

Farm to Families: Rebuilding Food Systems in North Philadelphia

Katherine Bennett 09 June 2011

Summary

Farm to Families connects a diverse group of Philadelphia-based nonprofits to get fresh, affordable, local food to North Philadelphia families each week, year-round. The named partnering organizations are St. Christopher's Foundation for Children, farmers and producers from the Delaware Valley foodshed, Common Market, the SHARE Food Program, the Women's Community Revitalization Project, Neighborhood Bike Works, the Health Promotion Council, the Food Trust, OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, the Reinvestment Fund, the University of Pennsylvania's PennDesign, and Greensgrow Philadelphia Project.

At United Way's second annual Strategic Partnership Conference: Creating Innovation and Impact Through Partnership, the Farm to Families initiative was awarded a prize of \$15,000 for their proposal to increase local food accessibility in North Philadelphia. [Read about the Strategic Partnership Conference here.](#)

Introduction

Over 60 percent of the city's adult population is overweight, and more than 50 percent of children struggle with obesity. In North Philadelphia, nearly 70 percent of children are overweight or obese. These astounding figures can be directly attributed to poverty levels and consumption behaviors (Philadelphia Department of Public Health 2010).

Philadelphia has the highest obesity rate among the nation's largest cities. The higher the obesity rate, the more serious the health problems, the higher the health-care costs (Bayliss 2010). Lack of access to affordable, healthy foods is a well-documented risk factor for obesity and related poor health outcomes, and the need for increased access to healthy foods is especially great in low-income, minority neighborhoods in the city. Targeting the communities plagued by the highest rates of childhood obesity in North Philadelphia, the Farm to Families program provides fresh, affordable and local food to families each week, year-round.

The Problem: Limited Food Access and Associated Health Risks

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Just a decade ago, a national study conducted by the

Fresh Food Financing Initiative showed that Philadelphia had the second lowest number of supermarkets per capita of major cities in the United States (Food Trust 2004). Lack of food access was particularly severe in low-income neighborhoods and was linked to high rates of diet-related diseases such as obesity and diabetes.

The direct correlation between food access and obesity rates is evident in Philadelphia. Philadelphia is home to many food deserts, areas that lack access to affordable fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk and other foods that make up the full range of a healthy diet. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010), food deserts may negatively affect health outcomes.

The Solution: Farm to Families

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In order to reduce the number of food deserts in Philadelphia, the Farm to Families initiative was created to provide sustainable food systems for families in North Philadelphia, where rates of childhood obesity are the highest in the city. The systems create access to affordable, readily available and reliable sources of healthy, culturally appropriate and locally produced groceries. St. Christopher's Foundation for Children (SCFC) has staged a fresh food intervention for North Philadelphia families. With the support of six of the

nation's largest health funders and a broad network of local service providers, SCFC has launched Farm to Families to re-imagine the inner-city food landscape.

Families living, working and worshipping in North Philadelphia are able to buy Farm to Families boxes. Participation is simple; individuals and family can easily order and pay for a food share one week ahead of time, in person at an established dropoff location within walking distance of their homes. The shares are available year-round, including the long winter months. Food shares are sold at wholesale cost, and cash, credit and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are accepted. The weekly shares are available in \$5, \$10 and \$15 packages. Each box contains fresh fruits and vegetables. The \$10 and \$15 shares additionally include one dozen eggs and one pound of poultry as well as increased quantities of produce. Farm to Families gives people in North Philadelphia a choice that many of them have never had before—the choice to buy affordable, healthy, local, high-quality food on a consistent basis right in their neighborhoods.

SCFC with Farm to Families has brought multiple organizations together to achieve a common goal. Significant funding provided by Convergence Partnership has allowed for the partnerships to thrive. The collaborative efforts of the diverse network of public and private local service providers have supplemented the

program. Partners play specific roles in either the system of direct service or education and advocacy. Direct service partners grow, distribute, package, redistribute or deliver produce. Other partners engage in educating, lobbying, evaluating and consulting for the Farm to Families program.

Direct Service System:

- Farmers and producers from the **Delaware Valley foodshed** supply sustainably grown and produced fruit, vegetables, eggs and meat.
- **Common Market**, a wholesale consolidator, marketer and distributor of local food, aggregates the farmers' bounty for weekly box distribution.
- **SHARE Food Program**, a supplier of affordable, nutritious food for individuals and organizations, packages and delivers weekly boxes to community-based organizations.
- Community-based organizations such as the **Women's Community Revitalization Project** act as the on-the-ground box delivery agent, additionally recruiting and managing the customer base.
- **Neighborhood Bike Works** delivers boxes to the homes of families without easy access to distribution sites.

Education, Advocacy and Evaluation

System:

- **The Health Promotion Council** offers relevant nutrition education and cooking workshops on site at box pick-up.
- **The Food Trust** works to create greater access locally and statewide through policy change work, including expansion of food benefits provided by SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, and amendments to school nutrition policies on food and beverages found in cafeterias and vending machines.
- **OMG Center for Collaborative Learning**, the **Reinvestment Fund**, and the **University of Pennsylvania's PennDesign** conduct ongoing evaluation.
- **Greensgrow Philadelphia Project**, long-time farmers and community-supported agriculture operators, provide technical assistance.

Program Facilitation:

- **SCFC** provides staffing support via a project manager; regular technical assistance with strategic planning, operations and evaluation; and a set of coordinated grants, one to each organization, to increase capacity for food access work.

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Conclusion

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Farm to Families is truly a multi-field collaborative, creating new partnerships and strengthening existing ones. Hundreds of North Philadelphia families have been helped by the Farm to Families program. In 2010, 267 families utilized the system and gained access to fresh produce.

Farm to Families' innovative approach to improving food access exemplifies how partnerships, even the most complex, can collectively achieve impact by leveraging resources towards achieving a common goal. The program is leading a community-wide shift in healthy eating. At some point, with SCFC at the helm or with program partners taking the reins, Farm to Families is envisioned as a city-wide food distribution system that gets the best-quality food to everyone who needs it.

The new system of dedicated partners has successfully created a simple solution to the food deserts of North Philadelphia. With the support of six of the nation's largest health funders and a broad network of local service providers, SCFC has successfully launched a progressive food share program in Farm to Families that rebuilds the inner-city food access landscape.

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