



Issue Brief: Food Hubs

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Introduction

Food Hubs

Food Hubs are most often defined as a business or organization that manages the collection, distribution, and marketing of local and regional food products to satisfy demand. Food Hubs are found to play an important role in providing a practical opportunity for small and middle-sized farms who are unable to meet volume, quality, and/or consistency requirements expected by most buyers. More modern definitions of Food Hubs also incorporate a grassroots, socially-just, community-based approach that bridges structural links over food system gaps, primarily between producer and consumer.

Food Hubs continue to gain support due to:

- **Agricultural Branding** – All 50 states have programs highlighting products sourced or made within the state.
- **Interest in Local** – Locality does not solely represent distance of food miles. It reflects traceability, energy consumption and even the flavor and taste associated with a region (its soils and climate).
- **Loss of “Ag” Businesses** – As the agricultural industry has increased its production efficiency, local level businesses (canneries, creameries, and markets) move to regional entities.
- **Community Connection & Social Change** – Addressing the needs of food apartheid is often viewed as more attainable at the local level.
- **Appeal** – Consumer value found in healthy, fair, affordable, and environmentally sound products.

Common challenges of Food Hubs:

- Quantity, consistency, and diversity of products
- Improving accessibility and convenience
- Assuring food security and safety

Food Hubs: Food Equity and Sustainability

Many Food Hubs develop out of the expressed needs of a group of people, grounded in a specific location. Desires to oppose and/or improve the corporate, industrial food system while simultaneously meeting the needs of individuals in the community can enhance the supply chain, propel equity, and encourage sustainability.

Methods for addressing food accessibility and Food Hub sustainability:

- **Partnering with Institutions and Markets** – “Pop-up farm stands” in schools and grocery stores, corner stores and markets accepting fruit and vegetable incentive programs (e.g. Double Up) increase access.
- **Building Farmer Capacity** – A Food Hub’s viability is only as strong as its farmers ability to meet demand.
- **Connecting with Food Assistance Programs** – Accepting the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) enables participant inclusion.
- **Adapting Food Packaging Models** – Many food hubs have noted an increase in sales with a modified a la carte vegetable box program that encourages consumer choice.
- **Treating Hubs as Public Goods** – Many hubs are sustained through subsidized grant funding geared towards tackling food insecurity.

Maricopa County: Food Insecurity

Maricopa County's rate of child food insecurity is 16.3%, compared to Arizona's rate of 17.2%, as of 2019. The Arizona Department of Economic Security's (DES) Hunger Advisory Council determined some 500,000 Arizonans will face diet-related illness by 2030. DES also found that while 1 in 6 Arizonans is affected by food insecurity, agriculture in Arizona employs close to 140,000 people and produces millions of pounds of produce, meat, eggs, and dairy. As noted by the Arizona Department of Agriculture (AZDA), "*Arizonans should not be hungry*".

The Arizona Food Desert (food apartheid) Map details Maricopa County rich with farmers markets, food banks, grocery stores, gas stations, and other food access locations; however, if one were to remove the gas station layer of the map (as it is safe to assume the majority of gas stations do not provide fresh fruits and vegetables, or grain options), it is easy to locate many areas lacking close access to healthy foods in the region.

Maricopa County: Food Access

One of the stated goals of AZDA is to reduce food insecurity (defined as "lacking access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food") and further ensure that all Arizonans have access to healthy foods.

Annual Food Summits and regional Food Access Workshops are held to tackle these ongoing food inequities within Arizona. Previous attendees include non-profit organizations, governmental entities, businesses, local community members, and agricultural producers. Anyone interested in working with food insecurity is stated as welcome to attend. Food access workshops are designed to address food inequities in specific counties that require additional program development and more comprehensive collaboration to meet the needs of the community.

Additionally, The Food and Agriculture Policy Advisory Committee (FAPAC) was created in 2017 to focus on food insecurity and related health issues, with the expressed intent of addressing three major

issues that can influence food access: The Emergency Food System, Food System Equity and Economic Development.

Food Hubs: Bridging the Gap

Food Hubs remain a viable option for communities in Maricopa County struggling with large percentages of food insecurity and/or healthy food access. Food Hubs can provide a bridge for small and medium-sized farms to reach a larger audience and be less dependent on a system that is increasingly designed for large farm productivity.

Resources

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