Bainum Family Foundation™

INSIGHTS ON FRESH-PRODUCE DISTRIBUTION IN D.C.'S WARDS 7 AND 8

Part 4 in a Series: A Continuum of Distribution Models

In 2018, the Bainum Family Foundation's Food Security team surveyed and convened organizations that distributed fresh, whole, take-home produce in the District of Columbia's Wards 7 and 8 through nongrocery sources[1] in 2017 (e.g., farmers markets, food banks, corner stores) as a first step to address an existing data gap (see Part 1 for more information). As acknowledged in Part 2, organizations that participated in the survey/convening represent varying levels of proximity to and engagement with community members in Wards 7 and 8. The following Q&A highlights ways in which different types of models are responding to inequitable access in the city, including through approaches to meet residents where they are, to engage in community feedback, and to shine a light on the interconnectivity of race, place, poverty and food insecurity in the District. But we acknowledge that no single action or entity can address historically rooted systemic inequities in the food system, and that our regional food system has a long way to go to advance inclusivity and food justice. It is crucial that food-access solutions are developed through a racial and income equity lens — but also that the food system authentically supports and engages community input, leadership and entrepreneurship — to foster a more equitable food system. In Part 4 of this series, we explore the range of produce-distribution models represented among the survey/convening participants.

Introduction

As discussed in earlier parts of this series, grocery stores provide a valuable supply of healthy food, but they're just one example of the many food distribution options that serve communities (in this case, the District of Columbia's Wards 7 and 8). Many other free and paid distribution programs — ranging from food pantries to community-supported agriculture programs (CSAs) to convenience stores — also provide residents with an opportunity to take home fresh, whole produce.

This fourth part of the series will spotlight a few of the different produce-distribution models represented among the survey/convening participants. (See Figure 1 below.) We interviewed:

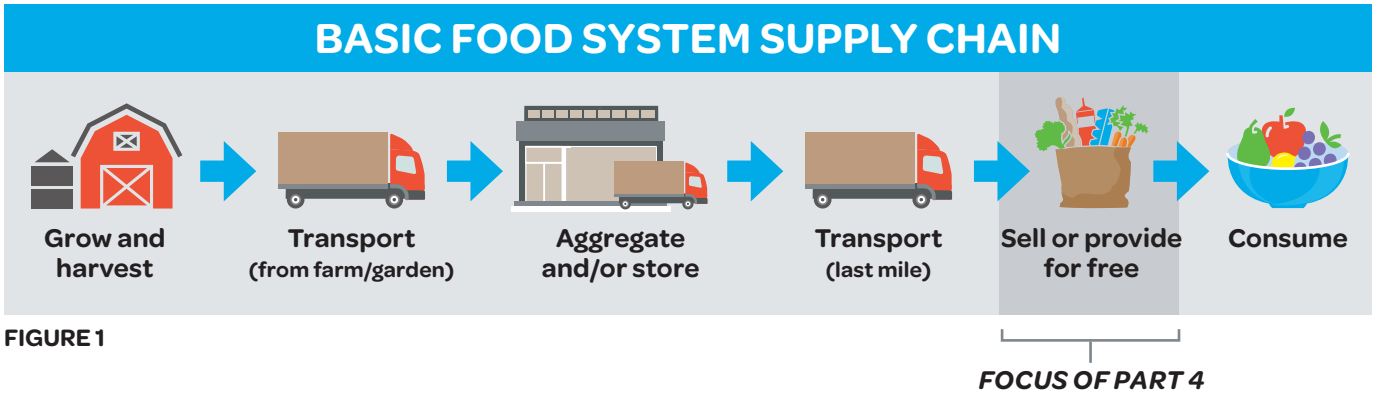

FIGURE 1

- **Laura Belazis,** Director of Food Access and Education at **DC Central Kitchen**
- **Dalila Boclin,** Director of Programs and Strategy at **Community Foodworks**
- **George Jones,** Executive Director of **Bread for the City**

We'll explore how these organizations use their models — including Bread for the City's **food pantries** ("Free" B2C, or business to consumer), DC Central Kitchen's **Healthy Corners program** ("Paid" B2B, or business to business) and Community Foodworks' **Pop-Up Food Hub** ("Paid" B2C, or business to consumer) — to procure and distribute produce (and other food) in underserved neighborhoods across the District, including Wards 7 and 8. In addition to our guest contributors, we will also showcase related findings from the survey and convening to bring in other voices from the participating organizations. (See Part 2 for a more detailed overview of the different models and for more information on the survey and convening.)

Interviews: Participant Spotlights

QUESTION 1: How did your organization choose the distribution model(s) it uses in Wards 7 and 8? Has it changed over time, or do you anticipate it changing in the future?

George: Bread for the City ***has been distributing food for the past 43 years,*** but we started distributing produce at a robust level much more recently. I wasn't around when we initially chose the [food-pantry] model, but ***we still use it today because it works for our clients,*** who live on low incomes but also have housing where they can prepare food. So, we distribute produce and nonperishables with the guiding assumption that our clients will take it to their home kitchens and prepare a full meal for their families.

Laura: In 2010, DC Hunger Solutions identified D.C.'s "**grocery gap**" — areas of the city where low-income residents have less access to grocery stores than higher-income communities. Instead of waiting for years for new grocery stores to open, DC Central Kitchen decided to use existing community assets

DC Central Kitchen's Healthy Corner Store program

to launch the Healthy Corners program in 2011. There are over 165,000 residents in Wards 7 and 8 and only three grocery stores, but there are many more corner stores, so different distribution efforts are a huge asset in helping us to reach this very large customer base. In our recent customer surveys, conducted by American University, more than ***70% of customers reported visiting their corner store every day or nearly every day. Rather than people coming to us, we're going to them***. Healthy Corners partners with nearly 60 existing small retailers and corner stores in the District to leverage their infrastructure and sell fresh produce in marginalized areas. This year, D.C. passed the **WIC Expansion Act**, which now allows small retailers to apply to be WIC vendors. And we're excited to start supporting Healthy Corners stores through the application process to become WIC vendors. (You can learn more about the Healthy Corners program in the **Building Healthy Corners manual**.)

Dalila: Community Foodworks' mission drives us to ***look for opportunities to lift local farmers, create access among underserved customers, and design sustainable pathways for connecting the two***. We focus on using farmers markets as a tool for expanding food access and equity but knew the markets would also have to offer profitability right out of the gate for any farm partners to participate. That's not easy to do for a number of reasons. Markets are slow to start. It takes years of regular, consistent market days before the farmers market really becomes a fixture in any community. Plus,

this timetable can often be even longer for markets aiming to serve underserved residents that have relatively low purchasing power, high demands on their time and historical lack of access. To secure farmer participation, we knew we'd have to offer more than retail sales. That brought us right to subscription and wholesale distribution.

The Pop-Up Food Hub works because Community Foodworks facilitates bulk sales to supplement retail activity at the market. Community Foodworks functions as an intermediary between our farmers and customers: We manage the customer cultivation, ordering, aggregation and delivery right from the market. Farmers just need to show up at the market with the produce we order in addition to what they plan to sell at the market. They enjoy an immediate boost to their revenue that day, while we handle the rest of the fulfillment process.

QUESTION 2: You each operate different kinds of programs. What do you see as the relationship between different distribution efforts in the community?

Laura: By meeting people where they are, our Healthy Corners program is ***reaching customers who may not be actively seeking fresh produce***, unlike a farmer's market where customers typically already have the intention of shopping for fruits and vegetables. Right now, as part of a USDA FINI (Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive) grant, we're operating a "5 for 5" incentive program at select Healthy Corners stores that provides $5 coupons for fruits and vegetables when customers shop with SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Community Foodworks also has a FINI grant, so we're able to cross-market our incentive programs to help customers access fruits and vegetables wherever is most convenient for them.

Community Foodworks' Pop-Up Food Hub

Dalila: Community Foodworks understands our program as nonemergency services. As a paid option, we are trying to reach consumers who have their most essential needs covered and may be at an inflection point in their lives where they can incorporate more fresh, local or seasonal food. It's our job to make sure that opportunity is available and unencumbered by structural barriers that limit access to fresh food. Through our programs, ***we strive to go beyond "available" to make local food a convenient, affordable and community-centered choice***. Like DC Central Kitchen, Community Foodworks also has a FINI grant that we operate in partnership with FRESHFARM and Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food & Agriculture that provides a dollar-for-dollar match on SNAP EBT (formerly food stamp) dollars spent at farmers markets. In addition to co-marketing with DC Central Kitchen, our goal for this program in the years to come is to integrate this program across all D.C. farmers markets.

But carving out this place in the distribution spectrum can be challenging. Customers, individuals and institutions alike have interacted with markets that are free, paid, subsidized, incentivized and/or donation-based. It's not clear for an incoming customer what to expect at a "market." In our experience, this mix of customer expectations makes it difficult to operate a paid model.

QUESTION 3: How has your perspective been informed by community input?

George: Bread for the City solicits community feedback on our services on a regular basis, through comment boxes, client satisfaction surveys and focus groups. One thing we've learned is that people really value the produce we give them. When we chose to focus on produce distribution, there were also two other pieces we considered: One, many people just don't use a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables due to limited

INSIGHTS FROM THE 2018 CONVENING: QUESTION 2, REFLECTIONS ON TERMINOLOGY

- As programs and approaches evolve, one potential implication is the creation of fragmented terminology that can be confusing for end customers (and other stakeholders) as they try to figure out what to expect at a given distribution program. For example, our convening participants shared that they use the word "market" in varying contexts: ***Half of the organizations at the convening had a program with "market" in the name. Yet the size and cost of "market" programs varies substantially*** across the cohort — in fact, the word is used across three different distribution model types: free business to consumer (Free B2C), paid business to consumer (Paid B2C), and paid business to business (Paid B2B).
- ***Participants perceived "fresh" produce to be of a high priority to many customers;*** organizations sense residents can be skeptical of quality in free/low-cost programs, especially if produce is "ugly" or donated/recovered, because of bad experiences they may have previously had. Several organizations use different descriptors (e.g., "cosmetically imperfect," "recipe ready" or "ultra-ripe") rather than "seconds" to make experiences more customer friendly and to signify that the produce is still valuable. But the variety of such descriptors may make terminology even more confusing for customers.

access to grocery stores — particularly in Wards 7 and 8, where there are only three full-service grocery stores for 165,000 people. Two, ***there is a biased and not-truthful narrative that people of color, particularly those with low incomes, don't really value produce and access to it.*** In actuality, these items are very highly valued by our clients.

Additionally, ***we want to ensure community voices inform how the food system gets reformed.*** We need to have conversations with community members about how they could and would want to be involved (e.g., a community member may want to own and operate a farmers market). There is a movement being built in D.C. around racial equity and eliminating poverty, and we need to ensure that the government participates in the fight against food inequity, too, not just nonprofits. Nonprofits are largely illustrations of models that can be taken to scale, meaning governments can take them to scale — if not directly operating the services then providing resources for it. But if the government is ever going to be part of this system of solutions around food insecurity and hunger, the entire community will need to buy in and build the power to make the government take action.

INSIGHTS FROM THE 2018 CONVENING: QUESTION 2, REFLECTIONS ON FREE/PAID PROGRAMS

While access was a broad priority for the participants, many shared that they don't fully understand the interaction between paid and free models. While some participants shared anecdotes where a free program may have reduced sales at a paid program, or where a free program helped generate access or customer interest, the group discussed that a more comprehensive data study — potentially with a university partner — would be necessary to understand interactions between program types.

QUESTION 4: How is your organization working to determine what is "affordable," either in the specific context of your program or in the broader context of food access?

George: There have been some efforts in the District to figure out what it would take to meet the need and for people to have access, but most of those studies tend to center on physical access to food and not so much about what it would cost related to income. I believe that ***people would have to be out of poverty to meet the financial need for food security.*** At Bread for the City, for instance, the average household makes less than $10,000 a year. And since the average household at Bread for the City includes between three or four people, a family needs to make much more than $10,000 annually to have enough money to meet their needs — including paying for food at a level that would be

INSIGHTS FROM THE 2018 CONVENING: QUESTION 3, REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Some organizations noted their efforts to adapt food-access solutions in response to community feedback, either directly from community members or through working with community-based organizations. ***Shared tools such as a Districtwide asset map depicting produce incentive and distribution programs could help both residents and distribution organizations*** see comprehensive and dynamic program information for existing programs to determine the assets and gaps in each community. To complement supporting the continued growth of community-owned food solutions, adapting existing models based on community feedback could leverage the technical and programmatic knowledge of distribution organizations with the lived experience of community members to identify what successful food access solutions could look like, and what supports (e.g., external funding, policy solutions) would be needed.
- Additionally, many organizations noted that they want to do high-touch, personal and hyper-local outreach to share information and hear feedback about their programs, but often use less effective, lower-cost tactics such as flyers and newsletters due to capacity constraints. Survey and convening participants noted opportunities to share feedback they receive from customers and to collaborate with organizations that have strong outreach and engagement models. Currently, ***there is limited coordination between organizations that offer paid or free models, but participants described a low-hanging fruit opportunity*** for models with captive audiences (such as free education programs) to refer customers out to broader resources in the community, including nearby paid options such as farmers markets.understand interactions between program types.

adequate, such as a diet that includes fresh fruits, vegetables and grains. The moral of the story is that we all try to figure out what's happening in food insecurity and what's happening in related spaces, such as the job market, housing and health care, but the truth of the matter is that everything feeds off each other. So we really need to think about solving food insecurity in a holistic way.

Laura: We have several mechanisms for assessing affordability for our Healthy Corners program. First, we benchmark ourselves against other area retailers to make sure we're in line with each other. Then, our product gets market feedback — so if the prices aren't affordable for retailers, they won't stock the product to begin with, and if they do, the customer won't buy it. Finally, in partnership with American University, ***we collect customer surveys and conduct customer focus groups and interviews to gather feedback on the quality, availability and affordability of our products.*** Feedback on the price of our products has been generally positive, and since we launched the "5 for 5" incentive, produce sales have more than tripled — meaning customers are voting with their dollars.

INSIGHTS FROM THE 2018 CONVENING: QUESTION 4, REFLECTIONS ON PRICING AND AFFORDABILITY

- Participants noted that their customers have different financial needs and aimed to offer products that were affordable, either by providing food for free or selling produce directly to consumers at or below cost. None of the programs that were paid/transacted indicated charging a premium above their procurement cost to the end consumer; in fact, survey respondents stated of the 248,000 lbs. ***of produce that was "paid," 54% was sold at a discount relative to sourcing costs while the remaining was sold at cost.***
- Some participating organizations pointed to the fact that distribution intended to improve access can unintentionally raise property values by adding a new neighborhood amenity. This possibility is especially of concern in the District, which — according to a **recent report by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition** — has the highest rate of gentrification and displacement of black residents in the country. Participants point to the fact that ***supporting opportunities for community input, employment and ownership can help reduce the risk of displacement and can move the impact beyond food access to food sovereignty.***

QUESTION 5: What are some of the root causes of this lack of affordability, or challenges/gaps for distribution programs in Wards 7 and 8?

Dalila: Last-mile distribution is expensive, regardless of what ward of the city we're talking about. In Wards 7 and 8, purchasing power is systemically depressed. At Community Foodworks, we offer several food-incentive programs to ensure everyone has the option to purchase food at our markets. These incentives, as well as our Pop-Up Food Hub, are grant-supported. I feel lucky to offer a service at a price point that doesn't cause people to question whether they can make healthy food work for their budgets. With that in mind, ***I think the gap Community Foodworks experiences really exists with funders, grant-makers, government and investors who expect our solutions to sustain themselves.*** Funds to support these programs need to come from the outside in so that those who can't afford produce have equal opportunity to purchase food at our markets.

George: I think at the heart of it is inequity — particularly racial inequity in D.C., where virtually everyone who lives in poverty and everyone who is food-insecure is a person of color. ***In the District, you have to think about income, poverty and food security through a racial-equity lens because it's mostly people of color who struggle with hunger and income inequality in this city.***

For instance, people who own cars or have easy access to them and have disposable income have higher levels of food security; they can afford to go further away to good grocery stores and can access a variety of options for their food needs.

Bread for the City's food pantry

And ironically, those of us with means get more accommodations around convenience than people with lower incomes. And it probably should be flipped over, that we can probably afford less convenience because we have more control over our resources and time. I think people trying to create more racial equity for people with low incomes should think about convenient or more granular ways people can access food.

INSIGHTS FROM THE 2018 CONVENING: QUESTION 5, REFLECTIONS ON RACIAL EQUITY

As we noted in the "Reflections on Terminology" section, organizational offerings and marketing may not match with customer priorities. Some organizations expressed a desire to ***expand staff competency around income and racial equity*** through training and establish more resident feedback loops to ensure understanding of and a focus on end-customers' priorities (e.g., supporting black farmers).

LAURA BELAZIS

Laura Belazis is the Director of Food Access & Education at DC Central Kitchen, overseeing the Healthy Corners and Nutrition and Community Education initiatives. Laura holds bachelor's degrees in chemistry and biology from the University of Virginia, and a Master of Public Health from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, where she focused on community-based public health and the social determinants of health. Beginning her career as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mozambique, Laura has more than 10 years of experience working to empower marginalized communities. She joined DCCK in 2013.

DALILA BOCLIN

Dalila Boclin is the Director of Programs at Community Foodworks, where she oversees the organization's portfolio of programs that make healthy, local food more accessible to underserved residents and institutions of D.C. and Northern Virginia. As a part of the founding team at Community Foodworks, she has designed and is implementing a new model for local food distribution coined the "Pop-Up Food Hub," which includes weekly distribution to nearly 50 child care centers, dozens of community-based organizations and hundreds of marginalized residents.

GEORGE A. JONES

George A. Jones has been Chief Executive Officer of Bread for the City (BFC) since 1996. He is responsible for the development and execution of BFC's long- and short-term strategies and for managing all administrative, financial and programmatic aspects of the organization and its 100 full-time staff. He has led Bread for the City's growth from a $1.2 million operation in 1996 to an $11.5 million operation in 2019. George holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia.

Endnotes

1 All surveyed organizations distribute food via nongrocery distribution methods. One organization that participated only in the convening distributes food through their grocery store.