



THE LAKE COUNTY
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
Growing Philanthropy. Building Community.

Coordinating Access to Affordable, Nutritious Food in Lake County, IL

AN IMPACT ANALYSIS OF LCCF'S 3-YEAR
PROACTIVE GRANT MAKING PILOT (2017–2020)



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Special Thanks to Our Partners



Liberty Prairie Foundation 

LCCF would like to thank our lead partners, **Northern Illinois Food Bank** and **Liberty Prairie Foundation**, for their diligent work to effectively coordinate access to fresh, affordable and nutritious food for our neighbors in need through the duration of this 3-year program. We are especially grateful for the collaborative, enthusiastic and innovative ways in which they approached the work during this pilot.

Thank you to our contributing editors: Hester Bury and Scott Jewitt, of Northern Illinois Food Bank; Jon Ashworth, of the Lake County Health Department; John Sonnier, Lake County Community Foundation board member; and Maggie Morales, of The Lake County Community Foundation.

We would also like to thank the Grainger Foundation for their generous support of this work.

LCCF appreciates the many volunteers and agency partners who generously contributed to this program.

- Advocate Condell Medical Center
- Avon Township/Avon Cares Food Pantry
- Beacon Place
- Community Christian Church of Lake County
- Faith Acres — Bread of Life Antioch
- Faith Acres — Big Table Wauconda
- Highland Park Community Foundation
- Highwood Recreation Center
- Lake County Health Department
- Live Well Lake County - Eat Well Action Team
- Mano a Mano Family Resource Center
- Midwest Veterans Closet
- Northern Illinois Food Bank Lake County member agencies
- North Point Food Pantry
- Nuestro Center
- Prairie Farm Corps
- Prairie Wind Family Farm
- Roberti Community House
- Round Lake Area Public Library
- TurnKey Digital
- University of Illinois Extension
- Waukegan Housing Authority
- YWCA of Lake County

Introduction

In 2017, The Lake County Community Foundation (LCCF) launched a 3-year proactive grant making strategy to increase access to affordable, nutritious food across Lake County. Proactive grant making is defined as when a funder identifies organizations or programs that target specific issues of interest to fund over a predetermined period of time. This pilot marked the first time that LCCF had engaged in a multi-year, proactive grant making process. The pilot was designed to combine strategic community leadership with intentional organizational investment to build a framework to support systems change across Lake County.

Upon completion of the pilot, the Foundation committed to creating an impact analysis to better understand how the 3-year, \$330,000 investment in this collaborative project has affected affordable, nutritious food access (including fresh produce) in Lake County. LCCF acknowledges that due to the experimental nature of this proactive grant making strategy, much can be learned through the evaluation of this approach. Through this evaluation and impact analysis, we wish to share the following with community stakeholders:

- Key data points regarding how the investment affected access to affordable, nutritious food
- Where we collectively succeeded (what worked and what did not)
- Recommendations moving forward

As part of the evaluation package, the Foundation created a comprehensive evaluative framework from which to collect and glean data. This framework took the form of an Excel document that served as a mechanism to capture the participating organizations' quantitative metrics and outcomes. Along with quantitative measures, the framework organizes the outcomes into themes to help draw conclusions about the work and identify areas of community impact. Themes within this framework included: food access, education and building the local food system.

Our hope is that conceptually, this framework can be replicated and serve as a guide to inform future multi-year funding initiatives.

It is important to note the effect that this multi-year initiative has had on emergency food response with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Programs, initiatives and relationships that were formed during the 3-year grant program were critical to informing our county's emergency food response in 2020. This is discussed further in the COVID-19: Collaboration, Crisis Response & Silver Linings section on page 23.

BACKGROUND

The Foundation has employed several grant making strategies since its inception in 2003. Early on, the board prioritized making several smaller grants to a broad range of health and human service organizations throughout Lake County. This strategy was effective in building organizational awareness and supporting the Foundation's efforts to understand Lake County's nonprofit landscape. However, it was not conducive to tracking long-term progress in addressing critical community and countywide issues.

Investing in Multi-Year Collaborations

Over the years, the need for stronger communication, collaboration and coordination among nonprofits became apparent and later resulted in LCCF's first multi-year funding initiative — the formation of The Alliance for Human Services of Lake County.

- [The Alliance for Human Services \(Est. 2011\)](#) — The Alliance is a member coalition of health and human service providers dedicated to improving the quality of the sector's service delivery, fostering collaboration

and providing a unified voice for Lake County advocacy efforts. LCCF seeded this coalition and has continued to provide funding and strategic guidance to support its development.

A few years later, LCCF had the opportunity to help seed a second coalition committed to ending human violence in Lake County.

- [Partnership for a Safer Lake County](#) (Est. 2015) — The Partnership is a coalition of community organizations and individuals committed to ending all forms of human violence in Lake County. LCCF funded the feasibility study as well as the coalition’s launch and has continued to provide financial support and technical assistance ever since. Over the years, the Partnership has become a thriving and active countywide collaborative effort.

These coalitions demonstrate that investments with long-term financial support and collaborative cultivation are more impactful and sustainable than a strategy that relies on a singular grant award with limited community impact.

In addition to seeding and supporting the above listed coalitions, LCCF has participated in a number of large-scale efforts to help move the needle on broad regional goals including some of the priorities in [CMAP’s Go To 2040 Plan](#). Staff have been deeply involved in [Live Well Lake County](#), a cross-sector collaborative focused on guiding the Lake County Health Department’s (LCHD) Community Health Assessment and supporting the implementation of their 5-year Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP).

Equipped with several years of learning from each of these collaborative efforts, the impetus for LCCF’s decision to pilot a multi-year proactive grant making investment grew out of the desire to be a part of a broader countywide or regional effort to alleviate systemic issues affecting our community.

[Live Well Lake County \(LWLC\)](#) is a collaboration between community-based organizations, government agencies, health care systems and academic institutions. The group guides a countywide Community Health Assessment process, prioritizes community issues and drives collaboration to improve the health of all who live, work, learn and play in Lake County. Under this collective impact model, the group is comprised of action teams to tackle the health priorities identified in the CHIP. LCCF staff sit on the LWLC Steering Committee and co-chair the Eat Well Action Team.

Informed Decision Making

Prior to launching the proactive grant making program, LCCF went through an extensive evaluation process to analyze its grant making impact and inform a strategy moving forward. Historically, LCCF’s grant making strategy was responsive one-year community investments solicited through a traditional request for proposals (RFP) process. Responsive grant making is being open to receiving proposals and funding ideas from any nonprofit, thus allowing the nonprofits to drive the agenda. During the analysis, staff and the LCCF Grants and Community Outreach Committee considered the success and challenges of LCCF’s grant making history. Through this process, they determined that the most successful and robust grant outcomes were from longer-term investments that incorporated technical assistance, like the examples previously shared.

The Committee also concluded that grants were most successful when:

- **Grantees were provided with unrestricted dollars:** Grant reports, outcomes data and feedback from grantees showed that grants were most impactful when the nonprofits had freedom and latitude to use funds in the way that made the most sense for their organization without LCCF being too prescriptive.

- **Decision making and interventions were data-driven:** Grantees that made programmatic and strategic decisions informed by solid and relevant local data, rather than anecdotal observations, had the greatest community impact.
- **Emphasis was placed on fostering partnerships and building trust:** When LCCF took time to cultivate strong relationships with nonprofit partners, it built trust, which in turn led to open and honest communication. This enabled partners to be candid and open about the state of their projects, organization and where they needed additional support. It also enabled LCCF staff to be a more effective partner because they understood organizational strengths, pain points and growth opportunities.
- **Risk taking, innovation and learning were encouraged:** The cultivation of strong relationships cited above led to nonprofits feeling confident and comfortable enough within the funding relationship to try new, innovative programs and services without the fear of failure. Nonprofits thrive when LCCF encourages innovation and risk taking.

Defining a Proactive Strategy

In response to these findings, the Committee resolved to launch a new strategy that would more efficiently focus LCCF's limited grant making dollars on proactive multi-year investments. The proposed strategy included seeking out specific organizations, not just as grantees, but as true partners to work collaboratively and openly to address a significant community need. The Committee affirmed that by narrowing LCCF's grant making focus, this platform would better support organizations serving individuals who are disproportionately affected by lack of access to address their basic needs. A multi-year funding commitment, they determined, would be a key feature of the new funding strategy because it would allow nonprofit partners to have a runway to think longer-term about addressing a critical community issue, rather than designing and implementing year-long strategies. This would allow both LCCF and the nonprofit partners to take a more holistic view of the county's ecosystem and apply a more comprehensive approach.

The multi-year investment strategy would also drive collaboration through the process and program design as well. All of these components would work together to position LCCF as a thought leader, innovator and driver of collaboration in Lake County.

RATIONALE

After coming to a consensus to pursue the multi-year proactive grant making strategy, LCCF worked diligently to further narrow the scope of the program and identify a funding priority. To do this, LCCF hosted a series of community conversations where roughly 200 stakeholders from across the county shared their experiences and perspectives on need in the community. LCCF also sought guidance and input from key partners including the Lake County Health Department, other funders and local frontline health and human service agencies.

This process and feedback led to the Committee narrowing the funding priority to three broad options:

- Access to education
- Access to behavioral and mental health services
- Access to affordable, nutritious food

Selection of these three topics was informed by the [Lake County Health Department's 2016 Community Health Improvement Plan \(CHIP\)](#) and [Feeding America's 2014 Hunger in America Report for Lake County](#). In the final selection process, the Committee considered:

- Where can the Foundation's limited grant dollars have the most impact?

- Are other area funders working on this issue?
- Does the Foundation have the necessary information and relationships to address the issue by leveraging a systems approach? A systems approach is defined as identifying organizations working on a specific issue and connecting them to others working on that issue to achieve a common goal.

After working through these questions, the Committee came to the consensus to focus its inaugural proactive multi-year grant making initiative on access to affordable, nutritious food. **Staff and the Committee were particularly compelled by the fact that at the time, nearly 70,000 individuals in Lake County struggled with food insecurity.** Since its inception, LCCF has supported organizations across the county that were committed to ensuring all members of the community had access to affordable, nutritious food. Through this work, LCCF was aware that efforts were underway to support food security. However, staff observed that the support system was fragmented.

LCCF defines food access as people having adequate income or other resources to purchase nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for a productive and healthy life. Access also requires that people have sources of healthy food available within a reasonable distance to a store and have a means to get there. Another factor related to access includes knowledge about the importance of healthy eating and the skillset and tools to prepare fresh, healthy food.

The Committee and staff felt they had an opportunity to play a significant leadership role in strategically coordinating efforts to ensure organizations, funders and community stakeholders were working together to maximize resources around food access. In addition, by aligning the LCCF's community investment and leadership efforts with work facilitated through the Lake County Health Department's countywide initiative, Live Well Lake County, LCCF could leverage the resources necessary to drive positive, meaningful change in this area.

PROACTIVE PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

After selecting access to affordable, nutritious food as the focus of the pilot proactive grant making program, LCCF analyzed the landscape of the county's food system organizations to identify potential partners. Since LCCF had spent years investing in food access work, staff came to this priority area equipped with deep knowledge of and relationships with the organizations engaged in this effort throughout the county. Staff recognized that the organizations selected would need to be high-capacity groups, open to collaboration and committed to improving food access for the county's most vulnerable neighbors. LCCF made the application process by invitation only and selected two organizations with extensive history and expertise in food systems work in Lake County: Northern Illinois Food Bank and Liberty Prairie Foundation.

The Lake County Health Department 2016 Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) identified these top health priorities as necessary to align community efforts through funding and resource allocation to improve communities:

- Cardiovascular Disease & Hypertension
- Obesity
- Behavioral Health
- Diabetes

LCCF relied heavily on these priorities to inform its proactive grant making strategy as all four areas are interrelated and closely intersect with access to affordable, nutritious food. Myriad national and international studies assert that diet and food access are significant determinants of obesity and are also risk factors in diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. In Lake County, 6% of residents are diagnosed with diabetes and 24.3% of residents are considered obese.

Northern Illinois Food Bank (the Food Bank), a member of [Feeding America](#), is a nonprofit organization with the goal of solving hunger in its 13-county service area. The organization is the source of nutritious food and innovative feeding programs for more than half a million people annually and seeks to ensure that no one is hungry in Northern Illinois. The Food Bank has an extensive food pantry network and provides food, support and technical assistance to its partner agencies. In Lake County, the Food Bank has 173 network partners (58 food pantries, 10 soup kitchens, five group home/shelters, seven senior sites, 42 Backpack Program sites and 51 youth program sites) all working diligently to close the meal gap in Lake County.

Liberty Prairie Foundation (LPF) is a private operating foundation headquartered in Grayslake, IL. The organization works across the region to incubate and mentor beginning sustainable local food farmers, provide fresh food access in underserved communities, educate and inspire youth, connect farmers with land and shape policy that affects the local food system. It owns and operates a 100-acre certified organic farm, nestled in the Prairie Crossing conservation community in Grayslake. LPF is nationally recognized as a leader in developing and supporting enterprises that build and strengthen the local food system while enhancing the natural landscape. LCCF partnered with LPF's Community Food System Program on this multi-year funding

initiative as the program sought to increase fresh food access in underserved communities by leveraging food from LPF's farm and relationships with local farmers.

Proactive Grant Making Program

Design:

- Applications made by invitation only
- 3-year funding commitment of \$55,000 annually for each partner organization
- A deep and demonstrated commitment to collaboration was key

After inviting these partners to collaborate on the application and site visit process, each organization was awarded \$55,000 in 2017 to pursue their respective work with the understanding that the grant would be renewed in 2018 and 2019, pending meaningful progress and outcomes.



Key Findings

Over the course of the next three years, from 2017–2020, Liberty Prairie Foundation and Northern Illinois Food Bank worked together as strategic partners to increase access to affordable, nutritious food in Lake County. The 2019–2020 funding cycle brought this pilot to a close. However, LCCF continues to invest heavily in food access work throughout the county. Staff gleaned insights about the program process, data and impact after the 2020 final grant reports were submitted and feedback was solicited from lead partners at the close of the 3-year initiative.

PROCESS

LCCF continuously sought feedback about the proactive grant making process and program implementation throughout its duration. Project leads from both organizations met with LCCF staff quarterly throughout the 3-year initiative to provide updates, share mutual learnings and explore ways to collaborate. These conversations resulted in LCCF learning several key findings about the process:

- **Removing Competition:** Inviting applicants to apply collaboratively and having both organizations sit down in the same meeting to discuss their application design and respective scope of work was transformative. It took the normally competitive nature of a grant application process out of the equation. Rather than compete, the organizations were encouraged to work together, which ultimately drove collaboration.
- **Cultivating Innovation:** LCCF continuously providing assurance to the organizations that they were committed to a multi-year investment cultivated innovation in both thinking and action. Both organizations had built trust with LCCF and felt comfortable being open about what was and was not working in their programs. This also positioned the Food Bank and LPF to take risks with launching new programs and trying new models that they may not have otherwise pursued.
- **Mutual Learning:** Both LPF and the Food Bank found considerable value in simply learning more about each other's work. This mutual learning allowed them to bring opportunities to each other and have the knowledge they needed to do their work and collaborate more effectively. Having a more thorough understanding of LCCF's vision for the impact of its grant making helped the organizations specifically target and tailor their work as well.

LIBERTY PRAIRIE FOUNDATION

The Liberty Prairie Foundation's Community Food System Program engages the diverse communities of Lake County, connects people to healthy, sustainably grown food and supports dynamic grassroots organizations working on local food projects. Over the years, the organization has built an extensive network of local food partners and piloted several projects to increase access to fresh food in underserved communities. LPF leveraged LCCF's multi-year investment to expand its fresh food distribution programs, food and nutrition education work and to launch [Grow Lake County](#), a website focused on the county's food system and the pinnacle of LPF's efforts to streamline and coordinate the food system. LPF was uniquely positioned to do this work as owner and operator of a 100-acre certified organic farm nestled in the Prairie Crossing Conservation Community in Grayslake. The organization hosts several programs on the farm including an incubator program for beginning farmers, which provides staff with deep connection to and knowledge of the county's agricultural landscape.

LPF had received an initial investment from LCCF in 2013, which helped to launch the organization's community outreach and food access work. The 2013 scope of work entailed a learning journey to understand

Liberty Prairie Foundation's Grow Lake County Project

- Organization uniquely positioned for work as owner of 100-acre certified organic farm
- Food distribution in targeted communities
- Education
- Reinvestment
- Build the network
- Grow Lake County, a local food system hub website



the local food system in Waukegan and the county more broadly as well as providing technical assistance to organizations pursuing food access projects. Waukegan was selected as the focus of this project because of its high poverty rate, significant number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch and the fact that the city has one of the highest obesity rates in Lake County. Waukegan also struggles with several low access areas where residents cannot easily get to a grocery store and are forced to shop at corner markets or gas stations, which often lack healthy, affordable fresh food options. This seed funding provided the opportunity and space for LPF to delve deep into community work and to ultimately launch food distribution programs in Waukegan, North Chicago and Round Lake, three communities that struggle with high poverty rates and lack of fresh food accessibility.

While building this program, LPF found that there were many organizations working to feed their communities in innovative ways, but the groups often worked in silo. There was a significant lack of communication and coordination among them. In fact, at one point early in the program development, LPF staff found that three separate organizations were

simultaneously planning to replicate the Growing Power model created by Will Allen out of Milwaukee, WI, in the same community.

Much of this learning shaped LPF's approach to the proactive multi-year initiative. Throughout the 3-year pilot, LPF's work included the following components:

Fresh Food Distribution Programs & Nutrition Education

LPF worked to increase access to fresh produce through targeted food distribution programs in Waukegan, North Chicago and Round Lake, coupled with nutrition education to show people how to use and prepare the vegetables from the farm.

- **Gleaning Program:** Gleaning is the act of harvesting leftover crops from a farmer's fields after they have been harvested for customers or when it is not economically profitable for the farmer to harvest the food. Several of the farmers located on LPF's Prairie Crossing Farm allowed staff to bring volunteers to glean their fields throughout the growing season during the grant period. That food was distributed to community partners such as Roberti Community House, Beacon Place, Community Christian Church of Lake County, the Food Bank's distribution center in Park City, IL and others. Approximately 9,500 pounds of food were distributed over the 3-year initiative through the Gleaning Program.
- **Beacon Place Program:** This program was in partnership with Beacon Place, a community organization located in Waukegan that provides youth programming, academic support, nutrition classes, literacy classes and much more. The program provided 40 women in the organization's MOM's Group with fresh produce for 8 weeks during the summer, along with samples, recipes and gardening education and tools.

Approximately 9,500 pounds of farm fresh, organic produce was distributed through LPF's Gleaning Program during the 3-year grant program.

Women in the organization's MOM's Group received a bag of fresh, organic vegetables for \$1 each week. Extended programming included cooking demonstrations, nutrition education and container gardening lessons to support families in growing their own vegetables at home.

- **Midwest Veterans Closet Program:** This program was in partnership with [Midwest Veteran's Closet](#), an organization that provides food, goods, support and dignity to local veterans. This program launched in year two of the 3-year initiative. The program provided on-site, in-depth cooking demonstrations, recipes, samples and nutrition education to 15 veterans each week for 8 weeks. LPF also provided complete meal kits to veterans so they could replicate the recipes each week at home and brought supplemental vegetables from the Gleaning Program for participants and for the organization's food pantry that serves veterans and their families.
- **WIC Program:** LPF partnered with the Lake County Health Department and its Women, Infant & Children (WIC) Program. Through the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program, women enrolled in WIC were provided with vouchers to use at local farmers markets. In 2017, LPF brought a mini market so that the women could redeem the vouchers immediately after receiving them at the LCHD office. Staff provided samples and nutrition education as well. A shift in state-mandated requirements for the program made it difficult to continue the model and sadly the program was discontinued in 2018.
- **Food Sovereignty:** LPF staff leveraged their relationship with the local food producers on its farm and collected excess seedlings to distribute to local community groups, community gardens, school gardens and others. Many of the groups that took seedlings redistributed them to neighbors, clients and others to encourage people to grow their own culturally relevant food. Giving people the knowledge and tools to grow their own food is empowering to communities and helps them take their food needs into their own hands.

Building the Local Food System

A significant piece of this 3-year collaboration involved further investment and capacity building to develop Lake County's local food system. LPF approached this work in three ways: micro-grants, the creation of an online information hub and fostering partner connections.

- **Reinvestment:** LPF reinvested \$40,400 of the grant funds from LCCF to further build the local food system through its Community Food System Micro-Grant Program and small grants to Lake County teachers to support school garden projects in partnership with the University of Illinois Extension. Micro-grants supported organizations engaged in local food projects including community gardens, school gardens, youth agriculture programs and food recovery efforts. Eight communities were impacted through the reinvestment, including: Barrington, Grayslake, Lake Bluff, Lake Forest, Mundelein, North Chicago, Round Lake and Waukegan.
- **Grow Lake County:** The [Grow Lake County](#) website serves as a hub of information for Lake County's local food system. The site makes it easier for people to find and purchase local food via an interactive map, provides local resources to help people grow their own food and includes information about the local food movement in Lake County and the organizations driving progress. It includes myriad resources for organizations involved in this work, and offers a comprehensive list of local, state and federal grant opportunities as nonprofits search for ways to support their work. LPF worked with local website developer, [Turnkey Digital](#), to build a beautiful and functional site, which launched in July 2017. From the launch of the site to the end of the pilot, Grow Lake County has had approximately 16,000 users.

LPF reinvested \$40,400 of grant funds to build the local food system through grants to support community-based food projects and school gardens.

- **Building the Network:** Over the course of the 3-year pilot, LPF staff did significant outreach to community groups to bring them into the broader Lake County food system network. Organizations brought into the network were provided with seedlings, seeds, gardening tools and other resources. The network was notified of grant and partnership opportunities as well. Over the course of the pilot, 25 organizations were added to LPF's food system organization network list.

Figure 1: Liberty Prairie Foundation Cumulative Outcomes at a Glance (2017–2020)

Outcome Category	Measure	Result
Food Distribution	Total pounds of food distributed	13,886
	Number of servings	55,546
	Value of fresh food distributed	\$46,143
	Number of meal kits provided to veterans	240
	Number of seedlings donated	2,317
	Seedling value	\$9,814
People Served via Food Distribution	Total number of people served	4,940
	Number of veterans served	270
	Number of low-income women served (WIC and Beacon)	160
	Teachers served	45
	Number of organizations receiving fresh food	6
Education	Number of education classes provided	46
	Number of people participating in education programming	205
	Change in behavior highlights (survey results)	See Figure 2
System	Grow Lake County website hits	16,000
	Increase in number of organizations in LPF community group database	25
	Amount invested via micro-grants and school garden grants	\$40,400
	Number of communities impacted	7

Survey Highlights

LPF surveyed participants from the Beacon Place and Midwest Veteran's Closet programs in 2018 and 2019 to help gauge the efficacy of its education programs. Survey results indicate successful outcomes as participants reported gaining knowledge of healthy eating and having greater access to fresh food during the program in both years.

Figure 2: Liberty Prairie Foundation Survey Highlights

Education Program	Year	Result
Beacon Place	2018	83% of those surveyed tried a new vegetable because of the program.
		100% of respondents regularly replicated the recipes at home using the market vegetables.
		84% of respondents said they would seek out vegetables distributed through the program at their local grocery store to feed their family.
		80% of those surveyed felt comfortable cooking with the vegetables after presentations.
	2019	93% of those surveyed tried a new vegetable because of the program.
		100% of respondents regularly replicated the recipes at home using the market vegetables.
		100% of respondents said they would seek out vegetables distributed through the program at their local grocery store to feed their family.
		85% of those surveyed felt very comfortable cooking with the vegetables after presentations.
Midwest Veteran's Closet	2018	100% of respondents said they ate more fresh vegetables as a result of the program.
		100% of those surveyed said when they did not recognize a vegetable, they were given the right information needed to cook it.
		100% of respondents said they felt that the program gave them information to help them make healthier food choices.
		Program participants tried a variety of new vegetables. Respondents cited kale, soup celery, cilantro, beans, leeks and beets as vegetables they had never tried prior to the program.
	2019	67% of respondents said they ate more fresh vegetables as a result of the program.
		100% of those surveyed said when they did not recognize a vegetable, they were given the right information needed to cook it.
		100% of respondents said they felt that the program gave them information to help them make healthier food choices.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS FOOD BANK

Northern Illinois Food Bank (the Food Bank) serves as the lead agency in our region working to solve hunger. The organization is an expert in managing food acquisition and distribution of nutritious meals to food-insecure individuals, children and families through innovative programs and partnerships. It leverages its extensive

network of pantry agency partners in its 13-county service area to accomplish this. **In Lake County, the Food Bank has 58 food pantry partners and provides them with food, support, capacity building in the form of small grants for equipment, technical assistance, training and networking.**

Meeting the Meal Gap in Lake County

The Food Bank's 3-year project goal was to provide 75% of the meals needed to meet the meal gap in every community in Lake County. The organization's goal was set to 75%, because additional meals are provided throughout the county through SNAP benefits and other programs not tracked by the Food Bank. They also set a goal to ensure that by the end of the 3-year pilot, 25% of all food it distributed was fresh produce. Through its partnership with LPF, the Food Bank leveraged the opportunity to increase the amount of fresh produce sourced from local farmers to support the local economy and save on transportation costs.

Northern Illinois Food Bank's Meeting the Meal Gap Project:

- Meet 75% of the identified meal gap in every community in Lake County
- Increase fresh produce distribution
- Build capacity for local food pantries

The Food Bank's project goals aligned well with its strategic plan, adopted in 2014. The plan guided the organization to meet 75% of the meal gap in every community across its service area by 2020 via five pathways:

- **More Meals:** Growing meal distribution in areas with unmet need, while sustaining distribution in areas where the Food Bank has established meal distribution nearly equal to the need.
- **Strengthen Leadership:** The development of organizational and community leaders will help accomplish goals safely, efficiently and effectively.
- **Build Healthy Communities:** Improve community health by providing SNAP Assistance and nutrition education and partnering with healthcare providers to screen for food insecurity and intervene with immediate access to fresh produce or referrals to local resources.
- **Ignite the Community:** Educate and engage the community to respond to food insecurity through donations and volunteering.
- **Be Trusted Financial Stewards:** The Food Bank is a financially healthy organization with more than six months of operating reserves and 97% of its resources going to its programs.

The PRAN

The Food Bank's Proximity of Resources and Need (PRAN) mapping tool allows the organization to see how much of the meal gap is being met on an annual basis in its service area. The map overlays two data sets: Census tract data (which identifies the number of food insecure people) and known distribution based on volume and location of Food Bank agencies (pantries, feeding sites and mobile pantries). It calculates the proximity to those needs based on three factors—walking, public transportation and driving based on Census survey data. The organization uses this map to determine where unmet needs are and where to concentrate future resources. The Food Bank acknowledges that the data included in the PRAN does have limitations:

- It is based only on the organization's food distribution
- Does not include other access factors such as hours of operation, etc.
- The data is 18 months behind

It remains an invaluable tool, however, to help the Food Bank identify areas of high need and informs strategy to meet that need.

Throughout the project, the Food Bank worked to provide nutritious food for all those in need through its network of member feeding sites and mobile pantries in targeted areas where it was not yet meeting 75% of the identified meal gap. Distribution efforts were focused in the northwest and southeast areas of the county after previous PRAN reports identified those parts of the county as areas where additional food distribution

28 Census tracts moved from red, orange, or yellow to green on the Food Bank's PRAN Map during the grant program period in the communities of: Antioch/Fox Lake, Beach Park, Buffalo Grove, Deerfield, Highwood, Lake Zurich, Riverwoods, Waukegan, Winthrop Harbor and Zion. The transition to green means that 75% of the meal gap is being met by the Food Bank in those Census tracts.

was required to meet the local need. Targeted communities included Antioch, Buffalo Grove, Highwood, North Chicago, Waukegan and Zion. The Food Bank also targeted seniors in North Chicago after identifying that specific demographic group as being food insecure.

At the start of the grant program, Northern Illinois Food Bank set out to turn the map of Lake County entirely green, which would indicate that 75% of the meal gap throughout the county is being met in all communities. In FY20, the final year of the grant, the Food Bank distributed 11.2 million meals in Lake County, a 20% increase over the previous year as they responded to the increased need for food assistance caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With this increase, the 2020 PRAN shows that the Food Bank achieved its original goal to "turn the map green," meeting 75% of the meal gap in all Census tracts. While the increase in food distribution due to

COVID-19 may have skewed the PRAN numbers, the Food Bank is working to analyze pre-COVID meal gap numbers of food-insecure individuals as well.

Throughout the course of the project, the Food Bank used a variety of strategies to meet their goal to close the meal gap in Lake County.

Food Distribution Programs

Northern Illinois Food Bank scaled up existing food distribution programs and launched new models in its quest to close the meal gap. They identified six target communities to infuse additional fresh food: Antioch, Buffalo Grove, Highwood, North Chicago, Waukegan and Zion. The organization also leveraged existing partnerships and fostered new ones to accomplish this in a collaborative way.

Six target communities: Antioch, Buffalo Grove, Highwood, North Chicago, Waukegan, Zion = 594,152 pounds of fresh food distributed in those communities during the 3-year grant program.

- **Mobile Pantries:** This model was an important method to ensure that food was distributed efficiently in targeted communities. The Food Bank used the PRAN mapping tool to identify areas with significant meal gaps that needed additional support.
 - The Food Bank identified a significant need among low-income senior citizen facilities in North Chicago and consistently distributed food to this population via a mobile pantry throughout the 3-year pilot.
 - The PRAN also indicated that there was a significant meal gap in Highwood, a community with limited food pantries. In 2018, the Food Bank launched a mobile pantry at the Highwood Recreation Center to meet the community's need. This is now a weekly distribution site and has highlighted the need for an additional permanent food pantry in this community, which is still being explored.
 - In July 2019, the Food Bank and several community partners launched the Rx Mobile Pantry at the Round Lake Public Library. Along with the Food Bank, this program was a collaborative effort of several

partners including Advocate Condell Medical Center, Avon Township/Avon Cares Food Pantry, Mano a Mano Family Resource Center, YWCA of Lake County and Round Lake Area Public Library. This program provides produce, milk, eggs and meat twice per month for free to residents identified by healthcare staff as food insecure. Residents access vouchers by visiting Mano a Mano Family Resource Center, YWCA of Lake County, Avon Township or the Advocate Condell Medical Center Diabetes Program, Wound Center and Cancer Center. A limited number of vouchers are also available through walk-ups on the day of the event. Partners are responsible for distributing the food vouchers and for following up with their identified participants. This program impacted nearly 4,000 people in 2019. Today, the Rx Mobile Pantry continues to serve an average of 200-250 households twice per month.

- **North Suburban Center Distribution:** At the beginning of the grant period, the Food Bank opened their North Suburban Center in Park City twice per month to all member agencies to pick up fresh food with no shared maintenance fees to supplement their regular deliveries. This led to the current system of allowing agencies to visit any weekday to pick up additional food, especially fresh produce.
- **Produce Drops:** Twice per month, the Food Bank distributed produce and nutritious non-perishable food through drops at designated sites including Waukegan Housing Authority, Faith Acres/Bread of Life Antioch and Faith Acres/Big Table Wauconda. This has now been replaced with increased deliveries direct to food pantries and the ability for agencies to pick up food when needed at the North Suburban Center.
- **Produce Purchase:** The Food Bank also leveraged its scale and purchasing power to use grant funds in all three years to buy fresh produce for distribution through its Lake County member agencies.
- **Take 50 Foods to Encourage (F2E):** This program provided an incentive for member agencies to access highly nutritious perishable and non-perishable foods that often have a higher shared maintenance fee than less nutritious alternatives. The Food Bank purchased F2E items that included whole grain cereal and pasta, shelf-stable milk, low-sodium soups and vegetables, 100% juices, brown rice and other items containing essential vitamins and minerals. Grant funds were used to pay for 50% of shared maintenance fees when member agencies ordered them.
- **My Pantry Express:** Launched in February 2019 as a pilot, this program serves as an online food pantry to reach people not using the current food pantry network. This innovative program is a scalable model to provide access to food for people facing barriers to the charitable food system that the Food Bank can replicate across its service area and the Feeding America network. The program was piloted in North Chicago and Waukegan and now provides three weekly distributions. The Food Bank is currently engaging member agencies to replicate the online model that has become even more necessary due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Northern Illinois Food Bank distributed approximately 440,000 pounds of food through growing or new food pantries, helping to support nascent pantries in high needs communities.

Reinvestment and Capacity Building

Throughout the 3-year program, the Food Bank reinvested grant funds to support member agencies through equipment purchases (such as coolers/freezers) and food credits for high need areas as partners worked toward raising their own funds to become sustainable. They also used grant funds to support North Point Food Pantry in Winthrop Harbor in their transition to a new facility, which greatly increased food distribution and access in the northeastern part of the county. In addition, they provided some partners with technology to support them in transitioning

Northern Illinois Food Bank reinvested \$34,500 of grant funds in its food agency partners in the form of food credits, technology and equipment purchases.

to the Link2Feed client data tracking software that provides up-to-date demographic information on the people that the Food Bank is serving.

Education

In 2019, the Food Bank brought educational programs to support vulnerable neighbors in Lake County. Their Whole Body Approach Class at Nuestro Center in Highwood targeted adults at risk of chronic disease and focused on improving their knowledge of healthy eating. The organization also introduced nutrition education classes for children at Nuestro Center. Nuestro Center provided the education using the Food Bank curriculum, which focused on improving the children’s knowledge of healthy eating. Unfortunately, these programs have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the Food Bank hopes to resume them when it is safe to do so.

Figure 3: Northern Illinois Food Bank Cumulative Outcomes at a Glance (2017–2020)

Outcome Category	Measure	Result
Food Distribution	Total pounds of fresh food distributed	7,914,729
	Number of servings	31,658,916
	Total pounds of food distributed to low-income seniors	91,949
	Percent increase of fresh food distributed	18%
	Pounds of food distributed in 6 target areas	594,192
	PRAN Census tracts moved from red /orange/yellow to green, meaning that target 75% of the meal gap transitioned to being met	28
	Pounds of food distributed through growing or new food pantries	436,879
	Pounds of F2E foods distributed	18,452
People Served via Food Distribution	Total number of people served	94,141
	Number of low-income seniors served	300
Education	Number of education classes provided	37
	Number of people who participated in educational programming	541
System	Highwood mobile pantry distribution	Creation of model that led to identification of need for sustainable, permanent Highwood food pantry
	Rx Mobile Pantry	Program launched to meet significant need in community of Round Lake
	Investment in agency partners (equipment, capacity building, etc.)	\$34,500

COLLABORATION

LCCF's 3-year proactive grant program was designed with collaboration in the forefront. From the application process forward, Liberty Prairie Foundation and Northern Illinois Food Bank were consistently encouraged to work together to increase access to affordable, nutritious food in Lake County. The organizations found several different ways to creatively achieve this goal while reinforcing this value with other partners and one another.

Gleaning

Produce from Liberty Prairie Foundation's Gleaning Program was delivered to Food Bank food pantry agencies and the organization's Park City distribution center. The Food Bank helped to inform LPF's distribution strategy by providing information about which pantries had cooler capacity to handle large amounts of fresh produce and which pantries needed an influx of fresh food.

LPF's Gleaning Program is largely dependent on volunteers. The Food Bank promoted the volunteer opportunity to its own volunteer distribution list, which led to an increase in Gleaning Program volunteers. The impact of this is substantial because the more volunteers LPF gets into the fields, the more produce they can harvest and distribute to communities in need.

Eat Well Action Team

As part of the Lake County Health Department's Live Well Lake County Initiative, the coalition formed Action Teams comprised of stakeholders across the county to work toward improving the four health priorities identified through the CHIP which included: cardiovascular disease and hypertension, obesity, behavioral health and diabetes. The Action Teams include: GO Lake County Network, Behavioral Health Team, Diabetes Prevention and Management Team, Tobacco Prevention and Cessation and the Eat Well Action Team. The Eat Well Action Team provided an effective vehicle for collaboration as LCCF staff co-chaired the team and the Food Bank and LPF participated as members. Both the Food Bank and LPF were vital members that helped to drive communication and collaboration on the team.



Shared Learning

Both organizations sought out opportunities to share learning and expertise throughout the 3-year grant program. Food Bank staff presented to LPF's Prairie Farm Corps youth development program to help teen participants understand the landscape of food insecurity in Lake County. LPF provided bilingual materials on healthy eating and recipes during the Food Bank's member agency shop days at the Park City distribution facility. The Food Bank also helped to inform LPF's distribution by providing information about which food pantries had cooler and staff capacity to accept large fresh food donations.

Locally Sourced Produce

Northern Illinois Food Bank set a goal during the 3-year grant program to increase the amount of fresh produce sources from local farmers to support the local economy and save transportation costs. Both grantees worked together to explore this. LPF introduced the Food Bank's purchasing department to a local farm business, Prairie Wind Family Farm. Representatives from both organizations sat in on a meeting to explore the possibility of the Food Bank sourcing more local produce from a farmer and what that model would look like. This was a positive conversation, and much was learned on both sides—detailed information about local farmer distribution channels and scale as well as how the Food Bank sources its produce and their required purchasing scale. While this conversation was beneficial to both parties, economies of scale were an issue. The Food Bank learned that the price that a small local food farmer would need to command to make a profit to support their business was not aligned with the price at which they would need to purchase the food. Regardless, this proved to be a valuable learning experience for both parties. The Food Bank worked diligently to source local food from orchards and other local producers as well during the grant as it was available. The Food Bank will continue its work to pursue local resources for donated produce.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The overarching goal of LCCF's proactive making grant strategy pilot was to increase access to affordable, nutritious food in Lake County. As strategic partners chosen to undertake this task, Liberty Prairie Foundation and Northern Illinois Food Bank worked collaboratively over the 3-year grant program to target specific communities and leverage their extensive partnerships and networks to accomplish this.

Total Food Distribution

Both the Food Bank and LPF expanded existing food distribution programs and launched new models, as discussed in previous sections, to increase the amount of fresh food available in some of the county's most food insecure communities. From year 1 to year 3 of the grant, there was a 47% increase in the amount of produce distributed by the organizations (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Outcome Category	FY18	FY19	FY20
Pounds of produce distributed	2,274,309	2,314,292	3,340,014
Number of servings	9,097,235	9,257,170	13,360,057
Number of people served	32,740	32,000	34,341

**47% increase
in produce
distribution
over the 3-year grant**

The Food Bank and LPF both concentrated their distribution efforts in specifically targeted high needs communities including Antioch, Buffalo Grove, Highwood, North Chicago, Waukegan and Zion. The organizations also targeted vulnerable populations: veterans, low-income women and low-income seniors.

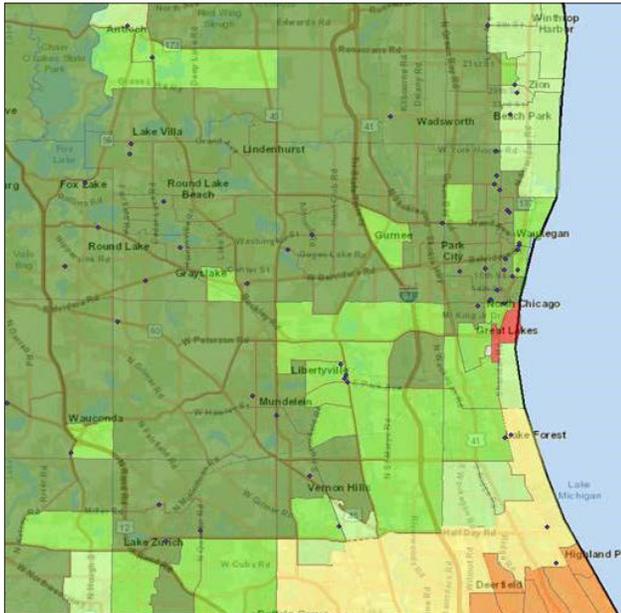
Figure 5: Liberty Prairie Foundation & Northern Illinois Food Bank Cumulative Outcomes at a Glance (2017–2020)

Outcome Category	Measure	Result
Food Distributed	Pounds of nutritious food distributed	7,928,615
	Number of servings	31,714,462
	Pounds of food distributed through growing or new food pantries	436,879
	PRAN Census tracts changed from yellow/orange/red to green, meaning target 75% of the meal gap transitioned to being met	28
People Served	Total number of people served through food distribution	99,081
	Veterans served	270
	Low-income seniors served	300
	Low-income women served (via WIC and Beacon programs)	160
	Teachers served	45
Community Impact	Communities targeted	Antioch, Buffalo Grove, Highwood, North Chicago, Waukegan, Zion
	Pounds of fresh food distributed to specifically targeted communities	594,192
	Food sovereignty - number of seedlings distributed	2,317
Education	Number of education classes provided	83
	Number of people who participated in educational programming	746
	Type of education provided	Nutrition literacy, healthy cooking, gardening
System	Highwood mobile pantry distribution	Creation of model that led to identification of need for sustainable, permanent Highwood food pantry
	Growing the food system network	Added 25 organizations to the LPF food system organization database over the life of the project.
	Amount invested in other food organizations via micro-grants, school garden grants and food pantry agency capacity building	\$74,900
	Creation of Grow Lake County as a resource and information hub about Lake County's food system	16,000 hits between launch of site in mid-2017 to July 2020

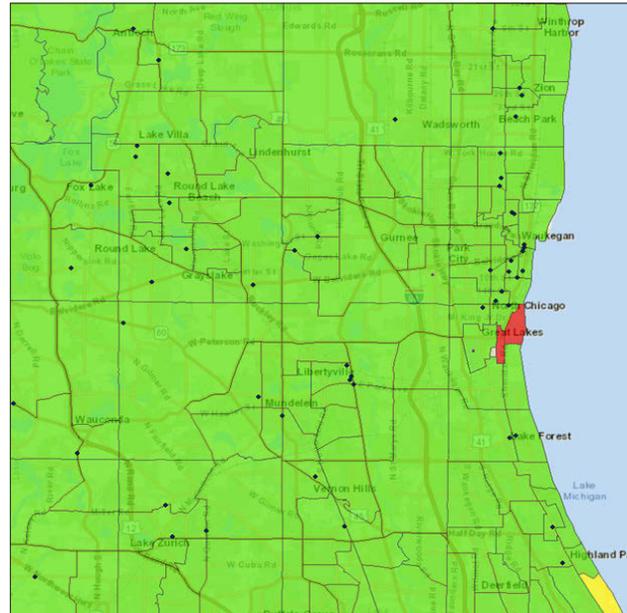
PRAN Goal

With the increased food distribution in FY20, the Food Bank has met their 2020 goal of meeting 75% of the meal gap in all Lake County communities. This incredible feat can be attributed to the Food Bank’s innovative food program models, reinvestment in their food pantry agency partners and strategically targeting communities that struggle with access to fresh food. Please see Figure 6 below for comparison between the FY18 and FY20 PRAN.

Figure 6: PRAN Map FY18 Compared to FY20



FY18



FY20

The FY20 PRAN shows the county entirely green, meaning 75% of the meal gap is being met in all Lake County Census tracts. There is a small red anomaly on the map at the site of the Naval Station Great Lakes in North Chicago. This area, located on the naval base, has a high population of low-income and food-insecure residents. The Food Bank does not have food distribution in those tracts because it is federal property. The small yellow section at the southeast corner of the county, south of Highland Park near Deerfield, is an area where Northern Illinois Food Bank has few partnerships. Much of the food distributed in that area is from local non-Food Bank agencies, which are not tracked and accounted for in the PRAN map. If those food resources were taken into account, the Food Bank believes this area would, in fact, be green.

Food Insecurity Trends

Over the last few years, Feeding America Meal Gap Studies showed that the food insecurity rate in Lake County is declining. The data show that the county’s rate is declining at a slower pace and is lower than the national average. See Figure 7 for food insecurity rates from Feeding America Meal Gap Studies.

An interesting fact within this data, however, is that the Food Bank identified a new trend reversal in 2017 (see Figure 8) that indicates that the income level of food insecure people in Lake County is changing. The green line at the top of the graph represents people with incomes below 185% of poverty, meaning they may be eligible for some federal food assistance programs. This population had been holding steady and even increasing until FY15 and has been dropping since then. The orange line represents

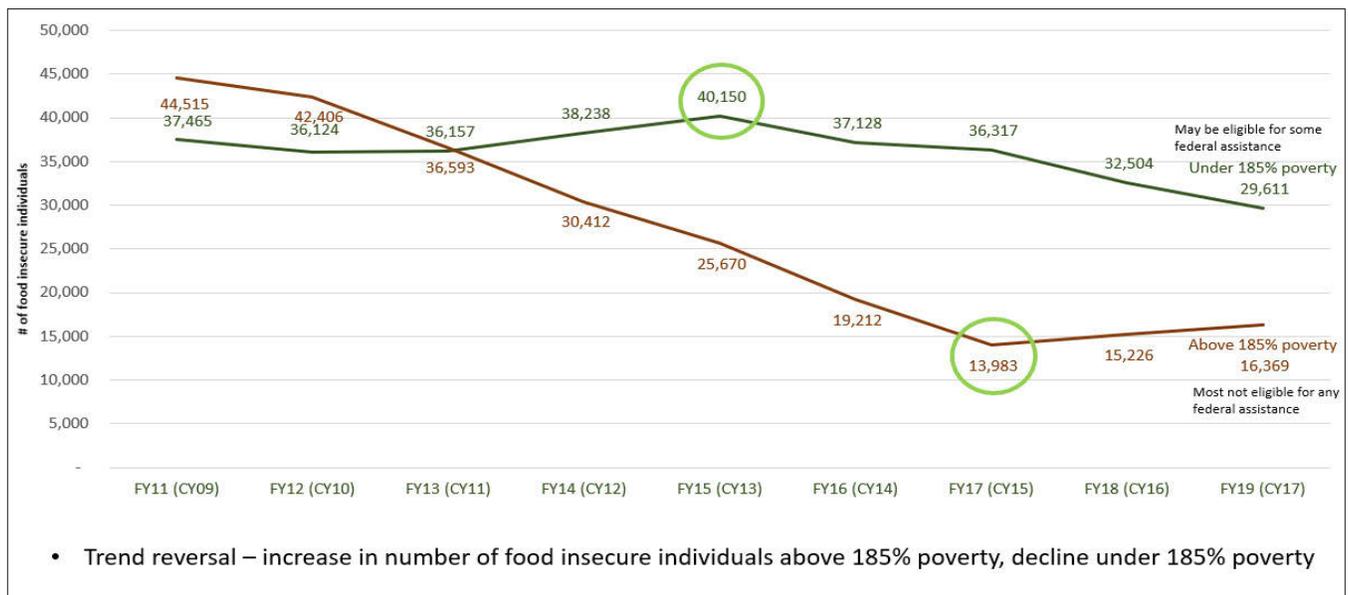
Figure 7: Lake County Food Insecurity Rate

Year	Rate
FY17	7.2%
FY18	6.8%
FY19	6.5%

people with incomes above 185% of poverty, meaning they are generally not eligible for any federal food assistance programs. This population saw declines earlier and hit a low in FY17 and has now been increasing for the last 2 years. **Essentially, this means that there is an increase in the number of food insecure individuals above 185% of the poverty line who are ineligible for federal food assistance programs and there is a decline in the number of people under 185% of the poverty line.**

The increase in food insecure people who do not qualify for federal food assistance programs because their income is too high could mean that additional pressure will be placed on the charitable emergency food system if the trend continues. The implications of this trend became glaringly apparent during the COVID-19 crisis as many families who have never needed food assistance found themselves seeking out help for the first time. This is discussed further in the COVID-19 response section below.

Figure 8: Poverty Levels of Food Insecure Neighbors



BUILDING THE SYSTEM

Both Liberty Prairie Foundation and Northern Illinois Food Bank worked throughout the 3-year pilot to build Lake County’s local food system in strategic, coordinated and sustainable ways.

Capacity Building

LPF and the Food Bank included reinvestment of grant funds as an important part of their work over the 3-year initiative. The organizations saw this as essential to building the county’s food system through strategic investment in other community-based organizations.

- LPF invested \$35,000 in small grants to community-based organizations doing food access work.
- LPF invested \$5,400 in grants to support school gardens in partnership with University of Illinois Extension.
- The Food Bank invested \$34,500 in capacity building for its food pantry partners, which included equipment purchases such as coolers, food credits for pantries serving high need communities and technology and software to support pantries in their transition to Link2Feed, the Food Bank’s new data management software.

LPF and the Food Bank reinvested almost \$75,000 during the program.

Grow Lake County

The pinnacle of LPF's work during the grant period was the launch of the [Grow Lake County](#) website in July of 2017. As discussed earlier, Grow Lake County serves as a hub of information for Lake County's food system and includes a plethora of local resources, information about nonprofits working to feed their communities, a comprehensive section highlighting food access work from the Food Bank and shows people where they can find and purchase healthy, fresh food from local producers. The site was carefully designed and curated and is an excellent local resource for the community. When LPF's staff structure changed, LCCF took over ownership and operation of the website. The Grow Lake County site is an important piece of infrastructure that ties together Lake County's food system. LCCF remains committed to maintaining this important resource for the community.

Local Food Network

When Liberty Prairie Foundation launched into community food access work in 2012, staff's key early observation was that Lake County had a robust system of local food organizations that were largely disjointed and riddled with groups working in silo. Over the years, LPF facilitated countless introductions, connections and partnerships through its community work. During the grant period, LPF added 25 organizations to its network list. These groups were offered grant opportunities, seedlings for their projects and connections to potential partners. This was a vital piece of LPF's goal to create a comprehensive network of food system organizations that communicated regularly and one that encouraged collaboration rather than competition.

SUSTAINABLE & INNOVATIVE PROGRAM MODELS

Northern Illinois Food Bank and LPF both expanded and launched food distribution programs during the grant period. Some of these programs were the nexus for identifying areas where additional investment is needed and serve as models for sustainability.

Highwood Mobile Pantry

In July 2017, the Food Bank launched the Highwood Mobile Pantry as part of the 3-year grant program after identifying the community as needing additional food relief support. Grant funds were used to bring regular bi-weekly mobile pantries to the Highwood Recreation Center. This distribution grew to serve approximately 100 households per distribution and has grown to serve 300–400 households weekly since March 2020 due to COVID-19. The Highwood Mobile Pantry has become a vital piece of the Food Bank's relief work in that community. The success of this model resulted in the Food Bank recognizing that the community of Highwood needs an additional permanent food pantry to meet the need. The mobile pantries and partnerships formed during this program laid the groundwork for a permanent, long-term solution. When the restrictions of the pandemic ease, the Food Bank will work to identify a partner in Highwood that has the capacity to open and maintain a pantry in this community.

Rx Mobile Pantry

Another highlight of the 3-year grant pilot was the Food Bank's launch of the Rx Mobile Pantry in Round Lake. This successful program was the product of a robust group of partners that came together to meet the needs of the Round Lake community. Program partners include: The Food Bank, Advocate Condell Medical Center, Avon Township/Avon Cares Food Pantry, Mano a Mano Family Resource Center, YWCA of Lake County and Round Lake Area Public Library. This model is discussed further on p. 14 in the Northern Illinois Food Bank Food Distribution Programs section.

By the end of the 2019 program, 632 vouchers were collected, and 3,875 people were served. The strong partnerships forged through this program made this a collaborative model with significant community buy in. This is now a permanent program, serving an average of 200–250 households twice per month.

COVID-19: COLLABORATION, CRISIS RESPONSE & SILVER LININGS

The year of 2020 was unprecedented. No one could have predicted the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic would have on our neighbors and communities. With the sudden onset of COVID-19, communities faced urgent needs including an exponential growth of food insecurity as people who had never before needed food assistance found themselves seeking help. The Food Bank has seen a 50% increase in people requesting food assistance and in October 2020, served approximately 60,000 individuals through the food pantry network in Lake County. They have doubled meal distribution in the six months from July to December 2020, distributing 10.1 million meals. Feeding America reports that in Lake County, IL the number of individuals facing food insecurity has risen from 48,730 individuals (7%) to 77,080 individuals (11%) and has doubled for children from 14,420 (8%) to 28,090 (16%) due to the pandemic.

An unanticipated result of LCCF's 3-year proactive grant making strategy program was that it put relationships and groundwork in place that were invaluable to the county's swift emergency food assistance response. As the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded, the Food Bank has served as the prime food assistance leader and resource in Lake County and across its 13-county service region. Over the course of the 3-year grant, the Food Bank built capacity in its member agencies and direct distribution programs, which put the organization in a stronger position to respond to the unforeseen and unparalleled increase in food insecurity during the pandemic. Without many of the programs and partnerships put in place during the grant period, the Food Bank may not have been able to respond as fully as it has, especially in high needs areas of Lake County. For example, the RX Mobile Pantry Program in Round Lake launched during the grant period allowed the Food Bank to have the structures and partnerships in place to efficiently respond to the urgent food need in the community caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The grant program also helped LCCF in its emergency response to COVID-19. In March, LCCF staff quickly mobilized to establish a permanent [Lake County Community Crisis Relief Fund](#) to meet the urgent needs that have arisen due to COVID-19 and to serve as a resource for future community or countywide emergencies. To date, LCCF has raised approximately \$1.2 million and has awarded \$1.1 million to assist the county's frontline health and human service partners in providing critical resources to help families.

Over the course of the 3-year grant, the Food Bank built capacity in its member agencies and direct distribution programs, which put the organization in a stronger position to respond to the unforeseen and unparalleled increase in food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much of this investment has been concentrated to support emergency food assistance as hunger continues to be the most critical and urgent need in the pandemic response. Throughout the 3-year grant period, LCCF gained deep internal staff knowledge of the county food system that turned out to be invaluable to their COVID-19 response. As a result of this body of grant making work and learning, LCCF was able to quickly identify key partners with the capacity to respond efficiently to meet the food needs of the county during the crisis. This ultimately allowed LCCF to have a swift and meaningful impact on the increase in hunger across the county through strategic investment.

As part of LCCF's emergency response, it heavily invested in a collective impact model, County Action To Combat Hunger (the CATCH Initiative). Through this model, several partners came together in March of 2020 including the Lake County Health Department, Alliance for Human Services, numerous health and human service agencies and organizations engaged in food distribution, to ensure that the county's most vulnerable people are fed during the crisis. Four vendors, [Community Action Partnership of Lake County](#), [Curt's Café](#),

Roberti Community House and BellaRu Catering (a for-profit catering company), are working together to make and deliver hot meals, groceries, personal protection equipment (PPE) and other basic essentials to Lake County residents who are COVID positive, lack transportation to get to a food pantry or are quarantined or homebound for other reasons.

The Alliance for Human Services serves as coordinator of this collaborative initiative. Since LCCF had spent the last three years building knowledge in the food system space, it was able to quickly identify which organizations had the capacity to leverage their models and have the greatest impact on the community. Through its Crisis Relief Fund, LCCF supported all four of the CATCH vendors, including Roberti Community House, a key partner in the 3-year proactive grant program.

COVID-19 has prompted LCCF to delay the launch of another proactive grant program in the short-term. LCCF staff and board recognize that the county's nonprofits are struggling with the negative effects of the pandemic as their budgets have suffered serious setbacks due to canceled fundraisers, increased demand for services and donor fatigue. In response, LCCF has committed to concentrating its resources to provide flexible general operating support to nonprofits through its 2021 Basic Human Needs Grant Cycle. Staff anticipates prioritizing general operating support at least through 2021, possibly into 2022, depending on how the sector recovers and rebuilds post-COVID.



Conclusion and Recommendations

There is much to learn from this pilot program as the 3-year proactive grant making strategy was the first time that LCCF engaged in a multi-year funding commitment. LCCF staff will use this experience to inform future proactive grant making programs. The following are some key concluding thoughts, learnings and recommendations that LCCF will consider moving forward based on staff observations and feedback from grantees:

CONCLUSION

Given all of the information and observations gathered in this report, LCCF concludes that this 3-year pilot grant program was a successful initiative. Through this multi-year investment, nearly 8 million pounds of fresh, healthy food were provided to some of our county's most vulnerable communities. Innovative programs and partnerships were launched that have now become permanent and will continue to feed our neighbors for years to come. Capacity building through reinvestment of the grant funds also impacted several other organizations in the county and helped to further develop and build the local food system.

Going forward, LCCF would advocate for this proactive multi-year strategy to continue because this pilot has proven that a sustained funding commitment can lead to innovation and a robust and impactful body of work. The spirit of collaboration and collective impact that partners brought to this pilot was vital to its success and LCCF staff would reinforce those key aspects in any future multi-year funding initiative. LCCF has also learned from this experience and has gained invaluable insight into what aspects of the program would need to change and remain moving forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Program Design

In a future multi-year funding strategy, LCCF staff would recommend ideally starting the discussion and program design by taking a data-informed approach to specifically define end goals. Having a clearer understanding of what we want to measure and how we measure progress at different points throughout the program will help to more clearly understand and articulate impact. This pertains to the recommendations below regarding outcomes and measures.

Outcomes and Measures

Each grantee was responsible for individually setting their annual outcomes and measures. This led to some inconsistency in data that was collected over the 3-year period and made it somewhat difficult to pull broader impact and themes out of the total body of work. LCCF would recommend that in the future, grantees and LCCF staff come to a consensus around outcomes and measures prior to the program launch so that metrics are consistent across the entire duration of the multi-year program.

Workplan

As part of the application process, both LPF and the Food Bank were required to submit annual workplans to lay out the timeline and deliverables of their proposed scope of work. This proved to be a valuable exercise for both grantees as well as LCCF staff and helped to organize and clarify the work ahead. Moving forward into any other proactive strategy, this would remain an important piece of the application process. In the future, staff would encourage partners to submit a joint workplan with specific shared metrics that can be easily tracked over time. This joint workplan would ensure that partners understand each other's annual scope of work and can identify both gaps and mutually reinforcing activities and goals.

Collaboration

The pilot grant program was centered around collaboration and this proved to be an invaluable component. Having the grantees and LCCF sit down together during the annual application process and subsequent quarterly updates was an important time to explore partnership opportunities and build trust. The grantees also provided updated reports on achievements, progress and challenges. Grantees were able to open doors to collaboration rather than be mired down by competition or uncertainty.

Application Process

Grantees were required to complete full annual applications. Feedback indicated that this process made the grantees feel at points that the three applications were somewhat disjointed rather than one cohesive 3-year body of work. LCCF would recommend that in the future, grantees be required to complete one application at the start of the multi-year commitment that provides an overview of the entire scope of work. Grantees would then be required to submit updates or summaries along with the joint workplan referenced above at the beginning of each subsequent grant cycle.

Organization Selection

The Liberty Prairie Foundation's Community Food Systems Program director left the organization at the start of year 3 of the grant program and its executive director left mid-way into the same year. The work continued through the last year of the grant, however, the body of work that was developed over the three years has now ended as LPF has made staffing adjustments and is undergoing a strategic planning process. This is certainly understandable as the organization works to streamline staff time and program priorities. However, it is unfortunate that the body of work and capacity built over the 3-year pilot will not continue. In the future, LCCF would recommend inquiring about project lead succession planning at the start of the program and whether a body of work would leave the organization with the departure of a particular staff member. This is an important factor to inquire about, but may not change whether a nonprofit receives funding, because it is simply the reality that so many nonprofits face. It is also important to note that LCCF had a leadership change during the last year of the grant program as well. These leadership and staffing changes did impact the program as staff worked to support knowledge transfer and valuable new perspectives were introduced into the work as well.

Thank you to our incredible program and thought partners, Northern Illinois Food Bank and Liberty Prairie Foundation, who helped to shape and lead this initiative. The LCCF staff and board are grateful for their extensive knowledge, expertise and support.

For more information about The Lake County Community Foundation's grant making, please visit www.lakecountycf.org.

Definitions

Capacity building: For the purposes of this analysis, LCCF considers capacity building as not only providing support through funds, but also technical assistance and equipment that ultimately helps organizations do their work and serve their clients more effectively and efficiently.

Collective impact: Brings people together in a structured way to achieve social change. Collective impact starts with a common agenda, which means coming together to collectively define the problem and create a shared vision to solve it. Collective impact also establishes shared measurement, meaning partners agree to track progress in the same way, which allows for continuous improvement. It fosters mutually reinforcing activities, coordinating collective efforts to maximize the end result. Collective impact also encourages continuous communication as it builds trust and relationships among all participants and has a strong team dedicated to orchestrating the work of the group. (Source: [Collective Impact Forum](#))

Federal poverty level: A measure of income issued every year by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Federal poverty levels are used to determine eligibility for certain programs and benefits, including savings on Marketplace health insurance, and Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) coverage. 2020 federal poverty levels are: \$12,760 for individuals, \$17,240 for a family of 2, \$21,720 for a family of 3 and \$26,200 for a family of 4. (Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [Healthcare.gov](#))

Food access: When people have adequate income or other resources to purchase nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for a productive and healthy life. Access also requires that people have sources of healthy food available within a reasonable and feasible distance to a store and have a vehicle or can use public transportation to get there. Another factor related to access includes knowledge about the importance of healthy eating and the skillset and tools to prepare fresh, healthy food. (Sources: [USDA Economic Research Service](#), [United States Agency for International Development](#))

Food insecurity: The state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. In the United States, currently 1 in 9 people struggle with hunger. Effects of food insecurity include: serious health complications, especially when people facing hunger are forced to choose between spending money on food and medicine or medical care; damage to a child's ability to learn and grow; and difficult decisions for seniors such as choosing between paying for food and critical healthcare. (Source: [Feeding America](#))

Food sovereignty: "Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally-appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations." (Source: [Declaration of Nyéléni](#), the first global forum on food sovereignty, Mali, 2007)

Food sovereignty goes beyond ensuring that people have enough food to meet their physical needs and asserts that people must reclaim their power in the food system by rebuilding relationships between people and the land and between food providers and those who eat. LCCF's perspective is that food sovereignty is encouraged by empowering people to grow culturally relevant food to feed themselves and their communities. (Source: [U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance](#))

Gleaning: Gleaning is the act of harvesting leftover crops from a farmer's fields after they have been harvested for customers or when it is not economically profitable for the farmer to harvest the food.

Local food system: A collaborative network that integrates sustainable food production, processing, distribution, consumption and waste management in order to enhance the environmental, economic and social health of a particular area. (Source: Community-Wealth.org)

Proactive grant making: Proactive grant making is defined as when a funder identifies organizations or programs that target specific issue of interest to fund over a predetermined period of time.

Responsive grant making: Responsive grant making is being open to receiving proposals and funding ideas from any nonprofit, thus allowing the nonprofits to drive the agenda.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC): WIC provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk. WIC serves about half of all infants born in the United States. (Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service)

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): SNAP is a federal program that provides nutrition benefits to low-income individuals and families that are used at stores to purchase food. A household must meet certain requirements to be eligible for SNAP and receive benefits. (Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service)

Systems Approach: "Identifying the organizations and individuals already working on a problem and helping them join forces to achieve their common goals." (Source: Stanford Social Innovation Review)

WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP): Eligible WIC participants are issued FMNP coupons in addition to their regular WIC benefits. These coupons can be used to buy eligible foods from farmers, farmers' markets or roadside stands that have been approved by the state agency to accept FMNP coupons. (Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service)