What can you do to make a difference in Vermont?
What can we do together?

The Vermont Community Foundation is dedicated to growing philanthropy that shapes the future of Vermont by helping people find and fund the causes they love, by building strong communities, and by leading with bold solutions. The Foundation periodically produces in-depth reports such as this one, on critical issues and opportunities in Vermont where philanthropy can make a difference.

Food Security

*(noun)* the consistent and reliable access to enough food to fully meet basic nutritional needs

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The local food system in Vermont is vibrant. There are more farmers’ markets per capita here than anywhere else in the country. Vermonter’s demand for direct purchase of local food has skyrocketed. And the state’s 10-year Farm to Plate Strategic Plan is the only one of its kind in the nation (more at www.vtfoodatlas.com).

But while the local food system is bringing health and community benefits across the state, some Vermonter’s are getting left behind. They include the 13% of Vermont families and one in five Vermont children who experience hunger or food hardship. They include the many Vermont families who struggle with food insecurity and obesity, for whom limited purchasing power results in children and others eating highly processed food that leads to a host of preventable, diet-related illnesses. Like much of the country, Vermont faces an obesity epidemic: 60% of adults in our state are overweight or obese, and the prevalence of obesity among adults doubled between 1990 and 2007.

We can do better. Vermont has a unique opportunity to ensure that all Vermonters have access to the benefits of healthy, local food. Farm to Plate identifies this issue as a clear priority, and many leaders are already addressing aspects of this work with real success. Foundations and philanthropists in particular are positioned to do what others cannot: identify needs, take reasoned risks, pilot innovations, and infuse capital. The Vermont Community Foundation is making a long-term commitment to this work; its Food and Farm Initiative builds on the programs already succeeding in parts of the state, helping to strengthen their collaboration and expand their reach statewide.

The Community Foundation is working at the nexus of hunger, health, and the state’s agricultural tradition to connect all Vermont families with healthy, local food—regardless of where they live, what they earn, or how much time they spend cooking.

We focus on three parts of the food system:

Farmers • Institutions • Vermont Consumers
Farmers and food producers are the backbone of Vermont’s cultural heritage, keepers of the working landscape, and drivers of the regional economy. They want to help address food insecurity by serving more Vermonter— and they know one way to do that is by scaling up and selling to large, local institutions like schools and hospitals. But they need better access to well-targeted business planning, as well as infrastructure for storing, processing, and delivering their products.

**FACTS**

**Farming is essential to Vermont’s economy.**
- There are roughly 7,000 farms in Vermont.
- In 2007, the latest year of the Census of Agriculture, major agricultural and food production here totaled $2.7 billion; over 21% of Vermont’s land was in agriculture; and jobs throughout the state’s food system accounted for 16% of all private-sector employment.

**Vermonters value farming, farmers, and farmland.**
- In 2009, the Council on the Future of Vermont reported that 97% of residents “value the working landscape and its heritage.” It was the overall highest-rated value of the 12 values residents considered.

**Philanthropy Can Help**

The Farm to Plate Strategic Plan has spurred a time of positive transition for Vermont’s food economy. The Community Foundation has talked and worked with many of the organizations and farmers involved in building local food access and food security. There is not always agreement about the best role for private funding. However, the approaches and programs highlighted in this report have promise. They are leverage points where philanthropy can make a difference.
**Technical Assistance**

Farmers are businesspeople, and to succeed today they have to be savvy entrepreneurs. But few Vermont farmers report advanced business skills prior to receiving tailored technical assistance: only 5% report high-level strategic planning skills; 11% report high-level sales and marketing skills; and 16% report high-level accounting skills. Although many programs provide technical assistance to farmers and food businesses, building a continuum of those services across all stages of farm development, all scales of operation, and all types of markets is critical to helping farms succeed and sustainably provide food for all Vermonters.

**PROMISING APPROACH**

**Fund Mentoring Programs**

Among the many technical assistance providers in Vermont is the [Vermont Farm Viability Program](#) of the [Vermont Housing and Conservation Board](#). For 10 years, the program has provided in-depth technical assistance to over 500 farmers and food businesses to develop business skills and long-term vision, covering everything from diversifying production and developing marketing plans to transferring farms to new ownership. In 2012, 98% of the program’s 127 clients reported improvement in their financial analysis and business planning skills.

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**Infrastructure**

Vermont farmers who want to scale up and sell to local institutions are often stymied by the lack of systems and facilities to affordably process, store, and distribute their products. A vegetable farmer may have a seasonal market for broccoli, but without access to a facility that can cut the produce into bite-size pieces and freeze it in bulk, relatively few Vermonters will taste it in the winter and spring. And without scaled distribution systems, some farmers struggle to keep their costs competitive and delivery schedules reliable.

**PROMISING APPROACH**

**Expand Regional Food Hubs and Distribution Services**

A number of regional food hubs and distribution services have developed in Vermont and around the country that give farmers the infrastructure and support they need to better serve local markets. For example, the [Vermont Food Venture Center](#) at the [Center for an Agricultural Economy](#) rents its processing kitchens to farmers and food entrepreneurs and helps them expand their markets. [Green Mountain Farm Direct](#), a regional food distribution service, links farm products with institutions through coordinated delivery. When food hubs and distribution services are structured—whether as for-profits, L3Cs, or nonprofits—and scaled in a way that meets their regional food system needs, they are well-positioned to aggregate harvests into the quantities that institutions need, process the food for consistency, and deliver it on a competitive scale.

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**Good Question**

*Is there a critical mass of farmers seeking to scale up to meet the wholesale, institutional market?*

While scaling up may be appropriate for some farmers, others are concerned about their ability to compete with industrial, out-of-state food prices. The Community Foundation believes that, given the right conditions, farmers and institutions can work together and find sustainable solutions. In the short term, as farmers develop ways to increase production and institutions find ways to prioritize local food, philanthropy can help bridge the gap.
Vermont institutions that regularly purchase food in bulk—like schools, nursing homes, and hospitals—can offer consistent, guaranteed purchases for which farmers can plan and grow. They also have systems in place to serve healthy, local food to large numbers of Vermonter. That’s why increasing consumption of local food in institutional settings is the initial focus of the Foundation’s Food and Farm Initiative—and a primary goal of the state’s Farm to Plate Strategic Plan. To achieve that goal, many institutions need new investments in infrastructure and professional development.

**FACTS**

**Institutions serve large populations of hungry and food-insecure Vermonter.**
- 40% of Vermont schoolchildren qualify for free meals.

**Institutions could source more food locally.**
- A survey of select Vermont institutions reveals that they could replace at least $11 million of out-of-state produce and egg purchases with local products. For example, only 17,000 of the 123,000 lbs. of carrots purchased annually by the 188 institutions that responded to the survey are local.

**Many institutions want to serve more local food.**
- 64% of the surveyed institutions have seen increased demand for local products from the people they serve. 94% expected their own demand for local products to stay the same or increase over the next three years.

All sources and works cited available at www.vermontcf.org.
Infrastructure

To source more food locally, Vermont institutions need dependable, efficient systems for purchasing and delivery. At present, a midsize hospital that wants large quantities of local food may have to contact many farmers to meet its need—a time-consuming and costly approach. And institutional kitchens that were set up for prepared, industrial food often need new equipment to use fresh local foods like root vegetables, which are often purchased whole.

PROMISING APPROACHES

Build Farm-to-Institution Networks

NOFA-Vermont (Northeast Organic Farming Association) and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board’s Farm Viability Program are working to develop a statewide Farm-to-Institution “community of practice” that helps farmers, food hubs, and institutions develop efficient and sustainable local food purchasing channels. Included in this work is the development of an online ordering system to streamline institutional purchasing from farmers.

Invest in Equipment

Each year, the Vermont Agency of Education and Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFM) support equipment investments at Vermont schools, from cutting boards and food processors to stoves and refrigeration units. Nearly every school that has received state Farm-to-School implementation funding has invested part of it in equipment needs that relate to local foods.

Professional Development

Professional development for institutions is key to connecting Vermonters with healthy, local food. Public schools, for example, are uniquely positioned to do this with children—but cafeteria staff need training to better purchase, store, and cook whole, local foods in accord with federal nutrition and food safety requirements. Teachers need guidance in bringing local-food education into their classrooms and engaging students’ families in the joys of local food. Over 90% of Vermont public schools have at least one element of Farm-to-School programming, but fewer than half of these programs include teacher training or farm/food classroom lessons.

PROMISING APPROACH

Train Food Service Workers and Educators

The Vermont Agency of Education’s Child Nutrition Program is working with organizations like Hunger Free Vermont, the School Nutrition Association of Vermont, and Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day) to provide workshops, conferences, and one-on-one meetings for teachers, administrators, food-service staff, school nurses, and parents. The work aims to build integration, consistency, and expanded participation in all areas of Farm-to-School programming.

Good Question

Why not focus philanthropy on access in retail locations, where people buy the bulk of their food?

There is promising work being conducted by the Vermont Department of Health and others to build access to fresh, local food in places like grocery stores and corner markets. To complement that work, the Community Foundation’s Food and Farm Initiative is focusing its early efforts on Farm-to-Institution work because it believes that changing eating preferences in institutions will result in more local food purchased at retail locations.
Most Vermont families value fresh local food and would buy more of it—but barriers often get in the way. Some families live a half-hour’s drive or farther from the nearest supplier of fresh, local food; many home cooks are unfamiliar with foods like root vegetables and how to prepare them in ways their families will enjoy; and local food can be relatively more expensive, particularly to people with limited income.

**Facts**

- **Low-income families view cost as the biggest barrier to healthier eating.**
  - According to a nationwide survey from Share our Strength, families are largely satisfied with the variety (61%) and quality (64%) of healthy grocery items available to them—but only 30% are satisfied with the price. In Vermont, nearly one-third of respondents to a 2010 poll by the Center for Rural Studies cited income and cost as barriers to buying local foods.

- **Low-income families are more affected by diet-related illnesses.**
  - 32% of Vermont adults (age 20+) living at less than 250% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) were obese in 2011, compared to 22% of those living at 250% FPL or higher.

- **Many rural towns don’t have a grocery store.**
  - In Essex County, 30% of residents have to drive over 10 miles to buy food from a supermarket. When the closest options are general stores and gas stations, food choices tend to be high-fat, high-salt, and highly processed.

All sources and works cited available at www.vermontcf.org.
Among the many approaches directed at consumers, the following are a sample of where Vermont is a national leader and where a modest philanthropic investment can make a difference.

**Promote Policy that Builds Access**

**Hunger Free Vermont** successfully advocated for passage of legislation in 2013 that makes Vermont the first state to offer free school lunches to all low-income children. By eliminating the reduced-price lunch option, the bill expands both eligibility and participation in school meal programs, resulting in more federal meal reimbursements and more funds with which schools can buy local food.

**Professionalize Farmers’ Markets**

Farmers’ markets are a low-cost way to build access to healthy, local food—but half in Vermont don’t have paid management and management turnover is high. To help farmers’ markets grow sustainably and become more accessible to all Vermonters, **NOFA-Vermont** is providing management training sessions on board and governance development, sustainability planning, food safety, marketing, and utilizing EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) card machines to enable people eligible for SNAP benefits to purchase local food.

**Expand Farm-to-School Programs**

In a state where 40% of schoolchildren qualify for free meals, schools are well-positioned to build economic, cultural, and physical access to healthy food. By working to strengthen the best practices developed by the **Vermont Farm to School Network**, the Community Foundation believes that every Vermont school can meet the 3 “C’s” of comprehensive Farm-to-School programs: local food in cafeterias, local food education in classrooms, and real-world connections with the community. The Farm to Plate Strategic Plan calls for Farm-to-School programs to exist in all Vermont schools by 2020.

**Harvest of the Month Campaign** is a pilot partnership of **Green Mountain Farm-to-School** and **Post Oil Solutions/Food Connects** that provides ready-to-use, seasonal materials for cafeterias, classrooms, and communities. The campaign promotes collaboration among educators, food service staff, administrators, students, parents, and food retailers. When beets were featured in February 2013, beet sales to partner schools increased by 22% over the previous year.

In Brattleboro-area schools with Farm-to-School programs, **Post Oil Solutions/Food Connects** manages Equitable Food Buying Clubs that invite parents to buy wholesale-priced, local food at schools. Using **Windham Farm and Food**, an aggregation and delivery service, the clubs coordinate biweekly orders from families of various incomes, with a focus on low-income Vermonters. Cooking demonstrations and taste tests build interest and skills around buying, preparing, and enjoying local foods.

**Good Question**

*Why not focus on food shelves and gleaning programs?*

Increasing the amount of fresh food in the charitable food system is imperative; the Vermont Community Foundation and many of its donor advisors are strong supporters of the work of the **Vermont Foodbank**, **Salvation Farms**, and others. In order for Vermont’s local food system to be equitable and sustainable, philanthropy must also support work that builds a market-based food system that allows Vermont farmers to thrive and the food they produce to be affordable. In this way, philanthropy can help create a culture and ethos that prioritizes healthy eating.
The local food system offers many opportunities for coordinated philanthropy to make a difference. The following strategies stand out as especially good places to start. By working together, we can ensure that Vermont is well on its way to a sustainable local food system that gives every Vermonter affordable access to healthy ways of eating for life.

HOW PHILANTHROPY CAN HELP

1. Expand Farm-to-Institution Efforts
Because they have the systems in place to serve and educate many Vermonters, institutions from preschools to nursing homes are poised to move the needle on access to healthy food statewide. Philanthropy is positioned to expand this work by funding infrastructure, technical assistance, and professional development.

Investments in infrastructure like food processing centers and distribution systems can help farmers scale up and meet institutional price points. And updated kitchen equipment can help food service workers in institutions cook with whole, fresh food.

Building a continuum of technical assistance services for farmers, food businesses, and food hubs across all stages of development, all scales of operation, and all types of markets helps the local food system better feed all Vermonters. The Vermont Farm Viability Program of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and NOFA-Vermont manage innovative technical assistance programs to build Farm-to-Institution “communities of practice.” Professional development programs at institutions help food service workers and educators bring local food to cafeterias, food education to classrooms, and health benefits to communities. Along with the Vermont Agency of Education’s Child Nutrition Program, organizations like Hunger Free Vermont, the School Nutrition Association of Vermont, and Vermont FEED are leading this work.

2. Invest in Consumer Education
When consumers are informed about their food choices and have a comfort level cooking with fresh, whole foods, behavior change can be lasting. Farm-to-School programs like Harvest of the Month Campaign and Equitable Food Buying Clubs are among the promising programs to choose from when considering grantmaking in this arena.

3. Support Convenings to Build Consensus and Vision
The Vermont Farm to Plate Network includes more than 250 food system stakeholders—nonprofits, government agencies, institutions, food businesses, capital providers, and community groups. With the guidance of the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan, these organizations are outlining new roles and learning how to best work together. Crucial to their long-term success is funding that builds capacity to convene and collectively build consensus, trust, vision, and impact.

4. Consider Mission-Related Investments
While grants are the standard philanthropic vehicle used to build sustainable access to healthy food, mission-related investments can also provide powerful support. By investing in for-profit ventures like regional food processing centers or in near-equity investment vehicles like the Flexible Capital Fund administered by the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, philanthropists and funders can complement their grantmaking strategy and affirm their long-term commitment to projects that further strengthen local food systems.

Food and Farm Initiative
Interested in how you can make a difference?
The Vermont Community Foundation’s Food and Farm Initiative builds on the strategies and provides support for the programs throughout this report.
To learn more or to give to the Initiative, please contact us at 802-388-3355.
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C O L L E C T I V E  I M P A C T

Vermont is Poised for Success

More than ever, there is growing statewide momentum and engagement behind local food access. Congressional delegates, public agencies, and nonprofit and philanthropic leaders are committed to the same vision: ensuring that all Vermonters access the benefits of healthy, local food in a way that supports Vermont farmers and expands the local economy. There is no better time to show your support.

The transformation in Vermont’s food system over the last decade could not have occurred without dynamic public-private partnerships that rose to fill the gaps. I firmly believe that this type of collaborative work will have a dramatic, positive impact on the economic wellbeing of Vermont communities and the nutrition of Vermonters.

— Patrick Leahy, United States Senator for Vermont

Vermont farmers are beginning to connect directly with hospitals, schools, workplaces, and higher education to supply them with healthy local foods—and this is great news for everyone involved. I envision a food system in which our producers and institutions work together seamlessly to fill the nutrition needs of all Vermonters, in all our communities.

— Chuck Ross, Secretary, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets

We have an epidemic of obesity in our state that is driving up our health care costs, and we have to increase the accessibility and affordability of local foods. It is essential for us to continue working together, to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

— Harry Chen, Commissioner, Vermont Department of Health

Providing good local food to all Vermonters is a unique opportunity to invest in our own health, in the health of our farms, and the health of our communities. It’s a simple vision, but a lot of innovation has to happen to achieve it—and Vermont is leading the way.

— Katherine Sims, Executive Director, Green Mountain Farm-to-School
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