



# ILLINOIS LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING ASSISTANCE:

LISTENING SESSION LEARNINGS

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS EXTENSION 2023

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# Introduction

*"Why are we making it so hard to buy local?"*

ADVOCATE FROM ELGIN LISTENING SESSION

**Around 95% of the food consumed in Illinois is purchased outside the state. Out of the \$48 billion consumers spend annually on foods, an estimated \$46 billion goes outside our borders (Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force 2009).**

Investing in local food production would help keep money in the state, increase farm income and jobs, support local businesses, provide fresh and high-quality food to our communities, and preserve farmland. Up to \$30 billion of economic activity would be generated annually by increasing local production, processing, and purchasing by 20% (Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force 2009). The federally funded Local Food Purchasing Assistance program is an opportunity to invest in food production and procurement in Illinois.



## What is Local Food Purchasing Assistance?

### Overview

The Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) program provides \$900 million of funding from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) to buy food produced in each state. The program was created to strengthen state food systems, support socially



disadvantaged farmers and producers, and ensure fresh foods are distributed to underserved communities. The award for each state is determined by the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) funding formula, which considers the poverty rate and unemployment levels within each state. In November 2022, the program was expanded through LFPA Plus. Illinois is expected to receive \$28 million to help improve its food supply chain resiliency over two years.

## What can funding be used for?

Most funding must be used to purchase locally produced fresh or minimally processed foods. Examples include fruits and vegetables, grain products, meats, beans or legumes, dairy products, and pre-determined specialty products such as honey and tomato sauce. Foods may be whole, cut, pureed, juiced, fresh, frozen, canned, or dried. Funding cannot purchase significantly processed foods such as baked goods (e.g., bread, muffins, crackers, etc.), prepackaged sandwiches or meals, and ready-to-eat items (e.g., chicken nuggets, fish sticks, pizzas, etc.) (USDA AMS 2021a) Products created under the Illinois [Cottage Foods Law](#) are not eligible to be purchased for this program. Review the [Illinois Local Food Purchasing Allowable Foods List](#) for a complete list of eligible foods. Ensuring the availability of culturally responsive fresh foods to food-insecure communities is a program priority. Growers and procurement professionals are encouraged to review the [Illinois Local Food Purchasing Assistance Cultural Food Guide](#) for a list of cultural foods requested in their region.

In addition to purchasing food directly, some funds are available to cover expenses related to storage and distribution. Examples include the rental of delivery trucks or other equipment (e.g., forklifts, refrigerators, freezers, etc.), payments/fees for common carriers for transporting or storing commodities, lease or rental of warehouse space, and supplies used in the storage and handling of commodity products (e.g., boxes, pallets, etc.). Equipment may be rented but not purchased. Funding cannot cover costs associated with food production activities (e.g., crop or seed insurance), training (e.g., GAP certification), or expenses that are not an inherent part of procurement (e.g., employees to pack food or prepare boxes for delivery) (USDA AMS 2021a).

## Who is involved?

USDA funds will flow through the Illinois Department of Agriculture and be distributed by the Illinois Department of Human Services. The University of Illinois Extension will provide facilitation and technical assistance, and members of the “Growing Illinois” advisory board will provide guidance and expertise. Advisory board members are disqualified from LFPA funding.



Members of the advisory board include:

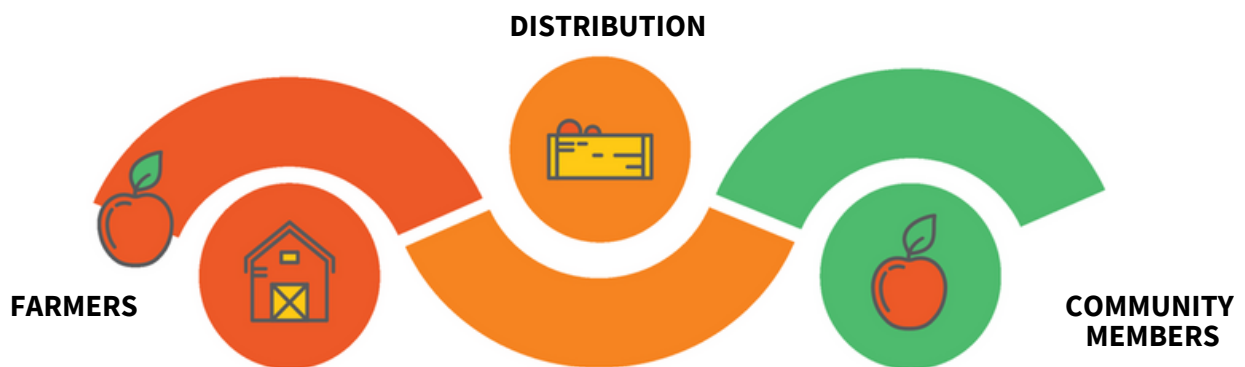
- University of Illinois Extension (facilitator)
- Feeding Illinois
- Illinois Farmers Market Association
- Illinois Farm Bureau / Illinois Specialty Crop Growers
- Experimental Station (representing a GUSNIP agency)
- Commission to End Hunger
- Illinois Public Health Institute
- Chicago Food Policy Action Council
- Illinois Association of Meat Processors
- Illinois Environmental Council
- Illinois Stewardship Alliance
- Student representative(s) from FFA, 4-H or MANNRS

## How will Local Food Purchasing Assistance work?

There are three ways to participate in LFPA:

1. As a socially disadvantaged **grower or producer** selling products
2. As a **community partner** that will distribute food to underserved communities
3. As a **lead agency** coordinating the logistics

The state is determined to use the funds to build a resilient and collaborative network of food system support in Illinois. The funding will buy food from socially disadvantaged farmers and distribute it for free through places in the community like nonprofits, food pantries, schools, and childcare centers.



Graphic adapted from Iowa LFPA, [iowalfpa.org](http://iowalfpa.org)



**Illinois Extension**  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Lead agencies located throughout the state will distribute funding to farmers and producers. Lead agencies are responsible for engaging with socially disadvantaged growers and producers, purchasing food, tracking metrics, packaging products, transporting products, and ensuring equitable distribution of these products to underserved communities throughout the state. The program is committed to purchasing 100% of products from socially disadvantaged farmers and producers within state borders. Using the USDA definition for socially disadvantaged farmers/producers, the Growing Illinois advisory board added specificity for Illinois. Foods may be distributed in underserved communities through a variety of community partners.

### **Socially Disadvantaged Grower/Producer Qualifiers**

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Black/African American
- Latine/o/a
- Refugee
- LGBTQ+
- Veteran
- Female business owner
- Greater than 50 miles (or 30 minutes) from the nearest distribution point
- Qualify for benefits based on income (low socioeconomic status)
- Person with disabilities
- New farmer/rancher (USDA definition is under ten years)
- Business is located in a high-vulnerability county (as determined by the CDC's [Social Vulnerability Index](#))\*

### **Potential Distribution Pathways**

- Mobile markets
- Novel ordering/pick up/delivery
- Backpack programs
- Areas where access to fresh or local cultural options is not currently available
- Summer food/snack programs
- Prescription programs
- Meals on Wheels
- Medically tailored meal programs
- Unhoused feeding programs
- Food box programs
- Food pantries
- School lunches
- Faith-based organizations
- Mutual aid initiatives

\*The high-vulnerability counties in Illinois are as follows: Champaign, Coles, Cook, Douglas, Fayette, Franklin, Jackson, Jefferson, Kane, Kankakee, Knox, Lake, Lawrence, Macon, Marion, Massac, Morgan, Peoria, Perry, Pulaski, Rock Island, Saline, St. Clair, Stephenson, Union, Vermilion, Warren, Wayne, Winnebago



# Listening Session Themes

## Overview

The advisory board is cognizant that local food producers, advocates, and food access organizations have concrete and relevant knowledge regarding current strengths and gaps in local food systems in Illinois. Community listening sessions were held to gather the information needed to center the program around the needs and priorities of these stakeholders.



- 30** listening sessions across the state
- 300+** community members heard
- 150+** potential partners identified

Nine listening sessions were held in communities throughout Illinois, as well as three virtual sessions. A total of 30 sessions were hosted with over 300 attendees. Sessions included representation from farmers, urban growers, producers, advocates, nonprofits, food hubs, food banks, and more. Over 70 potential lead agencies were identified. Many questions were asked and answered, problems were identified, and solutions were cultivated throughout these sessions. Each listening session followed the same format, but each session was unique.

The following questions were asked:

1. What is working well when it comes to connecting with the local food system in your area?
2. What would help you to participate in programs like this one (LFPA)?
3. What support would you need to better serve underserved individuals?
4. Who would be a good lead agency/organization in your area?
5. Who else should be involved from the local area to make this project successful?
6. What can we do to build a system that lasts beyond this funding?

Our analysis of the listening sessions revealed themes related to the strengths, challenges, and opportunities facing local food producers, food access organizations, and consumers.

## Strengths of the local food system in Illinois

In local food systems work, it is beneficial to build on existing successful initiatives. While the Illinois food system requires significant investments, many existing programs are effective. Five major themes emerged around strengths in the Illinois food system: existing collaborations and partnerships, the emergency food system, increased visibility to local foods, communication, successful examples of network-building, and alternative distribution pathways.



## Existing collaborations and partnerships

One of the major strengths of local food systems in Illinois are the existing collaborations between healthcare organizations, food pantries and food banks, farmers, and community organizations.

### *Healthcare partnerships*

Partnerships with healthcare organizations provide many opportunities to address food insecurity and food access. To address the link between hunger and health, some healthcare professionals conduct food insecurity screenings as part of wellness checks and provide nutrition education for clients with chronic diseases. In some cases, hospitals sponsored farms and community gardens or offered on-site farm stands or farmers markets to increase the amount of locally grown fruits and vegetables available to their communities. Food pantries and nonprofits utilized local health departments' expertise to create effective community surveys.

Prescription produce models are another way healthcare organizations have collaborated with the community to increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables to food-insecure patients. At one hospital, individuals that screened positive for food insecurity and/or diet-related disease were given a voucher to purchase produce at an on-site food pharmacy. Another example of an innovative prescription produce model is VeggieRx.

*“A sustainable food system requires a new orientation to food, understanding the relationship between food and the land, and understanding the connections between human health.”*

ADVOCATE FROM THE GALESBURG LISTENING SESSION

VeggieRX was developed as a collaboration between the Chicago Botanic Garden, Lawndale Christian Health Center, and the University of Illinois-Chicago's Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion (Illinois SNAP-Ed) to reduce barriers to fruit and vegetable consumption, improve health outcomes, and serve as an equity market channel for beginner farmers. Healthcare professionals in underserved neighborhoods prescribe VeggieRx to patients with diet-related diseases who are also food insecure. The prescription includes a weekly package of vegetables grown by farmer trainees in the Windy City Harvest Apprenticeship and nutrition education and cooking lessons.

### *Food bank and food pantry collaboration*

Listening session attendees commented on the benefits of local food pantries developing a relationship with their area food bank. Area food banks in Illinois often serve as distribution hubs for local pantries and can help drive local food system connections. The opening of River Bend Food Bank in Galesburg increased the availability of local cold storage and added an option for local farmers to donate extra produce. Eastern Illinois Foodbank was highlighted in multiple listening sessions for picking up produce from a local farm and distributing it to nearly 100 food pantries in the area.





### *Other successful partnerships*

Additional relationship-driven partnerships mentioned in the listening sessions include farmer-based distribution networks, connections with local community organizations, and engaging public officials. In an example of farmer-to-farmer collaboration, multiple local farmers contributed their products to one Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription. Another example that received much recognition throughout the listening sessions is the [LEAF Food Hub](#) in Southern Illinois. LEAF Food Hub is a farmer-owned business founded to offer residents of Southern Illinois locally-grown, nutrient-dense foods. The food hub provides an online platform for local farmers/producers to sell products ranging from fresh produce to specialty baked goods. Customers order online, then LEAF packs and distributes food to 12 locations. They also provide home delivery in six counties. Additionally, LEAF accepts SNAP and Link match as payment options.

Partnering with local organizations is an opportunity to expand wraparound services and food access initiatives. Previous partnerships include local Salvation Army and YMCA chapters. Faith-based organizations were mentioned as helpful partners in developing community access to food through hosting pantries, micro-pantries, or community gardens. Recruiting support from larger entities, such as grocery stores, was cited as a potential avenue for funding.

### **Emergency food system**

Our analysis indicated that the emergency food system is another strength of local food systems in Illinois and is functioning as intended. Listening session participants highlighted the success of the [Link Up Illinois](#) program in increasing the accessibility of locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables, particularly at farmers markets. Through the program, the value of SNAP benefits, known as Link in Illinois, is doubled for purchases at participating farmers markets, farm stands, food co-ops, and independent grocery stores.

According to the feedback provided at listening sessions, food pantries are serving their intended purpose. Pantries that offer wraparound services such as housing support, family case management, job counseling, and nutrition coaching help address the root causes of hunger. Client-choice pantries, which allow consumers to pick the items they receive, can increase the dignity of the food pantry experience and reduce food waste.

Additionally, the impact of the USDA [Farmers to Families Food Box](#) program was praised throughout the state. The program provided up to \$6 billion to purchase fresh produce, dairy, and meat products from American producers of all sizes to provide emergency food relief and to respond to market disruption (USDA AMS 2021b). Products were packaged into boxes and distributed to food banks, community and faith-based organizations, and non-profits.



## Increasing access and visibility of local foods

Attendees highlighted the power of community gardens and farmers markets in increasing the visibility of local foods in their communities. When discussing accessibility, advocates brought up that expanding pantry hours is a straightforward way of increasing access to food. Specifically, the importance of having some pantry availability outside of traditional Monday-Friday business hours was mentioned to accommodate a variety of work schedules. Additionally, the physical location of food access or healthcare organizations was stated as significantly impacting accessibility. Ensuring that the site is convenient can reduce transportation barriers. In the Elgin listening session, the concept of larger food pantries setting up satellite locations, referred to as “micro-pantries,” was discussed as another way to reduce transportation barriers. In one area of the state, community members can dial 211 to connect to a food pantry network that delivers food directly to them – effectively increasing food access by eliminating transportation barriers.



Innovative market options have emerged to increase the accessibility and visibility of local foods. One example is a hybrid food pantry that is open 24/7 through an online platform and provides delivery. Some organizations or farms that distribute CSA boxes incorporate a mutual aid model by offering customers the opportunity to purchase an additional box for a neighbor in need. Hosting farmers markets in grocery store parking lots allows customers to buy goods at the market and then supplement them with groceries at the store.

Finally, mobile markets were highlighted as an effective way to reduce transportation barriers and increase fruit and vegetable consumption. A partnership between Carle Health and Champaign-Urbana City Farms brings fresh, local, and nutritious food from urban farms to underserved communities on the Mobile Market. The Fresh Moves Mobile Market, operated by the Urban Growers Collective, is a bus converted into a mobile farmers market that brings produce to schools, community centers, and health clinics in Black and Brown neighborhoods in Chicago. The market offers produce grown by Urban Growers Collective and other local farms, locally produced pantry staples, and value-added products from local BIPOC makers. These are just a few examples; there are more mobile markets across the state.



## Successful communication and network building

Many advocates commented on the effectiveness of farmers markets in fostering connections between farmers and consumers, but also between farmers themselves. Mentorship and training opportunities for new farmers were mentioned as beneficial to building farmer-to-farmer relationships. Farmers that attended listening sessions utilized a variety of digital platforms to advertise and network. Farmers use Facebook to market their produce, follow other farms' pages, or find events. A grower from the Kankakee listening session stated that listing their farm as a business on Google was an effective way to recruit new customers. Another grower mentioned that newsletters helped them to stay connected to potential opportunities, particularly from The Land Connection, Angelic Organics, and the Young Farmers Coalition. Chicagoland growers highlighted the [Community Food Navigator](#) app as a collaborative space to connect, collaborate, and share information with fellow farmers. Farmers and food access organizations called out the mutual benefit of using a live spreadsheet to purchase and sell products. The spreadsheets are updated weekly with the type, quantity, and cost of products available from local farms.

## Alternative distribution pathways

Many listening session attendees mentioned market diversity as an essential way of reaching different consumers. Offering products at multiple markets such as CSAs, farm stands, farmers markets, and mobile markets allows consumers to buy food in a way that fits their consumption needs and schedule. Farmer-to-consumer delivery options offered by organizations such as LEAF Food Hub and [Market Wagon](#) are emerging as alternative markets that reduce barriers to local foods. Some regional food banks, like Eastern Illinois Food Bank mentioned above, have begun to support the distribution of locally grown or produced foods to food pantries in their area. In one case, local farmers shared infrastructural resources such as trucks to distribute their products.

Distributors are beginning to specialize in the distribution of local foods. Midwest Foods distributes products from an extensive network of growers and producers from Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, and Indiana. An Illinois-centric model is Down at the Farms, which operates as a food hub for 60 farms in Central Illinois, delivering local produce to grocers, individuals, and institutions in other areas of the state.

Additionally, there are some organizations pursuing food redistribution pathways. In one example, organizations picked up leftover produce from farmers markets and distributed it to food deserts or their local food pantries. In another example, local food pantry networks worked together to redistribute items between themselves if one pantry had an overabundance.

## What the Illinois food system needs

Feedback gathered in the listening sessions identified gaps in the existing Illinois food system.



Our analysis revealed the necessity of investing in infrastructure investments, agribusiness development, consumer needs, and building an interconnected food system network.

## Infrastructure investments

The need for infrastructure investments in Illinois was mentioned in nearly every listening session as a necessary step to improve the state’s food system. During many conversations, the frustrations over the general infrastructure gap overlapped with the lack of infrastructure required to participate in LFPA. Attendees highlighted the importance of building up the transportation and distribution infrastructure needed to transport food from the farm to the market and from the market to the consumer.

For those who grow produce, need for cold storage was mentioned frequently. Moving food to the consumer could be made easier and safer by expanding cold storage at nearly every point of the distribution process. This could include increasing cold storage facilities at farms, in transit through refrigerated trucks, and at distribution points such as food pantries, markets, or grocery stores.

*“It’s really hard work getting the food safely to that end-user in a timely manner. From harvest, it takes people; it takes buildings; it takes refrigeration. It takes electricity, and it takes gas.”*

ADVOCATE FROM A VIRTUAL LISTENING SESSION

Additionally, nearly every player in the Illinois food supply chain commented on the pressure of time and temperature-based food safety risks inherent in transporting food, which would be significantly reduced through access to cold storage. Farmers commented on the challenge of harvesting and transporting food to market on the same day. Market Box, a mutual-aid organization on the South side of Chicago that distributes local produce through a CSA distribution model, remarked on the necessary difficulty of receiving, boxing, and distributing their food boxes in one day. At one point, the organization froze cases of water bottles to make up for their lack of cold storage and keep their food safe.



Another valuable discussion involved the need for more food preservation facilities, such as processing facilities or shared commercial kitchens. The lack of processing facilities is a problem statewide, contributing to food waste, long wait times, or the need for producers to travel longer distances. Many of the facilities that are operating need repairs or upgraded equipment. Specifically, there is a severe shortage of animal processing facilities. Meat producers stated that wait times for meat processing facilities in Illinois can sometimes be over one year. This has forced producers to drive increased distances to get their products processed in a timely manner.



Fruit and vegetable growers would also benefit from processing facilities or commercial kitchens, particularly to preserve produce during the peak of the growing season. Extending the shelf-life of fruits and vegetables through processing would reduce food waste and allow farmers to provide products year-round to their communities. In one example, a food pantry that attended the listening sessions froze Michigan-grown blueberries and distributed them to their community during fall and winter. The current lack of processing facilities has caused residual economic effects across markets.

Listening session attendees also highlighted the need to reduce the infrastructure burden on farmers by establishing regional local food hubs, such as LEAF Food Hub in Southern Illinois. According to the USDA, food hubs are “a centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products.” Food hubs could reduce the need for capital investment, infrastructure maintenance, and storage for small and mid-sized producers (Barham 2010).

Various other issues were mentioned, such as expanding Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) throughout the state and providing quality payment solutions throughout our food systems. There was a specific ask for reusable packaging and boxes to move food. Finally, many farmers brought up the need for more staff to help with harvesting, handling, transportation selling products at the market and the challenge of paying them a fair wage. Potential lead agencies discussed the possibility of needing additional staff to manage the program coordination required to participate in LFPA.

## Agribusiness development

The listening sessions identified a need for agribusiness development throughout the state. With fast-paced changes in the agribusiness landscape, it can be easy to fall behind on strategies such as marketing for farmers and community organizations.

Farmers talked about the challenges of balancing the skillsets required to be a business owner and farmer, especially when the time needed to advertise their products or explore new market opportunities is severely limited by the demands of the growing season. Sessions identified an opportunity to provide marketing expertise to farmers who would like support advertising their products.



Additionally, initial startup investment was a topic of discussion. Some individuals may want to start farming but need more money and have concerns about the financial risks. Any new business has risks, and with agriculture, there are even more risks. Farmers, community organizations, and program administrations must implement de-risking strategies. This topic led the conversations on financial planning and insurance needs for farmers. By providing farmers with financial planning, insurance coverage, and risk management support, they can be more prepared for some of the unforeseen circumstances inherent within the profession.

Important land access and succession planning points were highlighted during the agribusiness-related discussions. Questions revolved around where to find land to farm, purchase, or lease and how to make farming financially possible. Land acquisition can be a challenging task to overcome without assistance. The average farmer in Illinois is 58 years old (USDA NASS 2017). This means that succession planning should be essential to any agribusiness discussions. The Illinois Farmland Access Initiative was established in collaboration with The Land Connection, The Conservation Fund, and The Liberty Prairie Foundation to establish a much-needed farm access strategy for Illinois. Although there are some resources to help with these concerns, listening session attendees felt that they needed more attention.

**58**

is the average age of farmers in Illinois (USDA NASS 2017).

## Meeting consumer needs

### *Education*

Consumers of all ages are an essential part of the Illinois food system, and their needs must be incorporated to strengthen the Illinois food system. Listening sessions identified a significant need for educating consumers, especially on preparing, cooking, and storing fresh fruits and vegetables. Farmers who attended listening sessions expressed concern that consumers wouldn't know how to prepare and eat the foods they had worked to grow for their communities. Consumers equipped with food storage and preparation knowledge could improve the nutritional intake of themselves and their families and reduce food waste.

Youth education was mentioned as essential to ensuring a longer-term shift in consumer food system knowledge. Teaching youth where their food comes from and how to cook can empower them and equip them with essential skills at a young age. Peer-to-peer stipend programs, such as the [Health Ambassadors](#) program at Beyond Hunger in Oak Park, were mentioned as a possible way to educate the community by the community and increase impact.



Many listening session attendees felt consumers need to be more connected to where their food comes from, including who grew or produced their food, how it was grown or processed, or where it came from. There is a need to address this gap in knowledge by informing consumers on the benefits of local foods, how and why to eat seasonally, and by connecting them to the farmers that produce the food they are purchasing. One way to accomplish this for socially disadvantaged eaters is by expanding marketing and recruitment campaigns for the Link match at farmers markets. Including profiles of growers and producers near their products is another way to increase the consumer connection to who is growing their food and where it's coming from.

### *Culturally responsive foods*

The Illinois food system feeds consumers from many different backgrounds and cultures. Illinois's Local Food Purchasing Assistance program is dedicated to using funds to provide cultural foods to socially disadvantaged consumers. Organizations that procure and distribute food expressed a desire to provide more culturally responsive food to their communities.

*“Are people going to know how to prepare and eat and enjoy this fresh produce that we've all worked so hard to grow?”*

URBAN FARMER FROM A VIRTUAL LISTENING SESSION

There is an opportunity for Illinois farmers to grow or produce more cultural foods to meet these demands. The [Illinois Local Food Purchasing Assistance Cultural Food Guide](#) was created in response to this feedback to make it easier for growers, producers, and distributors to provide the cultural foods their communities requested. The guide is meant to serve as a starting point and is not a replacement for collecting feedback directly from the community.

### *Increasing accessibility*

Meeting consumers where they are is essential to increasing their access to food. Listening session comments fell into four main themes: reducing logistical barriers, expanding SNAP, offering innovative food options, and driving community engagement. Delivering directly to consumers eliminates the time, transportation, and mobility barriers to accessing food.

*“I've got three senior buildings that are within maybe 3 to 4 blocks of where the pantry is. But those 3 or 4 blocks is like 400 miles to an individual that doesn't have mobility or the strength to push a cart.”*

A network of shared delivery vans could reduce financial burdens to organizations exploring providing a delivery option. Expanding pantry hours can reduce time-based barriers to food while increasing the number of food access organizations in a community can reduce transportation barriers. Mobile units, or a “produce aisle on wheels,” can also increase accessibility.

ADVOCATE FROM A VIRTUAL LISTENING SESSION



SNAP benefits are an effective way of reducing food insecurity. Listening session participants identified potential ways to expand SNAP in Illinois, including increasing the number of businesses that accept SNAP payments, allowing SNAP to be accepted by sole proprietors, and increasing participation in the Link Up Illinois match at farmers markets.

Many consumers may benefit from innovative food options. Examples include offering pre-cut produce or microwavable packaging to eliminate knowledge and time barriers to cooking at home or shelf-stable items for individuals without access to cold storage. At the Peoria listening session, alternative payment models were suggested to reduce the stigma of receiving free food. Consumers could participate in a pay-what-you-can model, pay for a subsidized grocery box rather than paying full price, or contribute volunteer hours instead of money to pay for their food.



Attendees also expressed the necessity of driving community food system engagement by serving farmers and consumers year-round. This could be achieved by offering indoor packaging and processing spaces to turn overabundant produce into shelf-stable options such as frozen or canned goods. The food system needs translation services to engage Illinoisans from all cultures and backgrounds. Finally, incorporating community feedback throughout all parts of the food system can build trust.

## **Building relationships and networks**

The listening sessions revealed that the Illinois food system is relatively connected but could be more interconnected. Organizations working in the food system tend to be aware of similar organizations in their locality but, in some cases, need to familiarize themselves with those outside their region. Additionally, people are often connected to those in similar roles (i.e., farmers are likely to have connections with other farmers). However, the Illinois food network needs support in driving interconnections between people with different roles in the food system (i.e., connecting farmers to food access staff). Local, state, and federal officials must be included in building the network to drive long-term food system policy support and funding.





Consumers need help developing relationships with their local farmers. Listening session attendees praised farmers markets for supporting community building in their areas but commented that, in some cases, they attracted the same types of consumers. Farmers markets throughout the state have diversified their audiences by hosting markets on different days or times to accommodate more work schedules, offering inclusive payment options such as Link match, and incorporating events or booths other than food vendors such as local artists.



Farmers need support forming relationships with places to sell or distribute their food. It is crucial to connect farmers to markets of all sizes, from convenience stores or assisted care facilities to hospitals or schools, to accommodate diverse business models. There is a particular need to help farmers connect and form partnerships with wholesale markets to ensure long-term stability. An urban farmer at a Chicago listening session suggested the creation of a training for farmers on how to develop good market relationships.

Growers would benefit from relationships with groups that can help reduce food waste during the peak growing season, such as processing facilities or food access organizations. Additionally, farmers would benefit from networking opportunities with other farmers. Farmers that attended listening sessions commented that forming relationships with other farmers can drive mentorship and resource sharing. Many groups requested assistance connecting with local farmers, especially socially disadvantaged farmers.

Listening session attendees suggested mapping Illinois's existing food system network, including growers, producers, nonprofits, processing facilities, distributors, and more. Farm mapping projects could incorporate data relevant to potential partners, such as whether they identify as socially disadvantaged, the size of their farm or business, what they grow or produce, and the type of agriculture they engage in. Existing mapping projects include [MarketMaker](#), a national partnership of land grant universities, the USDA, and food organizations to connect businesses in the food system to one another and potential customers. The map includes a list of farmers markets, farm stands, restaurants, U-Pick, wholesalers, farms, livestock, and breweries across Illinois and beyond. Based on the feedback from the listening sessions, there is an opportunity to grow and increase awareness of this resource.

*“Needing food is often difficult. The hope is that when people get back on their feet, they'll be purchasing food. So, if they know the farmer then, and they know the products that they received for free, maybe down the road they would become a customer for those farmers.”*

ADVOCATE FROM THE ELGIN LISTENING SESSION



**Illinois Extension**  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

# What the Illinois LFPA program needs

For many groups, participating in state grant programs can be a challenge. Listening session attendees provided feedback on what would help them participate in programs like LFPA.

## Fair market value

Farmers had many questions about the prices that products would be purchased for. Fair market value is an important driving factor within this program and agriculture as a whole. To ensure an equitable funding model across the state, providing a balanced, fair market value for products at least on par with wholesale prices was suggested. Farmers asked for market values that could capture a range of different growing practices, labor, packaging, and other costs which led to the creation of a [Fair Market Value List](#). Food prices are ever-changing on a weekly or even daily basis and vary geographically as well. Fair market value was a recurring topic and will continue to be addressed throughout the duration of the program.

## Communication and technical support

Many respondents asked for clear and transparent communication throughout the project and a simplified and equitable application process. To reduce the time and resource barriers to applying for the award, attendees requested transparency in the estimated time and effort required to complete an application. They suggested a pre-application or criteria check to determine eligibility before applying.

*“Sometimes the commitment to the reporting plus the work that’s outlined is just so much, especially for growers that have such a seasonal component and aren’t spending a lot of time in front of a computer.”*

ADVOCATE FROM CHICAGO FOOD JUSTICE SUMMIT

Potential awardees expressed concern over meeting IDHS requirements and desired support throughout the application process. They asked for the incorporation of a feedback process during the submission process and recommended providing a direct line or person to contact for questions. As lead agencies are expected to manage much of the award logistics, there was a request for lead agency-specific training. Throughout listening sessions, food system advocates requested training on how to write a competitive grant application. They also asked that the lead agencies selected for awards meet regularly to encourage feedback and transparency of Local Food Purchasing Assistance successes and challenges.

## Improving the application process

Listening session attendees desired flexibility and diversity in LFPA-funded projects. It was asked that awards be of different sizes and be awarded to various farm sizes, project types, and lead agencies. Many highlighted the importance of ensuring funds are distributed to smaller, newer



businesses as well as more established organizations. There were questions on the number of awards allocated and whether the number of awards given per region would be based on population density. Advocates desired that awards be issued throughout the state. It was requested that the reviewing committee be diverse and include socially disadvantaged growers or producers to support the equitable distribution of the awards. Farmers asked for long lead times to allow them time to create an effective business plan and reduced reporting requirements to ease their burden during peak production seasons. Many expressed concerns about the impact when funding ends and asked that applicants be required to incorporate an exit strategy into their application.

## Building a sustainable food system in Illinois

While LFPA is currently only funded for two years, there is an opportunity to strategically use the award and the listening session learnings to drive momentum toward longer-term change. There were suggestions to improve grower support, incorporate education and marketing strategies, and engage in advocacy to secure longer-term funding.

### Increasing grower support

In the face of an aging farmer population in Illinois, listening session attendees requested more support for new and current growers. Suggestions included providing training opportunities, reducing barriers for young farmers, and increasing access to market opportunities.

#### *Training opportunities*

Respondents requested a variety of education opportunities for growers of all experience levels. For individuals interested in becoming growers, programs like the [Windy City Harvest Apprenticeship](#) offered in partnership with Chicago City College or the [Stateline Farm Beginnings](#) program offered through Angelic Organics could be expanded or replicated. Many growers mentioned the value of mentorship and sought more opportunities to learn from peer-to-peer networks.



It is recommended that organizations that offer farmer programming consider implementing a mentorship program, as modeled in the Farm Beginnings program offered through [Food Works](#) in Southern Illinois. For more established farmers, there was a request for support from Illinois Extension or Illinois Farm Bureau in providing training such as food safety certifications, field management, pesticide application, or growing new crops. For farmers of all experience levels, there was an ask for help in creating short-term and long-term sustainable business plans.



## *Reducing barriers for young farmers*

To further reduce barriers to potential new farmers, advocates asked for financial assistance, such as offering training at a reduced cost to make programming more accessible or offering tax incentives to new farmers.

Grants provided through the [USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program](#) could support these initiatives. Farmers and food access organizations alike repeatedly requested the creation of a live, comprehensive list of current food system funding opportunities. Finally, land access remains one of the most significant barriers for new farmers to build successful agricultural businesses. Farmers need advice, resources, and assistance with affordable land access.



## *Increasing access to market opportunities*

Wholesale markets, such as local businesses, hospitals, schools, childcare centers, or assisted living facilities, can provide farm businesses with stable income and security. Farmers desired assistance accessing markets, which could be achieved by offering training to provide the information required to access existing markets or establishing new market opportunities through expanding initiatives such as [Local Food Purchasing Assistance](#) or [Good Food Purchasing](#).

Many growers indicated that mentorship from farmers who have successfully negotiated contracts could provide valuable insight. Farmers with experience negotiating contracts requested that procurement contracts be more flexible to meet their changing business capacities. One farmer suggested that assistance in making nutrition facts labels for their products would increase their accessibility to institutional markets. Finally, further investments in mapping the Illinois food system could make it easier for consumers and food businesses to purchase from local and/or socially disadvantaged growers.

## **Investing in education and marketing strategies**

Individuals who attended listening sessions advocated for educating consumers of all ages to drive long-term food system changes. Farmers and food access staff commented on the importance of teaching individuals how to prepare, store, and cook foods to mitigate food waste and increase nutritional intake. It is imperative to build the consumer-to-eater connection to deepen consumers' understanding of where their food comes from and who is growing. While



farmers markets and community gardens are an effective way of building these relationships, reaching individuals outside of these spaces is essential to build momentum for local foods. Individuals suggested investing in marketing strategies that connect consumers with the grower or producer behind their product and showcase the benefits of local foods.

## Engaging with advocacy

Listening session participants repeatedly championed a need for longer-term funding commitments (5-10 years) to effectively build a sustainable food system in Illinois. A significant financial investment is required to develop infrastructure across the state, including cold storage, distribution networks, processing facilities, food hubs, and cooperatives.

Advocacy can be an effective way to drive food system changes and receive more funding. There have been federal and national efforts to make the Local Food Purchasing Assistance program a permanent part of the Farm Bill. Additionally, people who attended listening sessions discussed implementing policies that require larger institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and food banks, to purchase more local foods.

As Local Food Purchasing Assistance is currently only available for two years, advocates iterated the importance of securing more funding by engaging with legislators on a state and federal level. Beyond infrastructure gaps, it is essential to note that farming is a profession with high financial risks and barriers to entry, particularly for socially disadvantaged farmers.



**While programs such as Local Food Purchasing Assistance are a step in the right direction, short-term funding is insufficient to support local farmers effectively, consistently provide fresh produce to underserved communities, or build a sustainable local food system.**



# Conclusion

Over 300 passionate growers, producers, distributors, nonprofit staff, activists, mobile marketers, food pantry volunteers, farmers market staff, and more attended listening sessions to share their passion and ideas for building a better food system. Feedback from listening sessions provided valuable insight for the Local Food Purchasing Assistance program and identified future opportunities for creating a more resilient and equitable food system in Illinois.

To strengthen our current food system, listening sessions indicated that Illinois needs to invest resources in infrastructure and agribusiness development, meet consumer needs through education and increasing accessibility, and build a more integrative food system network. For Local Food Purchasing Assistance specifically, attendees requested clear communication and technical support, a simplified and supportive application process, and that farmers be paid fair market value for their products.

*“One thing that one we want to see if we are going to participate is that this actually addresses systemic challenges and systemic problems so that we're truly using this to change the system as opposed to just continue shoving food through a pipeline that is broken.”*

ADVOCATE FROM A VIRTUAL LISTENING SESSION

To build a long-term sustainable food system for Illinois, the state must support growers and producers of all experience levels, invest in education and marketing strategies, and engage in advocacy efforts to secure more funding. Together we can build a better food system for Illinois.



# Appendix I

## Who would be a good lead agency/organization in your area?

Below is a list of the organizations that advocates listed as potential lead agencies when asked this question in their listening sessions:

- Advocates for Urban Agriculture
- American Farmland Trust
- Angelic Organics Learning Center
- Arukah Institute
- Auburn-Gresham Community Development
- Black Hills Regional Council
- Black Oaks Center
- Brave Space Alliance
- Farm Fed Co-op
- Carle Health Mobile Market
- Community Foundation of Central Illinois
- Champaign-Urbana City Farms
- Chicago Food Policy Action Council
- Chicago Parks District
- Chicago Public Schools
- Childcare centers
- Christian Activities Center
- Community colleges
- Community Development Financial Institution
- Community foundations
- Co-ops
- Down at the Farms
- Eastern Illinois Food Bank
- Economic Development Corporation
- Englewood Food Sovereignty Network
- Experimental Station
- Farmers markets
- Feeding America
- Feeding Illinois
- Food Banks
- Food for Greater Elgin
- Galesburg Community Foundation
- Gary Comer Youth Center
- Greater Chicago Food Depository
- Grow Greater Englewood
- Growing Home
- Health departments
- Heartland Alliance
- Illinois Extension
- Illinois Farm Bureau
- Illinois Farmers Market Association
- Illinois Migrant Council
- Illinois Stewardship Alliance
- Inner-city Muslim Action Network
- Iroquois County Public Health
- Kankakee Community College
- Latino Round Table of Southwestern Illinois
- LEAF Food Hub
- Liberty Prairie Foundation
- Local churches
- Local Foods
- Local Initiatives Support Corporation Illinois
- Local schools
- McHenry County College Center for Agrarian Learning
- Midwest Foods
- Midwest Partners
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- NeighborSpace
- Niche Natural Food Co-op
- Northeast Community Fund
- Northern Illinois Food Bank
- North Lawndale Community



# Appendix I (continued)

## Who would be a good lead agency/organization in your area?

Below is a list of the organizations that advocates listed as potential lead agencies when asked this question in their listening sessions:

- OSF HealthCare
- Outpost Natural Foods
- Plant Chicago
- Saint Sabina Catholic Church
- Star Farms Chicago
- Stewards of the Land
- Stone Temple Baptist Church
- The Common Market
- The Conservation Fund
- The Food Shed Co-op
- The Land Connection
- The Plant
- Top Box Foods
- Tri-County Health Department
- University of Illinois Chicago
- Urban Growers Collective
- Vegetable Growers Association
- Windy City Harvest
- YWCA





# Appendix II

## Who else should be involved from the local area to make this project successful?

Below is a list of the organizations that advocates listed as potential lead agencies when asked this question in their listening sessions:

- Advocates for Urban Agriculture
- After School Matters
- After-school programs
- Any entities with an excess of space/resources
- Assisted Care Facilities
- Blue Cross Blue Shield
- Bread for the World
- Caucuses that represent local communities (to ensure cultural relevancy)
- Center for Civic Engagement and Service Learning
- Chaplin's departments at Veterans Affairs hospitals (to reach veteran farmers)
- Chicago Food Sovereignty Coalition
- Chicago Grows Food
- Chicago Urban Agriculture Mapping Project
- Chicagoland food co-ops
- Cold storage operations
- Community colleges
- Community councils
- Community Food Navigator
- Community health
- Community members
- Community organizations
- Cooperative Food Kitchen on the South Side of Chicago (commercial food kitchen)
- Co-ops
- Councils on aging
- County health departments
- Down at the Farms
- Evanston Grows
- Faith-based organizations
- Farmers markets
- Feeding Illinois
- First Presbyterian
- Food banks
- Food Not Bombs
- Food pantries
- Food processing facilities
- Galesburg Community Foundation
- Genesis Garden
- Greater Chicago Food Depository
- Grocers
- Grow Greater Englewood
- Healthcare organizations
- Illinois Extension (food preservation support)
- Illinois Farmer's Market Association
- Illinois Food System Collaborative
- Illinois Migrant Council
- Illinois Stewardship Alliance
- Good Food Cooperative & Galesburg CSA
- Legislators
- Local chamber of commerce
- Local farmers
- Local governments
- Local park districts
- Local schools, school districts, school boards
- Market Wagon
- Midwest Food Bank



# Appendix II (continued)

## Who else should be involved from the local area to make this project successful?

Below is a list of the organizations that advocates listed as potential lead agencies when asked this question in their listening sessions:

- New Life Centers/Pan De Vida
- Northern Illinois Food Bank
- Salvation Army
- Senior centers
- Senior citizen groups
- Summer feeding sites
- The Hatchery
- The Love Fridge
- The Plant Chicago
- The Specialty Growers Association
- Transportation companies
- University of Illinois Chicago
- Urban Grower's Collective
- What's Good
- Windy City Harvest
- WTVP/Local television stations to get the word out
- Youth involvement and school education campaign



# Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following organizations who hosted a listening session in their community: Chicago Food Policy Action Council, Life Together Center, Marion Centre Mall, Henry White Farm, Elgin Community College, Kankakee Community College, River Bend Food Bank, and Go Green Community Fresh Market. We are grateful to the following individuals for facilitating the listening sessions across the state: Dr. Jennifer McCaffrey and Dr. Joseph Malual at the University of Illinois Extension, and Dakarai Howard at the Illinois Department of Agriculture.

## Suggested Citation

Bach, M., Colson, Q., & McCaffrey J. (2023) Illinois Local Food Purchasing Assistance: Listening Session Learnings. University of Illinois of Extension, College of Agriculture, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

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A special thank you to the food system advocates of Illinois who took the time to provide their feedback in the Local Food Purchasing Assistance listening sessions. A more resilient, equitable, and localized food system would not be possible without your passionate voices and actions.

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