



Seeding the Field:

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



Illuminary
Perspectives

July 2025



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.



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.

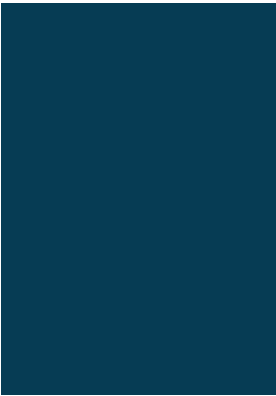
Implications for Funding and Relationships

Key Lessons

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.

- **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 communicate 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.