flexible, long-term funding:** Helped community-based organizations build infrastructure and capacity, allowing them to lead beyond food access and contribute to broader systems and civic change.
- **Field- and capacity-building support:** FAS grantees benefited more than any other CHF priority from non-monetary assistance, from DEI and leadership development to organizational strengthening, which enhanced implementation and resilience.

Least Effective Tactics:

- **Focusing on enrollment without addressing structural barriers:** Early strategies emphasizing SNAP and WIC enrollment did not fully account for systemic and logistical challenges (e.g., stigma, access, technology gaps), limiting reach.
- **Underinvestment in food retail ownership models:** Work under Objective 3 remained incremental due to broader economic and policy constraints, limited local retail infrastructure, and lack of community-controlled pathways to scale.

Conditions That Facilitated Success:

- **Trust-based relationships:** Strong interpersonal and interorganizational trust enabled adaptive collaboration and honest feedback loops.
- **Community-led governance structures:** When decision-making power rested with those most impacted, implementation was more effective and equitable.
- **Cross-sector alignment:** Efforts that aligned local, regional, and state actors around shared goals saw greater traction and durability.

Conditions That Hindered Progress:

- **Fragmented systems and power dynamics:** A lack of coordination across state agencies, nonprofits, and funders created inefficiencies and gaps in strategy. Initially, many statewide partners were reluctant to engage in deeper conversations about race, power, and structural inequities. As a result, collaborative leaders, like the Blueprint and local food coalitions, had to navigate these dynamics, requiring the time and capacity for deep relationship- and trust-building.
- **Limited infrastructure for community ownership:** In some cases, community-based organizations lacked the staffing, technical support, or capital needed to take on more ambitious roles in food systems design.

**Big Picture:
Connections & Impact**

03



The FAS strategy advanced a multifaceted vision for addressing hunger, one that moved beyond programs and toward systemic change. Through its three objectives, CHF supported efforts to build local systems, strengthen public food assistance, and expand access to healthy food retail.

While each of these efforts generated outcomes in its own right, their greatest value emerged in how they collectively helped shift relationships, narratives, and infrastructure across the broader anti-hunger field.

Investments built state and local capacity, deepened connections between community and policy or systems, and elevated new leaders and voices, particularly from underrepresented communities. In many places, the FAS strategy helped reframe hunger not just as a matter of access, but as a systems issue rooted in equity and power.

The strategy’s broader impact was shaped by how well these pieces aligned – or did not. When community power building was connected to policy and systems work, change moved farther and deeper. But when efforts remained siloed or narrowly defined, they struggled to take hold. Some investments helped foster stronger collaboration and field infrastructure, while others missed opportunities to shift underlying structures driving food insecurity. **CHF’s evolving approach, especially its shift toward community-led solutions, played a key role in strengthening the anti-hunger ecosystem.¹⁴** Still, questions remain about sustainability, scale, and how to embed equity more deeply. The FAS priority laid a foundation for long-term transformation, even as it revealed where more work is needed to build a resilient, just, and community-rooted food system.

¹⁴ For more information on CHF’s evolving approach, refer to the [FAS Priority Evolution](#) section.

Connecting the Dots: Alignment and Gaps Across the FAS Priority Objectives

CHF's overarching objective - **to build momentum around collaborative, community-owned solutions to food insecurity** - was rooted in a systems change vision aligned with the Blueprint. The three strategy objectives were intended to operationalize this vision. Internally, staff articulated how these objectives reinforced one another to drive structural transformation and equity through their theory of change and implementation plans. However, this alignment was largely conceptual; in practice, the priority did not function as a coordinated, cohesive strategy in the eyes of community partners.

Internal Clarity vs. External Confusion

While staff were guided by a theory of change that clarified how each objective supported systems change through the Blueprint's goals, this internal clarity did not consistently extend to grantees or field partners. Community organizations described the strategy as opaque, disconnected, and often unclear in its rationale or intended impact. Many partners reported not knowing what CHF was doing or how investments fit together. Internally, CHF staff acknowledged gaps in articulating how the pieces connected and a lack of consistent messaging, both internally and externally,

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I have not had one conversation with anyone in the food space that was able to say to me, 'I know what [CHF] is doing. I know what they're doing. I know why they're doing this. And here's why I feel supported.' What I hear over and over again ... is, 'I don't know what they're doing. I'm confused. I don't feel supported. Why are they not here?'

- Community Partner

about the overall strategy. While CHF's internal strategy increasingly emphasized racial justice and systemic equity, the pathway toward those goals was not always legible to partners.

This disconnect was echoed in the Grantee Perception Survey. While FAS grantees rated the FAS priority higher than the overall grantee pool on transparency, they still expressed confusion about how and why strategic decisions were made. One grantee suggested that greater clarity on CHF's social justice orientation, strategic shifts, and multi-pronged funding approach would help them better align and learn with CHF. Specifically, they requested insight into whether decisions were shaped by board preferences, data and trends, or community-informed theories of change.

Fragmentation Rooted in Strategy Origins

A key source of disconnection stemmed from how the FAS strategy was constructed. Objectives 1 and 2 were developed in response to the Blueprint's recommendations, while Objective 3, a legacy



investment in healthy food retail, was incorporated after the fact. This retrofitting resulted in uneven coordination across objectives. While the Blueprint provided a useful organizing framework early on, its agency- and nonprofit-led structure limited the CHF's ability to directly engage with community-driven work, especially as investments were routed through intermediaries such as the Blueprint and local coalition leads. The resulting distance weakened transparency, undermined trust, and limited opportunities for partners to shape or fully understand the funder's evolving direction.

Missed Opportunities for Integration

Despite strong values alignment and shared goals, CHF did not formally create opportunities for cross-objective learning, coordination, or reflection. There were isolated examples of effective integration, such as joint policy advocacy for Healthy School Meals for All, but these moments were the exception rather than the norm. Staff acknowledged that they did not have an intentional strategy to convene grantees, share learnings across objectives, and use their platform to tell a coherent story. As one staff member reflected, *"There was no space intentionally carved out to reflect on synergy."* Another staff member noted that this lack of integration raised larger questions about the coherence and impact of CHF's implementation plans, wondering whether objectives were designed to reinforce one another and contribute to field-level systems change. They reflected, *"if the priority objectives don't have synergy, perhaps the work is too broad, especially where we seek to have systems-level impact."*

Blueprint as Both Anchor and Limitation

The Blueprint was a powerful early scaffold for aligning investments and framing statewide action. It offered clear goals that mapped closely to CHF's objectives and helped structure initial decision-making.

While community partners viewed CHF's attempt to step back and avoid influencing the direction of the Blueprint as well-intentioned, some also expressed concern that not having a direct role in the Blueprint removed CHF from direct relationship with community. One community partner reflected, *"why did you remove yourself from [direct relationship with community]? From directly talking to community?"* CHF had strong relationships with community through investments outside of the Blueprint. Yet, these community partners viewed CHF's sizable investment in the Blueprint and lack of direct participation in the Blueprint as a missed opportunity for further community engagement that could have strengthened strategic cohesion and trust.



[CHF] hired [the food access work] out [to the Blueprint] ... and there are consequences for that. You're not as close to community. You're further away from the root cause. ... If that was the intent of [the Blueprint], then we should have known. I should have known because then I would've advocated differently. I would've operated very differently.

- Community Partner

Toward a More Integrated Future

CHF's FAS priority area was shaped by vision, urgency, and a genuine commitment to equity and systems change. But it also reflected the challenges of executing an integrated strategy within a dynamic, complex field. The connection between objectives was clear in theory but uneven in practice, fragmented by origin, structure, and communication gaps. With more time, CHF may have been able to foster deeper internal learning, stronger external communication, and more sustained cross-field relationships, unlocking greater impact. More intentionally aligning practices and purpose by staying proximate to community, communicating consistently, and designing strategies with connection could allow for the greater realization of the promise of collaborative, community-owned solutions.

Key Learnings:

- **Internal clarity must be externalized.** A strong theory of change is only effective if grantees and partners understand and can align with it.
- **Transparency = power sharing.** Explaining how and why decisions are made builds trust and invites authentic collaboration.
- **Strategy needs visibility.** When goals, decisions, and shifts are communicated clearly and consistently, alignment deepens and fragmentation is reduced.
- **Origins shape outcomes.** Retrofitted or siloed objectives, like those layered in after the Blueprint, can limit cohesion unless intentionally integrated.
- **Proximity strengthens coherence.** Intermediaries like the Blueprint can help coordinate, but without direct relationships, funders risk losing touch with lived expertise.
- **Integration takes intention.** Co-learning, shared spaces, and reflective practice are essential to avoid missed opportunities for cross-objective synergy.
- **Time and readiness matter.** Field-level integration requires not only time, but also partners prepared to collaborate across missions.
- **Ongoing communication is critical.** Alignment is not a one-time achievement. It must be maintained through steady, relational, two-way engagement.

How did investments work in concert, or not?

CHF's investments under the FAS priority were rooted in a shared vision of equity and systems change, but they did not consistently function as a coordinated, unified strategy in practice. While CHF staff described alignment across the three objectives through a clear theory of change, this alignment was largely conceptual and not reflected in grantee or partner experience. Structural origins, communication gaps, and siloed implementation limited the strategy's coherence.

What Supported Alignment:

- **A shared internal vision** grounded in systems change and racial equity helped orient staff.
- **Moments of integration**, such as joint policy advocacy efforts, demonstrated the potential of coordinated investments.
- **The Blueprint** provided an early organizing framework and helped structure initial decision-making.

What Undermined Cohesion:

- **Fragmented strategy origins**, with one objective retrofitted after initial design, created uneven connections between efforts.
- **Limited external communication** left partners unclear about how pieces fit together or what CHF was trying to achieve.
- **Missed opportunities for intentional integration**, including grantee convenings or cross-objective learning spaces, weakened strategy cohesion.
- **Distance from community**, especially through reliance on intermediaries like the Blueprint, reduced CHF's ability to stay proximate to lived experience and feedback.

Key Lessons:

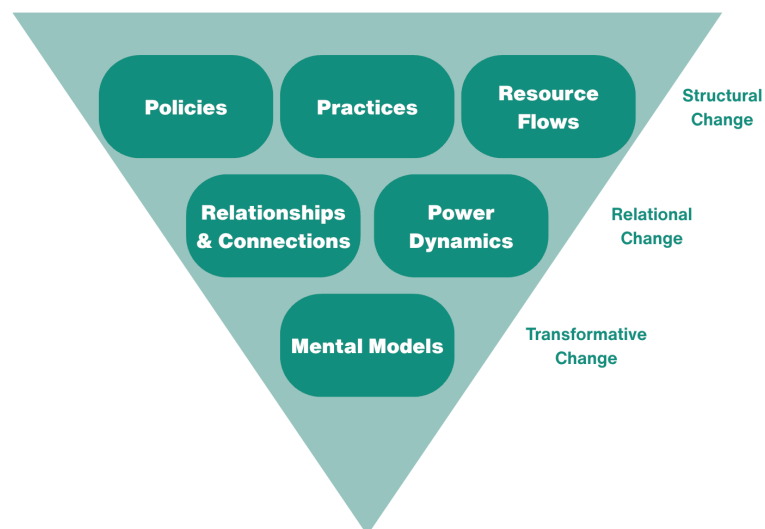
- **Conceptual alignment is not enough.** Strategies must be reinforced through visible, coordinated, implementation and steady communication.
- **Integration requires intentional design.** When objectives are designed or evolved separately, integration will not happen on its own.
- **Staying proximate to community strengthens coherence.** Direct relationships enable more grounded, adaptive strategy development.
- **Time matters.** Deeper alignment, shared learning, and cross-field impact require time to build trust, relationships, and infrastructure.

Shifting the System: FAS Impact Across the Water of Systems Change

CHF's FAS priority contributed to meaningful systems change across Colorado's anti-hunger field by addressing multiple layers of the [Water of Systems Change](#) framework, a core guiding framework for the CFS initiative.

From shifting power dynamics and strengthening relationships, to influencing policy and resource flows, the FAS strategy's investments moved beyond isolated programmatic fixes to create enabling conditions for long-term, equity-centered transformation.

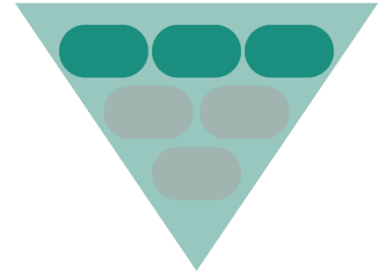
FAS investments made change at all three levels (structural, relational, and transformative), laying groundwork for more coordinated, just, and community-driven food systems. **Investments in the Blueprint and Objective 1 proved to be the most effective at encouraging systems changes at these levels.**





Structural: Changes in Policies, Practices, & Resource Flows

CHF's FAS strategy contributed to tangible shifts in policies, practices, and resource flows across Colorado's food system.



By resourcing collaborative infrastructure, supporting coalition work, and funding innovative community models, CHF helped influence state- and local-level changes that improved access to food and increased the visibility of hunger as a systems issue.

These investments enabled organizations to navigate policy processes, test new approaches, and expand services in ways that directly impacted how food programs are delivered, how funding is allocated, and how institutions respond to community needs. While not all goals were realized, the strategy helped create momentum toward more responsive, equitable food systems.

Policies

CHF's FAS priority contributed meaningfully to policy change at both state and local levels, demonstrating the critical role that public policy plays in shifting the systems that shape food access and security. Although the priority was not initially designed around policy outcomes, strategic investments, particularly through the Blueprint and CFS coalitions, helped build the infrastructure, relationships, and momentum needed to advance meaningful legislative and administrative reforms.

Importantly, grantee perceptions reflect the depth of this impact. In CHF's Grantee Perception Survey, FAS grantees rated CHF's contribution to advancing knowledge and public policy higher than the average across given by all CHF grantees, marking FAS as the highest-scoring priority area in this domain.

State-Level Advocacy through the Blueprint

The Blueprint emerged as the priority's most active and influential driver of policy change. Since 2020, the Blueprint has led or supported 35 policy priorities in the Colorado state legislature, serving as a central organizing body for anti-hunger advocacy. Its policy committee, legislative lobbyist, and behind-the-scenes strategy work at the Capitol helped elevate community priorities, align the field around shared legislative goals, and advance a policy agenda rooted in equity and lived experience. These coordinated efforts contributed to several significant policy wins, reinforcing the Blueprint's value as a long-term, systems-focused investment.



Local and Statewide Advocacy through CFS Coalitions

Although Objective 1 investments were not initially centered on policy, **nearly all CFS coalitions engaged in policy work over time.** This reflects an evolution in coalition strategy, moving from primarily service-focused activities toward efforts to reshape the structural conditions underlying food insecurity.

At the state level, half of the coalitions actively contributed to the passage and implementation of Colorado's Healthy School Meals for All policy. Their engagement took multiple forms, including mobilizing community support, developing public education materials, and participating in local implementation processes. Coalitions also aligned with broader advocacy campaigns, often extending the reach of existing policy initiatives rather than leading new ones. These contributions illustrate the value of coalition networks in amplifying policy momentum from the ground up.

Locally, four of eight coalitions engaged in efforts to shape food-related policy and planning, such as:

- Recommending implementation strategies for city food policies
- Providing public comment and data in support of policy change
- Supporting local hiring decisions for food systems roles
- Participating in budget advocacy or zoning reforms impacting food access

These efforts demonstrated that with sufficient support and coordination, place-based coalitions can be powerful engines for local food systems reform.

Coalitions demonstrated varying stages of readiness and effectiveness in the policy arena, reflecting a diverse range of strengths and starting points. Many entered advocacy spaces with strong alignment and deep community support, while others brought emerging energy and commitment, even if they lacked prior experience. These differences highlight an important opportunity: **advocacy capacity-building through technical assistance, coaching, and peer learning can build on existing momentum and ensure that more communities are equipped to shape the policy decisions that impact their food environments.**

Practices

One of the impacts of the CHF's FAS priority was its contribution to sustained changes in practices, especially those related to organizational culture, service delivery, leadership development, and institutional operations. Through investments under Objectives 1 and 2, CHF supported shifts away from transactional and charity-based models and toward more community-led, culturally responsive, and equity-focused practices across coalitions, nonprofits, and state agencies.



Centering Lived Experience in Local Coalitions

Through the CFS initiative under Objective 1, CHF required grantees to meaningfully involve people with lived experience of hunger in decision-making, strategy development, and implementation. This mandate catalyzed wide-ranging changes in coalition practices:

- **Leadership development:** Six of eight coalitions created cohort-based leadership programs for people with lived experience, particularly monolingual Spanish speakers and recent immigrants, who were supported through training, mentorship, and active participation in coalition governance.
- **Shifting program design:** Coalitions began to embed practices that emphasized dignity, belonging, and client choice, such as culturally relevant grocery planning, language justice initiatives, and inclusive community feedback loops.
- **Inclusive compensation and engagement:** Coalitions moved beyond volunteerism to compensate community members through stipends or paid positions, acknowledging the value of their expertise and labor.
- **Redefining narrative power:** Community participation challenged assumptions about who holds knowledge in food systems work, creating coalitions that were more grounded in the real experiences of hunger and access.

These changes strengthened relationships with communities historically excluded from food systems work and enabled coalitions to design services that were more responsive and rooted in local priorities.

Strengthening Organizational Practices Through Technical and Cultural Shifts


Alongside governance and service shifts, CFS coalitions also evolved operational and cultural practices:

- **Adopting equity and language justice frameworks,** leading to more inclusive coalition spaces and programs.
- **Improving collaboration and alignment** with values-aligned organizations to create more cohesive local food systems ecosystems.
- **Launching food entrepreneurship initiatives** that supported residents in launching small food-based businesses, advancing local economic opportunity alongside access.

These shifts moved coalitions toward long-term capacity-building and community ownership, replacing traditional top-down models with participatory structures designed for sustainability.

Enhancing State Agency Practices and Capacity

Investments under Objective 2 improved both the capacity and practices of state agencies managing public food assistance programs. These grants enabled agencies to innovate beyond compliance, resulting in lasting operational improvements:

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- **New tools and infrastructure:** Agencies created consistent statewide training materials, branded outreach materials, and educational videos that continue to be used post-grant, improving internal efficiency and public engagement.
 - **Capacity-building events:** Agencies organized rural community summits, “master classes” for child nutrition professionals, and cross-agency toolkits that enhanced learning and consistency across regions.
 - **Sustainable staffing and systems:** Grants supported additional staff positions, many of which continued after the funding period, and helped agencies identify and address previously unrecognized gaps in communications and service delivery.

These changes not only expanded agency reach and alignment, but also modeled a more proactive, equity-centered approach to public benefit administration.

Blueprint’s Role in Advancing Practice Change

The Blueprint also played a key role in advancing equitable practices at both the organizational and systems level. Its efforts encouraged food system partners, particularly state agencies and nonprofits, to:

- Adopt client-centered models of service delivery
- Prioritize culturally relevant foods and inclusive outreach
- Shift internal practices to better align with community needs and equity commitments

In tandem with the CFS initiative and Objective 2 investments, the Blueprint reinforced a field-wide movement away from traditional emergency food models and toward more systemic, community-responsive practices.

Resource Flows

A key lever in CHF’s FAS strategy was the reallocation of resources (financial, nutritional, informational, and institutional) to better reflect and serve the needs of communities most affected by food insecurity. Through investments under Objectives 1 and 2, CHF helped redirect the flow of funding, food, and public benefit access in ways that prioritized equity, community voice, and long-term capacity-building. While Objective 3 facilitated localized gains in food access through healthy food retail development, the most substantial resource flow changes were driven by the Blueprint and the CFS initiative under Objective 1 and the public program infrastructure investments under Objective 2.

Community-Led Grantmaking and Local Resource Realignment

The Blueprint played a central role in reshaping financial resource flows through its role as a grant maker. Since 2020, the Blueprint distributed over \$17.6 million in funding using practices that centered community voice and equity, providing flexible, responsive capital to grassroots and frontline organizations. This approach marked a significant departure from more traditional, top-



down philanthropy, modeling an equity-driven, trust-based approach to grantmaking that many interviewees noted as impactful and field-shifting.

In parallel, the CFS initiative empowered eight local coalitions to implement community-specific strategies for improving food access. Each coalition reported measurable improvements in the distribution and quality of no-cost groceries, including efforts to ensure offerings were not only nutritious but also culturally relevant. By coordinating more effectively with food banks, pantries, and mutual aid networks, and by amplifying the participation of historically underserved populations in programs like SNAP, coalitions helped re-align local food systems to better reflect community needs and values. Several coalitions also invested in community-based food entrepreneurship and retail to expand access while building economic power locally.

These investments helped shift food resources into communities that had previously been underserved or excluded, while also changing who held decision-making power over those resources.

Expanding Access Through Public Nutrition Programs

CHF's investments under Objective 2 helped expand the reach and improve the delivery of public food assistance programs, particularly SNAP and child nutrition initiatives.


SNAP Outreach Infrastructure: Strategic funding to CDHS and community-based outreach partners supported a rapid expansion of Colorado's SNAP outreach infrastructure. This investment helped:

- Stabilize early growth and build systems for durable outreach
- Develop multilingual materials and outreach tools still in use today
- Encourage community-based organization participation in the federal SNAP Outreach match program
- Reach previously excluded populations through stigma-reduction and trust-building approaches

Although many factors influenced SNAP participation during this time, including the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting federal policy, CHF's support aligned with a dramatic improvement in outcomes: from 42nd to 24th nationally in participation rates between 2019 and 2023.

Child Nutrition Access and Quality: Investments in child nutrition programming similarly enhanced the appeal, inclusivity, and effectiveness of school and summer meals across Colorado. These efforts included:

- Branding and outreach to normalize participation and reduce stigma (e.g., educational videos, Spanish-language materials)
- Sub-awards to school districts for equipment, taste tests, and tailored implementation
- Technology mini-grants to support mobile applications and streamline administrative processes
- Cohort-based "master classes" for food service staff and regional rural summits for small school districts



Though statewide policy changes like Healthy School Meals for All played a major role in expanding access, CHF's investments laid groundwork by improving visibility, infrastructure, and community readiness.

Laying the Foundation for Sustainable Change


Taken together, these resource-flow changes represent more than financial redistribution. They reflect a deliberate effort to:

- **Build community capacity** by resourcing leadership and infrastructure at the grassroots level
- **Improve service equity** by shifting institutional practices and delivery systems
- **Expand reach** by enabling more people, particularly in historically excluded communities, to access food assistance programs and culturally appropriate food options.

In doing so, CHF contributed to more durable, community-centered systems for food access that continue to operate beyond the life of the grants. While attribution is shared across many players, partners consistently recognized CHF as a catalytic force, especially in areas where state support had not yet materialized.

Key Learnings:

- **Flexible investments catalyze policy change.** Funding infrastructure, relationships, and coalition building, even without a direct policy focus, lays a foundation for systemic impact over time.
- **Strong convening bodies amplify impact.** Supporting central organizing entities align diverse partners around shared goals and drives coordinated advocacy efforts.
- **Capacity building strengthens grassroots advocacy.** Providing technical assistance, coaching, and peer learning helps community coalitions develop policy skills and equitable influence.
- **Centering lived experience transforms organizations.** Meaningful involvement of those with lived experience drives leadership, program design, and narrative shifts toward equity and responsiveness.
- **Equity frameworks ensure sustainable systems.** Promoting equity, language justice, collaboration, and operational improvements fosters participatory, long-term change beyond service delivery.
- **Supporting agencies beyond compliance fosters innovation.** Enhancing capacity in training, outreach, and staffing models proactive, equity-centered public service lasting beyond grants.
- **Community-led grantmaking shifts power and resources.** Entrusting communities with funding decisions redistribute resources equitably and models trust-based philanthropy.
- **Strategic resource flows build durable community capacity.** Redirecting diverse resources (e.g., financial, nutritional, informational) to underserved communities alongside leadership and infrastructure development sustains community-centered systems.



Relational: Changes in Relationships and Power Dynamics



CHF's FAS strategy played a significant role in reshaping the relationships and power dynamics within Colorado's food system.

By investing in coalitions, community leadership, and neutral infrastructure like the Blueprint, CHF helped build stronger connections between local and state actors, community members and institutions, and among organizations that historically operated in silos.

These investments fostered more inclusive collaboration, elevated the voices of those with lived experience, and began to rebalance long-standing power inequities in the anti-hunger field. While tensions and disparities remain, the FAS strategy created new pathways for shared leadership and more equitable influence in shaping food systems change.


Relationships & Connections

A critical lever in systems change is the quality and strength of relationships, among community partners, institutions, and the people most affected by food insecurity. Through its FAS priority, particularly investments under Objective 1 and through the Blueprint, CHF deepened the connective tissue across Colorado's food systems field. These relationships did more than just foster collaboration; they laid the groundwork for collective action, inclusion, and a more integrated response to hunger rooted in community power.

The Blueprint as a Statewide Connector and Convener

The Blueprint played a foundational role in cultivating relationships across the anti-hunger ecosystem. As the state's central convener, it brought together a diverse array of actors, from community-based organizations and grassroots leaders to state agencies and policy advocates, into shared conversation and strategy. The Blueprint approached its convening role with an emphasis on inclusion and belonging, fostering environments where all partners, regardless of position or power, could authentically participate.

This inclusive approach helped build bridges between groups that had previously operated in silos. It also elevated the voices of those most directly impacted by food insecurity, embedding their perspectives into statewide planning and advocacy. Partners consistently described the Blueprint



as a space where relationships were deepened, new partnerships were formed, and collective goals were articulated; contributions that are essential for long-term systems change.

Coalition-Based Relationship Building

At the community level, Objective 1 investments catalyzed a shift in how local coalitions approached relationship-building. The CFS initiative emphasized inclusive coalition development, encouraging grantees to bring together organizational partners, food producers, public agencies, and people with lived experience of hunger. This broadened network of engagement transformed coalitions into hubs of collaboration that could respond more effectively to local needs.

Coalitions used a variety of strategies to build trust and strengthen ties, ranging from community storytelling events and shared leadership models to language justice practices and compensated advisory roles. These approaches helped foster a greater sense of ownership and shared responsibility among coalition members and their communities. **This reflects a broader mindset shift toward collective impact and a recognition that systemic problems require coordinated solutions.**

Relationships as Infrastructure for Change

The FAS priority contributed to a reweaving of relationships across Colorado's anti-hunger field. Whether through Blueprint's statewide convening or the grassroots work of local coalitions, CHF's investments helped build the relational infrastructure needed to sustain long-term systems change. Partners have started to speak a shared language, trust each other more deeply, and work together more often to address the root causes of hunger.

Power Dynamics

Changes in power dynamics - who sets the agenda, whose voices are heard, and who holds decision-making authority - were among the most profound outcomes of CHF's FAS priority. Through strategic investments in both the Blueprint and Objective 1, CHF contributed to a shift in how power is held, shared, and exercised within Colorado's anti-hunger landscape.¹⁵

Elevating Lived Experience and Redistributing Leadership

Across the CFS initiative, **a defining outcome was the redistribution of power toward those most affected by hunger.** Nearly all coalitions funded through Objective 1 made sustained progress in creating leadership development and volunteer opportunities for community members with lived experience of food insecurity. These leaders were not only invited into the work; they were resourced, supported, and positioned to drive it. This marked a significant departure from

¹⁵ For more information on CHF's strategy and impact around community power building, refer to the [Community Power](#) section.



traditional charity-based models, in which solutions are designed and implemented for communities, rather than with them.

Six of eight coalitions developed formal cohort-based leadership programs focused on monolingual Spanish-speaking residents and recent immigrants. These programs embedded community leaders in coalition structures, supported them through capacity-building, and provided real influence over strategy, operations, and governance. In doing so, coalitions reshaped their internal cultures to reflect values of equity, dignity, and co-ownership.

One coalition captured this shift succinctly: *“Folks who’ve never had power ... are running the show.”* This sentiment was echoed in numerous accounts of community members serving on decision-making bodies, shaping local food strategies, and even co-designing brick-and-mortar food access solutions based on direct community input. **These new power holders brought fresh perspectives, greater accountability, and more responsive practices to local food systems, resulting in initiatives that were not only more equitable, but also more effective.**

From Institutional Control to Community-Led Systems

The Blueprint served as a complementary vehicle for power-shifting at the statewide level.

Originally launched through a CHF-led process, the Blueprint was not, at its inception, fully community-led. The planning and creation of the Blueprint Program Office mirrored existing power structures in the anti-hunger field, privileging systems partners and established organizations in determining goals and priorities. However, over time, and with intentional effort from both CHF and the Blueprint leadership, the initiative began to evolve toward a more inclusive and community-responsive model.

This evolution involved a deliberate transfer of power. CHF used its institutional influence to convene disparate partners and seed the Blueprint network. But once the Program Office was established, CHF stepped back from direct control, allowing the Blueprint team to define the direction of the work. This balance, making intentions clear while enabling local ownership, helped set the conditions for a more community-owned approach to statewide systems change.

The Blueprint Program Office, in turn, embraced this opportunity by centering lived experience, bringing smaller community-based organizations and individual leaders into statewide conversations, and creating platforms where local expertise was recognized and valued. In doing so, **the Blueprint contributed to a broader redefinition of leadership and legitimacy in the anti-hunger field, elevating the voices of those historically excluded from policy and systems work.**

Still, this power shift remains a work in progress. CHF continues to hold considerable influence in the field, and the Blueprint has more to do to fully embody its vision of community ownership. However, the Blueprint’s trajectory illustrates what it looks like to move from institutional gatekeeping toward distributed, shared power, and the transformative potential this holds for long-term change.



Building the Infrastructure for Lasting Power

Beyond individual leadership opportunities, the FAS priority helped local coalitions and the Blueprint build the infrastructure needed to sustain community-led power. This included training, technical assistance, and long-term flexible funding that enabled grassroots organizations to grow their capacity, refine their strategies, and engage in cross-sector advocacy and implementation. Many coalitions reported that they were now better positioned to convene diverse stakeholders, influence policy, and lead not only food systems work, but broader community development initiatives.

One interviewee noted that “*food is an entrée to other issues,*” describing how food access leadership evolved into organizing around transportation, childcare, and small business development. **This systems-level expansion reflects a deeper power shift: community-led food work becoming a platform for broader civic engagement and structural change.**

Shifting the Center of Gravity

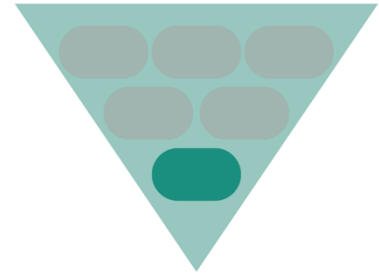
The FAS priority catalyzed the beginning of a rebalancing of power within Colorado’s anti-hunger field. By resourcing grassroots leadership, creating new decision-making pathways, and intentionally stepping back to make room for others, CHF helped shift the center of gravity, from institutional actors toward communities most impacted by hunger. While this shift is ongoing and uneven, groundwork has been laid for a more equitable and inclusive food system.

Key Learnings:

- **Relationships are foundational infrastructure for systems change.** Investments in connection, trust, and shared language lay the groundwork for coordinated, long-term impact.
- **Inclusive convening bridges and strengthens shared goals.** Supporting spaces like the Blueprint enabled diverse partners, including those with lived experience, to collaborate across silos and align efforts.
- **Coalition building deepens trust and community ownership.** Local coalitions that center lived experience foster stronger relationships, responsiveness, and shared accountability.
- **Resourcing community leadership shifts power and improves outcomes.** Supporting people with lived experience as decisions makers, not just participants, leads to more equitable and effective solutions.
- **Lasting power shifts require funders to seed, then step back.** Sustainable change happens when institutional support transitions to community-led governance and control.



Transformative: Changes in Mental Models



CHF's FAS priority made contributions to shifting mental models around hunger, food insecurity, and food systems across Colorado. These shifts, centered primarily in the Blueprint and Objective 1, with targeted efforts through Objective 2, represent a critical foundation for long-term systems change.

By supporting community voices, legitimizing justice-centered narratives, and funding efforts to reduce stigma and increase awareness, the FAS priority helped challenge dominant beliefs and assumptions that have historically constrained progress toward food equity.

These shifts in mindset, away from charity and toward equity, away from blame and toward systems, lay the groundwork for deeper, lasting change.

Advancing Food Justice and Reframing the Narrative

The Blueprint emerged as a key influence in reshaping how hunger and food access are understood in Colorado. As the leading convener and connector in the anti-hunger field, the Blueprint used its platform to center food justice, food sovereignty, and systemic equity in statewide conversations. As the Blueprint adopted a stronger focus on food justice, those values rippled across its network, changing not only *what* was discussed but *how* the field talked about hunger. Partners across the state noted a meaningful evolution: public discourse has moved away from narratives that blame individuals and toward greater recognition of hunger as a structural issue rooted in economic inequality, racism, and exclusion.

Blueprint spaces became key venues for exploring complex topics such as racial equity, language justice, and the legacy of charitable food systems. As one partner shared, *"Now more than ever before, there's a broader audience of stakeholders across the state of Colorado that realize hunger is not a condition of personal choice."* Through convenings, storytelling, and strategic engagement, **the Blueprint helped normalize these conversations and equip diverse actors, from community members to institutional leaders, with shared language to challenge old paradigms and co-create new solutions.**

Community Voices as Catalysts for Mindset Shifts

Investments under Objective 1, particularly through the CFS initiative, helped local coalitions become engines of mindset change at the community level. By centering lived



experience in coalition structures, strategies, and leadership, the CFS initiative moved communities away from charity-based, provider-driven approaches and toward food systems that prioritize dignity, cultural relevance, and equity.

This shift was particularly visible in Latino communities, where engaging immigrant and monolingual Spanish-speaking residents reshaped food access strategies and strengthened local buy-in. As these residents took on leadership roles and shared their stories, their presence helped reduce stigma, increase understanding of community needs, and reframe hunger as a shared issue rather than a personal failure.

Coalition members, local leaders, and elected officials also reported increased awareness of the complexity and breadth of food insecurity. For many, the CFS initiative facilitated new understanding that:

- Hunger affects a diverse cross-section of the community, not just a narrow, stereotyped group
- Economic inequality and racism are root causes of food insecurity
- Community members with lived experience have essential expertise that should shape solutions
- Inclusive structures and culturally relevant practices are prerequisites for equitable food access

This deeper understanding translated into tangible changes in how coalitions operated and how public officials viewed their roles in addressing hunger. Several communities noted a shift in decision-maker support for local food initiatives after participating in or observing the coalition's equity-driven work.

Destigmatizing Public Food Assistance

While mental model shifts were most prominent in Blueprint and Objective 1 investments, select work under Objective 2 also contributed. Outreach campaigns and enrollment support for programs like SNAP, WIC, and school meals helped reduce stigma and increase understanding among both potential enrollees and the broader public. Grantees created culturally and linguistically relevant messaging, including bilingual videos and translated materials, that emphasized program dignity, eligibility, and value.

For example, school nutrition partners developed campaigns that highlighted the quality of school meals and the importance of nourishment, helping to counter shame-based narratives and encourage broader participation. SNAP outreach efforts focused on dismantling misinformation, particularly the belief that participation deprives others of resources and emphasized the entitlement-based nature of the benefit. Partners observed increased willingness among residents to seek help, apply for benefits, and advocate for their food needs, a shift rooted in more respectful and accurate narratives.



Legitimizing Justice-Centered Work

One of the most powerful roles CHF played in changing mental models was legitimizing equity and justice-centered work at the community level. Many CFS grantees operated in environments where language about racism, structural inequity, or health justice was met with resistance. CHF's backing gave local leaders the credibility and permission to pursue difficult conversations and bold strategies.

As one partner reflected, *"When you're a community organization with a tiny voice, ... having the backing of an entity [like CHF] to say like, 'these things are important and it's time to focus on them,' was really supportive."* In this way, CHF helped elevate new mental models not only through funding, but through signaling and solidarity, making space for local leaders to challenge the status quo and reimagine what equitable food systems could look like.

Key Learnings:

- **Shifting narratives from charity to equity lays the foundation for lasting systems change.** Supporting justice-centered storytelling and reframing hunger as a structural issue challenges stigma and dominant assumptions that limit progress.
- **Centering community voices drives mindset transformation and reduces stigma.** Meaningful involvement of people with lived experience reshapes local strategies, fosters dignity, and builds broader understanding among communities and decision makers.
- **Legitimizing equity-focused work empowers bold leadership and systemic reframing.** Philanthropic backing signals the importance of justice-centered approaches, giving community organizations credibility and permission to advance difficult conversations and innovative solutions.

Strengthening the Field

CHF's investments through its FAS strategy strengthened components of the anti-hunger field across Colorado, contributing to improvements in capacity, collaboration, and leadership at both the local and state levels.

These investments, particularly those channeled through the Blueprint and CFS initiative, helped to “seed the field,” fostering a more interconnected, dynamic, and skilled ecosystem of actors working to address hunger and food insecurity.

However, while the field is stronger in many places, a fully integrated and coordinated statewide system has not yet materialized.

State-Level Capacity Has Grown

There was agreement among partners that the overall technical capacity and volume of anti-hunger work at the state level has increased since 2019. Partners described a “general increase overall, both in sheer volume, number, gross totals and also in technical ability of anti-hunger work.” The Blueprint served as a critical vehicle for this growth, positioning itself as a statewide connector, convener, and amplifier of anti-hunger strategies. It brought new visibility to Colorado's work, with some partners noting that “we're a model food system that California and Massachusetts, other states are looking at.”


CHF support helped catalyze the development of statewide strategies, bolster transparency and collaboration among state-level partners, and create new shared infrastructure for field-building. As one partner explained, “state-level partners, overall, we got better in supporting one another and collaborating more in our approaches. There was a transparency, kind of a warming that happened.”

Still, many acknowledged that while state-level collaboration has improved, it remains a work in progress. There is no single structure or strategy yet fully capable of connecting all the moving parts in a cohesive, sustainable way. As one CHF staff member noted, “field building is when



We've helped strengthen [the field] and create it. I hope that it keeps building the connections and the threads of connection between the different partners even when our funding is gone.

- CHF Staff



people are getting aligned with their work, they're learning from each other, there's power in numbers ... we're moving toward that, but we're not there yet."

Local Capacity Is Rich, But Unevenly Connected

At the community level, investments under Objective 1 yielded improvements in local food system capacity, leadership, and innovation. Coalitions became stronger, more coordinated, and more grounded in lived experience. Local work benefited not only from long-term funding, but from structures that supported volunteerism, grassroots leadership, and place-based customization. In many places, local actors took on roles and responsibilities, such as site leadership, community engagement, policy advocacy, that would have otherwise required dedicated staffing.

These pockets of local innovation represent some of the most promising building blocks of a statewide anti-hunger field. However, the connective tissue between them, between local coalitions and each other, and between local work and the state level, has yet to be fully developed.

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I do think [CHF] sowed seeds to create meaningful movement towards permanent change on varying levels. They created opportunities for local capacity, better cross-collaboration, and a renewal and refocus on what the key outcomes and objectives should be.

- Community Partner

“

[CHF] encouraged the Blueprint to try to support the relationship between community-level work and state-level work. But in the first couple years ... it didn't address increasing spaces that were specifically designed for the local coalitions or an intentionality about recruiting and engaging them.

- Community Partner

The Link Between Local and State Work Remains Underdeveloped

Efforts to align community-based work with state-level systems change have seen mixed results. While many local coalitions have begun participating in Blueprint-related committees or regional collaborations, the flow of knowledge and influence from local to state has been limited and slow.

This is partly due to structural and administrative constraints within public agencies, such as limited budget and staffing, which challenge the scalability and sustainability of community-informed innovations.

“

The community-level work is informing more of the local work. I don't feel yet that's really bubbling up to the state level at this moment. It could be showing up in another year or two.

- Community Partner



As one partner noted, there is a need to build “a robust system where we could scaffold the work and then move it forward in the sense that people feel like they’re empowered and contributing.”

One of the purposes of the Blueprint is to create this link between local and state work. It is important to recognize that the Blueprint Program Office has undergone significant organizational development and growth. After hiring dedicated staff with deep expertise in state-level anti-hunger systems, the Blueprint initially focused on optimizing the existing statewide system, prioritizing work with systems partners to build a strong foundation. The onset of COVID-19 catalyzed expanded connections across the state, strengthening relationships with community groups. Community organization representation was consistently present on Blueprint workgroups from early on, even as the initiative continued to evolve.

The Blueprint’s early focus and operational development meant it could not be everything to everyone at the start. Over time, it intentionally broadened its outreach and included more local partners in committees and decision making, beginning to bridge early gaps. **While some disconnects remain, this evolution reflects a natural and necessary growth process rather than missed opportunities alone.**

Toward a Stronger, More Integrated Field

Taken together, CHF’s FAS strategy catalyzed progress toward a stronger, more coordinated anti-hunger field in Colorado. There is deeper capacity, stronger leadership, and more shared commitment to equity than existed five years ago. The local landscape is rich with innovation and promise, and the state-level infrastructure has grown more collaborative and technically capable.

This emerging field has momentum, but it also has fragility. The system as a whole remains incomplete. While “seeds have been sown” and “threads are being built,” the field still needs intentional weaving: **clearer feedback loops between local and state actors, better scaffolding for grassroots influence, and structures that allow innovations to travel** across geography and scale across levels of governance.



Key Learnings:

- **Investing in both local and state capacity builds a more skilled and connected ecosystem.** Supporting leadership development and technical growth strengthens the entire anti-hunger field across multiple levels.
- **Creating structures that link local innovation with state systems enables scalable impact.** Funding efforts that build feedback loops and pathways for community-informed solutions ensures grassroots ideas influence broader policy and practice.
- **Recognizing organizational growth as an evolving process fosters sustainable development.** Providing time and resources for coalitions and conveners to build operations, relationships, and inclusive governance supports lasting efforts.
- **Fostering transparency and alignment among diverse partners reduces fragmentation.** Encouraging open communication and collaboration builds trust and shared commitment necessary for collective progress.
- **Addressing system fragility through intentional scaffolding sustains momentum.** Investing in infrastructure and coordination mechanisms lays the groundwork for durable, equitable field-building over time.

Community Power

CHF understood community power not just as an outcome but as an ongoing process; the ability of communities to influence the decisions and systems that affect their lives.

Community power was approached as both a means and an end: the iterative work of organizing, developing leadership, building relationships, and reclaiming narratives, with the goal of achieving representation, systems change, and community-defined outcomes.¹⁶

Locally Defined, Context-Specific Approaches

Across the FAS priority, community power building was deeply localized and non-linear. Each coalition or community moved at its own pace based on readiness, capacity, and the historical and political context in which they operated. Success was intentionally defined locally, whether that meant unseating a harmful SNAP administrator, launching a culturally competent food system plan, or supporting a Latina leader to take a seat on a historically white board.


This decentralized, responsive approach often began with building personal power, fostering confidence, voice, and leadership among individuals, before evolving toward collective and structural power, such as policy advocacy or institutional reform. Some coalitions began organizing internally (e.g., redesigning food shelves or improving internal governance), while others launched campaigns



There were relatively new immigrants to the U.S. and got to the point where [CHF] felt confident enough in their leadership skills and the work they had done to provide pretty significant resources for them to continue to do more work.

- Community Partner

¹⁶ This conceptualization of community power is drawn from The California Endowment ([An Ecosystem to Build Power and Advance Health and Racial Equity](#)) and Human Impact Partners ([Community Power and Health Equity](#)).



for ballot initiatives, expanded affordable childcare, or addressed representation in decision-making spaces.

Key Power Building Strategies

The strategies used by CHF, Terra Soma (the CFS initiative’s technical assistance partner), and its grantees to build community power spanned several dimensions:¹⁷

- **Personal Power:** Leadership development and coaching, particularly for leaders from immigrant and BIPOC communities, including tailored technical assistance for Latina leaders and participation in fellowships and peer learning.
- **Relational Power:** Strengthening networks of trust, both within coalitions and across communities, through annual convenings, grantee storytelling, and shared space for healing and solidarity.
- **Cultural Power:** Honoring community-defined leadership styles and investing in practices like language justice and compensating lived experience, which signaled a deeper cultural shift toward equity.
- **Structural Power:** Helping communities influence policy and other influential systems, such as unseating harmful public administrators, launching new grocery stores, passing ballot initiatives, and crafting local food system plans that served as blueprints for change.



Working through challenges of race and racism, that we did with Terra Som. For example, the Bias Index, Working Across Difference Index, and creating language around implicit bias, etc. Finding ways to create leadership opportunities for folks at different skill levels. I attribute that to Terra Soma’s support primarily.

- Community Partner

The Blueprint’s Role in Growing Local Leadership and Influence

The Blueprint also became a platform for building community leadership and capacity across the state. Supported by CHF’s sustained investment, the Blueprint prioritized an equity-forward approach that elevated the expertise and experience of those most affected by hunger. **By creating spaces where community members could both contribute to and lead anti-hunger strategies, the Blueprint demonstrated a values-driven model for power-sharing and participatory decision-making.**

Central to the Blueprint’s community capacity-building success was its commitment to centering lived experience. Through workgroups, project teams, and committees, the Blueprint intentionally created roles for community leaders to influence statewide decisions and shape policy priorities.

¹⁷ These dimensions of power are pulled from Network Impact’s report [Shifting Power: How to change systems by centering those most impacted by inequity through collective leadership](#).



Community voices helped define funding priorities, informed advocacy agendas, and grounded technical work in everyday realities. At the same time, the Blueprint offered practical support for community leaders to grow their own skills and confidence, including through leadership development, facilitation support, and compensated engagement. This approach ensured that the very people most impacted by hunger were not just heard but equipped and supported to drive change.

The Blueprint also served as a connector, linking local and state-level efforts and creating learning loops between grassroots and policy work.

By making space for mutual exchange, the Blueprint ensured that state initiatives were more reflective of local priorities and that communities could adapt and benefit from lessons learned elsewhere in the state. For smaller organizations or leaders new to advocacy, these connections provided critical access points to statewide systems that had historically been closed or dominated by larger institutions. Funding opportunities managed by the Blueprint further enabled communities to implement their own solutions and contribute to a shared vision for equitable food access.

This strategy of community capacity-building was not about inserting new leadership, but about resourcing the leadership already present in community. As one staff member noted, “*The Blueprint is supporting the efforts that already exist within community and providing the resources, skills, or connections needed to advance those efforts.*” In doing so, the Blueprint disrupted traditional dynamics where policy and systems work often overlook or undervalue community knowledge. It modeled an approach where equity was not a side goal, but a structural principle embedded in how power is shared, how funding flows, and how progress is defined.

Progress and Tensions

While significant strides were made in building personal and relational power, progress toward structural and ecosystem-level power was more varied. The work helped community members “*get to the table,*” but **sustaining influence at the systems level often required resources, readiness, and political alignment that communities were still building.** Several interviewees emphasized that the scale of federal policy constraints, such as around housing, wages, and immigration, limited the reach of local coalitions, underscoring the need to balance local wins with broader systems change goals.


Such limitations included:

- Lack of clear frameworks for internal conflict resolution and decision-making
- Burden placed on community leaders without sufficient foundational capacity support



[CHF] supports the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger in a big way. ... They have tried hard to be a model organization of what equity and leadership, and equity and decision-making power looks like. ... They have done a lot of hard work. Most people need to model what the Blueprint is committed to doing and is doing. They don't get enough credit.

- Community Partner

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- Ambiguity about who “the community” included, occasionally leading to a gap between nonprofits and grassroots actors

Signals of Impact

While it is too early to draw definitive conclusions about long-term systems change, early signals suggest that CHF’s power building approach helped create:

- Representation in governance (e.g., coalition leaders on local boards)
- Policy changes responsive to community priorities (e.g., ballot wins, food systems plans)
- Community identity and momentum, bolstered by storytelling and shared learning
- Greater institutional accountability, through coalition organizing and advocacy

Community power was both a core value and emergent learning in the FAS strategy. Through intentional investment in local leadership, technical assistance, and trust-based practices, CHF contributed to a foundation of distributed, context-specific power. Sustaining this momentum will require continued investment in both individual leaders and collective infrastructure, as well as more explicit attention to long-term structural change at state and federal levels.

Key Learnings:

- **Resourcing community coalitions builds durable power at the local level.** Flexible, multi-year funding allowed community leaders to strengthen networks, deepen trust, and shape strategies grounded in lived experience.
- **Centering relationships as infrastructure fuels collective action.** Investments in inclusive coalition building and shared leadership practices laid the foundation for coordinated, community-driven responses to hunger.
- **Legitimizing local leadership shifts power in the field.** Philanthropic validation gave credibility to coalitions and community-based organizations, positioning them as essential partners in statewide decision making.
- **Creating space for community voice transforms statewide strategy.** Structures like the Blueprint became more representative over time, embedding community perspectives in policy, planning, and advocacy.
- **Bridging local and state efforts strengthens community influence.** Intentional scaffolding and relationship building across levels of the system enabled community priorities to inform broader systems change work.

How, if at all, did CHF build community power through their strategies?

Throughout the FAS strategy, CHF made meaningful contributions to building community power by resourcing leadership, relationships, and infrastructure rooted in community experience. Rather than directing outcomes, CHF created conditions for communities to lead, organize, and influence systems change on their own terms.

Key Ways CHF Built Community Power:

- **Invested in Community Leadership:** CHF funded organizations and coalitions that elevated leaders with lived experience, resourcing them as strategic decision-makers, not just participants, in anti-hunger work. Beyond funding, CHF supported tailored capacity building and leadership development for community members with lived experience to take on leadership roles within their coalitions and communities.
- **Strengthened Coalition-Based Infrastructure:** By supporting local and statewide coalitions, CHF enabled cross-sector relationships to form and deepen, shifting power toward collaborative, community-rooted networks.
- **Supported Inclusive Convening:** Through partners like the Blueprint, CHF helped create spaces for diverse voices, especially those historically excluded, to engage meaningfully in agenda-setting and systems design.
- **Promoted Distributed Leadership Models:** CHF's flexible approach encouraged community-led governance structures and reduced reliance on traditional, centralized powerholders.
- **Provided Long-Term, Trust-Based Funding:** Multi-year, flexible grants gave community-based organizations time and space to build capacity, take risks, and move beyond service delivery toward structural change.

Lessons for the Field:

- **Resourcing community power requires more than representation.** It takes intentional investment in time, staffing, and leadership development to make community participation effective and equitable.
- **Relationships are a form of infrastructure.** Deep trust and shared purpose among community members, institutions, and funders were foundational to progress.
- **Funders must both show up and step back.** CHF's success stemmed in part from balancing institutional support with deference to local leadership and ownership.
- **Organizational growth takes time.** CHF supported community power not just by resourcing community efforts directly, but also by allowing key state-level infrastructure (like the Blueprint) the time and support to grow into a credible, community-responsive partner. This dual investment in both community and state-wide development was a critical condition for bridging local and state power.

What has been the cumulative impact on the anti-hunger field of the myriad investments made by CHF over the investment period?

Over the course of its multi-year investment, CHF's FAS priority catalyzed significant shifts in Colorado's anti-hunger field, supporting broader transformation from siloed food access work toward community-rooted, systems-oriented food justice.

While not all aspirations were fully realized within the initiative's time-bound structure, CHF's investments laid essential groundwork for long-term change. By resourcing local leadership, centering racial equity, and legitimizing both, values-driven approaches, CHF played a critical role in strengthening the field's ability to act collective and think systemically.

Key Contributions Include:

- **Accelerated a shift from charity to justice.** CHF helped reframe hunger as a structural issue and expanded the field's understanding of food access as inseparable from racial equity, power, and economic justice.
- **Legitimized community-rooted leadership.** By funding community and BIPOC-led organizations, CHF helped establish new centers of influence and gave credibility to justice-centered strategies previously seen as too radical or under-resourced.
- **Strengthened field-wide relationships and alignment.** Investments in convenings, collaborative planning, and shared narrative strategies built trust and cohesion across a diverse and historically fragmented ecosystem.
- **Planted seeds for long-term systems change.** CHF's focus on upstream solutions, including policy, procurement reform, and narrative change, set a foundation for sustained advocacy and deeper structural interventions.
- **Resourced experimentation and learning across the field.** CHF provided flexible, multi-year funding that allowed organizations to take risks, adapt, and innovate in response to community needs and systemic gaps. This investment in adaptive learning helped advance strategies that were more holistic and community informed.
- **Modeled a values-aligned philanthropic approach.** CHF's approach, grounded in trust, equity, and systems thinking, offered a powerful example of how philanthropy can act in solidarity with movements rather than simply funding services. Many partners cited CHF's posture and relationships as just as impactful as the dollars themselves.

The ripple effects continue. Though CHF's investment was time-limited, its influence persists. Field actors, including the Blueprint, have since evolved their strategies to further advance food justice, infrastructure development, and deeper community accountability, building on the conditions that CHF helped create.

Were there any important gaps or actions that could have amplified impact of these investments?

While CHF's investments catalyzed momentum across Colorado's anti-hunger field. As the field continues to grow in its focus on food justice and systemic transformation, several areas have emerged as considerations to further amplify impact:

- **Bridge short-term urgency with long-term vision.** While CHF's strategy focused on systemic change, partners continue to call for approaches that simultaneously meet immediate food access needs. Future efforts can consider how to sustain trust and action at both ends of this spectrum.
- **Expand support for community-owned infrastructure and supply chains.** Building durable, community-controlled assets, such as aggregation hubs, processing infrastructure, and culturally rooted supply chains, has become an increasingly focus for the field. These investments are key to long-term resilience and sovereignty.
- **Stay responsive to a rapidly evolving food justice landscape.** CHF's strategy evolved over time, but its time-limited nature meant it could not fully grown with the field's emerging focus on land access, ownership, and the full food system. Ongoing support and flexibility are essential to sustain this trajectory.
- **Center innovation in policy and technology.** Partners identified areas like food benefit delivery systems and institutional procurement as ripe for innovation. Deepening investment in these solutions can unlock pathways for equity and efficiency.
- **Strengthen bi-directional communication across ecosystem actors.** Early focus on systems-level partners laid important groundwork, but stronger, earlier collaboration with local food coalitions could further align local innovations with state-level influence in future initiatives.

What were the major changes in food security at the national level during the investment period, and where was Colorado positioned relatively?

Between 2019 and 2024, the national food security landscape in the United States experienced major disruptions and transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as both a crisis and a catalyst, temporarily lowering food insecurity rates through expansive federal relief, then contributing to a sharp rebound once those measures were rolled back.

Nationally, food insecurity rose from around 10.5% pre-pandemic to **13.5% by 2023**, the highest in over a decade.¹⁸ Use of charitable food remained elevated, with approximately **17.6% of U.S. adults reporting receiving food assistance in 2024** compared to approximately 12.1% in 2019.¹⁹ This increase was driven largely by the expiration of pandemic-era supports, including enhanced SNAP benefits, Pandemic EBT, and expanded access to school meals, all of which buffered families from hunger during lockdowns and economic turbulence. Simultaneously, rising food prices (up nearly 29% from 2019) outpaced wage growth for low-income families, placing additional strain on household budgets.²⁰

Colorado's trajectory mirrored these patterns, but with important distinctions. The state saw a meaningful decline in food insecurity during the height of federal relief, with rates dropping to 8.1% in 2021. However, like much of the country, those gains proved fragile. By 2023, **food insecurity in Colorado rose to 11.2%**,²¹ exceeding national averages and reflecting the broader strain of inflation, income disparities, and the expiration of emergency supports. Black, Hispanic, nonbinary

¹⁸ Douglas, L. (2024). *Hunger in US continued multi-year rise in 2023, government report says*. Reuters. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/hunger-us-continued-multi-year-rise-2023-says-farm-agency-report-2024-09-04/>

¹⁹ Gonzalez, D., Karpman, M., Gupta, P., & Waxman, E. (2025). *Households faced persistent challenges affording food in 2024*. Urban Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/households-faced-persistent-challenges-affording-food-2024>

²⁰ Martinchek, K., Gupta, P., Karpman, M., Gonzalez, D. (2023). *As inflation squeezed family budgets, food insecurity increased between 2021 and 2022*. Urban Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/inflation-squeezed-family-budgets-food-insecurity-increased-between-2021-and-2022>

²¹ Gonzalez, D., Karpman, M., Gupta, P., & Waxman, E. (2025). *Households faced persistent challenges affording food in 2024*. Urban Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/households-faced-persistent-challenges-affording-food-2024>

residents, and rural/farming communities (e.g., San Luis Valley, Weld County) in Colorado face disproportionately high food insecurity, often more than double that of white or urban residents.

While national trends clearly shaped conditions in Colorado, the state also stood out for its proactive efforts to mitigate hunger. For example, Colorado voters passed universal school meals through Proposition FF: Healthy School Meals for All in 2022, and state agencies worked in collaboration with nonprofits and community coalitions to expand enrollment in public food assistance programs like SNAP and WIC.

National conversations about food insecurity have increasingly shifted from charity-based narratives to recognizing hunger as a structural issue rooted in poverty, racism, and policy failures. Organizations like Feeding American and media outlets have helped reframe the issue, emphasizing systemic causes over individual responsibility. One key example is the growing attention to food insecurity among farmworkers, essential to the food system yet facing some of the highest rates of hunger, with up to 80% affected in certain areas.²² This shift has influenced state-level work in Colorado, where strategies increasingly reflect a structural, equity-driven lens.

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[Colorado] became a model structure for a lot of other states.

- Community Partner

Colorado's innovations contributed to shaping national perspectives and practices.

The state's integrated SNAP outreach infrastructure, investments in local food systems, and cross-sector coordination became a model for peer states, particularly in its efforts to combine state policy leadership with community-driven solutions. National organizations and federal partners took note of how Colorado leveraged philanthropic investment and coalition leadership to test new approaches, such as embedding lived experience into policymaking and streamlining enrollment across nutrition programs.

Partners also highlighted how national priorities under the Biden administration helped elevate food insecurity as a policy focus, creating momentum that aligned with and reinforced Colorado's efforts. The federal

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There was some momentum in Colorado and work happening here that predated the national level work, but then it was spurred on further by national level is the focus on sourcing food locally and investing in connecting farmers and ranchers with food pantries, food banks, schools, so that community members had access to healthy, locally produced food.

- Community Partner

²² Horn-Muller, A. (2024). *The people who feed American are going hunger: Climate change is escalating a national food crisis, leaving farmworkers with empty plates and mounting costs.* Eater. Retrieved from: <https://www.eater.com/2024/7/30/24209473/climate-change-farmers-labor-hunger-crisis-grist>

push to strengthen local and regional food systems, including increased investments in sourcing food locally, bolstered initiatives already underway in Colorado and helped justify expanded state-level action. At the same time, the national emphasis on centering directly impacted communities in anti-hunger work mirrored grassroots movements long active in Colorado. Partners noted that this shift in narrative and practice, from top-down solutions to community-driven strategies, was catalyzed by organizers and coalitions in the state and has since influenced broader field standards and expectations across the country.

The investment period (2019-2024) marked a period of disruption, realignment, and innovation in the national food security landscape. Colorado was shaped by and influential within this shifting context.

While the state was not immune to national challenges, particularly inflation and policy rollbacks, it emerged as a testbed for bold, equity-driven responses to hunger. Colorado's experience demonstrates the critical role states can play in translating national momentum into durable, community-rooted solutions that reframe food security as a matter of justice, not just charity.

Looking ahead, many partners expressed concern that food insecurity could worsen under the new Trump administration, both nationally and in Colorado. Partners pointed to potential threats to public food assistance programs, including SNAP and WIC, citing the previous administration's attempt to implement stricter eligibility requirements and reduce benefits. There is also uncertainty about continued federal support for local food systems, equity-centered initiatives, and community-driven approaches that gained traction in recent years. In Colorado, where recent progress has been bolstered by alignment with federal priorities, a shift in national policy could disrupt momentum and funding streams, making it more difficult to sustain or expand programs. Some advocates also fear a return to individual-blame narratives around hunger, rather than addressing the systemic drivers of food insecurity, jeopardizing both the tone and substance of future anti-hunger work.

**Exiting the Priority &
Moving Forward**

04



Exiting the Priority

The FAS priority ended in December 2024. Starting in 2023, the CHF team dedicated significant time planning the strategy exit. They identified key stakeholders that would be impacted by the decision and worked closely with the CHF Communications team to refine the messaging that was shared with those stakeholders. The CHF started these conversations with key stakeholders in September 2023 through the end of the year.

As part of this exit, CHF provided exit grants to key partners in the anti-hunger field, including a three-year grant to the Blueprint and two-year grants to seven CFS coalitions that continue to align with CHF's goals. CHF also made strategic investments in community-based organizations that built on the momentum of work that was already happening and was anticipated to be highly impactful, timely, and primed for a one-time catalytic investment.

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A lot of coalitions that are doing food systems work, they don't gain steam until year six. But they only had five years of funding. But when [CHF] was like, 'okay, everybody gets two more years of funding.' I was like, 'yes.' And generous funding. Hopefully that will get them to the seven-year mark and then we'll see what they do.

- Community Partner



Process and Perceptions of Exiting

CHF's decision to sunset its FAS strategy was anchored in a pre-established five-year investment timeline, yet its implementation revealed gaps in communication and raised critical questions about philanthropy's role in long-term systems change.

Internally, the exit was deliberate and accompanied by substantial off-ramp grants, phased planning, and reflective discussion about CHF's role in long-term systems change. Externally, however, partners expressed a deep mix of disappointment, concerns, and unresolved questions in response to CHF's decision to exit the FAS priority. The experience of the exit for partners revealed important lessons about how philanthropy navigates power, trust, and long-term accountability in systems-level work.

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As we're reverberating out of [CHF's] commitment to food insecurity, I am left with a lot of questions and I'm seeing voids happening as the funding is receding that concerns me. Committing to a few years of ample funding is good and good enough to get some projects initiated and some even completed. Truly transformative change has initiated in a lot of regards, but it's not complete and you leave it in a state where the probability of execution and completion and success is less than if you had stayed a little bit longer. Temporally, five years is sort of gracious in the traditional philanthropic sense. I don't think it's enough for truly transformative change. You've got to be in it for the long game of twice or three times that if you want things to come to fruition in the best way possible. It's just not enough. The solutions we need in the food space cannot be accomplished with five years of good work.

- Community Partner

While many initial partners were informed that the FAS strategy was time-bound, CHF staff noted that high turnover across nonprofit and agency staff, paired with limited knowledge transfer and the lack of ongoing messaging, contributed to a fading awareness of the five-year timeline. As CHF shifted toward more community-based relationships and funding in later years, this message was not always carried forward, particularly during the 2022-2023 internal priority recalibration period, when the timeline itself was uncertain. In hindsight, CHF staff acknowledged that not leading with the time-bound nature of the work during this phase may have contributed to partner confusion.



CHF made efforts to support clear messaging about the exit by providing communications to coalitions leaders to share with their networks. However, in some cases, this indirect approach left community members feeling blindsided or disregarded. Staff reflected that more direct outreach might have strengthened shared understanding and trust, particularly with partners who did not have close ties to CHF.

The emotional response to CHF’s exit reflected not only communication gaps but also the broader challenge of ending philanthropic investment in complex, systemic work that is still unfolding. Some community partners perceived CHF’s withdrawal as a sign that food justice was no longer a core concern, especially at a time when other funding streams were also contracting. Despite CHF staff noting that other funders remain engaged in anti-hunger work, many partners emphasized these actors often operate at a smaller scale or focus more narrowly (e.g., direct services or health-based programs). The absence of CHF, a highly visible and systems-oriented funder, left a notable gap not just in dollars, but in perceived field-level leadership. Even as promising initiatives like the Food Justice Funders Collaborative (an effort launched by the Blueprint) seek to build cross-funder coordination, the sector’s ability to sustain momentum remains uncertain.

These dynamics raised difficult questions for partners about how to align their work with CHF’s new strategic directions. Many were left wondering whether food systems work would still be welcomed within CHF’s evolving economic or health strategies, a tension that speaks to the importance of transparent, two-way communication in navigating transitions and maintaining shared purpose.



The work is never done, so there’s never really a good time to come out of a priority area. However, I think what I’ve heard from some other colleagues in this space is that not everyone knew that [CHF] was removing themselves from food access and security. I personally knew. I think they did a good job of letting their grantees and primary partners [know], but it doesn’t seem like everyone else from a funder perspective was aware of how much of an impact that was going to have on the ecosystem.

- Community Partner

The FAS team’s thoughtful approach to off-ramping, including continued relationship-holding and investment in coalition strength, demonstrates a commitment to responsible transition.

Yet, the experience underscores the importance of sustained, transparent, and relational communication, especially in time-bound initiatives where trust, community ownership, and systems change are central goals.



The table below outlines what worked well and what presented challenges in the exit process:

What Worked Well	What Didn't Work
<p>Significant Exit Grants: The two- to three-year funding commitments provided important breathing room for key grantees and allowed for continued momentum even after formal support ended.</p> <p>Strategic Planning: The internal decision-making process included thoughtful, phased communication planning, and reflection, allowing the team to express grief, frustration, and hope as they grappled with the weight of the decision.</p> <p>Seeding the Field: Despite limitations, the strategy helped build infrastructure and coalitions. The strategy seeded meaningful relationships, shifted narratives around food and equity, and helped build collaborative infrastructure.</p>	<p>Communication Gaps: There was a mismatch between CHF's communication strategy and community expectations. Assumptions that messages would be passed down through coalition leads did not hold, leading to community-level confusion and feelings of being disregarded.</p> <p>Insufficient Capacity Building: CHF underestimated the time and resources required to build lasting community capacity, especially through coalition models. COVID-19 further complicated these efforts and limited the depth of foundation-building that could occur.</p> <p>Unclear Future: Community members perceived the exit as sudden or unexplained, fueling worry about the viability of food justice work if even a large funder like CHF was stepping back.</p>

Grappling with CHF Power

CHF's decision to sunset the FAS priority generated strong reactions across the field. These reactions revealed not only the impact of CHF's investments, but the deeper ways in which power and trust are entangled in philanthropy. For many partners, CHF's exit reinforced long-standing concerns about the precarity of systems change work that relies on institutional philanthropy. At the same time, it prompted internal reflection within CHF about how their influence is felt, and what responsibility comes with it.

As the FAS priority ended, CHF staff grappled with their role as a powerful actor in the food system, holding financial, reputational, and relational capital that could either enable or constrain meaningful change. Internal reflections revealed a growing awareness



As far as entities with power themselves go, like real power, actual power, [CHF] approaches it correctly, which is how do we elevate community voice and leaders? How do we create flexibilities for them to be able to do the work without us being overly prescriptive? ... [CHF] does do a good job of supporting existing community power, not getting in the way too much.

- Community Partner



that their power must be wielded intentionally and, at times, be purposefully relinquished. Staff acknowledged that their decisions, including strategic exits, shape the broader philanthropic ecosystem and influence how other funders engage in the field. They also recognized that CHF's visibility can unintentionally overshadow more grassroots, community-driven work. As one team member noted, sometimes stepping back allows others to step forward.

This evolving perspective extended to how CHF approached relationships with grantees and communities. A community partner described CHF as one of the few institutions with “*real power*” that uses it responsibly, by elevating community voice, honoring local autonomy, and creating flexibility rather than imposing rigid expectations. In doing so, CHF actively worked to support existing community power, rather than displacing or diluting it. **While still learning how to fully navigate this balance, CHF's willingness to interrogate its role signals an important shift toward a more accountable, power-aware approach to philanthropy in the food system.**

Moving Forward

Partners emphasized that five years is too short a horizon for the kind of transformational systems change that food justice demands. The exit sparked fears of momentum loss, especially in food justice and community power building, and highlighted the need for clearer, more intentional transitions. Partners called for a minimum ten-year commitment to systemic work, co-created sustainability plans, and stronger bridge strategies to ensure continuity, particularly in underfunded spaces. Some questioned why food systems were not better integrated into

new focus areas at CHF, such as Economic Opportunity, arguing that food is foundational to workforce development, community resilience, and health. There were also calls for CHF to use its influence to mobilize other funders and advocate for public investment, especially since its dominant presence had historically discouraged others from entering the space. As one partner called CHF to do, “*if you're not going to fund this work, you have to advocate with other funders to do it. No one wants to [fund food insecurity work] because [CHF] exists.*”

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I'm certain that some of [CHF's] work will continue to weave parts of food security into other priorities. I would hope that some of that is made transparent as well, so that it's clear where people can plug in if they already have demonstrated success, or they have an important population that they serve and gather information and feedback from. Letting people know where they can continue to be in [CHF's] ecosystem, because there's no one else in the state that can fund like [CHF] again.

- Community Partner

Partners viewed the exit from the FAS priority as a pivotal, and in some cases painful, moment that calls into question the role of philanthropy in long-term systems change.



The exit from the FAS priority left a leadership and funding gap, promoting deep internal and external reflections on the responsibilities of funders to steward and sustain systems change over time. Moving forward, partners urged CHF to maintain a presence in food justice through non-monetary avenues like convening, policy advocacy, and thought partnership, recognizing that meaningful engagement does not end when a grant does. Their reflections offer clear and thoughtful guidance for how to responsibly wind down a strategy without losing the trust, momentum, or transformational potential built along the way:

- **Communicate clearly and repeatedly with all partners**, not just direct grantees, about upcoming shifts, timelines, and rationale.
- **Co-create a sustainability plan with partners** to support continuity of critical efforts, including connections to other funders.
- **Define and communicate alignment** between evolving strategies (e.g., economic opportunity) and legacy priorities like FAS.
- **Honor the time horizons required for systems change** by considering longer-term commitments or phased exits.
- **Remain engaged in non-monetary ways**, through thought leadership, policy advocacy, and shared infrastructure, especially in under-resourced fields.



Supporting an Evolving Field

The conclusion of CHF's FAS priority marked a pivotal moment, not just for CHF, but for Colorado's anti-hunger field. As CHF stepped back, the field continued to move forward: growing in its commitments to equity, justice, and structural transformation. Many of the seeds planted during CHF's investment period in power building, cross-sector collaboration, and systems thinking are now taking root in deeper and more durable ways.

Over the five-year investment period, CHF adapted to new insights, shifting priorities, and emerging opportunities, supporting a range of partners working at multiple levels of the system. Yet, as many community leaders noted, transformation takes time. The tension between a time-bound philanthropic initiative and long-term systems change was always present, and became especially visible during the exit.

In many cases, CHF laid important groundwork but could not remain in the space long enough to fully realize its potential alongside the field.

Rather than framing these tensions as missed opportunities, this section surfaces how CHF's strategy intersected with a field in motion. It highlights how the field is continuing to evolve, through growing attention to food sovereignty, supply chain equity, and economic justice, and how infrastructure and relationships seeded through the FAS strategy are being carried forward by community leadership and new forms of collaboration.

Ultimately, these reflections offer insight into what it takes to support a dynamic and maturing ecosystem and underscores that the work of transformation is ongoing, led by those most rooted in it.

Navigating System Complexity in a Time-Bound Strategy

CHF's FAS priority was designed to seed long-term systems change, focusing on food access as an entry point into broader anti-hunger and food justice work. While this was a valuable and strategic starting place, the food systems field, and CHF's own understanding, evolved over time to embrace a more expansive view that included food sovereignty, supply chains, and the cultural and economic dimensions of local food systems.

Community partners consistently surfaced the need for more integrated approaches across the food system, from emergency response to institutional procurement to localized production. However, CHF's five-year timeline and evolving internal priorities limited its ability to fully act on these insights, particularly as later-phase explorations into supply chain equity were not ultimately pursued due to strategic constraints.



Rather than reflecting misalignment, these tensions highlight the challenges of doing transformational work within a time-limited priority, and the importance of funders staying proximate to a field as it matures.

Key reflections include:

- **Time-limited strategies can constrain systems-level adaptation.** CHF began exploring food justice in later years, but the time-bound nature of the FAS priority and internal priorities meant that the strategy could not fully evolve in tandem with the field’s growing focus in this area. This left some partners feeling gaps in support for emerging priorities they saw as essential to long-term justice.
- **Focusing on access along limited impact on broader system transformation.** While CHF made critical contributions to food access and food justice strategies, partners noted that deeper investments in food production, aggregation, culturally relevant sourcing, and institutional procurement (e.g., schools, hospitals, prisons) were needed to build sustainable, community-driven food systems.



Working directly with farmers. ... There was a lot of opportunities to help support peri-urban or rural farms that align with the vision and values of food security. Getting to the source. Land and agriculture are foundation to any food security endeavor. I didn't see support for farmers and ranchers from [CHF]. ... It's hard to address food access without addressing food production.

- Community Partner

- **Meeting immediate needs while building for the future remains a core tension.**

CHF’s emphasis on long-term systems change sometimes felt disconnected from urgent food insecurity. While the strategy was not designed for emergency response,²³ community partners emphasized the importance of balancing near-term relief with systems-building in ways that reinforce, not trade off, each other.



Long-term needs to be accompanied by short-term assistance. There's that direct side of service where there's emergency food needs where there's a heightened sense of urgency for folks to eat.

- Community Partner

²³ While not designed to support emergency response, CHF provided significant donations to support food access and hunger relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, CHF provided 34 donations totaling \$1.9 million and two grants totaling \$2.4 million to support COVID-19 response efforts within the anti-hunger field.



Strengthening Community Ownership and Innovation Amid Structural Constraints

As CHF worked to advance food justice, partners expressed growing urgency around building durable, community-controlled infrastructure and technological solutions. These elements are core to long-term food sovereignty, yet require sustained investment, alignment with federal and state systems, and deep local capacity – conditions that extend beyond the scope of a time-bound philanthropic strategy.

While CHF made important strides in community-centered food access, partners identified key opportunities that remained out of reach due to policy barriers, funding limitations, and the broader field’s readiness. This tension reflects a common challenge in systems change philanthropy: the need to seed transformative ideas while recognizing the structural and institutional conditions that shape what is possible.

Key reflections include:

- **Community ownership of infrastructure remains foundational yet under-resourced.** Partners highlighted the need for physical assets, like warehouses, aggregation sites, and culturally relevant supply chains, owned and governed by communities. These were seen as critical to food sovereignty and long-term resilience, especially in the wake of supply chain disruptions during COVID. However, both CHF and the broader Colorado field faced challenges mobilizing large-scale investment and technical assistance to bring this vision to life.
- **Technology solutions were constrained by systemic barriers.** While there was interest in innovating food benefit delivery systems (e.g., payment processing models for SNAP and WIC), staff and partners acknowledged that federal and state limitations, particularly in WIC, curtailed feasibility. Broader technology needs remain a gap, but the missed opportunities reflect systemic constraints as much as funding choices.

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We should be owning infrastructure. You should have warehouses as a foundation. You should have technology as a foundation that builds thriving communities. You should be building assets and infrastructure that belong to community and allows them to circumvent the pressures of [market systems].

- Community Partner



Overall Approach

CHF's FAS strategy ultimately reflected a clear commitment to advancing community-driven solutions to hunger, with an emphasis on equity, systems change, and power building.

By prioritizing grassroots leadership and investing in coordination infrastructure, CHF helped catalyze new models and relationships across Colorado's anti-hunger field. At the same time, the strategy evolved in real time, shaped by lessons learned, emerging challenges, and ongoing reflection about CHF's role and influence in the anti-hunger ecosystem.

While CHF made meaningful strides to align its grantmaking with values of justice, accountability, and shared power, the process also revealed tensions and areas for growth. These reflections help illuminate how philanthropic institutions can continue evolving their practice to more fully embody equity in complex, shifting systems.

Approach to Equity-Centered Philanthropy

Over the course of the FAS priority, CHF developed a distinctive approach to philanthropy, one that reflected not only its values, but also a deep responsiveness to the needs and wisdom of community partners. Rather than relying on transactional grantmaking, CHF embraced a more relational, adaptive, and equity-centered model, prioritizing trust, learning, and systems thinking. This approach enabled grantees to engage in long-term, complex work around food justice while strengthened both organizational capacity and the broader field. The following themes highlight the core strengths of CHF's grantmaking practice in the FAS priority.



Relational and Equity-Centered Philanthropy

At the heart of CHF’s approach was a commitment to authentic, trust-based relationships with grantees. Partners described their interactions with CHF as rooted in honesty, care, and shared purpose, rather than paperwork or rigid metrics. CHF actively worked to dismantle traditional funder-grantee power dynamics through equity-minded processes and deep respect for community knowledge.

Grantees consistently named CHF staff as present, available, and deeply engaged in their communities, especially in discussions around equity and racial justice. This was also strongly reflected in CHF’s Grantee Perception Survey.²⁴

- FAS grantees gave CHF the highest score of all priority areas on 14 out of 15 questions related to funder-grantee interactions and community engagement.
- Scores were higher than average on questions about CHF’s trust, openness to feedback, candor, and valuing of grantee perspectives.
- The FAS priority had the highest score across CHF on the question, “Overall, most staff I have interacted with at the Foundation embody a strong commitment to racial justice.”

The FAS team’s relational stance created a foundation of mutual respect and accountability, allowing partners to lead with authenticity and vision.

Flexible, Responsive, and Supportive Funding

The FAS priority’s funding model was marked by a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness, allowing organizations to pivot in response to evolving community needs and strategic opportunities. This included adjusting deliverables and timelines, providing rapid support in times of crisis, and trusting partners to make mission-aligned decisions.



All of this culminated within the era of equity and inclusion and so saw an effort to reimagine what grant making within that context looks like, and to be mindful of the fact that a lot of the people that have lived experience and also maybe engaged in on-the-ground work may not be the best grant writers.

- Community Partner

²⁴ In the Fall of 2023, CHF partnered with the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) to administer the Grantee Perception Survey. A total of 449 grantee organizations completed the survey, 19 of whom indicated that their primary source of funding was through the FAS priority.



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They let us shift our budget for the grant and they let us carry out the timeline, drag out the timeline for a few extra years, which was awesome because what we ended up doing was buying a piece of land with the money and that grant, which is huge.

- Community Partner

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The Program Officers really care about the work and then come out and visit. They build that relationships. Whereas I've noticed other foundations don't do that. They volunteer, they do site visits, they hang out with us for a whole day and then meet people that they get to see where the money is going and everything like that. Building that relationship is very key and important.

- Community Partner

Program Officers were seen as ethical, caring, and practical problem-solvers, offering both encouragement and logistical support. The Grantee Perception Survey data affirmed this perception:

- FAS scored highest across all priorities on questions about the grant application and selection process.
- FAS grantees rated CHF especially high on responsiveness, candor, and staff respect for grantee leadership and autonomy.

This adaptive, trust-based funding approach helped organizations stay rooted in their missions while responding effectively to real-world complexity.

Emergent, Adaptive, and Learning-Oriented Practice

The FAS team embraced a learning mindset, both internally and in collaboration with partners. Staff regularly welcomed emergence, adapted strategies in real time, and increased investments in areas like language justice and racial equity based on partner feedback and shifting conditions.

This adaptive practice extended beyond one-time changes. It reflected a systems change orientation grounded in humility and curiosity. The FAS team's willingness to course-correct midstream, increase equity investments, and stay open to

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Learning, trying to understand. This effort in our conversation, for example, is an effort for them to show they're trying to really understand the impact that they had under the framework and approaches that they embraced.

- Community Partner



learning was seen by grantees as rare and meaningful. The Grantee Perception Survey data underscored this openness: FAS grantees gave the highest scores across all priorities on questions related to staff openness to grantee ideas and feedback, especially around equity and strategy.

Systems-Aware, Justice-Driven Perspective

CHF's approach to the FAS priority was deeply systems-aware, situating food insecurity within the larger context of economic, racial, and environmental injustice. This perspective allowed grantees to move beyond immediate needs toward visionary, transformative work, including land return, community-driven food sovereignty efforts, and participatory systems design.

The FAS strategy's evolution toward systems transformation, shifting from technical fixes to structural change, was supported by CHF's flexible, relational funding model and deep trust in grantee leadership. As one grantee put it, "CHF gave us the room to reimagine the work – not just expand it."



[CHF's] nuanced understanding of the food system as an interconnected network of people and relationships and saw the different leverage points from direct farm sourcing and distribution to individuals through community organizations, food boxes, healthy food retail. They really had a holistic understanding of what food access means in an expanded definition of local food systems. I thought that was important for [CHF] with access to resources to have and to encourage organizations to think about what it means to have.

- Community Partner



Areas for Growth

Throughout the FAS priority, CHF demonstrated a sincere commitment to equity, relationship-centered grantmaking, and community-rooted solutions. Partners appreciated CHF's efforts to move away from transactional philanthropy and towards values-driven, flexible approaches. At the same time, the work surfaced deeper questions about what it means to practice equity internally, how institutional power shows up in relationships, and what kind of infrastructure is needed to truly support community transformation.

As CHF looks to its future role in health equity ecosystems, the reflections below offer guidance on how CHF can evolve its practices to more fully live into its values and increase its impact across Colorado.

Clarity Power and Decision-Making

A consistent theme across interviews and the Grantee Perception Survey was confusion about how decisions were made, especially when they appeared misaligned with previously communicated strategies or community priorities. While Program Officers were seen as trusted, equity-minded partners, they were also perceived as constrained by institutional limitations, a dynamic that reinforced power imbalances and undermined transparency. Partners encouraged CHF to be more forthcoming about how strategic decisions are made, who holds decision-making power, and how community input is considered and acted upon.



I could also feel how limited and constrained [Program Officers] felt. ... What are the internal politics that, ...if addressed would allow it to become even more transformative?

- Community Partner

Align Investments with Stated Values

Partners called for stronger alignment between CHF's equity rhetoric and its grantmaking priorities, particularly in efforts to uplift directly impact communities. Some noted dissonance between stated commitments to community power building and the actual distribution of resources. For example, CHF's significant investment in the Blueprint was seen as moving resources away from community-driven solutions. Others expressed concern that funding decisions did not always reflect the broader systems transformation CHF aspired to support, such as investments in public food assistance programs (Objective 2) and healthy food retail (Objective 3). These tensions suggest an opportunity for CHF to revisit how values like racial justice, lived experience, and community agency are operationalized in funding practices.



I would've appreciated more transparency in how [CHF] makes decisions and what ... interests guide those decisions.

- Community Partner



Some real clarity and intentionality around investment being to support directly impacted communities' voices and power. I know that's been part of their work, but sometimes it's been at tension with other things that they want to do as well. I would encourage centering that in their funding going forward. If they think that's important and that's a powerful value that keeping that front and center in their investments would be important in whatever field.

- Community Partner

Invest in Relationship Infrastructure for Complex Collaborations

Collaborative, multi-partner initiatives are essential to systems change, but they require more than funding. They need strong relational foundations, clear process design, shared governance, and conflict resolution support. Some grantees expressed a desire for CHF to play a more intentional role in helping design and sustain these relational infrastructures. One community partner suggested incorporating questions into the grant application process that encouraged grantees to reflect on these areas because grassroots organizations or new collaborations may not have considered these dynamics previously. Without this support, promising initiatives risk breakdowns in trust, coordination, and long-term sustainability.



I would have liked to have seen questions in the grant around ... how are you going to deal with conflicts and differences of opinion, ...how difficult and emotionally laborious the work is.


- Community Partner

Expand Communication as a Practice of Accountability

Effective communication is not just a matter of clarity; it is a practice of relationship and accountability. While individual Program Officers were praised for transparency and care, many partners still experience CHF overall as opaque and institutionally distant. Some described it as a “large corporation” rather than a community-aligned foundation. This perception reflects a broader need for more layered, ongoing communication about strategy shifts, funding rationales, and institutional constraints. Particularly in times of transition, partners urged CHF to treat communication as a reciprocal, sustained engagement rather than a one-time information exchange.

Center Rural Realities and Regional Equity

Multiple partners highlighted CHF’s urban-centric orientation as a key gap. Centralized decision-making in Denver, paired with limited regional staffing, led to misaligned strategies and diminished trust in rural communities. Some interviewees also noted that CHF’s focus on BIPOC-led organizations, while important, risked overlooking the unique racial dynamics and anti-racism work



happening in predominantly white rural regions. Going forward, deeper attention to rural geographies, cross-racial organizing, and decentralized funding strategies could support a more inclusive and responsive approach.

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We see a lot of misplaced funding from Denver-based philanthropy in our [rural] communities to organizations that aren't trusted within the community or organizations who don't say what they don't do, what they say they're going to do. But because everybody's in Denver, they don't know that. Even though [CHF is] relational and trust-based, they need somebody in each region, at a minimum in the region. They need somebody who's from here to be guiding this process rather than somebody from Denver spending unseen amounts of money to come down here to learn about us. Give one of us a job to help you make decisions and guide this process.

- Community Partner

Exercise Leadership Beyond Grantmaking

Some partners saw missed opportunities for CHF to more boldly activate its influence in the policy and philanthropic arenas. They called for leadership in shaping statewide food systems strategy, advancing policy reforms, and modeling equity-centered philanthropy to other funders. CHF was encouraged to see itself not just as a funder, but as a movement actor, capable of convening, advocating, and amplifying community-driven solutions. In particular, partners noted that CHF could have played a stronger role in connecting food justice to broader health equity issues like universal healthcare and tax justice.

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Policy advocacy [was a missed opportunity]. ... There's so much work to be done at the state and federal level around globally healthy food systems, food access outside of just enrollment, which is super important. Where has [CHF] been? ... I talk to the policy staff of our funders all the time, but I have no idea what [CHF] is doing.

- Community Partner

Support Grantee Wellbeing and Equity Accountability

Grantees emphasized the importance of embodying equity not just in *what* is funded, but in *how* partners are supported. Despite being a health foundation, CHF did not always prioritize mental health, healthcare access, or burnout risks facing frontline organizations. Some also noted the lack of consistent standards or accountability mechanisms for grantees' own equity practices, leading to uneven progress and instances of tokenism. These reflections suggest a need for CHF to more holistically support both people and organizations, while also holding grantees accountable to shared equity goals.



Increase Transparency and Share Learning

CHF was encouraged to model transparency in both its institutional positioning and its learning practices. Some partners expressed a desire to better understand how CHF's endowment, investments, and historical wealth intersect with the systemic challenges it seeks to address. Others urged CHF to share lessons learned, including missteps, to foster collective learning and field-wide progress. Doing so could strengthen CHF's credibility, build sector knowledge, and catalyze more coordinated systems change.

What did CHF get right in their understanding of the challenge, and what did they miss?

CHF's understanding of the food insecurity landscape, and the racial and structural inequities embedded within it, was nuanced, evolving, and deeply informed by grantee experiences. Across the FAS priority, CHF accurately diagnosed the need to shift away from charity-based models and toward equity-centered, community-driven solutions. CHF recognized that food insecurity is not simply a matter of scarcity, but the result of systemic disinvestment, disempowering policies, and racialized power dynamics within the hunger relief and public food assistance systems. By prioritizing community voice, community leadership, and cross-sector collaboration, CHF designed a strategy responsive to both immediate needs and long-term systems change.

Grantee feedback echoed CHF's strengths in understanding the complexity of food insecurity and the communities most affected by it. On the Grantee Perception Survey, FAS grantees reported the highest scores across CHF's priorities on CHF's understanding of their field, organizations, and social context. They also highlighted the value of CHF's non-monetary supports, particularly technical assistance and leadership development, as aligned with the strategy's power building goals.

However, grantee reflections and field learnings also reveal important tensions that shaped how this understanding translated into action:

- **Ambition vs. Scale of Investment:** CHF's aspirations around systems-level change, particularly in shifting power to communities, were sometimes misaligned with the size and duration of its grants. Some grantees felt pressure to demonstrate large-scale impact without commensurate funding or field conditions to sustain that level of transformation.
- **Scope of Support for Food Systems Work:** Several grantees noted that while CHF funded coalition infrastructure, it did not sufficiently resource direct food access programs or the broader ecosystem needed to shift power in the food system. This left critical gaps in community capacity, especially for organizations doing frontline and radical food justice work.
- **Time Required for Deep Systems Change:** CHF rightly recognized the need to invest in trust-building, relational work, and leadership development, particularly for BIPOC community members and leaders. Yet some grantees expressed concern that CHF's exit from this area would limit the potential for this long-term change to fully take root.
- **Disconnects Between Policy and Practice:** While CHF supported state-level policy engagement through efforts like the Blueprint, there were still challenges in translating those wins into on-the-ground access improvements for communities, particularly among those navigating stigmatizing and burdensome public benefit systems.

Overall, CHF's strategy reflected a strong and equity-informed grasp of both the causes and consequences of food insecurity. Yet grantees' feedback highlights that durable systems change, especially shifts in power, requires longer timelines, broader ecosystem investment, and continued attention to the lived realities of those most impacted.

Addendum: Understanding the Objectives



This Addendum offers a deeper look at how CHF’s FAS priority evolved over time, and what it achieved, through the lens of its overall and three core objectives:

- Overall Objective** Build momentum around collaborative community-owned solutions to address food insecurity.
- Objective 1** Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of collaborative community-level efforts to reduce food insecurity.
- Objective 2**
 - (a) Increase participation in public food assistance programs among Coloradans who are eligible for them.
 - (b) Reduce barriers to public food assistance enrollment and utilization.
- Objective 3**
 - (a) Support public-private partnerships that increase the prevalence of affordable healthy food and beverages
 - (b) Increase prevalence of affordable, nutritious, culturally relevant food in communities that have historically lacked access.

Together, these objectives reflected CHF’s broader commitment to advancing more equitable, coordinated, and community-driven approaches.

Through direct investments, partnerships, and infrastructure support, CHF helped seed promising efforts and strengthened field capacity across Colorado. Progress was most evidence in areas that emphasized coalition building, leadership development, and systems alignment, especially within Objective 1. In contrast, Objectives 2 and 3 yielded more incremental gains, constrained by entrenched policy, structural, and market dynamics.

While the impact of these investments rests with the leaders and organizations closest to the work, CHF’s values, flexibility, and strategic positioning helped catalyze the conditions for long-term change.

The insights surfaced here reflect both the outcomes and lessons learned from this chapter of CHF’s journey as an equity-centered funder.

Overall Objective

Build momentum around collaborative community-owned solutions to address food insecurity.



Overall Objective

Build momentum around collaborative community-informed solutions to address food insecurity and coordinate existing resources in the sector

<p>Challenge: Partners are not working efficiently and effectively together to address systemic changes that will improve food security. Individuals most impacted by food insecurity have little power over shaping food systems and supports in ways that work for them.</p>	<p>Hypothesis: If we create a mechanism to coordinate existing resources across the state, then we will build momentum around collaborative community-owned solutions to address food insecurity.</p>
<p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Blueprint expertise was around working with state agencies • Blueprint will target state-level interventions (early assumption) • Actors in the food landscape have differing levels of power and influence and operate in silos 	<p>Expected Outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colorado has a comprehensive, collective approach for addressing food insecurity • Policy agendas reflect community experiences and insights • A healthy Blueprint Program Office owns this work and is prepared to carry it forward

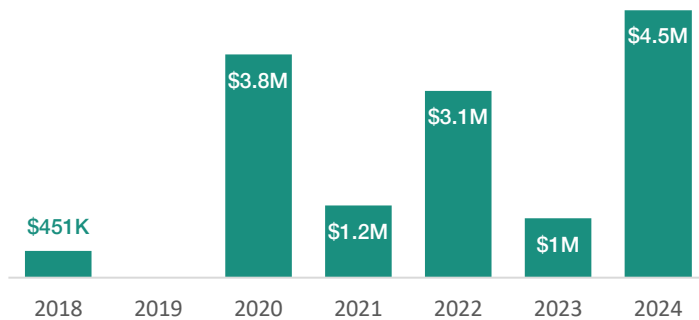
Total Investment in the Blueprint²⁵

\$14,056,766

8 grants

**2020: Included \$2.1M to support the COVID-19 Emergency Hunger Relief Fund*
**2024: Represents a three-year transition grant*

Investments in the Blueprint by Year



²⁵ The first investment in the Blueprint happened in 2018, outside of the FAS priority's investment period (2019-2024). The full amount of the investment in the Blueprint (from 2018-2024) is included here.



Summary of Activities and Investments

CHF's overarching objective for its FAS strategy - to build momentum around collaborative, community-owned solutions to food insecurity - was grounded in a systems-level vision of alignment, coordination, and field ownership.

This objective was pursued through a singular but catalytic investment: **the establishment and long-term support of the Blueprint**. From 2016 through 2024, CHF played a foundational role in both conceptualizing and resourcing the Blueprint, investing in the creation of a Program Office, and enabling the Blueprint's transformation from a five-year plan into a robust, community-driven statewide network. Over time, the Blueprint's mission evolved from technical food systems reform to a broader focus on food sovereignty, equity, and community capacity building.

At the outset, CHF believed that a centralized, multi-sector initiative could help overcome fragmentation in the food access landscape and drive policy and systems change more effectively. The strategy focused on launching a distinct, field-led entity that could coordinate statewide efforts, house shared workgroups, and lead advocacy aligned with the five core Blueprint goals. CHF intentionally decided on a Program Office model that was not housed in an existing anti-hunger partner organization, not because these partners did not have capacity, but because they wanted a separate organization to step into this leadership role to minimize the existing power dynamics.

Recognizing the power dynamics inherent in philanthropy, CHF deliberately sought to distance itself from day-to-day operations, refraining from staffing or governing roles in the Program Office and encouraging local and state actors to take ownership. Still, CHF's visible role in launching the initiative led many stakeholders to perceive the Blueprint as an extension of CHF's influence.

In response to this tension, CHF made a strategic shift midway through the initiative (2021), further stepping back from visible roles such as



participation in workgroups and leaning into a quieter, more supportive partnership with the Program Office. This included offering thoughtful partnership while deferring to field leadership, signaling a deeper commitment to equity and community governance. Internally, this evolution marked a significant change in how the funder understood its role, not as the leader of systems change, but as an enabler of field-led momentum.

This investment also served as a bridge across all three FAS objectives, supporting policy wins, amplifying community voice, and strengthening statewide coordination. The Blueprint's ability to build relationships across government, nonprofits, and grassroots groups enabled it to align and amplify disparate food access efforts under a shared vision. CHF's investment in the Blueprint was not only a vehicle for statewide coordination, but it was also a key learning site for how to shift power, seed field leadership, and embed trust-based, equity-centered approaches in philanthropic practice.







Blueprint Outcomes

CHF's sustained investment in the Blueprint created the conditions for meaningful statewide coordination, policy advancement, and capacity building across Colorado's anti-hunger field.

By resourcing the Blueprint as a central infrastructure initiative, CHF enabled the development of a dedicated, values-driven Program Office that could hold space for cross-sector collaboration and elevate community voice in state-level food systems work. The outcomes of this investment showcases the Blueprint's role in strengthening infrastructure and fostering alignment, as well as the persistent challenges of collaboration and the tensions that can arise from concentrated support. Taken together, these reflections point to both the power and complexity of investing in collaborative infrastructure to drive systemic change.

CHF's investments in the Blueprint led to:

-  **Blueprint impact, including Field Alignment & Community Leadership, Policy & Systems Change, Equity-Driven Funding & Emergency Response, and Public Awareness & Narrative Shift**
-  **Built state-level infrastructure**
-  **Evolving collaboration for systems change**
-  **Costs of concentrated support**



CHF Investments Opened the Door for Blueprint Impact

By financially supporting the infrastructure and work of the Blueprint, serving as a thought partner to the Blueprint Program Office, and trusting the community leadership, **CHF opened the door for the impact that the Blueprint has been able to advance since 2019.** An evaluation of CHF’s investment in the Blueprint²⁶ revealed that the Blueprint supported impact in four primary areas: Field Alignment & Community Leadership, Policy & Systems Change, Equity-Driven Funding & Emergency Response, and Public Awareness & Narrative Shift.

Field Alignment & Community Leadership	Policy & Systems Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthened coordination across local communities, state agencies, advocacy organizations, and funders • Acted as a trusted convener, bridging silos, and aligning partners around shared goals • Centered community voice, lived experience, and grassroots leadership in strategy and advocacy • Built early signals of community capacity to address food insecurity at the local level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced significant policy wins through coordinated, incremental advocacy • Developed and mobilized shared policy agendas rooted in community priorities • Build advocacy capacity and relationships at the Capitol • Elevating community-defined issues and shifted narratives toward systems change • Strengthened connections between food access, public programs (e.g., SNAP, WIC, school meals), and equity
Equity-Driven Funding & Emergency Response	Public Awareness & Narrative Shift
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeled responsive, flexible grantmaking centered on community-defined needs • Shifted philanthropic norms toward relationship-based, equity-rooted funding • Facilitated rapid response and resource deployment in moments of crisis • Provided timely and strategic investments that support innovation and resilience in communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raised statewide awareness of hunger and its systemic roots • Brought visibility to food justice as a broader movement beyond emergency food • Increased understanding among policy makers and the public about hunger as a shared concern • Amplified community voices and food sovereignty in the public discourse

²⁶ CHF commissioned an evaluation of the Blueprint from Illuminary Perspectives in 2024. Refer to their report (Setting the Table to End Hunger: The Colorado Health Foundation’s Investment in the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger) for more information on the work and outcomes of the CFS initiative.



Built State-Level Infrastructure

The creation and ongoing work of the Blueprint significantly strengthened state-level capacity in Colorado's anti-hunger field. **Through its emphasis on collective impact, collaboration, and movement building, the Blueprint has brought new infrastructure and coordination to a previously fragmented landscape.** Partners credited the Blueprint with helping to de-silo key actors, particularly food banks and state agencies, by creating spaces for shared strategy and action. This shift was driven by both direct engagement and modeling practices that other organizations have emulated.

Importantly, the infrastructure built through the Blueprint is not solely operational; it is rooted in relationships and trust among Blueprint staff, state agencies, nonprofit partners, and community members. Establishing a cohesive, team-based structure has taken time, particularly given the intentional focus on elevating community members personally impacted by hunger. The field also experienced considerable turnover, which contributed to periods of momentum and pause. Less than a year after the first Blueprint staff were hired, the COVID-19 pandemic further complicated the landscape, slowing some efforts while accelerating others.

Despite these challenges, the Blueprint absorbed and centralized capacity that was previously scattered, allowing for more focused policy work, greater community engagement, and stronger alignment across organizations. While some duplication of effort still exists, the Blueprint ultimately added value by creating durable infrastructure that facilitated collaboration and elevated community-centered approaches.



[CHF] can take credit for a good portion of the [changes in state-level capacity] based on the work that they've done. The Blueprint and their approach around collective impact, around tent building, around movement building more specifically. ... I don't think it was solely [CHF's] results, but I do think a large part of it was because [the Blueprint] was in the space, trying to get folks to collaborate and de-silo, which was so much of [CHF's] intent going into the work in the entire space.

- Community Partner



The creation of the Blueprint to End Hunger is another source of pride. That will have enduring effects, systemic effects in the state of Colorado. That infrastructure didn't exist before the Blueprint came about. With significant funding from [CHF], it now does, and is working in ways that are meaningful and important.

- CHF Staff



Evolving Collaboration for Systems Change

CHF's investments in the Blueprint played a pivotal role in strengthening state-level collaboration across the anti-hunger field. Partners acknowledged that the Blueprint's presence and funding support contributed to a cultural shift among statewide actors, fostering greater transparency, warming relationships, and a more consistent willingness to engage across organizational lines.

At the same time, **many partners emphasized that this progress is still in process.** While collaboration has increased, it often lacks the depth and cohesion needed to fully drive systemic change. This reflects not only current limitations but also the natural development arc of a statewide initiative still in its early years. Building the infrastructure for lasting systems change, particularly one grounded in equity and community voice, takes time, especially amid turnover, competing priorities, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some partners described coordination efforts as duplicative or fragmented, with opportunities missed to streamline work through trusted organizations already leading in key areas. Others pointed to a gap between public narrative of partnership and the internal realities of communication and decision-making, where competing interests can still inhibit trust.

“

I wish that statewide collaboration felt like it was actually collaborative. There's an outward message that says we're partnering with all these different people, but the depth of the partnership is lacking. The transparency and communication between some of those statewide partners leaves a lot to be desired, and there are often competing interests even then they have similar goals.

- Community Partner

These reflections highlight the ongoing and intentional nature of the Blueprint's work to deepen collaboration, not just increasing its frequency, but strengthening its quality through long-term relationship and trust building. Continued investment in this approach remains to realizing the Blueprint's vision for transformational, community-rooted systems change.

The Costs of Concentrated Support

While the Blueprint has played a critical role in advancing collaboration and state-level coordination, CHF's sustained and concentrated investment in the initiative also led to unintended consequences that impacted the broader food systems ecosystem in Colorado. Several partners described a dynamic in which the Blueprint came to function as an extension of CHF itself, receiving

“

State level partners, overall, we got better in supporting one another and collaborating more in our approaches. There was a transparency, a warming that happened. But it's not perfect yet.

- Community Partner



consistent, substantial operational support without the same level of scrutiny or evaluation applied to other grantees. **This deep resourcing, while well-intentioned, created a perception of codependency and raised concerns about equity in funding distribution.** Longstanding statewide partners, particularly those rooted in grassroots organizing or local food justice work, felt sidelined, observing that direct investment in their efforts diminished even as they were encouraged with the Blueprint's structures.

Community partners expressed frustration that funding was largely channeled through a single initiative, rather than being more openly available for diverse, community-driven approaches. As the Blueprint expanded its internal staffing and convening capacity, some partners questioned whether this growth supported or diluted the impact of existing organizations already active in the field. They noted that while collaboration with the Blueprint increased out of necessity, it did not always lead to more meaningful coordination or problem-solving. Some degree of fragmentation is to be expected as organizations build their own work and begin navigating how to align efforts. Still, these reflections suggest that a more intentional balance between investments in the Blueprint and in trusted, place-based community efforts could better support this alignment over time and help foster more inclusive systems change.



We collaborate more with the Blueprint because it exists. But if they weren't there, we would be collaborating just the same with everybody else. We don't collaborate more because of the Blueprint. ... The most interesting conversations that I have been a part of, how do we really come together and tackle something together, have been convened by someone that's not the Blueprint. ... They have staffed up so much in the past year that, instead of investing resources where people are already doing things that are overwhelmed, they've just staffed up and now there's just more people.

- Community Partner

CHF staff acknowledged that this approach diverted attention and resources from established, statewide anti-hunger organizations. They also pointed out that this shift in strategy to investing in the Blueprint and smaller, grassroots organizations (through Objective 1) contributed to a positive recalibration of longstanding power imbalances in Colorado's food systems ecosystem. Rather than continuing to fund a few large, well-resourced organizations, CHF chose to invest in coordinating infrastructure and emerging community-based groups, many of which were previously unknown or underfunded. This approach helped elevate the visibility and influence of smaller organizations across the state, broadening the field of actors engaged in food systems change. While power imbalances still exist, staff noted that they have become less entrenched, with funding and decision-making now more distributed across a diverse ecosystem.







Lessons Learned

CHF’s strategy to support the Blueprint as a central piece of Colorado’s food systems infrastructure surfaced a set of promising approaches, and persistent tensions, around how to build and sustain field leadership.

By investing in a neutral, values-driven Program Office model, CHF enabled a new form of coordination and collaboration across the anti-hunger field. Their adaptive and relational approach strengthened state-level alignment and deepened community engagement. At the same time, longstanding challenges related to trust, collaboration, and sustainability remain.

Lessons Learned

-  **Power and promise of a Program Office**
-  **Adaptive and supportive approach to field leadership**
-  **Barriers to authentic collaboration**
-  **Uncertain future of field infrastructure**



Power and Promise of a Program Office

CHF's decision to build the Blueprint as a standalone Program Office rather than embedding it within an existing organization proved to be a highly effective strategy for strengthening Colorado's anti-hunger ecosystem. This model emerged in response to a fractured landscape, where even well-resourced and impactful organizations were often siloed, competing for funding, recognition, and influence. Turf wars, personal agendas, and fragmented efforts frequently stalled collective progress. Recognizing that these entrenched dynamics could not be resolved by simply designating a lead organization, CHF made the deliberate choice to create a new entity that would operate as a neutral convener, unburdened by legacy power structures or institutional self-interest.

The Blueprint's Program Office structure allowed it to function as a trusted backbone organization, facilitating collaboration, holding space for diverse perspectives, and advancing systems change without competing for the same resources or visibility as other players.

Because it was not connected to any existing anti-hunger provider, the Blueprint was widely seen as a neutral entity, credible not because it claimed authority, but because it earned trust. This neutrality created space for more authentic collaboration, particularly among smaller or historically underrepresented organizations that had long felt sidelined in statewide conversations. It also allowed the Blueprint to prioritize long-term systems change over short-term programmatic wins, aligning its operations with the values of collective impact and incremental progress.

The Blueprint's credibility was not automatic, it was built over time. Early support from the steering committee, the backing of CHF, and the reputations and relational capital of its initial staff and Governing Council were instrumental in gaining field-wide buy-in. As the Blueprint evolved, its staff and Governing Council continued to cultivate legitimacy by prioritizing shared values, honoring community voice, and modeling transparency. This approach helped mitigate power dynamics that had long plagued the field, even if it could not eliminate them entirely. As one observer noted, the Program Office model created "a big tent" where different actors could come together with a shared purpose, even when moving at the slower, more deliberate pace required for inclusive, equity-centered work.

The Program Office model also offered a structural solution to the problem of sustainability in collaborative initiatives. Unlike temporary task forces or time-limited grant partnerships, the Blueprint was designed with the infrastructure, staffing, and strategic clarity to serve as a permanent coordinating hub. This allowed it to weather transitions, facilitate long-term planning, and adapt to changing political and policy landscapes without losing focus.

While the Blueprint's success cannot be attributed to structure alone, the Program Office model created the conditions for its unique contributions to take root. The model required deep



investment, years of development, and an intentional focus on values, staffing, and governance. But in a field marked by competition and fragmentation, it offered a pathway toward coherence, collaboration, and transformative systems change. As more funders and movements seek to build connective tissue across complex ecosystems, the Blueprint offers a compelling example of how a well-constructed Program Office can function not just as an administrative hub, but as a values-driven catalyst for equity and shared power.

Adaptive and Supportive Approach to Field Leadership

CHF's investment approach to the Blueprint was a strategic balance between resourcing leadership and ceding control. From the outset, CHF made a deliberate choice to create space for the Blueprint to emerge as a community-owned initiative, rather than a funder-led project.

By prioritizing flexibility, long-term support, and trust in the Program Office, CHF enabled the Blueprint to shape its own identity, align its work with deeply held values, and evolve decision-making authority over time.

This intentional transition of power helped foster legitimacy, community trust, and a sense of shared ownership among the organizations and individuals guiding the Blueprint's development.

Throughout its partnership with the Blueprint, CHF played four key roles: funder, connector and convenor, thought partner, and participant.

Funder	CHF moved beyond individual project grants to resource field-wide collaboration through unrestricted, multi-year funding. This approach allowed the Program Office to build the staffing and infrastructure required for effective coordination. However, CHF's singular investment also created challenges related to sustainability, coordination with other funders, and managing expectations within the field.
Connector & Convenor	CHF used its credibility to bring together key stakeholders at the Blueprint's inception, ensuring broad participation from state and community partners. This role was essential for launching the initiative and building early momentum. Over time, CHF shifted to a quieter connector role, pointing stakeholders toward the Blueprint, sharing information, and elevating the Blueprint's visibility, while recognizing the need to improve accessibility for grassroots partners and organizations new to the field.
Thought Partner	CHF maintained open channels of communication with the Program Office, engaging in honest dialogue around evolving needs and challenges. This dynamic enabled shared learning and offered both parties insight into broader field conditions. The Blueprint benefited from CHF's bird's-eye perspective on related sectors, while CHF gained real-time understanding of the Blueprint's day-to-day realities. There remained opportunity for CHF to contribute more of its technical expertise in ways that support, but do not direct, the work.



Participant

CHF's early participation in Blueprint workgroups and committees helped build trust and align efforts. Yet over time, CHF recognized that its presence could unintentionally skew conversations due to power dynamics inherent in philanthropy. By stepping back from direct involvement, CHF allowed the Blueprint to develop more organically, though this also limited its first-hand understanding of on-the-ground collaboration.

CHF's multi-faceted and adaptive support for the Blueprint proved to be a strong example of values-aligned field investment. While not without its tensions, this approach enabled the creation of a neutral, community-rooted coordinating body that is now playing a vital role in strengthening the anti-hunger and food systems ecosystem across Colorado.

Barriers to Authentic Collaboration

While the Blueprint made significant strides in strengthening coordination across Colorado's anti-hunger field, persistent challenges limited the depth and effectiveness of collaboration. Longstanding relational tensions, lack of strategic alignment, and unspoken conflicts often undermined trust and stall collective progress. These dynamics were compounded by competitive funding environments and structural fragmentation, which make sustained, equitable partnerships difficult to achieve. Addressing these barriers will require more than convening spaces; it calls for intentional facilitation, deeper investment in relationship-building, and funding models that reward shared leadership and transparency.



We need a strategic vision for what food security and food access should look like in the state so it's cohesive and everyone can align behind it, even if there's some differences.


- Community Partner

Relational tensions limited trust and progress. Historical mistrust, interpersonal dynamics, and organizational ego continue to hinder genuine collaboration among statewide food security partners, even when goals aligned.



We tried to host or convene a few statewide partners that were working in the food security space to understand what their priorities are, what their problem statement is, what the strategic plan to move forward is. What we uncovered was that one of the biggest barriers to truly collaborating and moving forward was the nature of previous relationships and feeling distrustful, like intentional miscommunications or lack of communication. Even when priorities were aligned, it seemed like one organization wanted to be the driver, and I'll use the word more 'ego' from that organization. It stifled true collaboration.

- Community Partner



Lack of shared vision fragmented the field. Without a cohesive statewide strategy for food access, efforts remain siloed and uncoordinated, limiting collective impact. Some community partners did not recognize the Blueprint as providing or coordinating this shared vision or the Blueprint goals as that shared vision.

Difficult conversations were often avoided. Many statewide partners are hesitant to engage in uncomfortable or challenging dialogue, internally and externally, which prevents the honest dialogue needed to resolve overlapping roles, territoriality, and generalized community engagement. This slowed progress in building coordination and collaboration across the anti-hunger field to build the trust and vulnerability needed for these difficult conversations.

Funding models discouraged cooperation. Competitive or narrowly structured funding streams create pressure for organizations to operate independently, often undermining incentives to collaborate or share leadership.

These challenges point to the need for intentional facilitation, stronger ground-level relationship-building, and funding strategies that reward authentic collaboration.

Uncertain Future of Field Infrastructure

While the Blueprint has successfully built new infrastructure and capacity to support collaboration and policy work in the anti-hunger field, concerns remained about its long-term sustainability. With the winding down the CHF's FAS priority, partners expressed uncertainty about what will happen to the systems, staff, and partnerships that were developed through the Blueprint. Although a transitional "off-ramp" has been funded, partners did not see a clear plan for how this infrastructure will be maintained once CHF's support ends. As one partner noted, building capacity without a durable funding strategy risks losing the progress made, potentially reverting the field to pre-investment levels of coordination and effectiveness. A long-term vision for sustainability and shared ownership among funders and partners is still needed to ensure this momentum does not staff.

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As far as I know, there's still no clarity of what happens after [the Blueprint's exit grant]. You create this additional separate infrastructure outside of what existed before and then what happens to that? How does that work? You build infrastructure while it's funded, but then how does that infrastructure get sustained after they stop funding? I don't think they've addressed those questions other than they created an off-ramp. ... You end up building capacity and then letting it [fall away]. People have to figure it out and then who knows where that goes, but it could end up going back to square one and end up in a similar capacity situation as you were prior to the investment. If there's not clear game plan for how you fund that and sustain that additional capacity. Capacity costs money.

- Community Partner



Areas of Improvement

While CHF's investments in the Blueprint yielded significant contributions to Colorado's anti-hunger ecosystem, partner feedback revealed several areas where the approach could be strengthened. As the Blueprint evolved into a central coordinating body, concerns emerged about its reach, equity, and alignment with on-the-ground needs, particularly among rural and grassroots partners.

Address Urban-Centric Limitations: The Blueprint's Denver-based structure limited its reach and relevance for rural communities. Partners in rural regions reported feeling excluded from decision-making and disconnected from Blueprint activities that felt overly centralized and institutionally driven.

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When you have Denver-based things, they're not going to reach the rural communities the way that something based in a rural community will. All the Denver-based work, especially Denver-based in a high-rise downtown up on a high floor, like it's super urban. They've done some good work. They've connected some people. But I would like to see things not be so urban-centric and not so Denver-centric.

- Community Partner

Balance Staffing with Community Investment: Concerns were raised about the Blueprint's recent internal growth outpacing its external impact. Partners called for more funding to flow directly to grassroots groups and community-led solutions rather than being concentrated in staff infrastructure.

Ensure Deeper Local Integration: As the Blueprint has evolved, its role in statewide coordination has become more visible, but its presence at the local level is still developing. While the Blueprint shared helpful resources, its role was often perceived as peripheral rather than central to community-based food systems work. Partners expressed a desire for more direct facilitation of relationships and partnerships on the ground. At the same time, some questioned the growing number of Blueprint staff, highlighting a tension between perceptions of scale and the reality that deeper local integration may require even greater staff capacity to effectively support place-based efforts.

Leverage Influence to Unlock New Resources: Interviewees suggested that the Blueprint missed opportunities to use its position and funder relationship to advocate for expanded funding pathways. A more proactive approach to unlocking state or philanthropic dollars for community partners could increase equity and sustainability.

Interrogate Power Dynamics and Funding Reliance: The long-standing and exclusive financial relationship between CHF and the Blueprint led to perceptions of codependency and blurred boundaries. Partners indicated that these dynamics limited transparency and may have inadvertently sidelined community-led organizations that could have benefited from direct support.

Objective 1

Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of collaborative community-level efforts to reduce food insecurity.



Objective 1

Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of collaborative, community-level efforts to reduce food insecurity

<p>Challenge: Partners are not working efficiently and effectively together to address systemic changes that will improve food security. Individuals most impacted by food insecurity have little power over shaping food systems and supports in ways that work for them.</p>	<p>Hypothesis: If we create mechanisms to build upon local community assets and elevate community voice, then we will build individual and collective power to change local food systems so that they meet the needs of community.</p>	<p>Expected Outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved collaboration and alignment between local actors in the food system Changes in local systems that increase local food access and security Coalition governance and processes centered in equity
<p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community members are the experts in navigating local food systems Centering lived experience in coalition building is critical for success The community already has a lot of assets to build from Coalitions are the most efficient strategy for local systems change Coalitions need to build their internal capacities and understand of local community needs before focusing on peer learning and engagement beyond their community Coalitions will intervene at the local level (early assumption) Local systems change needs to emphasize relationships, power, and mindset first to affect meaningful policy change 		

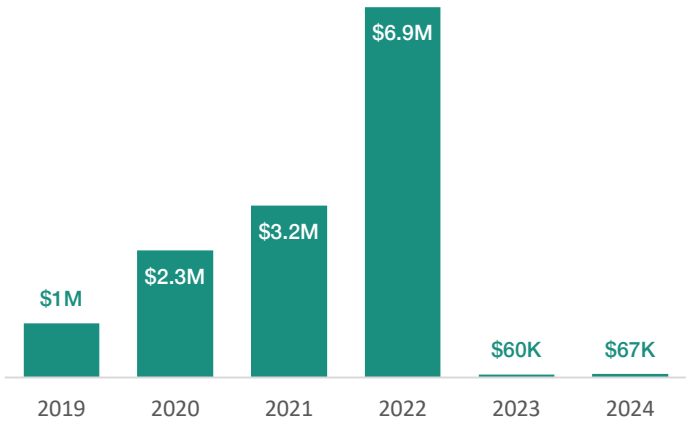
Total Investment in Objective 1

\$13,523,448

35 grants
32 sponsorships
2 donations

38 organizations

Investments in Objective 1 by Year



**2022: Includes amendments for two-year extensions for seven coalitions until 2026*



Summary of Activities and Investments

The strategy for Objective 1 – to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of collaborative, community-level efforts to reduce food insecurity – underwent significant and intentional evolution between 2019 and 2024.

The centerpiece of this work was the **Community Food Systems (CFS) initiative**,²⁷ a statewide investment in local food coalitions designed to catalyze long-term, community-led transformation of local food systems. Launched in 2019, the CFS initiative aimed to strengthen coordination among local food system actors, better align existing assets, and center the voices and leadership of those with lived experience of hunger. Through multi-year funding, CHF supported coalitions across Colorado to develop and implement strategies that expanded access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally relevant food, particularly for those most at risk of food insecurity.

The CFS initiative specifically sought to advance two of the goals outlined in the Blueprint:

- **Goal 2:** Increase the number of Coloradans who can access affordable, nutritious food in their communities.
- **Goal 3:** Increase the number of Coloradans who can access food assistance and nutritious food through community-based organizations.

At its core, the CFS initiative was built on the belief that fragmented local food systems, not a lack of resources, were a central barrier to food security. CHF hypothesized that coalitions grounded in equity and lived experience could help shift the dominant charity mindset and build more resilient, just food systems. Recognizing that communities entered this

²⁷ CHF commissioned an evaluation of the CFS initiative from Bright Research Group in 2024. Refer to their report, *Community Food Systems Summative Evaluation*, for more information on the work and outcomes of the CFS initiative.



work with varying levels of capacity and infrastructure, CHF offered phased funding, customized technical assistance through a partnership with Terra Soma, and a collaborative relationship with Program Officers to help coalitions strengthen systems change capabilities and leadership.

The initial model for the CFS initiative emerged as a proposed partnership with Kaiser Permanente Colorado to co-invest in building community capacity around food access and security. Although Kaiser Permanente Colorado ultimately did not co-fund the initiative due to budget constraints, CHF proceeded with a hands-off approach, relying on Terra Soma to provide technical assistance to support grantees. Early efforts focused primarily on aligning local systems and improving access, rather than explicitly advancing power-building, food justice, or leadership development. However, early implementation revealed gaps: many coalitions lacked the foundational trust, infrastructure, and governance required to lead systems change efforts.

These insights prompted a pivotal shift in strategy. CHF recognized that supporting coalitions to build internal capacity, particularly trust, equity-centered governance, and community engagement, was essential. Program Officers adopted a more engaged, learning-focused stance, working closely with grantees to understand their contexts and challenges. A new emphasis emerged on shifting from transaction food distribution models to transformational, community-owned strategies rooted in justice and equity. Technical assistance was reframed to build power through leadership development, peer learning, and centering lived experience.



We quickly understood that this was going to require sustained attention and focus of funding for a number of years. In order to get to these more systemic shifts and changes that we were looking to have within this initiative, that wasn't going to be a two-year funding opportunity.

- CHF Staff

The priority of funded coalitions also evolved over time (see table on next page). CHF began with planning grants to 15 coalitions in 2019, supporting the development of short-term strategies for local food systems transformation. In 2020, 12 of those coalitions received two-year implementation grants, selected based on their demonstrated commitment to engaging those with lived experience of hunger, community partnership and systems change. By 2022, CHF further refined its priority, awarding new two-year grants to eight coalitions that had meaningfully integrated people with lived experience into leadership and advocacy work. This strategic narrowing ensuring deeper alignment with the initiative's food justice goals. Seven coalitions received exit grants in 2024.



When we funded in 2022, we really honed in on the coalitions that we wanted to move forward. The ones that were aligned with centering people with lived experience, a racial justice focus, language access, those types of things. That shifted how we worked with the coalitions. We did not fund those that weren't aligned in that space. We were able to go a little deeper with those that were more aligned with the Foundation.

- CHF Staff

The CFS initiative's design – phased, flexible funding; tailored technical assistance through Terra Soma;



opportunities for peer learning; and strong Program Officer relationships – reflected CHF’s belief that lasting food systems change must be led by those most affected by hunger. While initial grants included coalitions with technical expertise in food systems, sustained investment focused on those that demonstrated meaningful progress in community partnership and power-building. This shift mirrored CHF’s broader commitment to equity and community-led solutions.

	2019	2020	2022	2024
Investment	\$85,000 planning grants (1 year)	\$200,000 - \$220,000 implementation grants (2 years)	\$400,000 - \$600,000 implementation grants (2 years)	\$600,000 exit grants (2 years)
No. of Coalitions	15	12	8	7
Grantmaking Decisions	Coalitions funded to develop plans to leverage coordination to shift their local food systems.	Coalitions funded based on intention to shift relationships, connections, and power.	CHF redefines health equity as its North Star and deepens racial equity focus. Coalitions funded based on commitment to partnerships with people of color with lived experience of hunger.	CHF funds grantees that align with its commitment to center impacted communities and apply a racial equity lens. Funding sunsets and coalitions funded to support sustainability and transition planning.

In addition to the CFS initiative, CHF awarded four additional grants under Objective 1 in 2021 and 2022, ranging from \$100,000 to \$1,160,000. These investments explored alternative models for collaborative, community-level food systems work beyond traditional coalitions. They prioritized community ownership, cultural relevance, and equity by supporting BIPOC, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ communities. Grantees advanced strategies like community-run food retail spaces, partnering with BIPOC growers and mutual aid networks, supporting new leaders through apprenticeships, and creating inclusive, healing-centered community spaces.

Together, these efforts reflect an aim to transform local food systems through equity-driven, community-anchored approaches. CHF’s investments under Objective 1 helped grow a diverse field of local leaders and coalitions equipped to reimagine food access, shift power, and drive long-term systems change rooted in justice and resilience.

Objective 1 Outcomes

CHF's investments under Objective 1 led to meaningful outcomes across Colorado's local food systems, particularly through the CFS initiative.

These investments supported communities in strengthening infrastructure, building local leadership, and improving coordination to address food insecurity in ways that were grounded in lived experience and aligned with local priorities.

Across both CFS and other Objective 1 grants, partners deepened relationships, expanded food access, and advanced strategies to shift power and influence within food systems.

CHF's investments in Objective 1 led to:

-  **Strengthened local food systems and increased access to food**
-  **Improved local coordination and relationships to address food insecurity**
-  **Built community capacity and leadership**
-  **Amplified lived experience**
-  **Leveraged strategies to shift local food systems**
-  **Elevated awareness of hunger and equity**
-  **Strengthened community infrastructure**



Strengthened Local Food Systems and Increased Access to Food

CHF's investments under Objective 1 directly contributed to strengthening local food systems and improving access to healthy, nutritious, and culturally relevant food across Colorado.

Coalitions funded through the CFS initiative played a central role in designing and implementing place-based, equity-driven strategies that responded to the unique food access needs in their communities.

These coalitions leveraged diverse tactics, from reshaping food pantry systems to advocating for inclusive public assistance programs, to build more coordinated, resilient, and community-anchored local food systems.

Across the CFS initiative, all eight funded coalitions²⁸ made progress in increasing food access:

- Many **improved the distribution and quality of food available** through existing food pantry and food bank networks, working to ensure that offerings were not only nutritious but also culturally relevant.
- Others **expanded participation in federal nutrition programs** like SNAP by reducing access barriers and deepening outreach to historically excluded groups.
- Some coalitions **supported food entrepreneurship and community-led food retail** to increase access while building local economic opportunity.

These efforts collectively reflect the CFS initiative's core hypothesis: that by strengthening the coordination and alignment of local food assets and resources, communities can more effectively meet the food needs of those most at risk of hunger.

Coalitions increased their capacity to address food insecurity through stronger coordination, deeper collaboration, and more community-centered approaches. CHF's investment in Objective 1 contributed to meaningful progress in building community-driven food systems that reflect the priorities and lived experiences of those most impacted by food insecurity. In many communities, this led to more responsive, sustainable food systems that were better equipped to serve diverse populations.

²⁸ The CFS evaluation included the eight local food coalitions that received implementation grants in 2022.



Improved Local Coordination and Relationships to Address Food Insecurity

CHF's investments under Objective 1 improved coordination and relationships at the local level to address food insecurity.

As coalitions matured and developed stronger internal structures, they deepened their external relationships, both within their immediate communities and across regions.

his growing network of collaboration helped transform siloed food access efforts into more cohesive, community-centered strategies.

Across funded communities, staff and partners observed stronger connections and a greater sense of shared responsibility for advancing food access. This emerging mindset towards collaboration, recognizing the value of working across organizations to pool resources, reduce duplication, and better serve community members, signals a meaningful cultural shift in how food insecurity is addressed locally. **It also points to early signals of systems-level thinking taking root at the community level, where organizations are beginning to see themselves as part of a larger, interconnected ecosystem.**

“


[In my community], there's also more willingness to collaborate and to try to operate as a collective more than just a single entity. It's like they came through that growth arc of, 'oh, we can't all do this on our own. Maybe let's work together. We're serving some of the same people,' which is great.

- Community Partner

The CFS initiative also created more opportunities for cross-community dialogue and learning. CHF staff noted “*more connection across communities, and networking,*” suggesting that coalition-level work is seeding broader collaborative infrastructure across regions. Several partners observed that “*more people are part of the conversation*” highlighting that coalitions are becoming more inclusive and representative, bringing in diverse perspectives and strengthening the relationships necessary for lasting change.

Built Community Capacity and Leadership

CHF's investments under Objective 1 led to meaningful growth in local community capacity and leadership to address food insecurity. The CFS initiative's coalition-based model proved highly effective at cultivating sustainable, community-led infrastructure to support food systems change.



By combining long-term, flexible funding with technical assistance, peer learning, and a focus on lived experience, the initiative created conditions for local leaders and organizations to grow their influence, strengthen coordination, and embed equity into their work.

Coalitions with strong leadership, infrastructure, and deep roots in the communities were particularly well-positioned to drive and sustain change. Several partners noted that, “*the capacity and the technical knowledge and expertise at the local level is pretty great,*” and that “*transformative change*” has taken root in “*all corners across the state.*” Technical assistance was an important contributor to this growth, providing hands-on support to help coalitions build infrastructure, refine strategy, and sustain community engagement.

“

[There are] pockets of rich coordination and expertise and ability at the local level, which is crucial and important for this work. They’re the ones who should be leading and driving the work ultimately.

- Community Partner

Leadership development was a central outcome. Coalitions not only elevated existing leaders, but also created space for new leaders, particularly people with lived experience of hunger, to grow into influential roles. Nearly all the eight coalitions invested in opportunities for people with direct experience of food insecurity to participate meaningfully and sustainably in shaping local strategies. One partner reflected, “*folks who’ve never had power ... are running the show.*” This shift helped build trust, increase authenticity in decision-making, and make food systems work more responsive to the people most affected by hunger.

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I’ve seen general individual professional capacity or skill. Folks have started with no experience and are now experts, the trial by fire kind of thing. And these folks ... have stepped up to the plate to keep the ball moving. Not many other realms would support someone brand new with very little professional experience taking on leadership; and these funds have really supported that. Folks who’ve never had power in their life before, perceived power in their life, are running the show. Folks that need support are being led by folks who have been in the same boat and look like them. I don’t think that there are many other programs that really value that. I see that as a big change and the leadership across the state.

- Community Partner

Several coalitions reported that their increased capacity extended beyond food access into other areas of community wellbeing. “*Food is an entrée to other issues,*” one CHF staff member noted, with coalitions expanding their influence into transportation, childcare, and small business



development. This ripple effect demonstrates that investments in food system leadership have broader implications for community power and resilience.

Amplified Lived Experience

CHF's investments under Objective 1 elevated the importance of centering people with lived experience of hunger in the design, leadership, and implementation of local food system change.


This strategic focus helped shift local coalitions away from traditional, charity-based models toward more inclusive, equity-centered, and community-driven approaches. The result was not only deeper trust and more responsive food programs but also expanded leadership opportunities, stronger civic participation, and a broader shift in how food insecurity is understood and addressed at the community level.

The CFS initiative required grantees to meaningfully engage people with lived experience, and this expectation led to significant changes across most coalitions. Six out of eight coalitions created cohort-based leadership development programs specifically for individuals who had experienced hunger, with a particular focus on monolingual Spanish-speaking residents and recent immigrants. These cohorts were supported through subcommittees and work groups that allowed participants to influence decisions and shape coalition strategy. Coalitions also invested in training and knowledge-building to help cohort members navigate food systems work and build the confidence and skills needed for sustained engagement.

The impact of these efforts was far-reaching. Coalitions began implementing food system practices that emphasized dignity, belonging, and choice, particularly for Latino communities. Many coalitions improved their responsiveness by gathering community-driven data and feedback, which informed program design and grocery store planning. One grantee described conducting over 500 conversations with community members to understand their food access needs and desires, which guided the design of new services aimed to foster a sense of belonging and reflect the cultural preferences to the community.

Individuals with lived experience expressed that their involvement was deeply meaningful.

Whether volunteering with food distribution, serving on committees, launching food-based businesses, or advocating for policy change, these community members saw their participation to give back and drive solutions for their neighbors. Their involvement also challenged dominant narratives about who holds knowledge and power in food systems work. As one coalition noted, centering lived experience helped shift away from a charity mindset and toward food systems that are *“more customer focused.”*



Coalitions also began to embrace language justice and cultural relevance as central components of their equity strategies. This not only strengthened relationships with historically marginalized communities but also helped foster coalitions that were more reflective of and accountable to the people they serve.

Leveraged Strategies to Shift Local Food Systems

CHF's investments under Objective 1 helped catalyze a range of strategies that coalitions used to shift their local food systems, with policy engagement emerging as an increasingly important lever of change.²⁹

CHF's investments supported coalitions in adopting increasingly sophisticated, systems-oriented strategies, combining network building, narrative change, and growing policy advocacy, to drive both grassroots and structural change in local food systems.

The CFS evaluation found that most coalitions employed a mix of tactics, including strengthening local networks, shifting narratives and mindsets, and advocating for policy change, to address food insecurity in a more systemic way. Many coalitions used the Water of Systems Change framework³⁰ to inform these strategies, demonstrating a deeper understanding of the structural conditions that influence food systems and are making more intentional choices about where and how to intervene.

While the original intent of the CFS initiative did not focus exclusively on policy advocacy, nearly all funded coalitions ultimately supported or engaged in policy efforts at the local or state level. These activities reflected a growing strategic sophistication among coalitions as they worked to reshape food systems through both direct service and structural change.

Concrete examples of policy engagement included participation in a statewide coalition that helped pass Colorado's Healthy School Meals for All legislation, advocacy for local sugar-sweetened beverage taxes, influencing local food budget allocations, and contributing to municipal zoning and comprehensive plans that impact food access. These policy activities reflected an understanding that sustainable food systems change must include both grassroots action and policy reform.

²⁹ For more information on these systems change strategies and impact, refer to the [Shifting the System](#) section.

³⁰ The [Water of Systems Change framework](#) was developed by FSG in 2018. This framework was a critical component of CHF's strategy with the CFS initiative and the technical assistance that local food coalitions received.



Elevated Awareness of Hunger and Equity

The CFS initiative played a significant role in raising community awareness of hunger, food insecurity, and the systemic inequities that shape local food systems.

Through funding and strategic guidance, CHF helped shift public and institutional narratives, moving conversations beyond food access toward deeper questions of justice, equity, and the root causes of hunger.

Grantees credited the CFS initiative with creating space for essential conversations in communities that had historically not engaged with concepts like racial equity, language justice, or health equity. The initiative gave local leaders permission and power to challenge longstanding assumptions and introduce new frameworks for understanding food insecurity.

CHF's support was not just financial; it also conferred legitimacy to local leaders pushing for systemic change. In some communities, these shifts were particularly meaningful given the presence of entrenched power structures resistant to change. As one grantee described, *"when you're a community organization with a tiny voice, ...having the backing of an entity that's fronting the bill to say like, 'these things are important and it's time to focus on them,' was really supportive."*



The other thing [the funding] allowed us to do ... was really elevate justice conversations. What is racial equity? What is health equity? What is language justice? Why are they important?

- Community Partner

More broadly, the CFS initiative helped grow statewide understanding of hunger as a structural issue rather than an individual failing. A partner explained, *"now more than ever before, there's a broader audience of stakeholders across the state of Colorado that realize hunger is not a condition of personal choice."* This shift in framing, toward viewing hunger through the lens of systems and social determinants, represents a critical mindset change that can unlock broader support for long-term solutions.

Overall, CHF's investments through the CFS initiative helped legitimize and amplify conversations that are critical to food justice. By aligning funding requirements with equity values, CHF enabled communities to name structural problems, question the status quo, and start building a shared vision for change rooted in awareness and accountability.



Strengthened Community Infrastructure

While few, CHF's Objective 1 investments outside of the CFS initiative strengthened physical and organizational infrastructure to support long-term, community solutions to food insecurity. Across these four sites, CHF grants enabled grantees to acquire and build critical assets that serve as the foundation for more sustainable and community-anchored food access work.

For example, grantees used CHF's flexible funding to secure land, facilities, and food system infrastructure that had long been identified as local priorities but were historically difficult to fund. One community partner reflected, *"we have the land now. ...So much funding doesn't let you buy land, ...but land is the basis of food systems, and land with water particularly."*

Similarly, funding was used to support the purchase of a community food center and commercial kitchen, enabling organizations to move away from temporary or rented spaces. The ability to secure permanent infrastructure gave organizations greater control, stability, and long-term potential to support food entrepreneurship, culturally relevant food preparation, and community events.

Partners also emphasized the regional significance of these assets: *"now we have huge critical infrastructure in our region."* While these facilities are still in the early phases of development, they represent an investment in long-term impact for these communities beyond the duration of CHF's direct support.

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There's clearly some local infrastructure that's being built that didn't exist that we'll find a way to survive probably, even if it's not quite at the same scale. Because I think you can do a local coalition at some level where there's still value that comes out of it, even if it's not heavily funded.

- Community Partner







Lessons Learned

CHF’s Objective 1 strategy successfully catalyzed local collaboration and community-led solutions to food insecurity by investing in coalitions and place-based efforts.

Several strategic choices, such as centering lived experience, supporting language justice, and offering tailored technical assistance, contributed to strong progress in many communities.

These investments created the conditions for deeper local coordination, leadership development, and more equitable approaches to food access. At the same time, persistent challenges around sustainability, funding models, and uneven coalition readiness revealed important areas for reflection and growth.

Lessons Learned

-  **What helped coalitions thrive**
-  **Lived experience at the center**
-  **Power of tailored support**
-  **Sustainability as a persistent challenge**



The Right Conditions: What Helped Coalitions Thrive

Local coalitions in the CFS initiative were most successful when several enabling conditions came together, particularly strong and stable leadership, organizational infrastructure, and fundraising capacity.

Leadership: While these factors made a difference, success was not limited to coalitions with ample resources. Instead, it was the presence of experienced, community-rooted leaders with the ability to navigate systems, build trust, and maintain momentum that set coalitions apart. Leaders who combined technical skills with emotional intelligence and a deep understanding of local dynamics were able to translate community needs into sustained action. For newer or less experienced leads, technical assistance played a critical role in helping build capacity, take informed risks, and grow into their leadership roles over time. In this sense, success was not about a coalition's starting point but about the supports in place to help them grow and adapt.




The relative professional capacity and emotional equilibrium of the project lead is directly related to the functionality and capacity of the coalition to get good work done. In other words, the more seasoned the project lead, the more likely the coalition was to make progress because the project lead knows how to work, create an effective coalition. That was a critical indicator. Which meant that earlier career people that we were coaching needed a lot more tools, needed more reassurance, needed reframing, because the first thing they would do, which I see a lot with young women, is doubt themselves and blame themselves.

- Community Partner

Organizational Infrastructure & Fundraising: Coalitions embedded in nonprofits with development support and administrative stability had a stronger foundation from which to pursue long-term work. For instance, one coalition led by a bilingual executive director with years of community leadership experience and deep local ties was especially effective at aligning funding with community vision and operationalizing culturally grounded strategies. However, the presence of infrastructure alone was not sufficient; what made the difference was how it was leveraged to advance shared goals and center community voice. Even smaller or newer coalitions made significant strides when they had access to timely, tailored technical assistance and the ability to engage in genuine power-sharing with local partners.

Additional Success Factors: Across coalitions, additional success factors included:

- Having a lead organization or individual with a learning mindset
- A willingness to engage community members as thought partners rather than simply program participants

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- Ability to understand their place within the broader local food system and political landscape and to strategically engage influential partners such as Hunger Free Colorado or public agencies
 - Forging strong relationships across the ecosystem amplified impact and the ability to advocate for systems-level changes.

Despite these strengths, coalitions faced challenges in balancing internal development with external systems-change goals. Barriers often emerged around coalition functioning, resistance to new ways of working, and difficulties in sustaining inclusive engagement over time.

Lived Experience at the Center


CHF's strategic emphasis on centering lived experience in Objective 1 proved to be one of the most impactful components of the CFS initiative.

By requiring coalitions to meaningfully include community members with firsthand experience of food insecurity, the initiative helped reshape who was included in food systems change.

Across nearly all participating coalitions, community members were not only invited to the table but compensated for their time, offered translation and interpretation services, and supported through leadership development opportunities. **These practices led to more inclusive, authentic coalitions that were better equipped to identify and act on local priorities.** In several cases, individuals with lived experience took on visible leadership roles, informed strategy, and advised formal food system actors. These were clear signs of a shifting power dynamic rooted in equity and community ownership.

The CFS initiative supported this work through targeted technical assistance through Terra Soma that helped coalitions adopt inclusive practices and navigate challenges. Coalitions implemented participatory action research, formed subcommittees or cohorts for Spanish-speaking leaders, and created paid roles or volunteer stipends for community members. Many also altered their structures to facilitate greater access, changing meeting times, offering childcare and transportation support, and intentionally partnering with community-based organizations to increase representation and trust. **These efforts helped transform coalitions into spaces where diverse lived experience was not just present, but integral to decision making and systems change.**

However, progress varied across coalitions, and partners faced barriers that limited full inclusion. Recruiting bilingual staff and diverse leadership remained difficult for some, and high turnover or underdeveloped infrastructure delayed efforts to engage community members meaningfully. Coalition development takes time, and in balancing internal transformation with external systems change, some groups struggled to maintain momentum. In more entrenched environments, certain institutions resisted power sharing, questioning the legitimacy of nontraditional leaders or defaulting



to hierarchies that marginalized lived experience. These tensions highlight the need for sustained capacity building, tailored support, and long-term investment in the infrastructure that enables inclusive participation.

Despite the challenges, the emphasis on lived experience laid critical groundwork for more just, resilient, and community-driven food systems, and offered a replicable model for other funders seeking to center equity in systems change.

Language Justice

As part of centering lived experience, a key success was the targeted support for language justice, which helped ensure more equitable and inclusive coalition spaces. Early in the CFS initiative, Terra Soma identified widespread barriers among grantees related to language access; most coalitions were English-dominant and lacked resources to provide interpretation, translation, or support for multilingual participation. In response, CHF acted quickly and collaboratively: they asked Terra Soma to conduct a needs assessment, which confirmed the gap, and then provided supplemental funding to all grantees to integrate interpretation and translation into their coalition work. The following year, CHF increased grant amounts significantly to ensure coalitions could embed language justice practices more deeply.

This support not only equipped coalitions to hold effective multilingual meetings, but also catalyzed broader conversations around equity, racial justice, and the social determinants of health, topics that had previously been sidelined in monolingual, English-only environments. As a result, coalitions became more accessible and responsive to diverse community voices, particularly among monolingual Spanish speakers and recent immigrants, laying the groundwork for more inclusive and community-informed food systems work.


Power of Tailored Support

CHF's provision of TA through a dedicated provider, Terra Soma, was widely regarded as one of the most effective strategies within the CFS initiative. Coalitions consistently emphasized that the TA they received was transformative, not just in content, but in its approach. Terra Soma brought deep expertise in food systems, equity, and coalition building, coupled with a highly relational, responsive, and consultative style. This enabled coalitions to make real-time progress on their goals while building internal capacity for longer-term systems change. Monthly meetings between CHF and Terra Soma allowed for responsive coordination and problem-solving, helping tailor support to the specific developmental stage, community context, and emerging needs of each coalition.



[Terra Soma] technical assistance kicked ass. That technical assistance changed my life as a professional. That particular team was so knowledgeable and deeply rooted in food systems work and literally has changed the way that I approach food systems development in community, hands down.

- Community Partner



What set this TA apart was its ability to adapt across coalitions of varying ages, capacities, and community dynamics.

Coalitions newer to systems work or undergoing organizational transitions received foundational support in establishing governance, structure, and strategy, while more mature coalitions, particularly those with historically white-led leadership, benefited from DEI and power-sharing training that helped shift internal culture and coalition composition. Terra Soma's ability to respond to linguistic and cultural needs, particularly for Spanish-speaking Latino coalition members, was especially noted; five of the eight coalitions received Spanish-language TA by the initiative's final years. This tailored approach, rather than a "one-size-fits-all," was critical for coalition success, recognizing where each coalition or individual partner was on their systems change journey.

Terra Soma's openness to feedback in this area was also valued by the CHF team. Early in the investment, CHF acknowledged a misalignment between the demographics of coalition leadership, mainly Latina women, and the initial composition of the Terra Soma TA team. This promoted the intentional inclusion of bilingual, bicultural staff to improve both cultural and linguistic alignment. However, some partners noted that Terra Soma could have further strengthened their work by deepening awareness of local nuances and pre-existing community dynamics.

The consistent praise for Terra Soma across the initiative underscores that high-quality, culturally responsive, and adaptive technical support is not just a supplement, but a cornerstone to successful coalition-based systems change.

Convenings


Annual coalition convenings became a highly valued component of the technical assistance offered through the CFS initiative, eventually providing critical space for peer connection, learning, and reflection. Grantees appreciated the chance to step back from daily demands, share successes and struggles, and gain insights from other communities working toward similar goals. These gatherings created a rare and energizing opportunities for grassroots leaders to reflect, build relationships, and feel a sense of solidarity across the state.



The people are incredible, and folks on the front lines at the grassroots don't get a ton of time to just sit back and reflect and learn some things and have a good time.

- Community Partner

Notably, peer convening was not part of the initial design of the CFS initiative. CHF's early approach to technical assistance was intentionally tailored to the emerging needs of individual coalitions, many of whom were still focused on internal development and not yet positioned for cross-site learning. As coalition capacity and appetite for connection grew, CHF adapted its approach, introducing the first statewide convening in 2021 and deepening opportunities for peer learning over time.



While these annual convenings were impactful, grantees expressed a desire for more frequent and structured opportunities, such as communities of practice or learning cohorts, that could support ongoing exchange and collaboration. The evolution of these gatherings reflects both the emergent nature of CHF’s strategy and the growing readiness of coalitions to engage in shared learning as a key lever for systems change.

Sustainability as a Persistent Challenge

Sustainability for the local food coalitions funded under Objective 1 will require intentional strategy, long-term investment, and stronger coordination across efforts.

While the CFS initiative catalyzed deep community engagement and capacity-building, many coalitions faced the challenge of maintaining momentum without continued financial support.


Sustaining the work will depend on more than passion; it will require a clear vision, diversified funding streams, shared ownership, and ongoing infrastructure for coordination, communication, and leadership. Several coalitions have taken important steps in this direction, such as developing local food system plans that could distribute responsibility across multiple partners. These plans offer a promising framework for organizing work in the absence of a single backbone entity, but they must be accompanied by strategies for implementation, resource mobilization, and role clarity across organizations.



A number of the coalitions have either already completed or are moving toward creating a food system plan for their community. That's a good idea because those are the kinds of things where you can chunk it up and say, 'this organization could take on this priority. That organization could take on that priority.' The coalition doesn't necessarily need to have all the resources to execute those things, but the coalitions will need to be thinking about how they're formulating their implementation strategy.

- Community Partner

Some conditions for sustainability were successfully seeded during the CFS initiative, such as increased local leadership, strengthened partnerships, and expanded engagement with community members. However, critical gaps remain. Many coalitions would benefit from greater support in building governance structures, financial planning, and communication capacity to manage the logistics and coordination that collaborative work requires. Grantees noted that technical assistance could have more explicitly supported sustainability, including financial sustainability planning, particularly as multi-year funding tapered off. Coalition leads also flagged the need for mental health support and continued leadership development to manage the weight of long-term



systems change work. Without a sustained focus on resources and equipping coalitions for these ongoing needs, there is a risk that progress made under the CFS initiative will lose momentum.

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If [CHF] knew that the well was going to run dry, part of the technical assistance grantees should have received is becoming sustainable financially. That should have been a requirement of the second implementation grant funding. What is your financial sustainability plan? ... I'm not sure how many grantees have anything left or would benefit from having invested a little more time ... to say, 'the flow of resources is going to stop, and as a result, we need to be prepared.'

- Community Partner

Funding

Coalitions encountered substantial challenges with securing funding to sustain their work, particularly as dedicated support from CHF neared its end. A central difficulty lied in the fact that it is “*really hard to fund coalitions for coalition’s sake.*” Many philanthropic institutions prioritize discrete, tangible projects over ongoing investments in coalition infrastructure or grassroots, community-driven priorities. While some coalitions have gained traction and visibility through their successes, this often placed them in a more competitive and resource-constrained funding environment, where sustaining operations required a more strategic approach to storytelling and alignment with traditional funder interests. As one observer noted, funders may be more inclined to support specific initiatives, such as coalition’s joint purchasing agreements, rather than broader systems change work that coalitions are undertaking. Moreover, the current political and economic climate has heightened uncertainty, with fewer funders willing to support work that challenges dominant narratives around individual responsibility for food insecurity. Without a coordinated strategy for financial sustainability and stronger community support to “pay the bill,” there is concern that much of the progress made through these coalitions could stall or fall away entirely.

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Several of these coalitions are going to run into challenges when the funding sunsets, unless they spend a concerted effort now thinking about how they tell their story and understanding how that story will land with the kind of funders that might be amendable to funding their work.

- Community Partner



Strategic Considerations

While the Objective 1 investments yielded meaningful progress in coalition development and community engagement, partners also surfaced key considerations that could strengthen future efforts.

Strengthen Consistent Communication Across the CFS Initiative: Partners emphasized the need for centralized, consistent communication, such as a monthly update or shared platform, to reduce confusion, align messaging, and prevent contradictory guidance across Program Officers. A more systematic communication strategy would have helped ensure shared understanding and coordination.

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When you have an initiative, consistent centralized communication on a monthly basis would've been helpful for the grantees. ... There were times where some type of communication in some sort of mechanism ... might've been helpful. Because [CHF was] very accessible on hand. Then sometimes there were differences in communication that came down to the communications approach was the Program Officer was the primary point of contact, but sometimes it was a game of telephone. What one Program Officer told one group was different than what I had been told and was different from what this other Program Officer said.

- Community Partner

Establish Clear Shared Goals and Common Metrics: Grantees expressed a desire for clearer articulation of shared goals and harmonized success metrics across the CFS initiative. Without a defined baseline or collective targets, grantees were unsure how their efforts contributed to statewide impact. A more structured approach to defining, tracking, and reflecting on shared outcomes could have enhanced alignment and learning.

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None of us really had a solid baseline. We didn't ever come together to say, these are the shared overall goals of this program. ... We as grantees don't know if we contributed to portfolio level change from [CHF's] eyes. ... What targets were we working towards? How did we define them? Why was measurement different across every single group?

- Community Partner

Ensure Learning Flows Both Ways: Grantees felt that valuable insights shared with CHF were not always disseminated back to peers. More transparent knowledge-sharing from CHF to the field could have prevented duplicative mistakes and strengthened coalition effectiveness.



[CHF] was the tree and we were the branches. There was all this fabulous information being shared back to [CHF], but not necessarily out to the grantees. The ability for peer-to-peer learning was a missed opportunity. A lot of us were making the same mistakes.

- Community Partner

Focus on Effectiveness and Continuous Improvement: Partners suggested more attention should be given to understanding what makes some coalitions more effective than others. Identifying and sharing success factors could strengthen the overall impact of the CFS initiative and ensure support is tailored to maximize results.

Objective 2

(a) Increase participation in public food assistance programs among Coloradans who are eligible for them.

(b) Reduce barriers to public food assistance enrollment and utilization.



Objective 2

Increase participation in public food assistance programs among Coloradans who are eligible for them.



Reduce barriers to public food assistance enrollment and utilization.

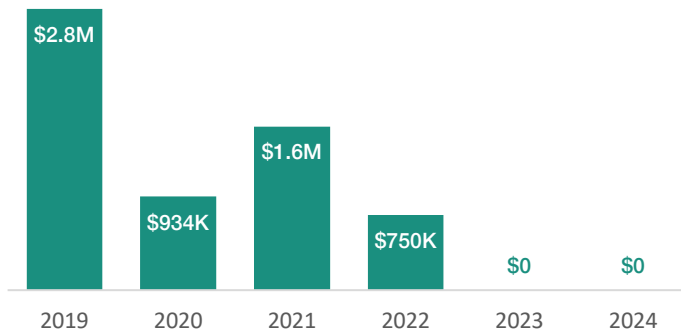
<p>Challenge: Community members face significant barriers in enrollment and utilization of public food assistance. Federal resources to support outreach, as well as training for existing partners, are lacking.</p>	<p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outreach will increase enrollment so that Colorado is the top 10 for SNAP and WIC enrollment (early)• Outreach is not enough for enrollment and utilization we need to reduce barriers (second stage)	<p>Expected Outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outreach activities increase as a result of more federal and state resources• SNAP, WIC, and school meal barriers (including stigma) are reduced• More people are enrollment and utilization public food assistance
<p>Hypotheses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• If we collaborate with government, nonprofit, and community entities to increase outreach and enrollment for food assistance and nutrition programs, then we will increase participation in public food assistance programs among Coloradans who are eligible for them.• If we influence and wield power with policymakers and state agencies to reduce barriers to SNAP and WIC enrollment and utilization, then we will reduce barriers to public food assistance enrollment and utilization.		

Total Investment in Objective 2

\$6,132,587

6 grants
2 donations
5 organizations

Investments in Objective 2 by Year





Summary of Activities and Investments

From 2019 to 2024, Objective 2 of the FAS strategy – reducing barriers to enrollment and utilization of public food assistance – shifted in focus and approach. Initially, CHF aimed to boost enrollment in SNAP, WIC, and federal child nutrition programs, aligning with Blueprint Goals 4 and 5, transitioning to a focus on community-driven solutions to reduce barriers.

The early focus was on expanding outreach and education, based on the assumption that increasing outreach alone would drive uptake. Early investments centered on state agency partnerships and large-scale outreach efforts intended to connect eligible Coloradans with benefits and move Colorado into the top tier nationally for enrollment.

However, as the work unfolded, it became clear that outreach alone could not overcome entrenched structural barriers. Enrollment in SNAP and WIC remained relatively flat, prompting a shift in strategy. Feedback from community partners revealed that the real barriers were rooted in outdated administrative systems, lack of multilingual access, and low cultural responsiveness. In response, CHF pivoted from a top-down, systems-oriented approach to one centered on community-led innovation and systems advocacy. Rather than continuing to invest heavily in state-level partnerships, which proved difficult to influence due to bureaucracy and limited capacity, CHF increasingly supported grassroots solutions rooted in lived experience.

“

We had to try to better understand why [people weren't enrolling in public food assistance programs], what was it that really was at the heart of people not enrolling in these programs. At that point as a foundation, we're also evolving ourselves to be more community-informed and community-centric.

- CHF Staff

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We started veering away from the idea altogether that increasing enrollment and removing even these barriers to public food assistance programs was actually the best approach to address food security in Colorado. We hadn't had a lot of success in changing those systems. Those systems were pretty entrenched.

- CHF Staff

Objective 2 investments included: support for the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to develop and implement a three-year plan aligned with Blueprint Goal 5; expanded SNAP outreach and application assistance programs leveraging federal match funds; and a pioneering afterschool meal program that reduced the “time tax” on BIPOC and low-income families, while generating data for future replication. Additionally, earlier investments from 2015–2018 included five grants focused on enrollment efforts and 12 WIC Innovation grants awarded in 2017. These early efforts laid groundwork for experimentation, but over time, CHF questioned whether enrollment rates alone were an adequate indicator of success, especially given how many eligible families still faced insurmountable access barriers.

As CHF deepened its food justice and systems-change lens, it prioritized emerging community-driven models such as Bondadosa and the Colorado Food Cluster. These pilots, while still maturing, offered critical learning about the complexities of implementing culturally responsive, tech-enabled food delivery and online ordering systems. Simultaneously, local coalitions and the Blueprint, part of the Objective 1 strategy, began pushing for changes in public benefit access, from removing discriminatory local practices to pressuring counties for more equitable SNAP processes, thus collapsing the silo between Objectives 1 and 2. For example, one coalition achieved local changes to the administration of public benefits by organizing around lived experience and applying public pressure, an impact that surpassed the reach of earlier state-level interventions.

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Recognizing that the Blueprint is also working on removing those barriers and they're working on increasing alignment, all of that.

- CHF Staff

While Objective 2 received the smallest financial investment of the FAS strategy, it delivered powerful strategic insights. CHF learned that enduring systems change is most effectively driven by



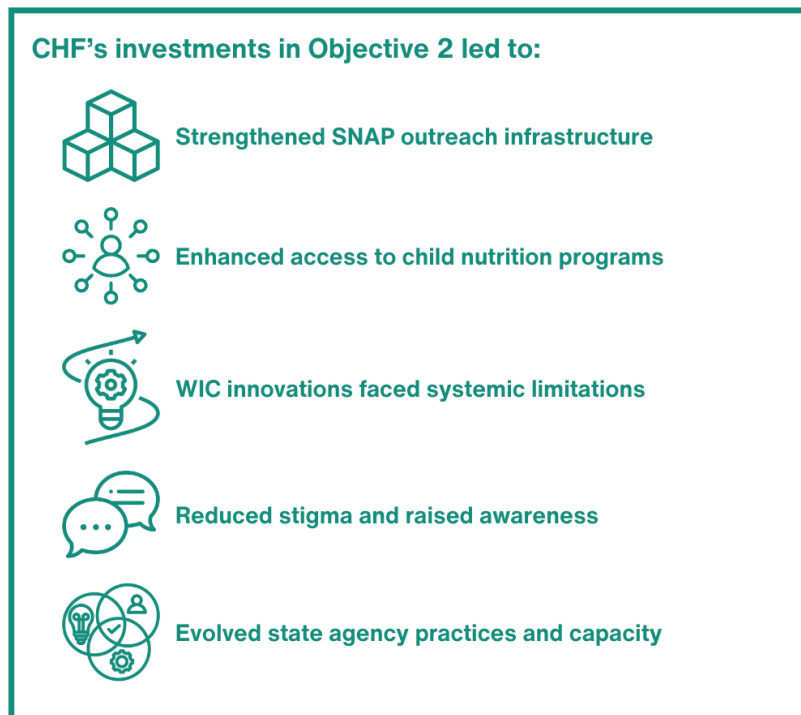
community leadership, not institutional outreach alone. This learning contributed to their shift toward power-building and relational organizing, confirming that the best path to equitable access is one rooted in lived experience, community context, and sustained local pressure. Going forward, CHF recognized the need to better connect community grantees with policy influence and to fund cross-sector partnerships capable of moving innovations like online WIC ordering from pilot to policy.

Objective 2 Outcomes

CHF's investments under Objective 2 aimed to improve access to and participation in public food assistance programs like SNAP, WIC, and school meals.

While these efforts contributed to modest improvements, such as bolstering outreach infrastructure, supporting innovations, and raising awareness, the overall outcomes were limited.

Many of the positive shifts observed were influenced by broader systemic factors beyond CHF's control, including pandemic-era policy changes and state-led efforts, while systemic limitations and barriers significantly slowed progress. These constraints, combined with the incremental nature of progress, prompted a strategic shift toward more community-driven advocacy approaches.





Strengthened SNAP Outreach Infrastructure

CHF played a role in helping to establish the infrastructure, relationships, and tools necessary for ongoing outreach success.

Through its investments under Objective 2, CHF played a role in building and strengthening Colorado’s SNAP outreach infrastructure, contributing to an increase in SNAP enrollment during the investment period.

Although multiple external factors, including federal policy changes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased need, also influenced enrollment, CHF’s support was recognized as a catalyst for capacity building and program expansion.

CHF provided critical financial support to the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) and its outreach partners during the program’s formative years. This investment helped scale the SNAP Outreach program, stabilize its early growth, and support the development of key tools and materials that continue to benefit partners inside and outside the formal outreach network.



[CHF] was extremely helpful at the time because [SNAP] Outreach was new. ... Having that additional financial support for the Outreach [program] was very helpful in the beginning. After time with them, then we were able to get some state funds, which allowed us to reduce that outside dependency. At the same time, we were really encouraging our Outreach partners to embrace how the federal program for Outreach was created, which is for the nonprofit partners to bring forward the match.

- State Agency

While it is difficult to attribute statewide SNAP enrollment increases to any single factor, data suggest the investment period aligned with an upward trend. Program administrators reported that CHF’s support helped bridge critical gaps before state funding was secured and encouraged nonprofit partners to engage more deeply with the federal SNAP Outreach match model. One administrator noted that CHF “*helped us grow and launch Outreach into a more sustainable program,*” underscoring the foundational role of early philanthropic investment in fostering durable infrastructure.



Participation in SNAP has significantly increased through the years that we had the relationship with [CHF] and after. In fact, we have a large amount of Coloradans on SNAP than we have ever had, and even the ratio of potentially eligible to eligible has increased. I do think when we had that partnership with them, they did help support those efforts. It's very hard to piece out exactly where that piece was, because there were multiple partners and we'd had some policy changes. ... I do think that having that contractual relationship when we did with them helped.

- State Agency

Enhanced Access to Child Nutrition Programs

Through its Objective 2 investments, CHF provided support to make Colorado's child nutrition programs more accessible, culturally relevant, and responsive to local needs.

Strategic support focused on strengthening the infrastructure and appeal of school and summer meal programs, with an emphasis on reducing stigma, enhancing quality, and improving outreach, particularly in rural and under-resourced districts. These investments not only provided tools and training for implementers but also created a statewide platform for promoting participation in child nutrition programs in both English and Spanish.

Key activities included the development of statewide branding and promotional materials aimed at normalizing and destigmatizing participation in child nutrition programs. This included animated educational videos, promotional materials featuring real food service staff, and translated content to ensure linguistic inclusivity. This funding also supported a series of sub-awards to local school districts, allowing them to implement tailored projects that enhanced the quality of their meal programs, ranging from new kitchen equipment to student-led taste tests. Additionally, technology mini-grants supported streamlined administrative processes, particularly for mobile applications tied to summer food programming.

To further build local capacity, CHF's investments supported cohort-based "master classes" on topics such as program operations, financial management, and farm-to-school models. Regional summits tailored specifically for small rural school districts also proved highly impactful, creating space for peer learning and focused problem-solving around challenges unique to rural contexts.

While statewide structural changes, such as the passage of Healthy School Meals for All, ultimately drove major enrollment increases, CHF's investments helped lay the groundwork by elevating visibility, building capacity, and reducing participation barriers.



WIC Innovations Faced Systemic Limitations

While CHF made targeted investments to support innovation and outreach in the WIC program under Objective 2, these efforts were ultimately limited in their impact due to entrenched systemic barriers. These projects sought to pilot online ordering and delivery services for WIC participants, an innovation with strong potential to improve access for families, especially those facing transportation or mobility challenges.

Despite early enthusiasm and local capacity to implement these pilots, critical structural issues within the WIC system proved difficult to overcome.

Key barriers included outdated state infrastructure, limited funding thresholds for pilot projects, and technological bottlenecks dominated by two major benefit processing vendors, CDP and FIS. These companies tightly control the backend systems that manage WIC transactions, making it extremely difficult for community-based organizations or even state partners to test or scale alternative models. Funded pilots ran into repeated roadblocks related to payment processing and data integration, such as the inability to place holds on EBT cards for future benefit redemption, a feature common in other service sectors but unavailable through WIC. These technical limitations not only prevented successful implementation but also highlighted broader structural challenges in bringing WIC services into the modern era.



Not as successful was the WIC delivery pilot. ... As a small organization, we were able to gain access to some insights and information that shed light into why the state continues to struggle in processing WIC benefits and we're unable to process them online today. Maybe next year. I actually don't know if that's every going to happen.

- Community Partner

While CHF's support enabled community partners to explore innovative approaches, the lack of deep technical expertise and leverage over state-level procurement and IT systems emerged as a key gap. As one partner noted, *"the level of experience and expertise [needed] does not exist within philanthropy, and it does not exist within the community organizations."* Without greater investment in upstream system reform and more influence over vendor relationships and state technology systems, these pilots remained aspirational rather than transformational.



Particular to WIC, where did we miss the mark? We funded these government agencies for procurement and then we funded the nonprofit organizations who are working to create access. Then the in-between how that data actually transfers the reimbursements, how the procurement actually happens, what are the fees, and what are the contracts, and what are the gateways – that level of experience and expertise is gone. Does not exist within philanthropy, and it does not exist within community organizations. It exists within the state agencies that are part of the Blueprint to End Hunger but there are no community organizations who are banging against the door with CDP and FIS to change that. They're just taking the FIS and CDP payment processors and they're playing the game.

- Community Partner

To fully realize the promise of innovation in WIC service delivery, future efforts will likely need to include cross-sector collaboration, robust policy advocacy, and significantly greater resources.

Reduced Stigma and Raised Awareness

CHF evolved their strategy in Objective 2 with an increased focus on reducing barriers to enrollment and utilization of public food assistance programs.

Most of the funded barrier-reduction work across public food assistance programs focused on reducing stigma and improving awareness of programs such as SNAP, WIC, and school meal initiatives.


Outreach efforts across the priority aimed to counter misinformation, increase understanding of program eligibility, and normalize participation, especially in communities that have historically faced shame or misunderstanding around food assistance.

Grantees developed messaging and promotional materials to make programs more approachable and widely understood. For example, school nutrition partners created bilingual video content, branding campaigns, and translated materials to reduce the stigma associated with school meals and emphasize the value of nutritional quality of the food served. SNAP outreach providers focused on education, disseminating clear information about eligibility and countering persistent myths, such as the idea that applying for SNAP



One of the main things, [SNAP Outreach] is not only about helping people apply, but it's also helping to get the word out on how to apply and also to try to dispel myths about the SNAP program. Those are some of the barriers that we have identified is people not understanding what the program is, not knowing that they might be eligible.

- State Agency



takes resources away from others. Outreach partners also emphasized the entitlement nature of SNAP to help potential enrollees, particularly seniors, understand that their participation would not burden the system.

This emphasis on storytelling and destigmatization helped shift mindset and increase program awareness.

Partners observed that the most effective outreach not only improved understanding but also made public food programs feel less intimidating and more desirable. These efforts, when combined with broader shifts like the statewide Healthy School Meals for All policy, contributed to increased participation across several programs.

However, CHF and partners acknowledged that stigma and misinformation are only part of the puzzle. Structural and administrative barriers, such as complex application processes, technology limitations, burdensome verification requirements, and rigid stocking rules for food retailers, continue to limit access and utilization, particularly among BIPOC and immigrant communities. Practices that lacked cultural and linguistic relevance further compounded inequities in access.

Meaningful access requires simultaneous work on both perception and infrastructure.

Evolved State Agency Practices and Capacity

CHF's investments under Objective 2 played a role in enhancing the operational capacity, communications strategies, and overall effectiveness of state agencies in public food assistance programs.

These targeted grants enabled state teams to undertake projects beyond their typical compliance and regulatory functions, filling critical gaps in outreach, branding, and training that otherwise would have remained unaddressed due to limited time, staffing, and resources.



A lot of the goal of the grant was to reduce stigma around eating school lunch. A lot of that promotion, the change in branding, it did have some effect on that. ... A lot of this work was geared towards reducing that stigma and promoting the quality of school meals, why we do what we do, what's in a meal, why you should participate and what you get when you do. It helped get the word out for programming around school meals have value and they're healthy.

- State Agency



When I rattle off this list of things that we were able to do with that grant funding, I don't think our team would have the funding or the capacity to create that style of programming that's a little bit outside of our compliance and what we're really here for. This funding allowed for a team of people to come in and focus on all these extra pieces that have this impact that our team may or may not have had the funding or the time for outside of it.

- State Agency

Agencies reporting that the funding allowed them to create consistent, statewide messaging and training tools that continue to be used beyond the life of the grant. One of the most valued outcomes was the development of short, animated educational videos and branded outreach materials. These products improved internal efficiency by standardizing communication and training processes while also enhancing public-facing materials. Agencies have since continued to use these formats, signaling a lasting impact on how they engage both program participants and implementing partners.

Importantly, agency leaders acknowledged that the funding not only supported implementation but also revealed underlying gaps they had not previously recognized, such as inconsistencies in branding, outdated outreach materials, or a lack of tools tailored to diverse local contexts. The funding helped surface and address these issues in ways that now benefit programming statewide.

Key Contextual Factors Shaping Public Food Assistance Outcomes

Several external forces significantly influenced public food assistance enrollment and access in Colorado, underscoring that policy, leadership, and broader economic conditions are as critical as outreach. One of the most impactful drivers was the state's 2018-2019 decision to **raise the SNAP income eligibility threshold from 130% to 200% of the federal poverty level**. This policy shift expanded access far more effectively than awareness campaigns alone. Similarly, **structural program improvements**, like the statewide expansion of free school meals through Healthy School Meals for All and increased WIC produce allocations, had a direct, sustained impact on participation by removing eligibility and benefit adequacy barriers.

The **COVID-19 pandemic served as both a stress test and catalyst**, dramatically increasing enrollment in SNAP and WIC due to heightened need and temporary federal flexibilities. These changes brought many new households into public programs and



What actually increased enrollment participation was just making [school meals] free [through passing Healthy School Meals for All]. Sometimes you structurally need to change the program and that's how you get people to use it. Like WIC, making a permanent increase in fruit and veggie allocation, that's what you do to increase participation. And you advocate to increase eligibility.

- Community Partner



accelerated modernization efforts. Where some state and county agencies demonstrated strong leadership, communities saw more responsive and accessible systems. This progress was further amplified by advocacy organizations that pushed for user-friendly reforms and held agencies accountable to community needs.

However, the conditions that drove these improvements were not permanent. As pandemic-era funding waned, outreach capacity declined, and enrollment momentum tapered despite community need. Efforts aimed at

increasing participation could not overcome **deeply rooted structural and administrative barriers** without accompanying policy change. **Rising housing costs, inflation, and broader economic instability** further intensified demand for food assistance, making sustained investments and systems-level coordination even more essential.



Some of [the increase in enrollment] is the advocacy that [partners] have done with state agencies. ... The coordination and the pushing from the advocacy community to make the program the best. ... Advocates have the dialogue and continue to push at the edges around the program in a way that's really necessary.





- Community Partner

Lessons Learned

Over time, CHF refined its approach to improving access to public food assistance programs in response to the structural complexity of public systems and the mixed results of state-level investments.

Several effective strategies emerged, including investing in community advocacy and supporting trusted intermediaries to drive reform from both within and outside government. At the same time, the work revealed persistent challenges, such as limited flexibility in public systems, gaps in communication and planning, and the tensions inherent in blending private funding with public implementation.

Lessons Learned

-  Limits of state-led systems change
-  Community advocacy as a catalyst for public food assistance reform
-  Navigating the shift from state to community support
-  Trade-offs of private funding in public systems



The Limits of State-Led Systems Change

The Objective 2 strategy, which focused on increasing participation in public food assistance programs and reducing barriers to enrollment, was perceived as falling short of its intended impact.

Despite significant investment in outreach, program innovation, and partnerships with state agencies, both CHF staff and community partners agreed that enrollment numbers remained relatively flat, and the overall theory of change did not hold.

Several early assumptions behind the strategy were challenged in practice. Notably, **initial investments aimed at driving systems change from within (e.g., funding state agencies) were hampered by top-down bureaucracy, limited agility, and federal constraints that diluted equity efforts.** While the intention to work through public systems was sound, the realities of institutional inertia and regulatory complexity meant that progress was slow and often incremental.

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I don't know if anything [in Objective 2] was effective. There was some movement and the state agencies were willing to try things, so that was great. ... I think there was interest in doing things differently, yet, what it seemed to take to make those changes stick or to really understand were the changes substantial enough to justify investments.

- CHF Staff

Staff also reflected on having **underestimated the complexity and time intensity of systems-level innovations.** Efforts like expanding food delivery or enabling online ordering proved to be long-term undertakings, requiring cross-sector alignment, policy change, and new infrastructure. These were important but ambitious bets, and the timeline needed to see transformative results was longer than anticipated.

While CHF's approach of allowing grantees flexibility and avoiding micromanagement was praised, particularly in how funds to CDHS leveraged federal matching, questions emerged about the sustainability and impact of those investments. As one staff member put it, there was uncertainty about whether the innovations that emerged were meaningful or scalable enough to justify continued investment.

Many partners observed that SNAP outreach and related efforts made a difference on the margins but failed to reach most eligible residents or drive the kind of systemic impact envisioned. Some questioned whether public food assistance should be the central focus at all, given that benefits remain underfunded, eligibility rules remain restrictive, and the broader public



safety net remains unstable. One partner noted that helping people access resources that are themselves inadequate does little to address the root causes of food insecurity.



Help people get to the resources, but make sure the resources have the capacity to do that. You can get people enrolled in SNAP. Now, the federal government is going to cut SNAP. You can get people enrolled in WIC and the federal government's going to cut those programs and those programs aren't accessible to everybody for a whole boatload of reasons. ... Those aren't solving the problem. They're helping people get through the day-to-day.

- Community Partner


These reflections suggest that Objective 2's strategy may have been too narrowly focused on technical solutions and individual-level barriers. Additionally, working with federal nutrition programs at a state-level leaves the work susceptible to federal changes. **Without deeper structural and national reform or bolder alignment with equity-focused goals, the strategy struggled to deliver lasting, scalable impact.** Future efforts may benefit from coupling systems innovation with more community-driven approaches that build power and resilience outside of public systems alone.

Community Advocacy as a Catalyst for Public Food Assistance Reform

As CHF implemented Objective 2, it became evident that community-driven advocacy was a more effective pathway to impact than top-down systems reform alone. Initial investments in state-led innovation encountered significant challenges.

In contrast, investments in local coalitions and field-building efforts like the Blueprint under Objective 1 emerged as more agile and effective.

Local coalition-led advocacy demonstrated the power of lived experience and on-the-ground leadership to drive practice-level change. These coalitions achieved results that state-level pilots could not, such as influencing local case management processes and creating pressure for administrative reforms. This led CHF to reassess its approach, recognizing that building community power and investing in local leadership often yielded “*more bang for your buck*” than higher-level policy experiments alone. It also underscored how Objective 1 and Objective 2 were inherently interconnected.



The Blueprint played a pivotal intermediary role in translating community priorities into policy and administrative reform. Through sustained support, CHF enabled the Blueprint to pursue both high-visibility wins and critical behind-the-scenes systems work. Legislative achievements included securing \$3.5 million in ARPA funds to modernize SNAP processing and advancing utility deductions that increased benefit levels. Simultaneously, the Blueprint improved user access through technical strategies like enhancing dual enrollment in PEAK, expanding telephonic signature capacity, and creating toolkits to support summer and afterschool meal access. This combination of policy influence and technical implementation was essential in a context where CHF had stepped back from direct engagement with state agencies, and highlighted the Blueprint’s role as a trusted, steady bridge between government and community advocates.

Over time, CHF began to see that effective systems change required more than formal partnerships or technical pilots; **it required sustained community voice, relational organizing, and embedded advocacy.** Investments in community-rooted innovations like Bondadosa and the Colorado Food Cluster offered critical learning, even when outcomes were still emerging. These experiments revealed the long-term nature of systems work and the gap between visionary ideas and feasible implementation within public bureaucracies. They also reaffirmed the importance of field-wide learning and highlighted the value of risk-taking as a philanthropic strategy, especially when aiming to shift systems toward equity and accessibility.

CHF’s evolution under Objective 2 reflects a deeper understanding of how change happens in complex systems: not through isolated structural tweaks, but through aligned, community-anchored strategies. By investing in advocacy infrastructure and elevating leaders with lived experience, CHF helped reframe food assistance reform as a community-driven process, not just a technical one. **The convergence of Objectives 1 and 2 offered a more holistic model for systems transformation, in which public program access was enhanced through local leadership, coalition power, and equity-centered design.**


Navigating the Shift from State to Community Support

Grantees experienced several challenges as CHF shifted away from supporting state agencies, particularly around communication, sustainability, and planning. While there was shared recognition that long-term sustainability would require leveraging other funding sources, some partners felt the transition lacked clarity and coordination, especially for those not directly funded by CHF but who were part of the implementation infrastructure. For example, SNAP Outreach partners noted that communication about the end of funding



[CHF] has been investing in [the Blueprint] to support some of these changes [to public food assistance programs] ... and some advocacy work. ... Through [the Blueprint’s] advocacy, we were able to procure three and a half million dollars in ARPA funding for legacy document imaging in order to beef up the state universal system that they’re in the process of developing based on Arapahoe [County’s] system. That wouldn’t have happened without [CHF’s] support.

- Community Partner



came indirectly, and sometimes belatedly, through state agencies, leaving them unprepared to fill the financial gap or develop replacement strategies. CHF staff even noted that a more gradual funding phase-out and clearer exit strategy would have allowed for better planning and possibly smoother handoffs to other funders or state support. Some also suggested that CHF could have used its influence to signal the importance of continued investment, such as by releasing a public brief or engaging with policymakers to champion ongoing funding.

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The other challenge was not so much about shifting away from it, but it was how we did it. Some of those agencies needed a more projected pathway for that funding to stop. It was what's going to happen is we're not going to stop funding altogether, but over the next two years, basically, the grants will become smaller and eventually they will go away. How do we actually exit those relationships as best we can?

- CHF Staff

Trade-Offs of Private Funding in Public Systems

Accepting private funding as a state agency offered both flexibility and complexity, creating a nuanced set of trade-offs. On one hand, agency staff appreciated the non-federal nature of CHF's support, which allowed for greater adaptability in program implementation. Unlike federal funds, which are often tightly restricted and slow to adjust, CHF's grants enabled state partners to pivot quickly, reallocate dollars, and respond to unforeseen delays, such as those caused by COVID, with minimal administrative burden. However, managing multiple funding streams, including state, federal, and philanthropic, introduced logistical challenges and competing expectations. Juggling different reporting requirements and outcome priorities added layers of complexity that some state agencies found burdensome. Additionally, longstanding relationships between CHF and agency staff created emotional and political tension when CHF became to pull back its financial support. These transitions required sensitive navigation, especially when staff within agencies were aligned with CHF's values but constrained by bureaucratic systems.

“

When you're dealing with state funds that have requirements, federal funds that have requirements, and then [CHF], which also wanted certain outcomes for the money, it was getting quite complicated to manage. It's been an easier program to manage with now we're only looking at mainly two funding streams because we just have the state and federal money.

- State Agency

Objective 3

(a) Support public-private partnerships that increase the prevalence of affordable healthy food and beverages.

(b) Increase prevalence of affordable, nutritious, culturally relevant food in communities that have historically lacked access.



Objective 3

Support public-private partnerships that increase the prevalence of affordable healthy food and beverages.



Increase prevalence of affordable, nutritious, culturally relevant food in communities that have historically lacked access.

<p>Challenge: There is a lack of retail sites that make affordable, nutritious food available in low-income communities and allow community members to share power within the food system.</p>	<p>Hypothesis: If we provide flexible funding and financing for healthy food retail in low-income communities, then we will support public-private partnerships that increase the prevalence of affordable, nutritious, culturally relevant food in communities that have historically lacked access.</p>
<p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food deserts exist in communities across the state and lead to obesity and other negative health outcomes (early) • Corner grocery stores increase access to healthy food in communities (early) • Nonprofit leaders do not have the ability to take on debt through loans (second stage) 	<p>Expected Outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased fresh food retail access • More retailers accept SNAP/WIC • Increased number of BIPOC-owned or -led fresh food retail sites that build power and community wealth

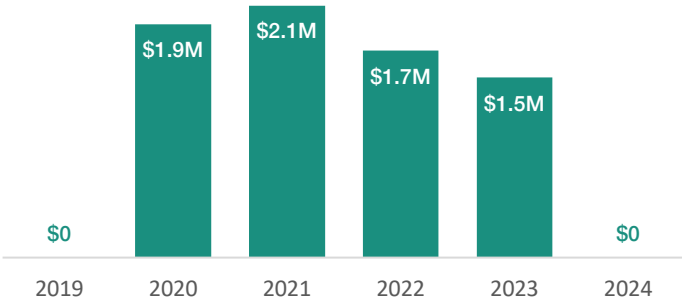
Total Investment in Objective 3

\$7,270,241

7 grants
1 PRI
1 donation

7 organizations

Investments in Objective 3 by Year





Summary of Activities and Investments

CHF's work under Objective 3 focused on increasing access to healthy, affordable, and culturally relevant food in underserved communities through investments in food retail infrastructure.

This work began with the creation of the **Colorado Fresh Food Financing Fund (CO4F)**, a public-private partnership inspired by a 2009 study linking limited supermarket access to poor health outcomes and informed by the Denver Food Access Task Force. CO4F was capitalized in 2012 with \$6.47 million from CHF, leveraging additional dollars from Piton Foundation, Kaiser Permanente Colorado, and the Colorado Trust for a total investment of approximately \$10 million. Its initial aim was to stimulate economic development and improve food access through loans and grants to grocery stores and other food retail outlets in underserved areas.

CO4F was administered through a partnership model: the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority (CHFA) managed larger loans, while Colorado Enterprise Fund (CEF) handled smaller, community-based projects, offering more tailored support to BIPOC-led and grassroots businesses. Outreach, eligibility screening, and technical assistance on the loan application were supported by Progressive Urban Management Associates (PUMA). By 2021, the fund had supported 29 projects through CHFA and 19 through CEF. While CO4F improved food access in several rural and low-income areas, it became clear over time that many visionary, community-led projects needed more flexible support than traditional loans could provide. Between 2020 and 2022, CHF pushed CHFA to adopt a stronger food justice lens, prioritizing culturally relevant food access, community ownership, and equity-focused evaluation criteria.

However, mismatches persisted between the financing tools available and the needs of community-rooted entrepreneurs. CEF proved to be more effective at engaging communities of color and providing technical assistance to support the success of the loan. Ultimately, CHF ended their funding for CO4F in 2023.

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Our money was not having the intended impact that we wanted to have in community. There was a lot of those factors that led us to the conclusion that [CO4F] was no longer an effective strategy for us, and that we could actually move those funds quicker and in ways that felt more aligned with our new priorities and our new directives if we did it in-house.

- CHF Staff

“

We had new capacities at the organization that we didn't originally have when we created [CO4F]. That ability to administer those funds and do it in a way that felt comprehensive and responsible and all of that, we had built that muscle internally by that time. We were able to use that muscle, but it meant that there was more work for us to do internally.

- CHF Staff

In response, CHF pivoted toward direct grantmaking to community-led food retail or infrastructure initiatives. Between 2020 and 2023, CHF awarded approximately \$5 million in grants to support grassroots projects grounded in food sovereignty, racial equity, and community ownership. These investments included:

- Montbello Organizing Committee's capital campaign for a community-designed grocery store integrated into a broader mixed-use development
- San Luis People's Market, a member- and employee-owned cooperative
- East Denver Food Sovereignty Initiative's efforts to launch a full-service, community-owned grocery store and kitchen for professional food processing, cooking equipment, and food safety training and certification
- Ute Mountain Ute's pilot to assess demand and financial viability for a culturally relevant food retail project grounded in Indigenous food systems

Though not all projects advanced to full implementation within the strategy window, they collectively demonstrated the value of centering community leadership, offering significant insights into the planning, technical assistance, and timeline needs of community capital development.

Through this objective, CHF learned that community ownership and culturally responsive food retail are one component to advancing food justice but require long-term investment, patience, and capacity-building beyond capital alone. The early emphasis on market-based solutions like grocery stores did not fully align with the complex realities of food systems and equity. By transitioning toward flexible, community-directed funding, CHF supported more sustainable and inclusive food access models. These efforts helped shift internal understanding of food retail as part of a broader ecosystem of health, housing, and economic development.

Objective 3 Outcomes

CHF's Objective 3 investments yielded limited tangible progress in expanding access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally relevant food in underserved communities.

Through targeted capital deployment, infrastructure improvements, and support for community-led initiatives, CHF helped lay the groundwork for longer-term food system transformation.

CHF's investments in Objective 3 led to:



Expanded access in underserved communities



Job creation and technical support



Community ownership and leadership



Infrastructure for long-term equity



Expanded Access in Underserved Communities

CO4F overall achieved some measurable outcomes in expanding food access for low-income, rural, and underserved populations. By late 2021, CO4F supported 29 projects through CHFA and an additional 19 through CEF, impacting a total of 35 locations. Collectively, these efforts deployed over \$6.89 million via CHFA and \$1.15 million through CEF.³¹ CHF funding contributed to these achievements but were not the sole investor in the work.

These investments enabled retailers to upgrade equipment, expand healthy inventory, and improve store infrastructure, enhancements that revitalized local neighborhoods and improved consumer access to healthier food options. In 2023, 83% of CEF investments served low fresh food access areas and 72% of borrowers were low-income, exceeding performance targets in these areas. However, rural targets were harder to meet, revealing an area for future improvement.

Job Creation and Technical Support

In addition to financial investments, **CO4F strengthened business resilience and local employment through technical assistance and job creation.** CEF deployed over \$650,000 to 18 retailers and delivered 541 hours of technical assistance, supporting grantees with planning, compliance, and implementation. These efforts helped create or retain 164 full-time jobs, a notable achievement given the ongoing challenges of operating in low-margin, under-resourced markets. While demographic tracking showed progress, increasing BIPOC borrower representation remains an opportunity for further equity advancement within the program's lending and support strategies.

Community Ownership and Leadership

Beyond CO4F, **other funded projects demonstrated significant gains in community ownership, leadership, and cultural alignment in food systems.** Grantees launched and operated community-led grocery markets, developed certified commercial kitchens, and expanded infrastructure that supported local food businesses and cooperatives. Projects like the San Luis People's Market reported success in replacing unhealthy products with culturally relevant foods, increasing revenue to support staff and reinvestment.

Many initiatives intentionally prioritized youth engagement, Indigenous knowledge-sharing, SNAP education, and resident leadership development, ensuring that food access was tied to broader empowerment and community health outcomes.

³¹ CO4F Annual Report, 2020-2021. Prepared by Progressive Urban Management (P.U.M.A.) & Colorado Housing and Finance Authority (CHFA).



Infrastructure for Long-Term Equity

Investments also helped build durable infrastructure (physical, organizational, and relational) for long-term community wealth. Projects supported the formation of steering committees, co-ops, and incubators, and several began planning new food retail spaces. Even in the face of challenges like staffing turnover or construction delays, grantees displayed resilience through capacity-building, adaptive project management, and ongoing community engagement.

Gaps and Opportunities for Deeper Impact


While Objective 3 investments demonstrated some clear success, key limitations remain. Most grantee reports focused on outputs (e.g., equipment purchased, staff hired) but lacked concrete data on affordability, nutritional improvements, or long-term community outcomes. Financial sustainability also emerged as a concern, with several projects still in early stages or dependent on ongoing operating capital. Many initiatives were deeply rooted in place but not yet connected to broader policy shifts or statewide supply chain infrastructure, limiting their potential for systemic transformation.

Lessons Learned

While CHF's approach to Objective 3 led to some localized successes, it ultimately fell short of delivering widespread or transformative impact. Over time, both partners and CHF staff came to question whether traditional retail models could adequately address the root causes of food insecurity, particularly in under-resourced communities.

Several key lessons emerged, including the need to pair capital and technical assistance, elevate community-driven innovation, and more strategically align investments with existing infrastructure and rural realities.

Lessons Learned

-  Re-thinking retail as a solution
-  Capital alone isn't enough
-  Community-driven innovation and equity in food retail
-  Overlooked leverage points in local food access



Re-Thinking Retail as a Solution

Several partners and CHF staff expressed skepticism about the overall effectiveness of the Objective 3 strategy focused on expanding healthy food retail.

While some projects were noted to have had localized success, stakeholders consistently highlighted that the strategy fell short of transformative impact.

In some regions, community partners noted that retail investments did not reach their region at all, or that the highly visible projects had yet to come to fruition. Others questioned whether retail models alone could meaningfully address the systemic causes of food insecurity, particularly when stores remain unaffordable for low-income residents. As one partner stated plainly, “*retail is a capitalist solution to a capitalist problem,*” underscoring a belief that new access points alone do not solve for root causes like poverty and wage inequality.

CHF staff also reflected critically on the limitations of the strategy. They noted that while CO4F led to some grocery stores opening in areas with limited access, the costs were high. **There was also recognition that CHF’s early assumptions may have underestimated the complexity of launching and sustaining retail in underserved areas.** Additionally, the strategy did not evolve quickly enough to incorporate alternative models, such as nonprofit or no-cost grocery stores, that might better meet the needs of food-insecure communities. One staff member suggested that with more time and deeper exploration, CHF could have shifted toward more equitable, community-centered infrastructure solutions.

Several reflections point to a need for clear articulation of what constitutes meaningful “access,” as well as more robust community input in defining solutions. Some noted progress in increasing food visibility, but challenges remained in aligning retail offerings with community needs and preferences. Future strategies could benefit from deeper investment in alternative models, more flexible infrastructure approaches, and efforts to center affordability, cultural relevance, and lived experience in the design of food access initiatives.

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[Healthy food retail is] an interesting way to unpack access, because what we found was that we were getting food to where it needed to go, but a lot of time we found it difficult, for example, for communities to embrace the same understanding because they wanted choice and it was hard at that time to communicate the limitations of local food. At that point, we were unpacking what healthy, affordable food means. We’re still trying to understand those definitions. In terms of getting food out to people, it was successful and we saw an increased visibility of food. But there was still limitations in the supply chain that impacted the way we thought about access and how people were experiencing access.

- Community Partner



Capital Alone Isn't Enough

Technical assistance proved to be a necessary and effective complement to capital investments under Objective 3, particularly for community-based grocery projects supported through CO4F.

CHF recognized that financing alone could not sustain food retail initiatives, especially in underserved or rural communities where independent grocery business models are difficult to maintain. To address this, they began to prioritize CEF's lending and technical assistance strategy through CO4F, pairing smaller, flexible loans with tailored technical assistance and capacity-building support. This shift increased the viability of local, often BIPOC-led businesses by helping them plan, operate, and sustain grocery models aligned with community needs. CEF's culturally responsive technical assistance, adapted underwriting processes, and ongoing relationships with borrowers made them an especially effective partner in this work.

When CHF brought this objective strategy in-house, one key feature was avoiding debt burdens that could overwhelm small or emerging retailers. By offering substantial grant funding rather than loans in many cases, CHF allowed community-led projects to move forward without the pressure of repayment, a critical advantage in communities with limited financial resources.

Still, CHF staff reflected that more could have been done earlier. In hindsight, they acknowledged that approaching food retail as a community capacity-building strategy, not just a capital investment, would have warranted earlier investments in planning support, financial literacy, and business model development. While CO4F evolved to integrate capital with capacity, the early lack of upfront technical assistance may have delayed or limited the success of some initiatives. **These reflections underscore the importance of pairing flexible, non-extractive funding with strong planning and implementation support to build lasting, community-centered food infrastructure.**

Community-Driven Innovation and Equity in Food Retail

Investing in community-driven solutions proved to be a more effective and equitable approach to advancing Objective 3 than the traditional public-private loan model offered through CO4F. While CO4F successfully funded some grocery and corner store projects, its structure often favored

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We learned about the need for not just capital, access to capital, but access to deep technical assistance and capacity building for folks that were trying to do this work. That became part of the portfolio at some point, that the loans that were being given had to be married with the right level of technical assistance and capacity building so that we could increase the chances for sustainability for these businesses to continue to exist in these communities over the long term. ... Even with technical assistance and capacity building, it's still very, very difficult to build a sustainable business model for grocery stores.

- CHF Staff



organizations with strong grant-writing skills and conventional business readiness, leaving out many grassroots, culturally rooted efforts with deep community trust but limited institutional capacity. In contrast, CHF's later investments emphasized flexibility, risk-tolerance, and a belief in the expertise of those with lived experience.

By resourcing solutions already in motion within communities and supporting trusted local organizations, either directly or through field infrastructure like the Blueprint, CHF enabled more responsive and resilient food access models to take shape.

Several projects exemplified this shift. These were initiatives that traditional lenders would likely have deemed too risky or underdeveloped, but CHF's willingness to provide early-stage capital and absorb risk created essential space for learning and experimentation. Projects like FreshLo with Montbello Organizing Committee were rooted in community leadership, with racial equity and cultural relevance built into their design from the start, factors that contributed to long-term viability despite slow or complex development timelines. These efforts illuminated a key insight: **community-driven capital projects often require several years from planning to implementation, and readiness funding, technical assistance, and relationship-building are critical success factors.**



We were able to fund more innovative models. Whereas the work that happened through CO4F was more specifically around grocery stores and corner stores, which are very much needed. ... We were able to fund other more innovative models. ... We were able to lean into our values and belief that community knows what they need, they understand their challenges, they also understand their solutions. Sometimes it's okay for philanthropy to take a risk on a community idea.

- CHF Staff

By expanding beyond conventional retail to support cooperative models, food hubs, and culturally tailored food distribution, CHF backed solutions that were more aligned with community needs and aspirations. These investments helped strengthen local ecosystems, build power among underrepresented groups, and make room for alternative definitions of success. The Blueprint also complemented this work by helping community members engage with retailers, expand SNAP access, and amplify community-led retail strategies in a handful of regions. This broader, equity-centered approach helped surface new strategies for food access that were more inclusive, adaptable, and ultimately transformative.



Overlooked Leverage Points in Local Food Access

Despite the conceptual foundation of the healthy food retail strategy, CHF missed key opportunities to deepen its impact, particularly by not fully supporting the small, neighborhood-based food retailers that serve as critical access points in both rural and urban communities. These small players often face steep barriers, such as limited cold storage, distribution challenges, and inadequate infrastructure, that inhibit their ability to consistently provide fresh, healthy food. An opportunity was also lost in not aligning more closely with the Community Food Access Program through the Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA), which was designed to bolster SNAP-accessible, independent retailers through accessible grants and infrastructure support. By not partnering or scaling these efforts, CHF may have overlooked a high-leverage avenue for broadening reach and supporting proven, community-rooted solutions.

Navigating Challenges in Food Retail

Investing in healthy food retail as a pathway to improving food access revealed significant structural, operational, and relational challenges.

Structural Challenges: Traditional lending models lacked flexibility and cultural competence to support small, community-led retailers. High costs and slow timelines made projects expensive and difficult to scale. Financial tools and institutional frameworks were not well-suited to the unique needs of grassroots food retail ventures.

Operational Challenges: Many projects struggled with launching, scaling, or sustaining operations amid a consolidated grocery market favoring large players. Loan defaults and extended project timelines created financial and logistical burdens. Small and nonprofit ventures faced difficulties meeting distribution, inventory, and compliance requirements.

Relational Challenges: Insufficient trust-building and engagement with local power dynamics undermined project buy-in and success. Historical context and community relationships were underestimated in strategy design and implementation. Some initiatives fractured under pressure due to a lack of sustained support and alignment with community needs.

CHF's experience investing in healthy food retail highlighted the need for structural redesign and a shift toward capacity-focused, community-rooted approaches. Effective infrastructure required deep accountability to and leadership by impacted communities.

Appendix

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Methodology

The evaluation plan was designed to inform CHF’s evaluation questions and communications plan for the FAS priority, developed in collaboration with the CHF team.

Co-Creation Process

The evaluation started with a Co-Creation Session with key FAS team members. The goal of the Co-Creation Session was to reach shared understanding across the FAS team and Illuminary Perspectives of what we were learning about and evaluating, and why. This shared understanding allowed us to refine the evaluation plan to be specific to the FAS team’s context, work, and needs. During the Co-Creation Session, the team developed the hypotheses, assumptions, evaluation questions, and learning uses (from their Communications Plan) for the FAS priority evaluation.

Hypotheses & Assumptions

Hypotheses are the “if-then” statements about what we think will happen because of CHF’s investments in the FAS priority, linking actions to desired outcomes. They are statements of beliefs, assumptions, and predictions linked to the theory of change. The hypotheses (and accompanying assumptions) are what was “tested” through the valuation. Underneath the hypotheses are the team’s assumptions about how change happens and the role that CHF can and should play in food access and security.

Below are the hypotheses we refined and assumptions we surfaced during the Co-Creation session:

IMPACT: Coloradans are able to access the nutritious food they want, when they want it, at a price that fits their budget, and with dignity.	
If... We create a mechanism to coordinate existing resources across the state...	Then... We will build momentum around collaborative community-owned solutions to address food insecurity.
Assumptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Blueprint expertise was around working with state agencies • Blueprint will target state level interventions (early assumption) • Actors in the food landscape have differing levels of power and influence and operate in silos 	
If... We create mechanisms to build upon local community assets and elevate community voice...	Then... We will build individual and collective power to change local food systems so that they meet the needs of the community.
Assumptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community members are the experts in navigating local food systems • Centering lived experience in coalition building is critical for success • The community already has a lot of assets to build from 	



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coalitions are the most effective strategy for local systems change • Coalitions need to build their internal capacities and understanding of local community needs before focusing on peer learning and engagement beyond their community • Coalitions will intervene at the local level (early assumption) • Local systems change needs to emphasize relationships, power, and mindset first in order to affect meaningful policy change 	
<p>If... We collaborate with government, nonprofit, and community entities to increase outreach and enrollment for food assistance and nutrition programs...</p>	<p>Then... We will increase participation in public food assistance program among Coloradans who are eligible for them.</p>
<p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach will increase enrollment so that Colorado is in the top 10 for SNAP and WIC enrollment (early assumption) 	
<p>If... We influence and wield power with policymakers to reduce barriers to SNAP and WIC enrollment and utilization...</p>	<p>Then... We will reduce barriers to public food assistance enrollment and utilization.</p>
<p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach is not enough for enrollment and utilization; we need to reduce barriers (evolved assumption) 	
<p>If... We provide flexible funding and financing for healthy food retail in low-income communities</p>	<p>Then... We will support public-private partnerships that increase the prevalence of affordable healthy food and beverages.</p> <p>Then... We will increase prevalence of affordable, nutritious, culturally relevant food in communities that have historically lacked access.</p>
<p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food deserts exist in communities across the state and lead to obesity and other negative health outcomes (early assumption) • Corner grocery stores increase access to healthy food in communities (early assumption) • Nonprofit partners do not have the ability to take on debt through loans (evolved assumption) 	

Overall Assumptions:

- CHF will invest in food access and security for five years
- Aligning the FAS strategy with the Blueprint goals will make CHF more impactful as a funder for food access and security
- Shifting work where possible to a food justice lens will deepen impact (evolved assumption)

Evaluation Questions

Below are the evaluation questions identified during the planning and co-creation process. These were developed based on CHF's learning priorities and the assumptions identified during the Co-Creation Session.

Guiding Learning Priority: Where is the anti-hunger field now? What is it poised to do? How did CHF's investments contribute?	
Evaluation Question: How did the FAS priority evolve over the investment period (2019-2024)?	Evaluation Question: What has been the cumulative impact on the anti-hunger field of the myriad investments made by CHF over the investment period?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did CHF get right in their understanding of the challenge, and what did they miss? • What were the tension points and how did CHF navigate them? How did these influence the work? • What were the implications of the shift from food access to a food justice model on funding patterns and relationships, if any? • How did CHF's approach to community power building evolve over the investment period? How did this shift tactics? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did investments work in concert, or not? • How, if at all, did CHF build community power through their strategies? • What tactics were most and least effective? What conditions facilitate or hinder the success of the chosen tactics? • Were there any important gaps or actions that could have amplified the impact of these investments? • What were the major changes in food security at the national level during the investment period, and where was Colorado positioned relatively?

Learning Uses

The FAS and Communications teams had already identified three objectives for their communication plan around the FAS priority:

1. Share lessons learned through the FAS work so that internal and external philanthropy professionals can apply them to their work.
2. Tell the story of Colorado's food ecosystem – what it was, what it is, and what's possible through power building.
3. Communicate achievements as a result of priority area to internal and external audiences.

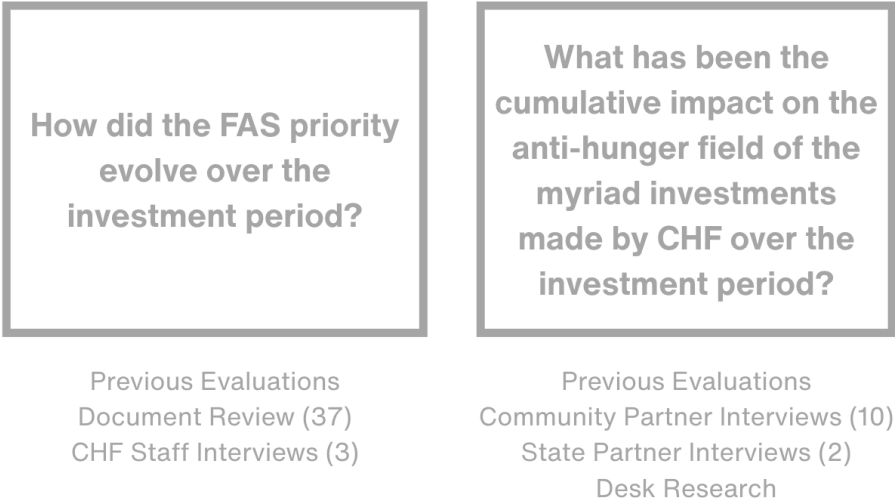
Overall, the evaluation was designed to inform these objectives by:

- Elevating learnings that could influence other strategies and approaches within CHF
- Provide concrete examples of lessons
- Contribute to the process of exiting the FAS priority and tell the story of what it takes to exit through the evolution of the priority



Evidence Collection

Illuminary Perspectives collected evidence to help understand whether the FAS team’s assumptions and hypotheses held up or if there were areas to evolve our thinking. We collected evidence from multiple perspectives to provide a holistic picture of the FAS priority and the wider systems in which the work is situated.



Previous Evaluations

This evaluation builds from previous evaluations that CHF commissioned of their investments in the Blueprint (Illuminary Perspectives, 2024) and the CFS initiative (Bright Research Group, 2024). The reports from these evaluations were used as key sources of evidence in this evaluation for understanding both evaluation questions, specific to CHF’s work in Objective 1.


Evaluation Question 1: Strategy Evolution

Document Review

Illuminary Perspectives conducted a document review at the start of the process to determine what we already knew about each of the evaluation questions. Each of the documents was reviewed for information and documentation related to each of the evaluation questions. This allowed us to make the best use of partner and staff time to build on what we already knew, rather than reiterating existing knowledge or documentation.

In total, Illuminary Perspectives reviewed **36 documents**. Documents included:

- Strategy documentation such as iterations of the theory of change, implementation plans, impact reports, and learning plans
- Historical documents about the development of the FAS priority
- Documentation of the strategic decisions made during the evolution of the FAS priority



The document review also included an **analysis of the investments** made under the FAS priority.

Staff Interviews

To supplement our understanding from the document review, Illuminary Perspectives conducted three one-hour, confidential interviews with current or former CHF staff members about the evolution of the strategy, key successes and challenges, and staff perspectives on FAS impact.

Evaluation Question 2: Impact

Evidence collection for the second evaluation question happened over two phases. This phased approach allowed us to scaffold our learning to fill gaps from the document review and delve deeper into:

- How community partners conceptualize the anti-hunger field
- What changes have happened in the anti-hunger field and where community partners see the anti-hunger field headed and why
- How CHF's FAS strategy contributed (or not) to changes in the anti-hunger field
- Identify what community partners

Phase 1 Interviews

Illuminary Perspectives conducted initial semi-structured interviews with community partners and state agencies. Based on the document review, the initial interviews focused on grantees under Objectives 2 and 3 and community partners one-step removed from the FAS priority with key insight into the anti-hunger field.


In Phase 1, Illuminary Perspectives completed one-hour interviews with four community partners and two state agencies. All interviews were confidential, and participants received \$150 in appreciation of sharing their time and expertise as part of the evaluation.³²

Phase 2 Interviews

Following the first phase of interviews, Illuminary Perspectives worked with the FAS team to identify areas there were still gaps in our understanding around the evaluation questions and areas for further inquiry. Based on what was learned through the document review and initial interviews, the second round of partner interviews focused on:

- The ways in which there is (or is not) strengthened community and connective capacity and power in the anti-hunger field, and how the FAS priority contributed to this (or not).
- Knowing that systems change is a long game, where on the systems change path is the anti-hunger field and how, if at all, that momentum continues.

³² Representatives from state agencies did not receive an incentive for their participation.

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- Lessons learned from crisis points in the anti-hunger field (like COVID) that can help us navigate crises in the future.

In Phase 2, Illuminary Perspectives complete one-hour interviews with six community partners. All interviews were confidential, and participants received \$150 in appreciation of sharing their time and expertise as part of the evaluation.

Desk Research

Illuminary Perspectives also conducted desk research to fill in missing information from the document review and identify key national changes in food security during the investment period.

Sensemaking

Following the evidence collection, Illuminary Perspectives facilitated an in-person Sensemaking Session with the FAS team in June 2025 to review the evidence against the evaluation questions. We discussed our observations based on evidence, made meaning of the findings, and elevated key insights. In addition to this being an opportunity for inquiry and dialogue, the Sensemaking Session was also an additional evidence collection opportunity to inform the final report.

Theory of Change

FOOD ACCESS AND SECURITY					
Challenges	Objectives	Strategic Approaches	Tactics	Outcomes	Impact
Partners aren't working efficiently and effectively together to address systemic changes that will improve food security. Individuals most impacted by food insecurity have little power over shaping food systems and supports in ways that work for them.	Overall objective: Build momentum around collaborative community-owned solutions to address food insecurity	Create a unified vision for ending hunger in Colorado and a mechanism to coordinate existing resources in the sector	SG: Fund a program office to lead efforts to align partners around food security, take action, and generate additional focus and investments into hunger	- Colorado has a comprehensive, collective approach for addressing food insecurity - Policies addressing barriers to food security are advanced in a coordinated manner - A healthy program office coordinates this work and is prepared to carry it forward	Coloradans are able to access the nutritious food they want, when they want it, at a price that fits their budget, and with dignity
	Objective 1: Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of collaborative community-level efforts to reduce food insecurity	Create a mechanism to build upon community assets and elevate community voice	FO: Fund local coalitions to create stronger collaboration and community food systems DCA: Provide capacity building support to funded coalitions to strengthen their equity-centered food systems change efforts	- Improved collaboration and alignment between local actors in the food system - Changes in local systems that increase local food access and security - Coalition governance and processes centered in equity and community informed/driven approaches.	
Community members face significant barriers in enrollment and utilization of public food assistance. Federal resources to support outreach, as well as training for existing partners, are lacking.	Objective 2a: Increase participation in public food assistance programs among Coloradans who are eligible for them	Collaborate with government, nonprofit and community entities to increase outreach and enrollment for food assistance and nutrition programs	SG: Draw down federal match to support community outreach (CDHS) SG: Support enrollment in federal child nutrition programs (CDE) FO: Implement community-developed practices to improve enrollment (WIC) SG: Increase WIC utilization through an online ordering and food delivery pilot	- SNAP outreach activities increase as a result of more federal and state resources - SNAP, WIC and school meal enrollment barriers (including stigma) are reduced - More people are enrolling and utilizing public food assistance	
	Objective 2b: Reduce barriers to public food assistance enrollment and utilization	Influence and wield power with policymakers to reduce barriers to SNAP and WIC enrollment and utilization	SG: Partner with Advocacy on general operating grants and responsive advocacy grants to key partners		
There is a lack of retail sites that make affordable, nutritious food available in low-income communities and allow community members to share power within the food system.	Objective 3a: Support public-private partnerships that increase the prevalence of affordable healthy food and beverages	Provide flexible funding and financing for healthy food retail in low-income communities	SG and PRI: Invest in the Colorado Fresh Food Financing Fund through the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority (CHFA) and the Colorado Enterprise Fund (CEF)	- Increased fresh food retail access - More retailers accept SNAP/WIC	
	Objective 3b: Increase prevalence of affordable, nutritious, culturally relevant food in communities that have historically lacked access due to racial inequities		SG and PRI: Partner with Colorado Enterprise Fund and others to provide loans, grants and TA for BIPOC food retailers that create community benefit.	- Increased number of BIPOC-owned or -led fresh food retail sites that build power and community wealth	