



# Community Food Systems Summative Evaluation

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Colorado Health Foundation—FINAL REPORT



The Colorado  
Health Foundation™



**BRIGHT**  
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## Executive Summary

The Community Food Systems (CFS) initiative intended to create long-lasting changes to local food systems and strengthen collective capacity within Coloradan communities. Colorado Health Foundation (CHF) commissioned Bright Research Group, an independent research and evaluation firm, to conduct a summative evaluation of the CFS initiative to document the impact of the investment, collective progress toward partnering with people with firsthand experience of hunger, and the overall effectiveness of the grantmaking strategy. This report provides key findings from the evaluation based on an analysis of the eight coalitions that were funded during the final implementation phase of grantmaking. The summative evaluation pursued three lines of inquiry: 1) assessing the impact of the CFS investment; 2) documenting grantee progress toward sharing power with those most impacted by food insecurity; and 3) evaluating the effectiveness of the overall initiative. The methods were qualitative—consisting of key informant interviews, focus groups, and a review of background documents—and utilized a participatory and inclusive approach.

### Findings

**Finding 1:** All eight coalitions increased access to healthy, nutritious and culturally relevant food by improving the distribution and quality of food available through existing food pantry / bank systems, increasing the participation of diverse communities in programs such as SNAP, and expanding food entrepreneurship. CHF believed that if coalitions focused on strengthening the coordination and alignment of existing local food assets and resources, more Coloradans could get access to healthy, nutritious, and culturally relevant food. The evaluation found evidence to support this underlying assumption of the CFS investment.

**Finding 2:** Coalitions pulled multiple levers to shift their local food systems, including strengthening networks and relationships, changing narratives and mindsets, and supporting policy change efforts. The evaluation found strong evidence that coalitions are using the Water of Systems Change framework to make decisions around coalition strategy, an area of growth since the last evaluation in 2021.

**Finding 3:** The CFS investment's emphasis on engaging people with lived experience in meaningful ways within local coalitions has facilitated a shift away from a charity mindset and resulted in local food systems that are more customer focused, especially for Latino communities. Most coalitions implemented data collection and engagement efforts to learn about and develop strategies to become more responsive to customer and community needs. Because of this component of the grantmaking strategy, coalitions are adopting food system practices that emphasize dignity, belonging, and choice, and they have expanded access to culturally specific foods for the Latino community.

**Finding 4:** While the CFS investment did not expect grantees to focus solely on policy change, the evaluation found that most coalitions supported local or statewide policy. With the exception of one grantee, all the coalitions joined at least one local or state policy campaign to increase the level of resources available locally to address food insecurity, such as supporting a statewide coalition to pass the Healthy School Meals for All legislation; influencing the local food-budget financing; examining comprehensive plans and local zoning policies; and advocating for the passage of a local tax policy for sugar-sweetened beverages.

**Finding 5:** The coalition structure was an effective vehicle for increasing local community capacity, expanding the number of partners vested in ending hunger, and engaging in collective action towards shared goals. CFS hypothesized that investing in local community-based coalitions to engage in collective efforts to disrupt their food systems would increase community capacity to meet the needs of low-income Coloradans and increase the power and influence of these coalitions. The evaluation found that most of the eight funded coalitions have strengthened their capacity, power, and influence at a local level and are well positioned to sustain their efforts to advocate for systems changes in their community.

**Finding 6:** Over the five years of the CFS investment, most coalitions made sustained progress by creating new leadership development and volunteer opportunities for people who had experienced hunger. Grantee-lead organizations, coalition members, and people with lived experience reported strong support for integrating people with firsthand knowledge into coalition efforts. With the exception of one grantee, all the funded coalitions have invested in infrastructure changes and tested out new tactics for community engagement.

**Finding 7:** Most coalitions invested in training and building the insider knowledge of people with lived experience to participate in meaningful ways within the work of the coalition and creating the coalition infrastructure to sustain their involvement. Six out of eight grantees created cohort-based leadership development opportunities for people with lived experience with hunger, with a particular focus on reaching monolingual Spanish-speaking residents and recent immigrants. Coalitions created a variety of structures to support cohort-based learning, including subcommittees and work groups.

**Finding 8:** People with lived experience found meaning at all levels of contribution in the work for their local coalitions and emphasized that their participation gave them the opportunity to give back to their communities. The evaluation found that people with lived experience valued the opportunity to be active contributors in addressing food insecurity through participation in coalitions or subcommittees; volunteering with food distribution; engaging in food entrepreneurship; advocating for local or statewide policy; or accessing leadership development opportunities.

**Finding 9:** The core elements of the CFS initiative, including the emphasis on including the voices of people with firsthand experience with hunger in meaningful ways and technical assistance from Terra Soma, strengthened community capacity to end hunger. The eight funded coalitions currently in the CFS portfolio have strengthened their infrastructure to partner with people closest to the problem of hunger and food insecurity; the number of organizational partners and community residents vested in changing local food systems has increased; and the tactics to shift local food systems have expanded access to healthy, nutritious food in Coloradan communities.

## Discussion and Lessons Learned

Throughout the CFS investment, CHF sought to increase access to nutritious foods by supporting local coalitions' systems change efforts. Coalitions significantly strengthened and expanded local networks and increased resources dedicated to improving their local food systems. The core elements of the initiative facilitated meaningful changes in community capacity and progress toward ending hunger in Colorado.

Among the lessons learned that CHF and other funders vested in building community capacity to address the issues faced by low-income Coloradans are:

**Value of Integrating People with Lived Experience:** The emphasis on integrating people with lived experience led coalitions to implement strategies to engage communities that are impacted by hunger and facilitated a number of practice and mindset changes. CFS's goal of meaningful community participation aligned with the priorities of people with lived experience, and those who participated appreciated the opportunity to contribute at all levels, from volunteer to coalition facilitator. While the Continuum of Community Engagement<sup>1</sup> provides a useful framing for coalitions to weigh different tactics for community partnership, future investments should consider that all levels can be valuable to collective efforts and to the individuals who participate.

**Systems Change Takes Time:** Systems change, coalition building, and leadership development take time. Coalitions did make important and meaningful changes to the local food system, particularly with respect to aligning and coordinating key partners vested in increasing access to no-cost groceries and increasing the participation of communities that have experienced hunger in coalition efforts. Coalitions improved access to high-quality, nutritious, and culturally relevant food, particularly among Latino Spanish-speaking residents, by activating multiple levers at once. With such a bold and ambitious vision, CHF should partner with grantees to identify which systems changes are feasible within a time-limited initiative and support grantees in developing plans for sustaining the work over the long term.

**Diverse Capacity Among Funded Coalitions:** CHF funded a portfolio of coalitions across diverse geographic regions, which strengthened community capacity at a local level across the state. The diversity of the grantmaking portfolio in terms of geography, stage of development, political context, organizational capacity, and appetite for power sharing meant that coalitions had a range of technical assistance and resource needs. Terra Soma brought unique qualifications as a TA provider that may not be easily replicated in future investments. Future investments may consider focusing on coalitions with a similar level of need, political context, or developmental stage to tailor technical assistance and facilitate peer learning.

**Focus on Hunger:** The CFS investment focused solely on shifting local food systems to end hunger. The single-issue focus enabled coalitions to bound the parameters of their systems change activities and resulted in a set of strategies and tactics specifically designed to disrupt the existing food system in their communities. The value of supporting broad community capacity across intersectional issues that residents who are low-income experience is that it allows for cross-issue coalition building and responds to the needs of impacted communities. The focus on hunger resulted in specific and meaningful changes to local food systems and early wins. Funders should consider the trade-offs and value associated with a single issue versus an intersectional approach when funding community efforts to improve conditions for low-income communities.

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1. Colorado Health Foundation. *Community Engagement Spectrum*.  
<https://coloradohealth.org/sites/default/files/documents/2023-05/CommunityEngagementSpectrum-043023%20%282%29.pdf>.