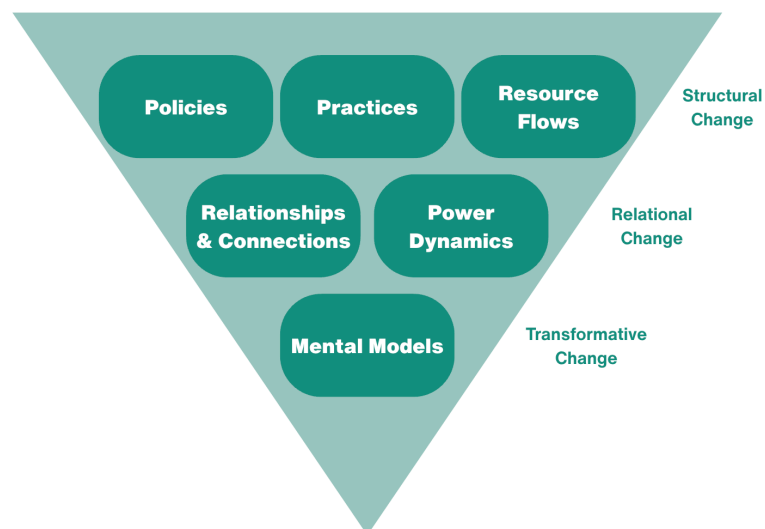


# Shifting the System: FAS Impact Across the Water of Systems Change

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.**

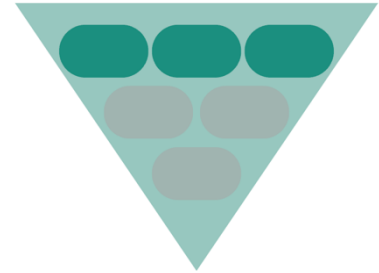
FAS investments made change at all three levels (structural, relational, and transformative), laying groundwork for more coordinated, just, and community-driven food systems. **Investments in the Blueprint and Objective 1 proved to be the most effective at encouraging systems changes at these levels.**





## 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.<sup>15</sup>

## 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

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<sup>15</sup> 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

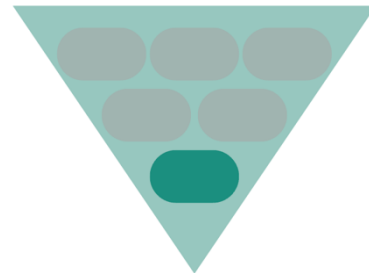
The FAS priority catalyzed the beginning of a rebalancing of power within Colorado’s anti-hunger field. By resourcing grassroots leadership, creating new decision-making pathways, and intentionally stepping back to make room for others, CHF helped shift the center of gravity, from institutional actors 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.