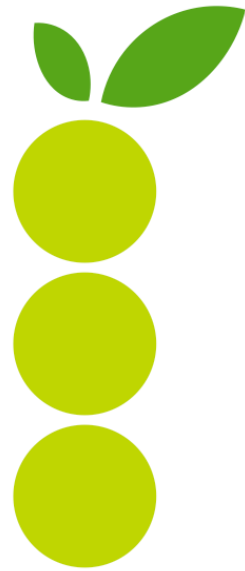


Food, Funding, and Fairness:

An Evaluation of the Colorado Food Pantry Assistance Grant



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Executive Summary

Since 2018, Hunger Free Colorado has worked with the Colorado state legislature to allocate funding to the Food Pantry Assistance Grant program to provide financial resources for food pantries and food banks to purchase dairy, meat, and produce, ideally from local agricultural producers, farmers, and ranchers. This program was the direct result of food pantry clients identifying dairy, meat, and produce as the most important items to receive when visiting a food pantry. The purpose of this report is threefold: (1) To discuss the successes and challenges of the Food Pantry Assistance Grant (FPAG) as described in both qualitative and quantitative terms via interviews, surveys, and existing data; (2) To provide policy recommendations for improving the functionality of the grant; and (3) To explore the long-term ways in which the FPAG, if properly leveraged, could contribute to a stronger, healthier, and more resilient food system in Colorado, improving food security in the face of threats such as COVID-19 and climate change. This evaluation also aims to tell the stories of the community partners involved in the FPAG. This project will support Hunger Free Colorado in advocating for programs, policies, and funding that support those who are most impacted by food insecurity, while also building community capacity and resiliency through the support of community food systems development.

A brief introduction to hunger in the U.S. sets the stage for the legislative history and priorities of the FPAG, as well as what “local” means in the context of the Colorado food system. Importantly, this report would not be complete without a discussion of the context in which it was written. In early 2020, the need for an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed the landscape in which the grant was embedded, impacting the emergency food system and the administration of the grant.

Evaluators used mixed-methods analysis of community partner surveys and interviews to develop themes and recommendations. Quotes from community partners have in some cases been edited for clarity, and anonymized when requested. Research from this project indicates that successes of the FPAG include:

- Larger quantities of food
- Better quality food
- More culturally responsive food
- Increased client satisfaction
- Relationship-building between food pantries and food producers
- Positive impacts to Colorado’s economy

Recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the FPAG include:

- Continuing the grant for at least five years
- Streamlining the application and reporting process and standardizing data collection
- More support for technical assistance and outreach
- Aligning the grant cycle with the Colorado growing season



- Phasing the local purchasing mandate back in over two years and revising the definition of “local”
- Centering equity

The FPAG, in addition to meeting immediate needs for fresh, healthy produce, meat, and dairy in the emergency food system, is acting as a pilot program for ways to strengthen local and regional food systems in Colorado. This is key to the health and security of state residents in the face of disruptions such as pandemics and climate change. Investments in strong local infrastructure and institution of complementary policies would contribute to increased food security in the state.



Introduction

Hunger in the United States

While consuming a nutritious and diverse diet is an important element of a healthy lifestyle, many Americans struggle to access nutritious food for themselves and their families. “Food insecurity” occurs when “the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire acceptable food in a socially acceptable way, is limited or is uncertain.”¹ Growing income disparities throughout the United States have resulted in an increased dependence on the emergency food system,² which has been severely exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), in 2019, 11% of households in the United States experienced food insecurity and 4% of households experienced “very low food security,” which is defined as “reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.”³ In 2020, the number of households with “very low food security”—households where “normal eating patterns were disrupted due to lack of resources”—more than doubled as a result of the pandemic, increasing from 4% to 11%.⁴ Researchers have identified the primary causes of food insecurity as low salaries, high medical costs, and reduced funding for federal assistance programs.⁵ Other barriers to food access include limited transportation, functional impairments,⁶ and restricted access to social cohesion and support.⁷

Limitations of the Emergency Food System

The emergency food system is a key support network for people experiencing food insecurity. However, studies of the emergency food system over the last two decades have revealed myriad flaws: Although the emergency food system does important and necessary work to address immediate needs, it has historically done little to mitigate and address the root causes of food insecurity itself.⁸

One issue in the emergency food system is that donation-based food supplies are often low-quality, leading to poor health outcomes and loss of dignity for participants.⁹ To ensure long shelf-life, food

¹ Bazerghi, C., McKay, F. H., & Dunn, M. (2016). The Role of Food Banks in Addressing Food Insecurity: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Community Health*, 41(4), 732–740.

² Shanks, C. B., Weinmann, E., Holder, J., McCormick, M., Parks, C. A., Vanderwood, K., Coburn, C., Johnson, N., & Yaroch, A. L. (2019). The UnProcessed Pantry Project Framework to Address Nutrition in the Emergency Food System. *American Journal of Public Health*, 109(10), 1368–1370.

³ United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) (2020, Sept. 9). [Definitions of Food Security](#); USDA ERS (2020, Dec. 16). [Food Security and Nutrition Assistance](#).

⁴ Food Law and Policy Clinic (FLPC) & National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) (2021). *An Evaluation of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program*. 50 pp.

⁵ Shannon, J., Borron, A., Kurtz, H., & Weaver, A. (2020). Re-envisioning emergency food systems using photovoice and concept mapping. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 15(1), 114–137.

⁶ Functional impairments manifest as difficulties in taking care of oneself or performing everyday actions and may be caused by, for example, vision, hearing, or movement limitations, or behavioral, language development, or physical development disorders.

⁷ Chung, W. T., Gallo, W. T., Giunta, N., Canavan, M. E., Parikh, N. S., & Fahs, M. C. (2012). Linking neighborhood characteristics to food insecurity in older adults: The role of perceived safety, social cohesion, and walkability. *Journal of Urban Health*, 89(3), 407–418; Oemichen, M., & Smith, C. (2016). Investigation of the food choice, promoters and barriers to food access issues, and food insecurity among low-income, free-living Minnesotan seniors. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 48(6), 397–404.

⁸ Lindenbaum, J. (2016). Countermovement, neoliberal platoon, or re-gifting depot? Understanding decommodification in U.S. food banks. *Antipode*, 48(2), 375–392; Bazerghi, C., McKay, F. H., & Dunn, M. (2016). The role of food banks in addressing food insecurity: A systematic review. *Journal of Community Health*, 41(4), 732–740.

⁹ Poppendieck, J. (1999). *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. Penguin; Fisher, A. (2017). *Big Hunger: The Unholy Alliance Between Corporate America and Anti-Hunger Groups*. MIT Press.



banks receive low-cost, non-perishable foods which are often processed or canned, and are low in essential nutrients like calcium, Vitamin A, and Vitamin C.¹⁰ The combination of inconsistent donations and the high cost of nutritious foods leads to food banks providing a limited range of healthy foods.¹¹ Food banks distribute food to various organizations such as food pantries or soup kitchens, who in turn distribute it to the public. Food pantries often have limited budgets, leading to a prevalence of nonperishable foods and a prioritization of immediate need over long-term health¹² via providing cheap, high-calorie items. Donated fresh produce is often low-quality or nearing the end of its shelf-life (*see below*, “Better Quality Food”). In contrast to the prevalence of non-perishable and processed foods provided by food banks and food pantries, clients prefer perishable items like vegetables, fruits, meats, and dairy products.¹³ This holds true in Colorado: In response to the Colorado Department of Human Services’ (CDHS) 2021 food pantry client survey, 50% of respondents said meat was the most important item to receive, followed by vegetables (20%), fruit (15%), and dairy (13%), with only 2% ranking grains and cereals as the most important.¹⁴

Paths Forward

Hunger relief organizations in Colorado formed the Colorado Food Pantry Network in 2015 to identify and address gaps in Colorado’s emergency food system. The network conducted a client survey (N=2,209) from 2016 to April 2018. The results of this survey revealed a need for more fresh produce, proteins, and dairy in the emergency food system in Colorado, with 83% of surveyed clients reporting these as the most important items for them to receive from food pantries.¹⁵

The Food Pantry Assistance Grant (FPAG) was developed in 2018 to better serve clients by providing healthy food choices. The FPAG grants state funding (with the addition of federal funding during COVID-19) to food pantries and food banks to purchase high-quality fresh produce, meat, and dairy, ideally from Colorado-based producers. In its 4-year history, the FPAG has proven to be a rich testing ground for creating farm-to-food pantry relationships, building capacity for technical assistance, and revealing ways to increase resilience in supply chains. Most importantly, it has provided food pantries the opportunity to live out their values by providing high-quality fresh food. This has allowed pantries to support their communities’ food producers in ways that gave dignity to their clients, strengthened community bonds and connections, and kept small producers afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting multi-faceted crises.

The purpose of this report is threefold: (1) To discuss the successes and challenges of the FPAG as described in both qualitative and quantitative terms via interviews, surveys, and existing data; (2) To provide policy recommendations for improving the functionality of the grant; and (3) To explore the

¹⁰ McEntee, J. C., & Naumova, E. N. (2012). Building capacity between the private emergency food system and the local food movement: Working toward food justice and sovereignty in the global North. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 3(1), 235–253.

¹¹ Bazerghi et al., 2016.

¹² McEntee & Naumova, 2012.

¹³ McEntee & Naumova, 2012; Barone, A., Krummel, D. A., & Lee, S.-Y. (2020). Availability of food options and nutrition education in local food pantries. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 52(5), 492–502.

¹⁴ Kathy Underhill, Food Distribution Programs Manager at Colorado Department of Human Services, personal communication, 2021.

¹⁵ Abalo, T. (2020). *Farm to Food Pantry Evaluation Report: FY19 Colorado Food Pantry Assistance Grant*. Prepared for Hunger Free Colorado. 55 pp.



long-term ways in which the FPAG, if properly leveraged, could contribute to a stronger, healthier, and more resilient food system in Colorado, improving food security in the face of threats like COVID-19 and climate change.

Legislative History

The FPAG was first authorized as part of House Bill 18-1322, the 2018-19 Long Appropriation Act, signed into law on April 30, 2018. The bill allocated \$500,000 from the General Fund, which is used for state programs including education, health care, human services, and corrections. The largest sources of General Fund revenue are income and sales taxes. The money was disbursed through CDHS and administered by Onward! Foundation, a community foundation headquartered in Cortez, Colorado. Funds were designated for food pantries and food banks to purchase foods that qualified for Colorado Proud certification: a “food or agricultural product... grown, raised or processed in Colorado.”¹⁶ Up to 10% of the funds received could be used for indirect costs including transportation, refrigeration, and storage.

Cycle 1

Year 1 funds were awarded to grantees in two rounds; the first in January of 2019, the second in March 2019. The final report on both rounds of the grant was due May 2019. Onward! Foundation conducted spot audits of 10% of participating pantries, randomly selected, to verify purchase of Colorado Proud products via receipts.¹⁷ Pantries applied for \$1,502,330 more than they received.¹⁸ Of the \$451,250 distributed to pantries in 2019, \$439,701 (97%) was spent on food as opposed to indirect costs or infrastructure.¹⁹

Cycle 2

During the second iteration of FPAG, it was authorized as part of Senate Bill 19-207, the Fiscal Year 2019-20 Long Bill, signed into law on April 18, 2019. The bill included a \$100,000 allocation from the General Fund for food pantries and food banks to purchase foods that met the Colorado Proud definition. Again, no more than 10% of the funds received were to be used for indirect costs. The grant was again administered by Onward! Foundation. Cycle 2 funds were awarded to grantees in August 2019. Recipients were required to submit reports by May of 2020. Pantries received \$52,500 less than they asked for, and \$806,800 less than the amount they ideally wanted.²⁰ Of the funding distributed to pantries in the second year of the grant (\$90,000 total), 99% was spent on food.

Cycle 3

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and onward complicated funding for the third iteration of FPAG. Federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding totaling \$70 million

¹⁶ Colorado Proud logo use guidelines, www.coproud.org.

¹⁷ Nicci Crowley, former grant administrator at Onward! Foundation, interview, 2021.

¹⁸ Abalo, 2020.

¹⁹ Abalo, 2020.

²⁰ Data from Hunger Free Colorado, 2020.



was added to the state General Fund in May 2020 for eligible expenditures, of which the FPAG was determined to be one. House Bill 20-1422, signed into law June 22, 2020, appropriated \$500,000 from the CARES Act in the General Fund for FPAG, and the Governor's office later added an additional \$100,000. Again, no more than 10% of the funds received were to be used for indirect costs.

Due to concerns about expeditious distribution of the funding, administration of the grant was moved to CDHS. Funds were awarded to grantees in August 2020. Final reports on expenditures were due December 30, 2020. An accounting of this round of the grant can be found in the 2021 CDHS report ("HB20-1422 Final Report"). In 2020, "grant requests totaled more than double the funds available."²¹ Of the funding distributed to pantries in the third year of the grant, 97% was reported spent on food.²² Of the money reported spent on food, about 62% was verified as spent on locally-produced foods. The remaining funds could not be verified.

Cycle 4

Also in 2020, House Bill 20B-1003 revised the FPAG. This Bill was signed into law Dec. 7, 2020, during an Extraordinary Session. The Bill removed the \$20,000 cap on award amounts per grantee and the requirement that foods purchased be certified Colorado Proud, instead suggesting that Colorado Proud items be purchased "to the extent practicable." The bill appropriated \$5 million from the Federal CARES Act dollars in the General Fund for the FPAG. This time, up to 20% of the total award could be spent on expenses related to food distribution including staff time, storage, transportation costs, equipment, or delivery to clients. Applications were due Dec. 20, 2020, and funds were awarded to grantees by the end of March 2021. Grant recipients were required to spend all grant funds and distribute all purchased food by June 30, 2021. Final reports on expenditures were due July 1, 2021. CDHS again administered the grant. Applicants reportedly asked for more than double the amount of funding available.²³

As of November 2021, data is not available on how much of the \$4.938 million distributed to pantries in the fourth year of the grant was spent on food as opposed to indirect costs or infrastructure, but previous to the June reporting deadline, CDHS estimated it would be less than the allowed 20%.²⁴ CDHS did not collect data on what amount was spent on local food.²⁵

Cycle 5

Senate Bill 21-027, signed into law July 6, 2021, included an allocation for the FPAG. It again appropriated \$5 million from the Federal CARES Act funding in the General Fund. CDHS outsourced administration of the grant program to a third party, Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger. Implementation will be according to section 26-2-139 (2), C.R.S., which includes the purchase of Colorado Proud products "to the extent practicable" and allows use of 20% of the award on direct and

²¹ Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS)(2021). *Food Pantry Assistance Grant Program HB20-1422 Final Report*. 23 pp.

²² CDHS, 2021.

²³ K. Underhill, personal communication, 2021.

²⁴ Colorado Office of the State Auditor (OSA)(2021). *Pandemic Relief Programs Administrative Expenses: September 2021 Performance Audit*. 103 pp.

²⁵ K. Underhill, personal communication, 2021.



indirect costs of food provision including transportation, food delivery, expanding staff costs, refrigeration, and storage. Grant applications were due on Oct. 26, 2021, and recipients were announced Nov. 3, 2021.²⁶ The Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger has a focus on racial justice and equity in the food system. Decision considerations included questions about collaboration with communities served, how long grant funding would sustain the work, and where food would be procured. The fund disbursement, client survey, and reporting processes are still in development as of the publication of this report.

COVID-19 Impacts

“The pandemic magnified everything, and made every problem bigger, and every solution more expensive.”

-Effie Rorke, Senior Director of Public Policy, Feeding Colorado

Both the data collected during this project and CDHS data confirm the drastic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Impacts of the pandemic on households in 2020 included work hours cut (54%), lost jobs (41%), and health issues/sickness (33%).²⁷ CDHS found that “one-third (33%) of people receiving assistance from food pantries in October and November 2020 had never visited a pantry before the pandemic.”²⁸ These issues continued in 2021; CDHS’s 2021 client survey revealed that COVID-19 resulted in 33% of pantry clients having work hours cut and 25% losing their jobs. Seventeen percent experienced serious illness or death in their immediate families. Another 14% lost childcare, 8% lost healthcare and 3% lost their housing.²⁹ For 45% of clients surveyed in 2021, COVID-19 forced them to increase their use of food pantries, and 29% of clients visited food pantries for the first time because of COVID-19 (see Figure 1).

How has COVID-19 impacted clients' use of the food pantry?

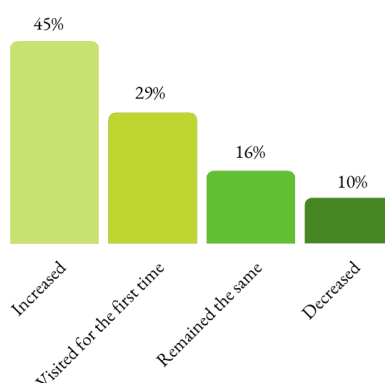


Figure 1. The bar graph displays how the pandemic impacted client relationships with food pantries. Data collected from surveys.

²⁶ For a list of the grantees, see the [Blueprint to End Hunger website](#).

²⁷ CDHS, 2021.

²⁸ CDHS, 2021.

²⁹ K. Underhill, personal communication, 2021.

The majority of food pantry and food bank staff interviewed detailed harrowing increases in the demand for their services during the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from doubling or tripling the number of families they were serving, to serving 300-400% of pre-pandemic numbers, to increasing the amount of meals served by 600%.³⁰ In addition, many organizations who had never provided food before saw a need and pivoted to food distribution.³¹ The five Feeding America food banks in the state had to scale up as well, some as much as 50% or more, and several have maxed out their infrastructure.³² Supply chain issues also impacted the food banks, making it necessary for them to switch to a purchasing model rather than a donation model:

“The supply chain challenges that happened in the private sector and in retail partners, and corporate and agriculture, all of those flowed downstream to food banks. So at the same time that the need was increased, donations were down—food donations were down and food procurement became more challenging. So the food banks have had to really scale up their purchased product to keep supply chains steady.”³³

For example, Erin Pulling, CEO at Food Bank of the Rockies (FBR), recounted that FBR “used to spend \$2.5 million dollars a year on food purchasing—this year we will spend almost \$12 million.”³⁴ The infusion of financial resources from both the public and private sector during the pandemic facilitated the switch to a purchasing model, which for some pantries represented a paradigm shift, as this was the first time many had a budget to purchase food as opposed to relying solely on donations:³⁵

“The switch from donated food to purchased food... came about because of COVID-19. And you can't go backwards on that. Because when you're purchasing food, you have control of the types of food you're distributing. And when it's donated, it's donated, so the food choice might not be as robust. So now merging those two, how does a purchased and donated model work together to best feed the community?”³⁶

Many food pantries found the purchasing model more effective than the donation model for serving their clients during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they were able to acquire higher-quality produce that lasted longer and didn't need to be composted as often as donated produce (*see* “Better Quality Food,” *below*). Russell Goodman, formerly Hunger Free Colorado's Regional Food Coordinator for the Northwest region, said of the purchasing model that, “It's a financial transaction, so it supports the farm, it supports the local producers that will ultimately be able to yield food sovereignty by producing for local consumption... [A]t the end of the day, the purchase model is more sustainable. And you can

³⁰ Carolyn Alexander, Operations Director at The Action Center, interview, 2021; Anonymous pantry leader, interview, 2021; Gwen Cameron, Regional Food Coordinator for the Western Slope, interview, 2021; John Dougherty, Interim Executive Director at Lift Up, interview, 2021; Rachel Landis, Regional Food Coordinator for the Southwest Region, interview, 2021; Rosalind May, Regional Food Coordinator for the Denver Metro area, interview, 2021; Gabe Moe-Lobeda, Pantry Coordinator at Jewish Family Services, interview, 2021.

³¹ Marc Jacobson, CEO at Hunger Free Colorado, interview, 2021.

³² Effie Rorke, Senior Director of Public Policy at Feeding Colorado, interview, 2021.

³³ E. Rorke, interview, 2021.

³⁴ Erin Pulling, CEO at Food Bank of the Rockies, interview, 2021.

³⁵ Abalo, 2020.

³⁶ Kim da Silva, CEO at Community Food Share, interview, 2021.



also afford the opportunity to plan so that the food pantry or meal producer... can more efficiently serve the clients.”³⁷

COVID-19 forced many pantries, and some distributors, to shift to less efficient means of food distribution to avoid physical contact with others and lessen the potential transmission of the virus. East Denver Food Hub, for example, noted increased popularity of food boxes because they were a no-touch option; however, food boxes are not as efficient and cost-effective as bulk orders, particularly standing bulk orders.³⁸ Many pantries had to shift from client choice models, which they preferred, to food boxes, “which is not what you want in an ideal world.”³⁹ Client choice models prevent waste and increase client dignity and satisfaction. Most pantries switched back to a client choice model as soon as possible.

Even as the economy reopens, the delayed impacts of the COVID-19 recession will impact the most vulnerable for many years to come. The federal government is attempting to address the issue, but federal funding is unlikely to be permanent. In March 2020, Congress passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which gave the USDA and states the authority to adjust their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to address increasing food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of this Act, states were able to provide increased emergency allotments of SNAP benefits to impacted households. The act also provided \$500 million to the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program to assist low-income mothers and pregnant women who lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic.⁴⁰ The Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer program (P-EBT) was also introduced, providing grocery benefits to families who lost access to free or reduced-price school meals during the start of the pandemic. In October 2020, the P-EBT program was extended through 2021, and in December 2020 states were authorized to implement a 15% increase in SNAP’s maximum benefit through June 2021.⁴¹

In Colorado, SNAP participants increased 18% from February 2020 through February 2021, indicating that many households had difficulty affording adequate food during the pandemic.⁴² Similar trends were seen across other states and emergency food assistance programs.⁴³ In response to the elevated and persistent food need across the United States, the American Rescue Plan Act was enacted in March 2021. This Act introduced provisions that extended the increase of the SNAP benefit COVID-19 relief fund; authorized the continuation of the P-EBT program through the 2020-2021 school year; sanctioned supplementary investment in the WIC program; and increased federal funding to assist states experiencing a surge in the need for SNAP.⁴⁴ However, the provisions outlined in this act

³⁷ R. Goodman, interview, 2021.

³⁸ Kathryn Ardoin, Value Chain Coordinator at East Denver Food Hub, interview, 2021.

³⁹ K. da Silva, interview, 2021.

⁴⁰ Rosenbaum, D., Bolen, E., Neuberger, Z., & Dean, S. (2020, Apr. 7). [USDA, States Must Act Swiftly to Deliver Food Assistance Allowed by Families First Act.](#)

⁴¹ USDA (2021, Mar. 22). [Help to Put Food on the Table: Facts On Nutrition Assistance in the American Rescue Plan.](#)

⁴² Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP)(2021, Oct. 9). [Changes in WIC, Medicaid, and SNAP Participation by State.](#)

⁴³ CBPP, 2021.

⁴⁴ Rosenbaum et al., 2020.



were scheduled to end in September 2021.⁴⁵ Colorado has yet to be approved to operate a P-EBT program during the 2021-2022 school year; however, an extension plan is currently being developed and will be reviewed by the USDA.⁴⁶ The USDA has also granted Colorado a waiver to extend emergency SNAP relief through November 2021.⁴⁷ Extensions of WIC waivers were approved through September 2020, although some active waivers have been extended “until 30 days after the end of the nationally-declared public health emergency.”⁴⁸ It is unknown whether supplemental federal assistance will continue after these dates. Due to the uncertainty of federal funding, the FPAG provides a unique opportunity for Colorado to build resiliency and autonomy into its emergency food system and be better prepared for crises. The creation of networks between local producers and food pantries has the potential to increase the flexibility and stability of the Colorado food system through local sourcing and shorter supply chains, which allows communities to quickly adapt to changing environmental conditions, economic disturbances, or public health emergencies (*see also* “Resilience,” *below*). The positive results of the FPAG outlined in the following section indicate that the grant program is a worthwhile use of state funding and should be continued even as—or especially as—CARES Act funding and other federal funding decreases or disappears.

The Priorities of the FPAG

Originally, the FPAG was conceived as a way of putting purchasing power and decision-making into the hands of food pantries.⁴⁹ The local purchasing requirement in place during the first three rounds of the grant was added to support Colorado farmers and create a “win-win-win” for the economy of the state.⁵⁰ The “win-win-win” is broken down as (1) getting healthy, culturally responsive food to food pantry clients; (2) connecting communities; and (3) creating stronger local food systems by creating new market channels between pantries and producers.⁵¹

Some interviewees thought the FPAG served to fulfill a combination of priorities, namely supporting Colorado farmers and getting healthy food to people who need it.⁵² One interviewee prioritized getting food to people who needed it, with supporting Colorado agriculture as an important but secondary goal.⁵³ Multiple interviewees expressed a need to clarify the priorities of the FPAG⁵⁴ and expressed concerns that if the purpose of the grant was to distribute large quantities of food rapidly (as was the case during COVID-19), then this might not be the most efficient way to meet that goal.⁵⁵ Others mentioned that maximizing efficiency in purchasing and distribution is not the intent of the grant.⁵⁶

⁴⁵ USDA (2021, Mar. 22).

⁴⁶ USDA (2021, Nov. 26). [State Guidance on Coronavirus P-EBT](#); USDA. (2021, Aug. 26). [State Plan for Pandemic EBT](#).

⁴⁷ USDA (2021, Nov. 26) [SNAP COVID-19 Emergency Allotments Guidance](#).

⁴⁸ USDA (2021, Sep. 21). [WIC Policy Memorandum #2020-6: Extensions for Certain USDA FNS-Approved COVID-19 Waivers](#).

⁴⁹ K. Underhill, interview, 2021.

⁵⁰ Lisa Cutter, Colorado Representative for House District 25, interview, 2021.

⁵¹ Ashley Wheeland, Director of Public Policy at Hunger Free Colorado, interview, 2021.

⁵² Marion Kalb, Institutional Food Program Administrator for the City of Denver, interview, 2021; Marissa Silverberg, Food Systems & Policy Administrator for Jefferson County Public Health, interview, 2021; K. da Silva, interview, 2021.

⁵³ L. Cutter, interview, 2021.

⁵⁴ K. Underhill, interview, 2021; E. Pulling, interview, 2021; E. Rorke, interview, 2021.

⁵⁵ E. Pulling, interview, 2021; E. Rorke, interview, 2021.

⁵⁶ K. da Silva, interview, 2021.



One interviewee wanted additional clarity on whether the purpose of the program was food or relationship-building, asking: “Is the focus on getting a lot more food? Because then... maybe the dollars just don’t stretch as far as they would if the food banks were doing it at scale. If the focus is on the relationships, then that’s okay if the dollars don’t stretch as far, because that’s not the point.”⁵⁷ Despite confusion about the main purpose of the grant and concerns about efficiency, one interviewee stated that “if the goal is to support local farmers, maybe [the FPAG is] doing exactly what it should.”⁵⁸

This lack of clarity is most likely due to the way priorities shifted in response to increased need due to COVID-19. During 2020, the priorities of the FPAG shifted from the “win-win-win” or mixed-priority model described above, to a model which explicitly prioritized getting larger quantities of food out, faster, to more people. In addition to the increased overall funding, this shift can be seen in the removal of both the Colorado Proud purchasing requirement and the cap on how much funding each applicant could request. Ashley Wheeland, Director of Public Policy at Hunger Free Colorado, speculated that in the absence of COVID-19,

“helping the food system and helping the agricultural side would have been more of the focus... but it couldn’t be, necessarily... because we needed to get food to folks more quickly than usual with the program. But I think that if... we hadn’t had COVID-19, we would have been talking about how this program is providing pantries the dollars [to fill] the gaps... to buy the healthy stuff people need from local folks. So it would have been funded much less, I’m sure, but it would have still met an important need.”⁵⁹

Supporting Local Food and Colorado Agriculture

The FPAG increases healthy options in the emergency food system by utilizing state funding for purchases of fresh, local food by food pantries and food banks. The most recent grant cycle does not include a requirement to purchase local food. In contrast, during the first three cycles of the grant, the FPAG required a Colorado Proud certification to indicate that food purchased was a “food or agricultural product... grown, raised or processed in Colorado.”⁶⁰ Pros and cons of this certification requirement are discussed in more detail below (*see* “Recommendations: Colorado Proud Labeling”).

What is “Local”?

In this context, “local” must be defined, which is easier said than done. Scale is fluid and relational; what is defined as “local” in one context may not be “local” in another.⁶¹ The 2008 Farm Act defines “local” fairly broadly, deeming a product “local” if it is less than 400 miles from its origin, or within the State, territory, or tribal land in which it is produced. “Local” is often used, with varying degrees of accuracy, as a proxy for a host of other desired characteristics including ecological sustainability, social

⁵⁷ E. Rorke, interview, 2021.

⁵⁸ E. Pulling, interview, 2021.

⁵⁹ A. Wheeland, interview, 2021.

⁶⁰ Colorado Proud logo use guidelines, www.coproud.org.

⁶¹ Born, B., & Purcell, M. (2006). Avoiding the local trap: Scale and food systems in planning research. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 26, 195-207.



justice, democracy, better nutrition, food security, freshness, and quality. But geographic proximity is no guarantee of any other characteristic. Born & Purcell (2006) warn against the conflation of “local” with other desired qualities, calling it “the local trap.”⁶²

With that caveat in mind, there is evidence that connecting local producers directly to food pantries increases the availability of fresh produce, meat, and dairy in the emergency food system and the accessibility of those resources to clients.⁶³ Connecting local farms directly to the emergency food system is a relatively new development. A national review of 115 organizations operating programs to increase food justice by meeting more of their own food needs and relying less on corporate donations reported only 21 programs operating or partnering with farms.⁶⁴

Approximately 1% of the food distributed by most food banks comes from local farms and gardens; those who procured significantly more primarily did so through coordinated gleaning⁶⁵ efforts. Additionally, there is a trend of food banks which distribute greater amounts of fresh produce being predominantly located in more affluent areas with smaller relative populations in poverty.⁶⁶ Despite these underwhelming findings, such programs are relatively novel in the emergency food system, and it is worth exploring whether food banks and pantries can be restructured to act as change agents by operationalizing the goals of community food security: maximizing self-reliance, justice, and democracy.⁶⁷ The FPAG is acting as a pilot program to experiment with how this restructuring might occur, and to reveal potential barriers and pitfalls for a program working to create a just emergency food system.

Methodology

For this 2021 evaluation of the FPAG, evaluators used a mixed-methods approach, integrating results from interviews and survey data. The evaluation used a non-random sample, focusing only on participating food pantries, clients, and producers. From June 2021 to September 2021, evaluators conducted 68 interviews with Regional Food Coordinators, food bank and pantry leaders, producers, and other invested community members. Three surveys⁶⁸ were created to gather information on individual views and experiences as well as to evaluate the successes and challenges of the FPAG across different community partner groups.⁶⁹ Each survey included open-ended, rating, multiple choice, and Likert scale questions. Client surveys were offered in English or Spanish and distributed through

⁶² Born & Purcell, 2006.

⁶³ Abalo, 2020.

⁶⁴ Vitiello, D., Grisso, J. A., Whiteside, K. L., & Fischman, R. (2015). From commodity surplus to food justice: Food banks and local agriculture in the United States. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 32, 419–430.

⁶⁵ “Gleaning” is defined by the USDA as “the act of collecting excess fresh foods from farms, gardens, farmers markets, grocers, restaurants, state/county fairs, or any other sources in order to provide it to those in need.”

⁶⁶ Vitiello et al., 2015.

⁶⁷ Vitiello et al., 2015.

⁶⁸ Complete survey results can be found in Appendix A

⁶⁹ The term “community partner” is used in lieu of “stakeholder” in an effort to substitute more equitable language. The continued use of the word “stakeholder,” which references the process by which an individual would claim a piece of land by driving stakes into its corners, perpetuates a settler-colonial mindset and normalizes land theft and displacement of Indigenous people.



SurveyMonkey. Printable versions were also available so that hard-copies could be provided for those who did not have access to a computer or smartphone. Each survey participant received a \$20 gift certificate as compensation for their participation.

Surveys

Client Survey

The Client Survey was created using a survey tool developed for the Hunger Free Colorado 2019 Farm to Food Pantry Report. Evaluators asked food pantries to distribute the survey to their clients to assess how FPAG funding impacts clients' access to fresh, nutritious, and culturally responsive⁷⁰ food. The survey also collected information on potential barriers to food access and demographics. The survey consisted of 42 questions and took an average of 14 minutes to complete. The survey sample consisted of 208 pantry clients, with a 90% completion rate.

Examples of some of the questions asked on the Client Survey:

- Has the pantry provided you and your household with healthier food options than you would have if you did not have access to the pantry?
- What types of foods do you want to see MORE of in this food pantry?
- What would improve your ability to access nutritious and culturally appropriate foods?

Pantry Survey

The Pantry Survey was distributed to representatives of food pantries who were familiar with the FPAG and the application, purchasing, and distribution processes. The survey was designed to gain insight into allocation of funds, relationships with local producers, success and challenges, and potential areas for improvement. The survey consisted of 47 questions and took an average of 26 minutes to complete. The survey sample consisted of 26 pantry leaders, with a 100% completion rate.

Examples of some of the questions asked on the Pantry Survey:

- If you applied for funding in some years, but not other years, what prevented you from applying?
- How important is it to you to procure food from local producers and vendors?
- What are your current challenges in providing healthy and culturally-appropriate foods for your clients?

Producer Survey

The Producer Survey was distributed to Colorado farmers and ranchers who have partnered with pantries receiving FPAG funding. This survey was designed to collect information about the types of

⁷⁰ The term “culturally responsive food” is used to encompass some level of client engagement by pantry staff; decisions around what foods a pantry offers are influenced to some extent by client feedback and request. See “More Culturally Responsive Food,” below, for additional information.



products provided to pantries, financial impacts, benefits and limitations to technical assistance, and the strengths of and challenges encountered while creating partnerships between producers and pantries. This survey consisted of 28 questions and took an average of 10 minutes to complete. The survey sample consisted of 16 producers, with a 100% completion rate.

Examples of some of the questions asked on the Producer Survey:

- How significant has the financial impact of participating been to your operation? Please explain.
- Is there any additional technical assistance you need to connect you to new market channels and maintain relationships with food banks and pantries?
- What could be changed or added to the FPAG to better serve the needs of your operation?

Interviews

Evaluators interviewed Hunger Free Colorado Regional Food Coordinators, food pantry leaders, food bank leaders, agricultural producers, produce aggregators and distributors, grant administrators, Hunger Free Colorado staff, and other invested community partners. The majority of interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, though a small amount took place in-person. Most interviews took roughly 30 minutes to 1 hour to conduct. Questions were designed to obtain information relevant to each group's unique position and experience. In total, evaluators conducted 68 interviews.

- Hunger Free Colorado Regional Coordinators (6)
- Pantry leaders (33)
- Food bank leaders (3)
- Producers (8)
- Aggregators/distributors (4)
- Grant administrators (2)
- Hunger Free Colorado staff (2)
- Other (10)

Data Analysis

The evaluators collected 250 survey responses and conducted and transcribed 68 interviews, which were analyzed using the following methods.

Quantitative Analysis

Data from each survey was analyzed to identify trends relating to farm-to-food pantry relationships; COVID-19 impacts; technical assistance capacity; quality, quantity, and locality of purchased foods; and overall client satisfaction. Where percentages were reported, numbers were rounded to the nearest whole number. Quantitative data was combined with qualitative data to inform analysis and recommendations.



Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis methodology. Each interview was transcribed and the responses were evaluated for patterns. Themes that emerged included commentary on the local mandate, grant timeline, equity, technical assistance, areas for improvement, and program successes, which the evaluators further analyzed to inform program recommendations.

Data Gaps

The mixed methodologies used in the data collection process left some gaps in evaluators' data. Some pantries had significantly higher client response rates than others. This could be skewing the sample, geographically or demographically, toward pantries that have capacity to administer surveys or toward pantries with larger client bases. Client surveys were offered in different modalities but not available in languages other than English and Spanish. Surveys were also sent out in August, resulting in low producer survey response rates due to their busy schedules during the growing season. In an attempt to bridge this gap, surveys were sent out again to producers in November, resulting in more responses, although the response rate of producers still remained lower than the other groups surveyed. Finally, interviewees self-selected, so responses were only received from those who had the time and willingness to be interviewed.

The evaluators were not able to contact many pantries that did not apply for the FPAG to find out why they did not seek FPAG funding for their organization. Those that were contacted mentioned numerous reasons for not applying for the funding, including:

- The pantry leaders did not know about it.
- The organization already had sufficient funding.
- They were deterred by Colorado Proud product buying restrictions.
- There were not enough resources or technical assistance available to spend the money the way they wanted to spend it.
- They wanted the help to go to where it seemed more needed.

Successes of the FPAG

In interviews, 16 pantry leaders named better quality food as one of the main successes they experienced from FPAG funding, and 14 mentioned increased client satisfaction. Those that mentioned one or both strongly emphasized the positive impacts, stating, for example, that the increase in quality “made a life-changing difference to our clients.”⁷¹ According to the pantry survey results, the majority of pantries received positive client feedback on the food offered. Five pantry leaders mentioned larger quantities of food as a success they experienced from using FPAG funding. During interviews, 14 food pantry leaders reported that the FPAG gave them the capacity to build relationships they hadn't established before.

⁷¹ Corry Higbee, Pueblo Cooperative Care Center, interview, 2021.



Larger Quantities of Food

“[I]t allowed us to purchase more produce, more beans, and more eggs than we normally could have, and increase the distribution rate.”

- Walter O'Toole, Food Bank Manager, Emergency Family Assistance Association

During the first year of the grant (2018), “81% of reporting pantries stated that they increased the amount of perishable foods available in their pantry.”⁷² In 2020, “the grant funding increased [food pantries’] capacity to serve more people and meet a significant increase in need.”⁷³ According to the results of this 2021 survey, 81% of responding pantries were able to increase their availability of fresh produce, dairy, and meat. The largest barriers to this before FPAG included: lack of funds in general and specifically for regular deliveries; lack of funds and staff time for procuring and sourcing; high cost of meat and local products; lack of product availability; reliance on donations; and insufficient storage.

Better Quality Food

“[T]here's very much these myths and this discrimination, almost, against who is deserving of fresh, local, healthy food, and so [the FPAG] really helps destigmatize [receiving food assistance]. Our food pantry isn't just the leftovers. It's not just the bottom of the barrel. It's not just whatever couldn't sell—you're getting really good quality healthy food and you're supporting farmers in our region.”

- Rebecca Clausen, Grub Hub Fort Lewis College

Better quality food was a clear benefit of FPAG funding. As one interviewee put it, “[T]he food pantries are receiving vastly higher quality produce through this program than they ever do through [food banks] or grocery rescue or anything like that.”⁷⁴ Some pantries reported that when they relied on donations, they received very poor-quality food, particularly produce, much of which had to be composted rather than distributed to clients. The produce was described as “half a step from the slop bin”⁷⁵ and some pantries had to end relationships with donating partners after receiving donations of produce of which 90% had to be composted. These donations were characterised as “charity dumping.”⁷⁶ The poor-quality offerings took a toll on client dignity. As one pantry leader put it, “we have clients whose dignity has been crushed day-in, day-out [when] they get crap for food.”⁷⁷ Another called it “dehumanizing.”⁷⁸ Pantry leaders wanted to remedy the situation. As one stated, “[J]ust because you need food assistance doesn't mean the quality of the food that you receive [should be] less than the quality of food that you might choose for yourself, if you could.”⁷⁹ Another said, “I've seen a really positive increase in sourcing fresh produce, and an acknowledgement that families that go to

⁷² Abalo, 2020.

⁷³ CDHS, 2021.

⁷⁴ G. Cameron, interview, 2021.

⁷⁵ Anonymous pantry leader, interview, 2021.

⁷⁶ Anonymous pantry leader, interview, 2021; *see also* Fisher, 2017.

⁷⁷ R. Landis, interview, 2021.

⁷⁸ Marci Cochran, Regional Food Coordinator for the Pueblo area, interview, 2021.

⁷⁹ Monique Marez, Coordinator of Pueblo Food Project, interview, 2021.



food pantries want fresh produce. And that's something that has shifted and changed. That was not the way things were even a couple years ago.”⁸⁰

The FPAG helped. For example, one pantry leader mentioned now having the power to create a funded food program: “Donations probably flip-flopped... 99% donations before and 1% purchased and now it's 99% purchased and 1% donated. And I think our clients are benefiting from that.”⁸¹ Another pantry leader said, “You should see our food pantry today. We've got fresh peppers, fresh jalapenos, potatoes, bananas, apples, oranges. It looks like a beautiful European fruit stand and produce stand, like you're at a farmers market. But if that funding subsidies, we won't be able to offer [food] at that level.”⁸² Another relayed that they had a reputation for giving out bad produce, which the FPAG remedied.⁸³ Others said, “Some of the things that we get here are the things that the grocery store deems not sellable, but not compost, so then we get it... It's already so close to its end of life. So being able to have more space and more sources to get the fresh [produce]... was a really, really great idea,”⁸⁴ and that with FPAG funding, “we didn't have to worry about having to throw away half the produce we got from our sources.”⁸⁵

The 2021 Client Survey found that 86% of clients believe that pantries have provided their households with healthier food options than they would have been able to get if they did not have access to a pantry.

More Culturally Responsive Food

Many pantry leaders surveyed and interviewed reported that FPAG funding enabled them to procure more culturally responsive foods. Tangentially, the majority (51%) of clients surveyed reported feeling very satisfied with the *availability* of culturally responsive food while less than half (43%) reported feeling very satisfied with the *variety* of culturally responsive foods. This indicates that while the majority of clients have access to culturally responsive food, there is room to diversify the types of foods offered.

The term “culturally responsive” here is intentional, though the original surveys used the term “culturally relevant.” Many community partners interviewed opted to use culturally “responsive” versus “appropriate” or “relevant” because of the subjective nature of what is considered appropriate and who gets to define what that means for other cultures. Regional Food Coordinator Roberto Meza reflected on his experience working with individuals who do not identify as part of a culture trying to define what is appropriate or relevant:

⁸⁰ Anonymous pantry leader, interview, 2021.

⁸¹ Allison Taggart, Integrated Family Community Services, interview, 2021.

⁸² Helen Sedlar, Mountain Family Center, interview, 2021.

⁸³ Anonymous pantry leader, interview, 2021.

⁸⁴ Kelly Ivan, Christian Action Guild (CAG), interview, 2021.

⁸⁵ Robert Lindeman, Society of St. Vincent de Paul of Castle Rock, interview, 2021.



“And to tell us that the food that we grow, by people of color, is not culturally ‘relevant’ was a big realization for me, because who determines what is culturally relevant but the communities that grow that food, and that consume that food? So I try to steer that conversation away from culturally relevant foods because by that definition Coca-Cola is culturally relevant, but it’s not values-based.”⁸⁶

Culturally responsive food involves those procuring it “not trying to be the voice of the community, rather elevat[ing] the voice of community members.”⁸⁷ A pantry leader who wished to remain anonymous explained that the key difference between responsive and relevant

“is that we have taken the time, and it’s a part of our model, to really engage our participants in the community so that we know that the decisions we’re making are in response to direct communication that is participant-centered. And it’s not just us going ‘Well, from what we know of your culture, we think that these [foods] are what’s relevant to you.’”⁸⁸

Pantry leaders surveyed attributed their challenges in providing culturally responsive foods to:

- Lack of knowledge about client’s culturally preferred foods; some respondents were unable to collect client input due to COVID-19
- Donations aren’t culturally responsive or fresh
- Supply chain disruptions
- Cost of foods
- The short time frame for spoilage of fresh foods
- Lack of storage capacity

Addressing these challenges starts with asking clients what they want. Both Helen Sedlar of the Mountain Family Center and Jaclyn Yellich of Denver South High School mentioned that directly engaging with their clients to find out their preferences was the first step in transitioning to offering more culturally responsive foods. Yellich explains:

“What we found is that almost all of our families, except people who look like us, wanted these dried chilies and were so excited that we had them. They had never asked me for them before. And quite frankly I couldn’t afford them.”⁸⁹

The same anonymous pantry leader quoted above was able to meet the cultural needs of multiple communities with FPAG funding by providing fresh staple foods that could be used to prepare a wide variety of dishes:

“Not only are we working to meet their new needs [from the pandemic], but we’ve also found that these basics and essentials that [are] our food priorities this year really go to serve just

⁸⁶ Roberto Meza, farmer at Emerald Gardens and Regional Food Coordinator for the Denver Metro area, interview, 2021.

⁸⁷ Tommy Crosby, Food Access Manager at Metro Caring, interview, 2021.

⁸⁸ Anonymous pantry leader, interview, 2021.

⁸⁹ J. Yellich, interview, 2021.



about any community. When we really focus on those basic essentials, people are able to make their own culturally responsive food in their home out of those things that we provide.”

Increased Client Satisfaction

“[The clients] want to know if we’re going to keep doing it. They’re like, ‘Please don’t stop.’”

- Helen Sedlar, Mountain Family Center

Better quality food was associated with increased client satisfaction. In response to CDHS’s 2021 client survey, 50% of respondents said meat was the most important item to receive, followed by vegetables (20%), fruit (15%), and dairy (13%).⁹⁰ The overwhelming majority of respondents to the evaluators’ Client Survey listed meat and fresh fruits and vegetables as the items they wanted to see more of at the pantries. Ninety-one percent of clients prefer fresh foods that need to be prepared over canned or ready-to-eat foods. FPAG appears to be helping to meet those needs. The majority of clients were satisfied with the variety and quantity of available healthy foods at their pantry, including protein, fresh fruits and vegetables, and dairy. Pantry leaders described clients receiving food purchased through FPAG as “so thankful and grateful,”⁹¹ “beside themselves,”⁹² and “just thrilled.”⁹³

Relationship Building

“[The FPAG] helped us get more food, but it really helped us build new relationships as far as being part of the sustainable regional food system.”

- Rebecca Clausen, Grub Hub Fort Lewis College

The opportunity to establish relationships between farmers and food pantries was cited by 14 food pantry leaders interviewed as a success of the FPAG. Interviewees mentioned building and strengthening relationships with ranchers, produce growers, distributors and food hubs, honey producers, and even a milling company. Of respondents to the 2021 Pantry Survey, 74% believe that it is very important to have relationships with local producers and have some already established; 15% believe that it is very important, but don’t yet have relationships established. A minority of pantries reported not needing to work with either a distributor or a Regional Food Coordinator because they had their own networks already set up. The majority of producers interviewed mentioned the benefits of new relationships and market channels to their businesses. The creation of Regional Food Coordinator positions helped build many of those relationships.

Hunger Free Colorado launched the Regional Food Coordinator positions, funded by a private grant, in 2019. This was in response to the lack of connection between pantries and farmers revealed during the first round of FPAG. Hunger Free Colorado decided to make it a priority to provide technical

⁹⁰ K. Underhill, personal communication, 2021.

⁹¹ Brittney Woodrum, St. George Episcopal Church in Leadville, interview, 2021.

⁹² Dayna Scott, Broomfield FISH, interview, 2021.

⁹³ Jo Haynes, Food Bank Manager of EChO Food Bank at Evergreen Christian Outreach, interview, 2021.



assistance: connecting pantries and producers, working out delivery and storage logistics, and in some cases aggregating food for distribution. For example, Rachel Landis, Regional Food Coordinator for the Southwest region, has created a 5-county network of food hubs that aggregate from small producers in rural and frontier areas of the state. Across Montezuma, Dora, La Plata, San Juan, and Archuleta counties, the network moved half a million dollars worth of local food products since the start of COVID-19, a significant financial investment into the local economy. Connecting these food hubs across counties increases the resiliency of the region's food system while simultaneously supporting local producers. Six Regional Food Coordinators are currently working across Colorado to connect local producers to food pantries in an effort to develop local food systems centered around equity and choice.

A pantry leader who wished to remain anonymous said, "We've... been able to make important partnerships with local producers and vendors, some of which (small farms for example) have expressed that the funds were *very* helpful to them during the pandemic. These partnerships have strengthened our community all around and we'd love to continue those relationships."⁹⁴ Erin Foster West, the Western Campaigns Director for the National Young Farmers Coalition, said that Coalition members value the opportunity to feed their community and provide food to people in need: "A lot of them are coming with the values of getting into growing food because they want to be part of the community, they want to grow healthy food, they want to connect with networks of people who are interested in healthy food. So connecting with food pantries is a really good way for them to live into those values. So they can not just provide food to lovely people who come to the farmers market, but also get the food out to people who are really in need of food and don't always have good access to fresh, healthy, local food." One producer in the Roaring Fork Valley near Aspen, CO said, "We've heard a tremendous amount of feedback from our region [about] the impact on so many levels, from confidence, to a sense of being acknowledged and seen, to increased well-being on a family and community level as a result of [the FPAG]. And I can speak for my farmers, when we package for the pantries, they feel really good... So I think that just on all levels, it's connecting user groups that don't interact and providing [a] high value of multifunctional benefits."⁹⁵

Economic Impacts

"If it wasn't for that grant, we probably wouldn't be here, I would have lost my farm."

- Roberto Meza, Regional Food Coordinator and founder, Emerald Gardens

Though a complete economic analysis of FPAG was not feasible (*see below*), there is still significant economic justification for funding the FPAG at the highest possible level. All the information collected indicates that the FPAG benefitted the state economically; one producer called it "a step in the right direction in creating a fiscally healthy food system."⁹⁶ For example:

⁹⁴ Anonymous pantry leader, interview, 2021.

⁹⁵ Eden Vardy, Executive Director of The Farm Collaborative, interview, 2021.

⁹⁶ Sue Salinger, Ekar Farm, producer survey, 2021.



- 69% of agricultural producers surveyed stated that the FPAG has had a **significant impact on their business**
- 94% of producers agreed that **partnering with FPAG-participating pantries improved their business**
- Revenue generated from the FPAG was spent on farm operations, infrastructure, wages, seeds, and amendments. **75% spent FPAG funds on farm operations, 38% on infrastructure, and 56% on wages** (*see* Figure 2)
- Producers also reported indirect benefits including reductions in food waste, the ability to expand production, the acquisition of necessary equipment, and the investment of proceeds back into the business
- Producers who did not see a significant financial impact from the FPAG still found it useful to develop diversified income streams
- All producers said they would participate in the FPAG again

**Where did producers spend the money that was generated as
a result of FPAG ?**



Figure 2. This row chart shows how producers allocated the funds that were generated from pantry partnerships throughout their business operations. Data collected from surveys.

One producer said that the FPAG accounted for 25% of their 75% revenue increase in 2020, and “it appears that it will be even more significant in 2021 because of the development of relationships with the pantries.”⁹⁷ In regards to one farm in Salida, a food pantry leader stated that “our purchasing allowed them to expand so much that they were able to build another high dome for their greenhouses.”⁹⁸ Another pantry leader who wished to remain anonymous reported hearing from two farms that business resulting from the FPAG helped them survive transitioning their business model during COVID-19. Interviewees reported very positive feedback from producers: “We have quote upon quote upon quote from farmers about how grateful they were, how [FPAG] saved their farm, how they want this to continue, this is who they want to serve, they want to feed their communities.”⁹⁹ A food hub employee said, “I heard from several of our producers, especially the smaller and midsize producers who are really counting every apple, that [the FPAG] was super impactful. And if we had

⁹⁷ Janie VanWinkle, VanWinkle Ranch LLC, producer survey, 2021.

⁹⁸ B. Woodrum, interview, 2021.

⁹⁹ R. Landis, interview, 2021.

not been buying from them, nobody would have. And if we did not have the customers who were all Food Pantry Assistance Grant recipients, we would not have bought that stuff.”¹⁰⁰

The FPAG was a “significant and very helpful” new market for numerous members of the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union.¹⁰¹ The market channels FPAG provided help move less popular cuts of meat and whole animals that need to find a buyer, benefitting Colorado ranchers.¹⁰² Meredith Rose of the Community Agriculture Alliance (CAA) in the Yampa Valley mentioned that the FPAG is particularly impactful for small communities, “especially in our small Valley, where... everyone’s... nestled in here. And while the network is growing, it’s still small. [S]o it really does mean a lot, because there’s just a handful of producers that we have here. [I]t definitely does make a big difference.” In 2021, CAA worked with producers like Snowden Meats, a small beef producer processing about 30 head of cattle a year. Gwen Cameron, the Regional Food Coordinator for the Western Slope, said that small farms were beginning

“to rely on that market for their produce and growth. We’ve seen our farmers increase their production as a result of this program, we’ve seen the small distribution company buy another truck, hire more people; I think it really helped them survive through COVID-19... For farmers, I think it did make a significant impact, because while \$100,000 and 33,000 pounds was not a lot compared to what that food pantry distributes, it’s a lot for those farms, who are in some cases only a few acres in size. And so getting purchases from a food pantry in that volume made a big impact for them. And it also grew the small distribution business that was the middleman in between the two.”

Indeed, the FPAG not only supported producers and pantries, but also the links between them: aggregators, produce distributors, and food hubs. For example, business from FPAG transactions supported the regional produce distributor Colo-Pac significantly¹⁰³ and helped East Denver Food Hub support producers directly, specifically small and mid-sized producers.¹⁰⁴ Early Morning Orchard, a farm/wholesale/food hub operation based in Palisade, Colorado, was able to maintain staff full-time,¹⁰⁵ creating benefits and positive impacts throughout the supply chain.¹⁰⁶

“I could share with you countless conversations with vendors who called us and just offered thanks and gratitude because [the FPAG] got them through.”

- Corry Higbee, Pueblo Cooperative Care Center

¹⁰⁰ K. Ardoin, interview, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Harrison Topp, Membership Director of Rocky Mountain Farmers Union and farmer at Topp Fruits, interview, 2021.

¹⁰² H. Topp, interview, 2021; Sarajane Snowden, Snowden Meats, interview, 2021.

¹⁰³ Jake Trujillo, Coordinator of Colo-Pac Produce, Inc., interview, 2021.

¹⁰⁴ K. Ardoin, interview, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ “I’ve been able to maintain full time staff, full time, year round staff of five people which normally in the wintertime, I’d go down to about two, maybe three, including myself” (Kaye Davis, Operations Manager of Skip’s Farm-to-Market and Early Morning Orchard, interview, 2021).

¹⁰⁶ H. Topp, interview, 2021.



Funding Limitations

Though the FPAG has provided significant support to producers and food pantries, there is still a gap between the amount offered and the amount required to fully fund the emergency food system. The FPAG has not been able to provide all the support that grantees asked for or needed. The amount requested exceeded the amount awarded every cycle of the grant. In 2018, pantries received 23% of what they asked for.¹⁰⁷ In 2019, pantries received 63% of what they asked for, and \$806,800 less than the amount they ideally wanted.¹⁰⁸ In 2020, “grant requests totaled more than double the funds available,”¹⁰⁹ and in 2021, applicants again asked for more than double the amount of funding available.¹¹⁰ This may be an artifact of the grant process, as the amounts requested fluctuated with the total amount available via the grant, but the gap between funds requested and funds received shows the consistent and ongoing need for funding FPAG at the highest possible level.

Evaluation Limitations

This evaluation was unable to provide a robust economic analysis that holistically quantifies all the benefits of the FPAG to Colorado’s economy for several reasons:

- Evaluators had difficulty contacting a sufficient amount or representative number of producers involved in the grant. There is not a centralized database of producer participants, as each pantry had their own system for contacting local producers. Contact information from the food pantries themselves was not comprehensive, as evaluators could not contact all food pantry participants.
- The timing of the project data collection phase coincided with the peak growing season in Colorado, meaning that most producers did not have capacity to contribute data to the project, even with incentives.
- Evaluators had difficulty accessing the raw data collected by both grant administrators (Onward! Foundation and CDHS) due to confidentiality requirements. Synthesis reports were available for cycles 1 and 3 of the grant, but not cycles 2 and 4. In addition, the first three cycles of the grant required spending on Colorado Proud products, but cycle 4 (for the largest amount of money at \$5 million) only suggested doing so, and data was not collected on the proportion of grant funding spent on Colorado Proud products during that cycle of the grant.
- Economic benefits do not only include money spent on Colorado Proud products; they also include jobs created or maintained, wages earned, infrastructure created or strengthened, and more positive health outcomes for recipients of healthier food. There was no way to adequately quantify these benefits, though evaluators collected substantial qualitative evidence of the grant’s positive impact on the people and economy of Colorado.
- The extraordinary circumstances surrounding COVID-19 make analysis of state funding impacts over the grant time period difficult, as the situation diverged far from baseline starting in March 2020 with the infusion of Federal CARES Act money into the state budget.

¹⁰⁷ Abalo, 2020 (\$1,953,580 requested and \$451,250 received).

¹⁰⁸ Data from Hunger Free Colorado, 2020 (\$142,500 requested and \$90,000 received).

¹⁰⁹ CDHS, 2021.

¹¹⁰ K. Underhill, personal communication, 2021.



State funding for local food infrastructure could pay for itself many times over, but to accurately measure the whole spectrum of the economic impact, the following are needed:

- Standardized reporting
- Centralized information collection
- Measurement of indirect impacts

Policy Recommendations

This section discusses policy recommendations and facilitation improvements developed for the FPAG from surveys and interviews of pantry leaders, pantry clients, producers, and other community partners. The FPAG would likely be improved by:

- Continuing for a minimum of five years
- Streamlining the application and reporting process and standardizing data collection
- Continuing technical assistance and expanding outreach resources
- Adjusting the grant cycle to better align with Colorado's growing season
- Permitting forward contracting to provide financial assurance to Colorado producers
- Incrementally reinstating the local purchasing mandate
- Centering equity

Continue FPAG for Five Years Minimum

"I think it would be beneficial to all the entities involved to have a five-year grant cycle. That's enough time that you can build infrastructure, you can build sustainability into your food pantry, and that you can really make an impact in developing a more resilient food system around that food pantry."

- Gwen Cameron, Regional Food Coordinator for the Western Slope

In order to continue to meet the needs of those facing food insecurity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the FPAG should be guaranteed for at least another five years so that community members benefitting from the grant funding continue receiving healthy foods while the economy improves, unemployment rates drop, and the need for food assistance decreases. To do so, evaluators recommend the following funding schedule over the next five grant cycles:

- 2022 - 2023: \$5 million as need is still very high and federal pandemic benefits may be ending (see "COVID-19 Impacts, *above*")
- 2023 - 2024: \$3.5 million per cycle
- 2024 - 2027: \$2 million per cycle

Three Regional Food Coordinators recommended a guaranteed five-year cycle for the grant.¹¹¹ A food hub employee stated that "the biggest challenge [with the FPAG] has been that it ends, that it's not predictable."¹¹² A grant administrator suggested making it a permanent line item in the state budget:

¹¹¹ R. Goodman, interview, 2021; R. May, interview, 2021; G. Cameron, interview, 2021.

¹¹² K. Ardoin, interview, 2021.



“I think it’s one of those things that, for it to be effective in state government, it needs to be a normal part of everyday work. And so it needs to be, for example, a line item that gets funded every year, so that the state can really build a program and infrastructure around it, rather than a one-off.”¹¹³

Related to long-term, sustainable funding, multiple interviewees brought up a recent state policy change that could potentially impact the FPAG. On June 25, 2021 Governor Polis signed SB21-087 into law, commonly known as the Agricultural Workers’ Rights Bill.¹¹⁴ Fair and equitable labor conditions for farm workers are a key part of resilient, sustainable food systems. During the interview process, community partners including pantry leaders, farmers, and food hub workers¹¹⁵ raised concerns that as the new law is implemented, the prices of Colorado foods will increase, deepening the financial challenges for food pantries in procuring local foods, which many already report can be cost-prohibitive. As of this report publication, the nuances of the bill are still being discussed; however, impacts of its implementation must be considered in future administration for and budgeting of the FPAG.

An interviewee representing the National Young Farmers Coalition suggested an annual appropriation in the state budget so that the FPAG could continue indefinitely.¹¹⁶ Though support for the program in the Colorado state legislature was bipartisan and “pretty unanimous,”¹¹⁷ having to run the FPAG legislation yearly causes “issue fatigue” among legislators and funders, who have limited resources and want to support “sexy” issues rather than persistent, endemic ones.¹¹⁸ Making the grant multi-year could address these pitfalls.

Streamline Application and Reporting Process

In their final reports in 2021, pantries and food banks were very grateful for the funding and appreciated the simplicity of the application and reporting.¹¹⁹ Below is a summary of the feedback received regarding the application and reporting process.

Application

Suggested Improvements

- Expand the application window from one week to at least two full weeks
- Provide the application questions to those applying in advance so they can work on and save their responses separately prior to submission
- Issue a copy of the application submission to applicants for their own records

¹¹³ K. Underhill, interview, 2021.

¹¹⁴ [SB21-087](#).

¹¹⁵ R. Meza, interview, 2021; K. Ardoin, interview, 2021; Anonymous pantry leaders (2), interviews, 2021.

¹¹⁶ Erin Foster West, Western Campaigns Director for the National Young Farmers Coalition, interview, 2021.

¹¹⁷ A. Wheeland, interview, 2021.

¹¹⁸ M. Jacobson, interview, 2021; M. Kalb, interview, 2021.

¹¹⁹ K. Underhill, personal communication, 2021.



- Create a general educational resource all stakeholders can refer to for information surrounding the FPAG, such as which organization is providing facilitation, their contact information, when the application opens and how to apply, funding requirements and guidelines, contact and geographical information for Hunger Free Regional Food Coordinators, and potential producers to begin contacting for local procurement

The majority of pantry leaders reported that the process of applying for the FPAG was not difficult; and the Pantry Survey found that 91% of pantry leaders didn't experience any challenges when accessing or applying for the grant. Many pantry leaders felt similarly to Dayna Scott from Broomfield FISH, who said the process was "pretty simple and straightforward" compared to other grant applications they had completed in the past that took longer or asked for substantially more information.¹²⁰ "It wasn't complicated," said Kelly Ivan of Denver's CAG, "they got back in a very timely manner." When asked about future rounds of the FPAG, Ivan said she "would definitely apply again."¹²¹

Some pantry leaders hesitated to request as much money as they could have because they did not want to be denied the grant, even with the flexibility to spend 20% on non-food purchases. "The stakes are so high that we just want to make sure we're getting the money," Allison Taggart of Integrated Family Community Services said, "and so we may cut back on a lot of our requests. [F]or instance, I may say 100% on food, because I'm nervous if I say 20% on something else, it might not be accepted. [H]owever the powers that be interpret that, realize we want to do the best we can, we're just really nervous about what the readers are thinking."¹²²

Despite the general positive feedback regarding the application process, some pantry leaders did express frustrations with the online Google form application. Some applicants had to learn to use the platform before submitting the application, creating an additional barrier to those pantries already operating with minimal staff capacity. Other applicants critiqued using Google forms because the application cannot be saved while in progress and does not provide a copy of the application to the applicants, "so if there's one piece of information [the pantries] don't have, then all of [the] work is lost."¹²³

Additional barriers to accessing or applying for the FPAG included lack of communication between the facilitating organizations and pantries about when to apply for funding and the logistics of the grant cycle, and a lack of a centralized resource in which to find information about the FPAG.

¹²⁰ D. Scott, interview, 2021.

¹²¹ K. Ivan, interview, 2021.

¹²² A. Taggart, interview, 2021.

¹²³ Anonymous pantry leader, interview, 2021.



Reporting

Suggested Improvements

- Allow at least two weeks between spending deadlines and reporting deadlines. This would provide ample time for pantry leaders to gather receipts and fill out paperwork, resulting in a more robust and accurate spending report
- Provide clear and detailed instructions to the pantries upon funding approval regarding the reporting process. Information should include expectations of recording proof of purchases with receipts and expected client feedback requirements
- Allow exemptions from client feedback. Some pantries provide services anonymously and cannot collect the proper information, while others serve populations unable to complete the survey
- Offer a hard-copy reporting process for those individuals who are less computer literate or organizations without access to a computer
- Standardize and centralize data collection

The reporting requirements of the FPAG have depended on which organization facilitated the grant funding, differing between Onward! Foundation and CDHS (*see* “Legislative History,” *above*). The majority of pantries did not have difficulties with the reporting requirements. However, some could benefit from a reporting deadline adjustment to better coincide with the spending deadline. The most recent report was due June 30, 2021. “That was also the final day we could spend money on the grant,” said a pantry leader who asked to remain anonymous. “That was a real challenge for us.” Pantry leaders already under pressure to spend remaining funds by the deadline may not have the capacity to fulfill the reporting requirements to the best of their ability.

Many pantry leaders requested clearer instructions on how to provide proof of purchases when reporting. Some could not provide proof of purchasing because they did not know they needed to keep their receipts for the final report, while others could not keep the receipts because of staffing issues or lack of a central office or space to manage them.

One particular pantry leader explained the difficulties they faced in reporting because their disabled clients were physically incapable of filling out the feedback survey required to receive future rounds of funding:

“I don’t have a single client who can understand the survey to fill it out. If I tried to have the clients fill out the survey, all of them would be filled out by the staff member according to how the staff member felt at the moment. It would not have been filled out by the client because our clients can’t process that way, or see the significance of even answering a question that was asked like that. No fault of their own.”¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Anonymous pantry leader, interview, 2021.



Despite appealing to the facilitating organization, the above pantry was instructed to get client feedback surveys in as quickly as possible despite the impossibility of that task. The pantry was then denied further grant funding. This inherent ableism in the reporting requirements excludes already-marginalized populations from receiving funding and support they need.

Standardize Data Collection

Standardizing methods and metrics used in collecting data may help bridge the gaps discussed in earlier sections of this report (*see* “Data Gaps;” “Economic Impacts,” *above*). There were numerous questions evaluators were unable to answer during the course of this project. In the future, certain types of formal data collection efforts would be better undertaken in a more comprehensive manner by the grant administrator or the Colorado Food Pantry Network, *i.e.* collecting data on:

- How many clients were served by each pantry
- How many total clients were served across the state
- More thorough information on client demographics
- How many food pantries are in Colorado, which pantries are members of the Colorado Food Pantry Network, and their reasoning for joining the network or not
- Total pounds of Colorado Proud food purchased, broken down by type
- Total dollars spent on Colorado Proud food, broken down by type

Technical Assistance

Suggested Improvements

- Allocate at least 5% of FPAG funding for technical assistance such as Regional Food Coordinators
- Facilitate outreach efforts to increase coordination between pantry leaders and Colorado producers, such as:
 - Hosting regular webinars for all those receiving funding about how and where to spend the funds in a manner that benefits the local economy
 - Creating a peer exchange portal similar to that of the [Colorado Resiliency Office](#) to encourage pantry-to-pantry, pantry-to-producer, and producer-to-producer communications
 - Creating a unified database of Colorado producers with preferred contact information, product selection, and seasonal availability

What is Technical Assistance?

“Technical assistance can involve explaining what the Food Pantry Assistance Grant is, and helping pantries out when they’re going through the application process and have questions. It’s educating them about seasonality and what they need to do to plan for that. And it’s matching them up with farmers and helping them overcome any obstacles that they have in that purchasing.”

- Gwen Cameron, Hunger Free Colorado Regional Food Coordinator



For the purposes of this report, “technical assistance” refers to resources, training, and support provided to FPAG participants, and typically manifests as an individual or organization able to connect food pantries to producers in some way. Figure 3 displays the locations and proximities of the individuals and organizations providing technical assistance across the state: the Hunger Free Colorado Regional Food Coordinators (RFCs), food banks, aggregators and distributors,¹²⁵ and food hubs. The distribution of the heat map shows that some areas of the state have a higher density of technical assistance resources, indicating more access to support with implementation of the FPAG.

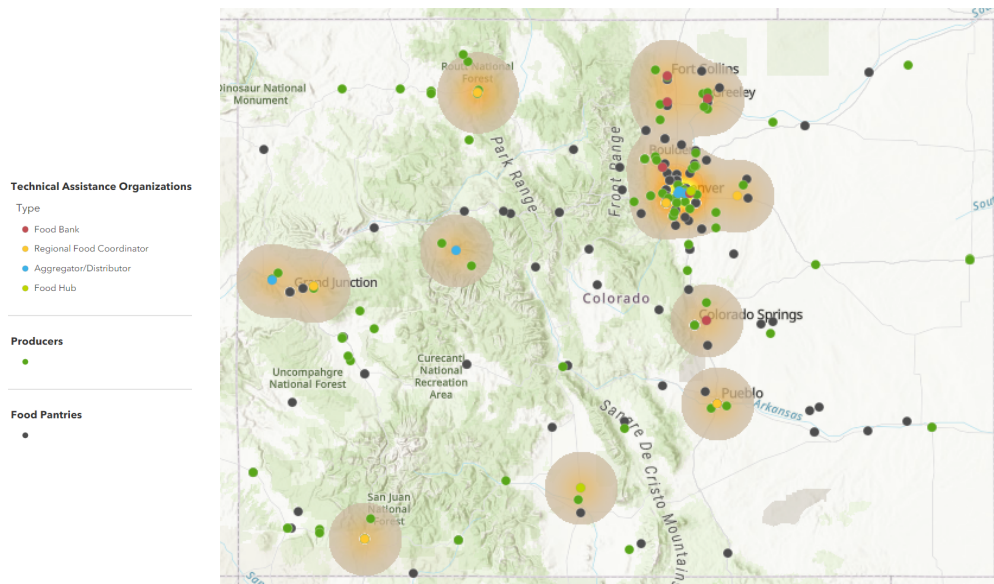


Figure 3. FPAG Technical Assistance. The shaded areas above correlate with the locations of the Regional Food Coordinators and other technical assistance organizations across the state. This map only includes organizations mentioned in surveys and interviews. It is highly likely there are numerous other groups offering technical assistance in various ways not represented here. This is a screenshot from the evaluation StoryMap, which is hyperlinked in Appendix A.

Expanding technical assistance for pantries and producers is a key opportunity for improving the FPAG. A theme that emerged during surveys and interviews with producers and pantry leaders was the lack of resources to establish and maintain relationships with each other. Both pantry employees and producers are incredibly busy and often did not have adequate time to dedicate to reaching out in an effort to spend or receive FPAG funding. The pantry leaders surveyed who did have experience working with the RFCs (24%) expressed that it was a positive experience and helpful in making connections with local Colorado producers. For example, Helen Sedlar of Mountain Family Center recalls her positive experience working with the Hunger Free Colorado RFCs:

“We’re pretty dialed in for our community. I’ve been in the community for 30 years, and have worked in each of the pockets and know the ranchers fairly well. But when we were needing to supplement that, because again, we’re at 8000 to 9000 feet and [not] a lot grow[s] up here, Hunger Free did absolutely help us. We were able to get canned green chilies. We were able to

¹²⁵ These organizations do the intermediary work that can be challenging for those in other roles: contacting farmers to see what they have to sell, taking orders from pantries and other institutions, and organizing delivery or pickup.

get jellies and jams from peaches, we were able to order cases of the Palisade peaches. So Hunger Free helped us with those connections.”¹²⁶

However, the majority of food pantries did not have experience with the RFCs (76%), most commonly due to the lack of staff capacity to engage with them. Many FPAG recipients did not have previously established working relationships with Colorado producers and did not know where or how to begin looking for them. But the desire to build and maintain those connections is there. Of those pantry leaders surveyed:

- 74% believe that it is very important to have relationships with local producers and have some already established
- 15% believe that it is very important, but they do not have relationships established
- 7% believe that it is not a priority but do have relationships established
- 4% believe it is not a priority and do not have relationships established (*see* Figure 4)

Do pantries prioritize relationships with local producers?

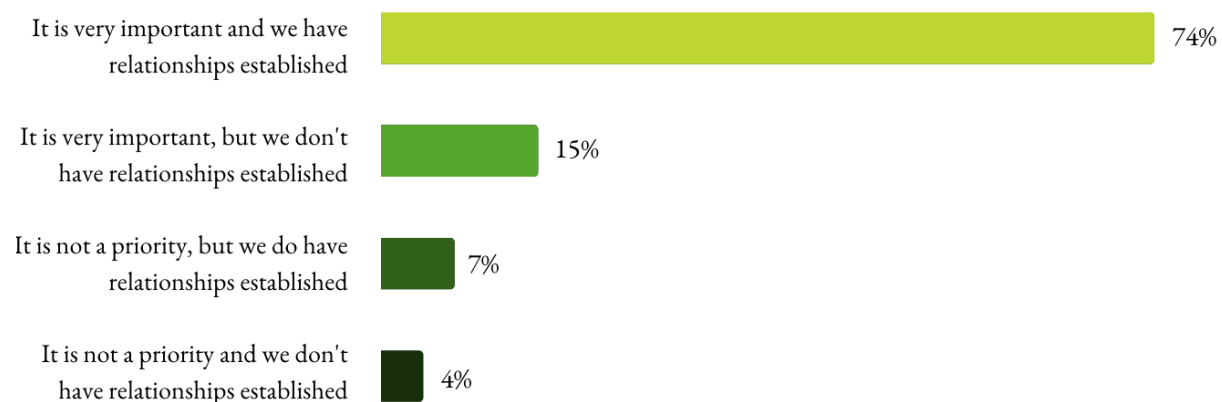


Figure 4. The row chart displays how participating pantries prioritized relationships with local producers; and whether they had relationships established. Data collected from surveys.

Regional Food Coordinators

To better support the ability of food pantries in the state to purchase local food, Hunger Free Colorado hired six Regional Food Coordinators, who are experts in their communities, to provide technical assistance to emergency food access organizations in procuring local food. These Regional Food Coordinators are based in Denver, Bennet, Steamboat Springs, Palisade, Durango, and Pueblo but work between regions and across the state.

¹²⁶ H. Sedlar, interview, 2021.



These part-time positions developed in tandem with the initial cycles of the grant; RFCs act as a bridge between pantries and producers, explain mechanisms of contracting, aggregate and share resources, and more. The six coordinators around the state have extensive agricultural knowledge, expansive networks, and a wealth of experiences within Colorado's food system. From interviews with the RFCs, it is clear the FPAG would benefit from dedicated funding to bring more coordinators on board (RFC salaries are paid through Hunger Free Colorado via a private grant). Currently, some RFCs are responsible for covering regions beyond the capacity of one person. For example, Gwen Cameron is the Regional Food Coordinator, based in Palisade, for the entire Western Slope and acknowledges she is unable to service the region as comprehensively as she would like because:

“The solution is different for every single pantry, right? The barriers that exist for a pantry to purchase local food are different in every single scenario. That's why I think the work that we do as regional coordinators is really critical. I think there should be twice as many of us so that we can cover the whole state.”

Cameron described the gaps in coverage:

“Outside of my region we have holes. We have Rachel down in Four Corners, we have Russell in the North Routt County area, we have Roberto on the front range, and there's a lot of holes when you think about that. There's the southern front range area that's not covered, there's the Arkansas Valley that's not covered, [and] the San Luis Valley that's not covered.”

By increasing the number of RFCs across the state, each would have a smaller region to focus on and more time to connect pantry leaders and producers, building relationships and using FPAG funding to bolster the local agricultural economy. Aside from connecting farmers to food pantries, Roberto Meza explains that the role of the Regional Food Coordinator is “also to understand at a higher level where the disconnects [are], and to insert that perspective of regional producers and agricultural workers in the same scope. Food access is generally focused on where that food is going. So now we're looking at where that food is grown, how it's grown, who delivers it, who aggregates it, and finally, where it gets distributed.” More funding for RFCs or similar types of technical assistance would facilitate that deeper understanding of the food system in each region.

Facilitating Outreach

Outreach is a form of technical assistance that goes beyond simply connecting pantries and producers. When asked how to improve outreach efforts and resources, four main needs emerged from the responses of those surveyed:

- More regular communication between producers, pantries, and grant administrators about grant deadlines and other necessary information
- A chart showing all of the food pantries and banks in the region with contact information
- An independent, multi-vendor marketplace website that would meaningfully connect local produce buyers, including food banks and pantries, with producers
- Continued education and incentives for food pantries to create and sustain relationships with producers



During the 2020-2021 FPAG cycle, grant applicants reported hearing about the FPAG through Hunger Free Colorado, Jewish Family Services, The Salvation Army grant writer, Colorado Health Network, Onward! Foundation, Food Bank of the Rockies, Logan County Dept of Human Services, Weld Food Bank, and the Good Food Collective. When Onward! Foundation facilitated the FPAG, they conducted outreach via the Food Pantry Network email list, the networks of other organizations and foundations, and advertising, primarily Facebook ads.¹²⁷ One suggestion to increase communications between grant administrators, pantries, and producers is to host regular webinars for all community partners interested in or receiving funding from the FPAG. These webinars would serve as informational sessions about program updates and network sessions to share insights, such as strategies for spending funds in a manner that benefits the local economy.

Another option to facilitate outreach would be to create a peer exchange portal, similar to that of the Colorado Resiliency Office,¹²⁸ with all available producer, food bank, and food pantry contact information broken down by region to encourage pantry-to-pantry, pantry-to-producer, and producer-to-producer communications.

Further, those involved in the FPAG would benefit from creation of a central online multi-vendor marketplace where Colorado producers can list their product selection, seasonal availability and preferred ordering/contact methods. This database could be designed similarly to the Good Food Collective's Farmer Database (*see* Figure 5). Jay Hirschfeld of 41North expands on why this would be useful for producers:

“Having gone through this process, we identified a major need for a true, independent, multi-vendor marketplace website that would actually, meaningfully connect local produce buyers, including food banks and pantries, with producers. Something similar to this exists in the form of Community Agriculture Alliance in Steamboat, but it is focused on the [extremely small, niche] retail customer. Because of the inconsistency of customers, lack of wholesale distribution and sales, and lack of significant marketing efforts, working with CAA is less beneficial than, say, a wholesale local distribution website [or] distributor would likely be for a working, commercial farm.”¹²⁹

Educational outreach is pivotal in bridging gaps in understanding the nuances of agriculture and the emergency food system that play into administering the FPAG. See Appendix A for examples of educational materials created by evaluators for various audiences. These informational flyers were designed using information from interviewees about what they would like to know more about in other sectors (*i.e.* food pantry leaders were asked what they wished they knew about the growing season). Sue Salinger from Ekar Farm elaborates on the importance of continued education in outreach efforts:

¹²⁷ N. Crowley, interview, 2021.

¹²⁸ [Peer Exchange — Colorado Resiliency Office \(coresiliency.com\)](https://coresiliency.com)

¹²⁹ J. Hirschfeld, producer survey, 2021.

“On the system level, continued education and incentives for food pantries [is needed] to create and sustain relationships with farms.”¹³⁰

Farmer Database Development

- Using AirTable to establish a database of farmers in SW CO
- 88 farmers (and counting!)
- Tracks types of food, ways to contact, etc.

	Farm Name	Location	Contact Name	Best Mode o...	Website	Products
36	Harvest Moon Produce	Dolores, CO	Emily Adie	Website	https://harvestmoonprod...	Strawberries Sugar Snap Peas
37	Haught Creek Ranch Or...	Dolores, CO	John L. Bussard			Eggs Radishes Snow peas
38	Haycamp Farm and Fruit	Dolores, CO	Nina Williams	Email Call	http://haycampfarm.com/	Arugula Basil Lettuce Spinac
39	High Country Elevator	Dove Creek, CO				
40	Homegrown Farm	Bayfield, CO	Mike Jensen, Emily...	Email Call	http://homegrownbiodyna...	Mixed Vegetables
41	Homestead Orchard Far...	Ignacio, CO		Facebook Email	https://www.facebook.co...	Mixed Vegetables Pumpkin Egg
42	Hoppy Hop Farms	Durango, CO		Call Text Email	https://hoppyhopfarms.c...	Greens Lettuce Microgreens

Figure 5. Good Food Collective’s Farmer Database. Image from the Farms to Food Assistance Food Hub Board Presentation 2021 Update by Olivia Trim and Rachel Landis, slide 17.

Grant Cycle and Growing Season

Suggested Improvements

- Extend the spending deadline to after the peak production season in Colorado.
- Adjust the timeline to a full year cycle (see Figure 6).
- Permit forward contracting to provide an economic boost for producers and flexibility for pantries, and promote robust relationships between pantries and producers.

Timeline

“The FPAG grant cycle has rarely aligned with the growing season in Colorado. The current FPAG program, for example, has a spending deadline of June 30, 2022. I will have no products available to sell to food pantries looking to spend their FPAG dollars, and our farm will not benefit from the program.”

- Anonymous producer

The most prominent feedback received from pantry leaders, producers, Regional Food Coordinators, and other community partners regarded the timing of the grant cycle. Because the FPAG functions on a legislative timeline, pantries have to spend the funds in spring and early summer, before Colorado’s peak agricultural production in the late summer. If pantries are most excited about the ability to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables with FPAG funding, they are missing out on a large portion of

¹³⁰ S. Salinger, producer survey, 2021.

what this grant is meant to accomplish when they have to spend their funding before the growing season even begins.

The majority of pantry leaders interviewed¹³¹ mentioned, unprompted, that the timeline was a challenge, and 40% of pantry leaders interviewed¹³² suggested aligning the timeline of the grant with the growing season. Reasons given for this included:

- It would have given them the ability to purchase greater quantities of locally-grown or Colorado Proud food and fresh food, as opposed to non-perishable items
- There is increased quantity and variety of produce available during peak harvest times

Producers interviewed and surveyed also suggested aligning the grant cycle with the growing season, with the understanding that this alignment would be less impactful for meat producers who can process and freeze product¹³³ than it would for produce growers, who rely on purchases during the growing season. Farm expenses (primarily labor and water) are highest June through October; produce season begins in late June with most produce ready July through October.¹³⁴ “If pantries need to accept produce that they can pay for earlier than that, the grants can’t be used.”¹³⁵ There is some geographic variation in the growing season as well. Higher elevation farms, such as the Farm Collaborative in Summit County or Elkstone Farm in Routt County, need different accommodations for their shorter season, though they utilize canning and grow storage crops to compensate for growing season limitations.

Over half (62%) of the pantry leaders surveyed suggested lengthening the grant cycle, making it a full-year or multi-year grant. When asked about the ideal grant cycle, one respondent said, “Two years. I can be calm in two years.”¹³⁶ Others said, “Give pantries the calendar year at least to purchase and distribute food.”¹³⁷ An extended timeline would:

- Give pantries the ability to provide consistent offerings of fresh food for clients
- Give pantries the ability to connect with and build relationships with local farmers and ranchers
- Provide a foundation for greater financial and functional stability within pantries
- Reduce the amount of time spent applying for grants
- Provide the opportunity to invest in expanded services
- Allow for long-term and big-picture strategic planning
- Reduce stress levels

¹³¹ Eighteen out of 33

¹³² Thirteen out of 33

¹³³ S. Snowden, interview, 2021.

¹³⁴ See the [Colorado Produce Calendar](#) provided by the Colorado Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association.

¹³⁵ Anonymous producer, interview, 2021.

¹³⁶ Anonymous pantry leader, interview, 2021.

¹³⁷ Katie Dix, Executive Director of Gunnison County Food Pantry, interview, 2021; Joy Concepcion, Growing Home, interview, 2021.



A year-long or multi-year grant cycle was also supported by producers, who reported that a longer time period would allow them to plan ahead for purchasing seeds, starts, and amendments, organizing irrigation (this planning usually happens February-March), and hiring seasonal workers (which generally starts in May and continues through October). One producer would ideally like to be notified in November, in order to begin discussions about what to grow for the program the following year. When the program provides a ballpark estimate in March and a final amount by April, this is after the majority of planning for the year has taken place.¹³⁸

The uncertainty of a one-year or shorter grant cycle prevents investment in expanding operations. One of the Regional Food Coordinators described hesitancy among pantries and producers to invest in needed infrastructure without assurances that the grant would continue from year to year:

“They are hesitant to take a chunk of that money and spend it on a cooler if pretty soon, they won’t be getting funding to make local purchases [and] they’ll be right back to a donation-based model or a shelf-stable food model. On the flip side of that, farmers are hesitant to expand their production [without] having any kind of guarantee that a food pantry will come and make the same volume of purchases a year from now, two years from now, and onward.”¹³⁹

Fruit farmer and Regional Food Coordinator Gwen Cameron described her ideal timeline for the FPAG:

“I would have the application period open in October and it would be a minimum three-year spending period for the pantry. Five years would be better. By accepting applications in October, you’re prompting the food pantries to start to think about their needs with enough lead time to get to the following harvest season; you’re setting them up for success in that they have enough time to think about ‘OK, I’m going to get this funding and I’ll have that for next year and I want to make fresh food purchases from local farms, so in order to do that I need to think about who those farmers are going to be,’ or, ‘If I don’t have a cooler, that gives me enough time to set aside [a percentage] for capacity-building and build a cooler so then I can hit the ground running in harvest season.’”¹⁴⁰

Respondents also mentioned wanting more consistency in the grant cycle, *i.e.* making the application deadline, date of funding distribution, and spending deadlines the same each year and having the same reporting requirements each year.

¹³⁸ Ben Armstrong, Production Manager at The Farm Collaborative, interview, 2021.

¹³⁹ G. Cameron, interview, 2021.

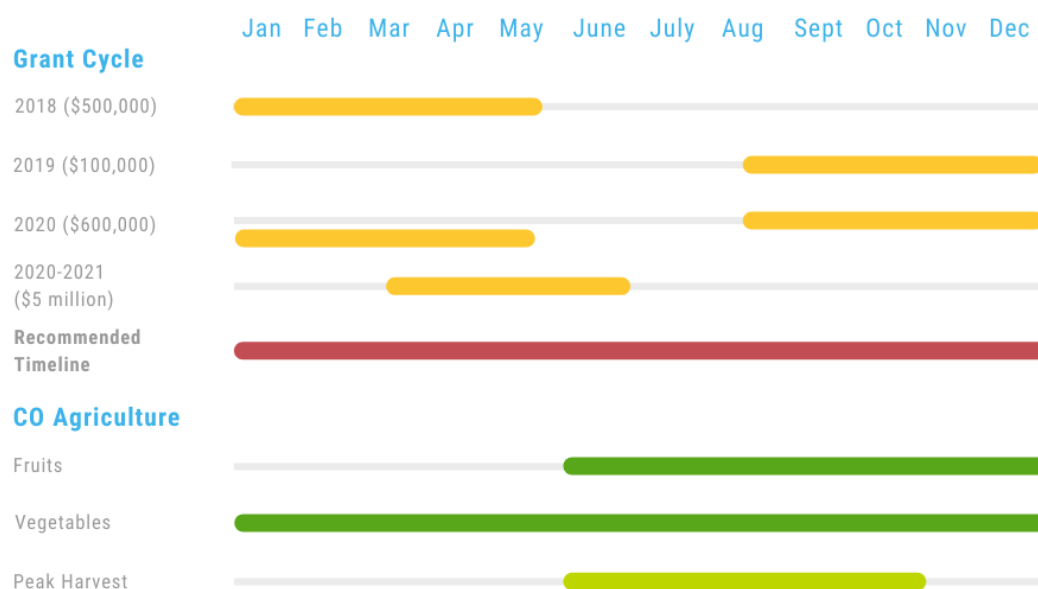
¹⁴⁰ G. Cameron, interview, 2021.



“I want to emphasize the positive benefits of creating sustainable markets that are these public-institutional partnerships, how valuable they are for the producer community, [and] how valuable they are for our members. And ensuring consistency... moving forward is going to be really important. I think one thing that could kill the program is an off-and-on cycle. So as much as we can communicate to lawmakers and program operators that this should become a consistent and successful part of the pipeline for food in Colorado... it's only a win-win.”

- Harrison Topp, Rocky Mountain Farmers Union

Food Pantry Assistance Grant Historic & Recommended Timelines



In order to align with the growing season in Colorado and maximize fresh food in the emergency food system, the ideal FPAG grant cycle is at least one year in length, with multi-year funding desired by many involved.

Figure 6. Historic and recommended timelines of the Food Pantry Assistance Grant. Note that the 2020 grant cycle timeline extended into 2021 and overlapped the 2020-2021 grant cycle.

In contrast, slightly more than a third (38%) of pantries surveyed did not think it would be helpful if the grant cycle was longer. Reasons for this included:

- The pantries did not have difficulty in spending the money in full
- Larger-scale pantries often had purchasing, storage, and distribution systems already in place
- A year-long cycle suits the pantry’s funding strategy
- There was concern that extending the grant cycle could lead to more burdensome reporting requirements



Forward Contracting

“At the very minimum, forward contracting should be a piece of the Food Pantry Assistance Grant. If we can't plan on a five-year schedule, forward contracting will at least allow the food pantry to spend the money in the way that they would like to, rather than on a timeline that's not in sync with the harvest season in Colorado.”

- Gwen Cameron, Fruit Farmer and Regional Food Coordinator

Forward contracting allows pantries to place and pay for orders before the growing season begins and receive product post-harvest. This method of purchasing provides assurances both for the pantries, in that they will have fresh foods throughout the season to provide to clients, and for the producer, in that they have up-front orders to invest in the inputs needed for a successful season. Producers would benefit greatly from the increased security that comes with having cash flow at the beginning of the season when they are not generating revenue and need resources the most. The FPAG has not permitted forward contracting in its previous iterations.

By allowing pantries to order and prepay for foods, forward contracting would mitigate the challenges some have experienced in spending large sums of money on perishable foods like meat and dairy without adequate storage space. One aggregator voiced concerns about pantries stocking up on fresh foods in an attempt to use their remaining grant funds, potentially compromising food safety.¹⁴¹ Forward contracting would allow those pantries with limited space, refrigeration, or distribution capacity to receive a more manageable amount of fresh food over a longer period of time without necessarily having to bear the burden of investing in expanding pricey infrastructure:

“So if I have 50 pounds of lettuce, and the pantry has one refrigerator, I might actually cause them a problem by dropping off 50 pounds of lettuce at once. But from the farmers perspective, ‘It's free, it's a donation, why do you not want it? Here's 50 pounds of lettuce.’ But it can kind of gum up the works. And so by mindfully planning, on the one hand a purchase is made; it's a financial transaction so it supports the farm, it supports the local producers that will ultimately be able to yield food sovereignty by producing for local consumption. At the end of the day, the purchase model is more sustainable. And you can also afford the opportunity to plan so that the food pantry or meal producer, whatever it is, can more efficiently serve the clients.”¹⁴²

Local Purchasing Mandate

Suggested Improvements

- For the next two grant cycles, require 50% of the grant funding be used to purchase Colorado-produced dairy, meat, and produce. For the three following cycles, mandate 100% of the grant funding be used on Colorado-produced dairy, meat, and produce. Allow for the local

¹⁴¹ K. Davis, interview, 2021.

¹⁴² R. Goodman, interview, 2021.



purchasing mandate to be waived for pantries with exceptional barriers to local purchasing and during emergency situations similar to COVID-19.

- When reinstating the local mandate, expand the definition of “local” to include the following categories: Colorado Proud-certified products; dairy, meat, or produce grown, raised, or produced within the borders of Colorado; dairy, meat, or produce grown, raised, or produced on any Tribal lands located fully or partially within the borders of Colorado (*see also* “Centering Equity,” *below*).

There were varied opinions regarding the local mandate included in the first three rounds of the grant. In general, producers, Regional Food Coordinators, and community partners supported it, while pantry leaders’ opinions were mixed; of those interviewed, six specifically mentioned supporting the local mandate, three were against it (mainly in order to provide more purchasing flexibility), and nine said that they prioritized purchasing local food regardless of the presence or absence of the local mandate. Food bank leaders interviewed also prioritized buying local regardless of the FPAG local mandate because it makes sense financially and environmentally, but also mentioned that buying local can be impractical considering the large scale of their purchasing and the need for variety throughout the year.

Considering the original purpose of the grant and recent recommendations from Hunger Free Colorado, one suggestion for improvement is to phase local purchasing back into the FPAG starting during the 2022-2023 grant cycle by requiring that 50% of the food purchased with grant funding be Colorado-produced for two funding cycles. This could be accomplished by awarding half the total grant funding to organizations which will purchase 100% locally, or by requiring each organization to spend a percentage of the funding received on locally-produced food. Organizations funded by the grant that are not yet purchasing local foods should receive information about the phase-in of the local requirement, its purpose, and ways to fulfill it. Two years would provide ample time for organizations without current connections wishing to receive grant funding to find local producers to purchase from in the subsequent cycles. The next three grant cycles mandating 100% local purchasing would ensure that the total grant funding would be circulated directly back into the Colorado agricultural economy, supporting local producers and providing more fresh, nutritionally-dense food to the communities served.

Flexibility should be built into the FPAG to allow removal or waiver of the local purchasing requirement for pantries with exceptional barriers to purchasing local, like those with geographic limitations at high altitudes, and in emergency situations similar to COVID-19. However, even under such circumstances, the FPAG should prioritize, encourage, and incentivize local food purchasing, for example via additional points on the application or additional funding for pantries participating in local purchasing.



Benefits of Local Procurement

Integration of local food into the emergency food system is part of a “triple-win” strategy that, in urban contexts, has been shown to: (1) Improve access to healthy, affordable food, and at the same time; (2) Support economic and workforce development in low-income communities; and (3) Strengthen local and sustainable food systems.¹⁴³ Such “win-win-win” initiatives support local and sustainable food production while working to eliminate health disparities and empower and improve the lives of community residents.¹⁴⁴

The majority of both food pantry leaders and clients stated that local food was important to them. Seventy-five percent of clients surveyed believe that it is either *extremely important* or *very important* that food pantries provide local items (see Figure 7). Of those surveyed, 48% of pantry leaders believe that it is *extremely important* to procure food from local producers; 33% believe that it is *very important*; 19% believe that it is *somewhat important* (see Figure 8). Pantry leaders reported that purchasing locally was important for the following reasons:

- Benefiting the local economy, agriculture, and community by creating jobs and supporting neighbors’ businesses
- Reducing environmental impact
- Clients want better quality, fresher, more local foods
- Creating important partnerships with local producers, especially in the pandemic
- Forming networks that allow the community to be more aware of what resources are available at the pantry
- Supporting more sustainable and equitable food systems

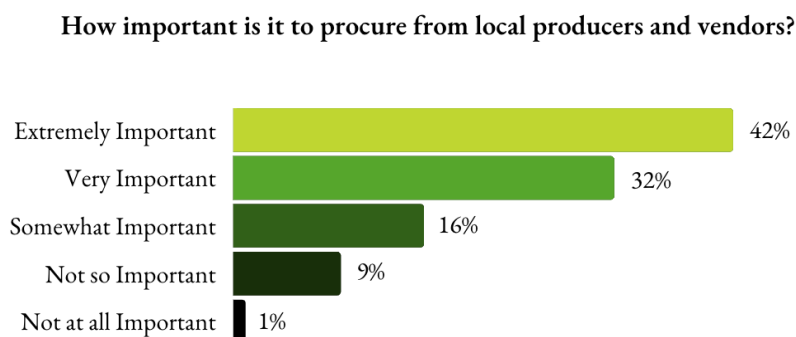


Figure 7. The row chart displays how important it is to clients for pantries to offer food produced by local producers and vendors. Data collected from surveys.

¹⁴³ Health Care Without Harm (2018). [Community Benefit and Healthy Food: A National Assessment](#). 100 pp.

¹⁴⁴ Health Care Without Harm, 2018.

How important is it to procure from local producers and vendors?

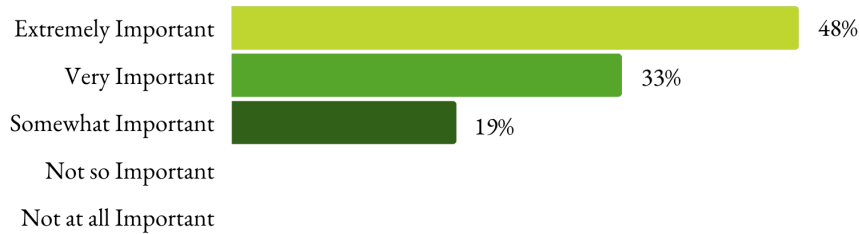


Figure 8. The row chart displays how important it is for pantries to procure food from local producers and vendors. Data collected from surveys.

In general, producers, Regional Food Coordinators, and community partners support the local mandate. The consensus among Regional Food Coordinators was that they would like to see the mandate reinstated, as it makes more of a meaningful and sustainable impact when spending is targeted on the local and regional food system. A member of Rocky Mountain Farmers Union expressed strong support for the local mandate: “We’re fully in support of not only creating better, healthier options for people who suffer from food insecurity, but also creating better, healthier options for producers [who] are trying to make a living.”¹⁴⁵ Other respondents thought that mandating local purchasing would be more beneficial to agriculture than simply making it an option.

Though the grant spurred many organizations to reach out to local producers for the first time, many pantries already have an ethical commitment to or preference for buying local. For some pantries, the FPAG allowed them to do so for the first time or at greater volumes. Others such as Pueblo Cooperative Care had a commitment to local purchasing that the FPAG allowed them to put into practice for the first time; before FPAG, the cost of doing so was prohibitive.¹⁴⁶

Barriers to Local Procurement

“My limited dollars that I’m getting from these grants needs to feed everybody that’s driving through my parking lot... I have a really difficult time blending those two challenges of high volume/low price and low volume/high price in a systemic way. Do I pay higher prices? Or do I feed more people?”

- Anonymous pantry leader

The biggest barrier for food pantries to purchasing locally is that in general, each dollar spent purchases less food. Pantries that prioritized maximizing efficiency with limited monetary resources struggled with paying the same or higher prices for a smaller volume of food than they could have purchased had they been able to spend the money unrestricted. For example, a Denver pantry that used the funding to purchase meat said, “If I can buy a non-Colorado Proud product, I can get six or seven times the food

¹⁴⁵ H. Topp, interview, 2021.

¹⁴⁶ C. Higbee, interview, 2021.

for the same money. I understand wanting to support Colorado farmers, I get it. But it's just not cheap.”¹⁴⁷ Pantries also seek to provide variety to their clients, and “there are certain items that our state just doesn't produce.”¹⁴⁸ For example, one organization “had to use national vendors for our shelf stable stuff, because we simply don't have the product mix that we need here in Colorado.”¹⁴⁹ One food bank leader expressed concern about flooding the state's supply chain with multiple competing demands for local produce.¹⁵⁰

Of pantry leaders surveyed that did not prioritize local purchasing, reasons included financial limitations and priorities, and the fact that produce is seasonal and can only be grown in certain regions, and pantries would prefer to provide variety. A difficulty some pantries encountered while the local purchasing requirement was in place was lack of capacity or time to connect with local producers directly; this sometimes led to Colorado Proud purchases at retail prices from local commercial vendors like King Soopers, Walmart, Safeway, Target, or Whole Foods. Pantries that reported purchasing Colorado Proud food at retail prices in the Pantry Survey gave reasons including:

- Buying products from local farms was cost-prohibitive
- Local produce was not in season at the time they had to spend the grant money
- Local producers did not have the quantities needed
- Limited staff capacity did not allow for the logistics necessary to purchase directly from local producers

This situation is not ideal, as it neither directly supports local producers or allows pantries to maximize their purchasing power. Technical assistance and timeline adjustment are key to ensuring pantries can maximize their limited funding for local purchases.

According to community partners interviewed, barriers to pantries purchasing local food direct from producers include, but are not limited to:

- Lack of knowledge that direct purchasing is possible
- Lack of staff capacity to coordinate purchases from multiple small producers (*i.e.* delivery logistics)
- Lack of transportation and storage infrastructure such as adequately-sized freezers or refrigerators
- Cost
- Lack of capacity to seek out funding, *i.e.* not having a grant writer on staff¹⁵¹ or lack of capacity for writing grants¹⁵²
- The need for assistance with technology¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ Bob Van Wyck, Metro Ministries, interview, 2021.

¹⁴⁸ T. Crosby, interview, 2021.

¹⁴⁹ M. Marez, interview, 2021.

¹⁵⁰ K. da Silva, interview, 2021.

¹⁵¹ G. Cameron, interview, 2021.

¹⁵² M. Cochran, interview, 2021; R. Goodman, interview, 2021.

¹⁵³ B. Woodrum, interview, 2021.



- Difficulty finding and contacting local producers that had needed products available
- The need for an online portal through which to access shared resources in a centralized location¹⁵⁴
- The Colorado Proud website was difficult to navigate. Having a user-friendly database of Colorado producers (potentially with a message board) would make pantry leader's lives easier¹⁵⁵

The relaxation of the local purchasing requirement in 2020 may have allowed pantries to participate that had not before (*i.e.* Brown Bag Ministries), but that question was not specifically asked of all interviewees. The consensus from surveyed pantry leaders about the removal of the local purchasing requirement was that it made it easier to make purchases and provided more options and flexibility. However, most pantries tried to continue purchasing local food.

Colorado Proud Certification

We recommend expanding the definition of “local” to include the following categories:

- Colorado Proud-certified products
- Dairy, meat, or produce grown, raised, or produced within the borders of Colorado
- Dairy, meat, or produce grown, raised, or produced on any Tribal lands located fully or partially within the borders of Colorado.

Of those surveyed, 56% of pantries answered “yes” to prioritizing purchasing Colorado Proud items; 19% answered “no”; 18% answered “sometimes”; 7% answered “I don’t know” (*see* Figure 9). The FPAG required Colorado Proud certification to indicate that food purchased during the first three cycles of the grant was a “food or agricultural product... grown, raised or processed in Colorado.”¹⁵⁶ For pantries that did not already have connections with producers, the Colorado Proud label and website was a useful starting point, though several reported that the website was difficult to navigate. Pantries that already had relationships with local producers, however, sometimes needed to walk them through the process of becoming Colorado Proud-certified so they could qualify as suppliers through the FPAG. Though the barrier to entry to apply for the Colorado Proud label is low, pantry leaders reported that it added an extra step to an already-complex process.¹⁵⁷ Thus, the definition of “local” should be expanded to include dairy, meat, or produce grown, raised, or produced within the borders of Colorado, even if it is not certified “Colorado Proud.” As long as grant recipients can provide the name and address of the producer they intend to source from,¹⁵⁸ verification should not be prohibitively difficult.

¹⁵⁴ D. Scott, interview, 2021; Greg Pratt, Bienvenidos Food Bank: Northwest Family Assistance Center, interview, 2021; E. West, interview, 2021.

¹⁵⁵ Janice Brown, Pierce United Methodist Church Food Pantry, interview, 2021; J. Yellich, interview, 2021; J. Haynes, interview, 2021; K. Ivan, interview, 2021.

¹⁵⁶ Colorado Proud logo use guidelines, www.coproud.org.

¹⁵⁷ G. Moe-Lobeda, interview, 2021; G. Cameron, interview, 2021.

¹⁵⁸ M. Kalb, interview, 2021.



Do pantries prioritize purchasing Colorado Proud items?

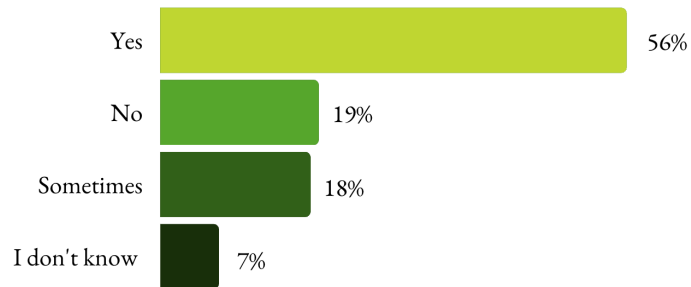


Figure 9. The row chart depicts the distribution of pantries that prioritize purchasing Colorado Proud items with FPAG funding. Data collected from surveys.

Centering Equity

“I think that the Food Pantry Assistance Grant can only address food justice and equity issues if the organizations receiving the funds are committed to food justice and equity. If the organization isn't internally committed to that as a priority, then probably just the money being there isn't going to change that.”

- Monique Marez, Pueblo Food Project

While equity is not an explicit focus of the FPAG, this research indicates it is imperative that the program is implemented with equity in mind in order to reach its full potential. According to our respondents, there are a multitude of ways to better weave equity into the FPAG, including but not limited to:

- Addressing geographical barriers
- Encouraging more inclusive representation in decision-making spaces
- Building a local and regional food system rather than a pantry system
- Prioritizing values: environmental sustainability, fair labor practices, and community health and nutrition
- Addressing the root causes of food insecurity

Addressing Geographical Barriers

The FPAG funding is distributed across the state of Colorado in varying amounts depending on the size and capacity of the pantry applying for the grant. However, some community partners questioned whether the state-based parameter was the best way to define the boundaries of where funding could flow, suggesting that perhaps a region-based distribution system would be more effective. The Farm Collaborative's Eden Vardy explains: “[C]atering opportunities for those more regionalized producers is also going to solve some of the systemic challenges around equity in the program.”



RFC Rachel Landis describes the region she serves as:

“Five counties of southwestern Colorado ringed in by the San Juan mountains, spilling into Arizona and New Mexico and Utah, just based on the way food and people tend to move down here. And so we work across that region, with stakeholders from all aspects of the food system, to jointly build this intact regional, resilient, and just food system.”

There are similar implications and challenges for Native and Indigenous communities. Tribal lands in the southwestern portion of Colorado cross state lines. Expanding the definition of “local” to include “dairy, meat, or produce grown, raised, or produced on any Tribal lands located fully or partially within the borders of Colorado” would remove some of the barriers between Tribal populations and FPAG funding due to the geographical limitations of the grant, while also supporting regional food systems. While some Colorado-based Tribal entities, such as Four Corners Food Collaborative, have received FPAG funding in the past, Landis further explains the problem:

“We have... probably the highest density of Indigenous and Native American residents outside of urban Denver for the state. And that’s because we have the Ute reservation and the southern Ute Indian tribe reservation that are within the five-county boundaries, which gets into a weird thing for us, because they also go across state lines. So when you look at the Food Pantry Assistance Grant, in general, for us, limiting it to a state... poses some real issues for our Tribal members, we serve cross-state populations.”

Rural areas of the state have the potential to benefit from FPAG funding in different ways than the urban areas do. While the metro regions may receive a large portion of grant funds to account for large populations and large numbers of clients served, rural areas face challenges that threaten food security in ways that cities such as Denver do not. Landis said, “It’s almost like it’s a geographic oppression. You don’t have the internet, you don’t have jobs, you don’t have water. You have all these barriers to overcome” that are systemic and not as common in urban regions. Former RFC Russell Goodman describes one such transportation challenge in the northwest region and explains how equitable distribution of FPAG funding to rural areas can help overcome these obstacles and create a more resilient food system:

“Particularly in a valley like we live in, it’s easy to think about...what food sovereignty means, because there’s one way in and one way out on either side, and if either of those ways gets blocked, or if there’s some sort of problem that prevents food from coming in from literally either end of the road, then we’re foodless unless we understand how to support our own community with the food resources we have in our midst. And so by utilizing these funds to create pathways, they become durable pathways.”

Inclusive Representation

The FPAG should not exclude any pantry from applying for and/or receiving grant funding based on their clients’ ability to complete reporting requirements or represent themselves in any capacity. In addition to removing the barriers for differently-abled clients in the reporting requirements (*see*



“Reporting”), the FPAG should encourage pantries to seek direct input from the clients in their community to foster more collaborative decision-making processes. Of those surveyed, 58% of pantries already have clients on boards or involved in some part of the decision-making process. “It’s so important to really have local regional folks be the ones making these decisions,” said Joel McClurg of Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger, “because they understand the local context better than anyone.”¹⁵⁹

As Regional Food Coordinator Rosalind May put it:

“We talk about it being just, more equitable, all these things. But what does that really look like? And how do we get everybody together in a room to brainstorm that? And ensure that the shape of our food system isn’t being dictated by what are still mainly white-led organizations coming from a certain lived experience? How do we make sure that the voices of people that are currently building our food system and seeking land and trying to make this work [are included]?”

Creating a Local and Regional Food System, Not a Pantry System

While the FPAG is a useful tool for helping meet the need of food pantries, the grant should be used in a way that helps strengthen local and regional food systems rather than creating and/or strengthening the food *pantry* system. Pantries are meant to be emergency food providers, not an institutionalized system people must routinely rely on to feed themselves and their families (*see* “Strengthen the Social Safety Net,” *below*). Regarding the FPAG, Regional Food Coordinator Rosalind May addresses these deep-rooted systemic issues:

“Are we trying to make food pantries stronger and better in 30 years, or are we trying to make sure that food pantries aren’t needed anymore? Is what we’re doing creating jobs?”¹⁶⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the precarious nature of Colorado’s food systems. Crisis can be a catalyst for positive change. Kathleen Keesling of Dove Creek Care and Share put it this way:

“During crisis, you can often build the economy. It’s almost like an incubator of need. You go, ‘Well, wait a second, we can actually build a stronger economy, if we just utilize our local people.’ We can give out food, but we also have people that are getting economic stimulus. That makes our community more resilient. I always like to see that kind of connection between food pantries and industry, as opposed to [competition].”¹⁶¹

Regional Food Coordinator Roberto Meza expressed that:

“[The pandemic was] the perfect opportunity to begin innovating a new model that was able to meet the immediate need, but at the same time, taking what we now know of how the system operates and how food systems operate, to begin developing a foundation to improve

¹⁵⁹ J. McClurg, interview, 2021

¹⁶⁰ Creating jobs leads to financial security for employees, increasing the likelihood community members will have the ability to independently purchase food instead of relying on pantry

¹⁶¹ K. Keesling, interview, 2021.



them. And to develop a model that is intentionally built on equity, dignity, and reciprocity with the values of food sovereignty and economic justice at its center.”¹⁶²

FPAG funds have helped pantries afford to purchase values-based foods that are aggregated and distributed by regional food hubs, or directly from producers, rather than continuing to procure food solely from donations. Rebecca Clausen from Grub Hub Fort Lewis College said:

“We had this goal of always wanting to think of our food pantry as part of supporting the regional food system. Rather than just being a draw on [the food system], asking our farmers ‘Hey, can you donate some zucchini, can you donate some carrots,’ and they’re barely making a living, too, in the industrial food system. And so, we were further exploiting [farmers] by asking them to always give us their food for free, which they would do. They were generous and sometimes they just have extra things that [don’t] sell in the markets. But it felt so good to be able to say, ‘We want to pay you a fair market value for your great produce.’”¹⁶³

By allowing food pantries to participate in the farm-to-institution procurement model, FPAG helps lay the groundwork for other farm-to-institution connections, creating relationships and supply chains that have the potential to create a resilient and just food future outside of the emergency food system.

Prioritizing Values

“We need to reprioritize what we value. So instead of going to the lowest price, we need to go to the highest value in terms of commitment to social and environmental responsibility.”

- Roberto Meza, Regional Food Coordinator

The FPAG has the ability to generate a deeper systemic impact if it purposefully allocates funds to values-based organizations. Here, “values-based” refers to organizations that prioritize core values such as equity, diversity, accountability, dignity, and respect in their food purchasing decisions and pantry operations. This could include, for example, pantries with plans to purchase culturally-responsive foods, those with no service restrictions (e.g. income requirements), or those that purchase from small, beginning, or BIPOC producers. CAG’s Kelly Ivan expressed these values:

“We don’t take financial information. We do ask for gender and ethnicity just to know... [that] helps us to be diverse in our food that we’ve purchased.... Especially with the way things are in our society now. Just being inclusive and welcoming, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, you know, we love you all. And we want everyone to be fed and their needs to be met.”¹⁶⁴

The FPAG could potentially achieve this impact through shifting dollars to support values-based procurement by awarding funds to pantries with commitments to purchase from

¹⁶² R. Meza, interview, 2021.

¹⁶³ R. Clausen, interview, 2021.

¹⁶⁴ K. Ivan, interview, 2021.



“producers that are values aligned and have that same goal of food sovereignty and choice being in the hands of the community... And so not only are they a values-aligned partner, but they procure from value-aligned growers, producers who are paying workers a livable wage, who are not perpetuating a lot of the things that those larger Ciscos of the world are doing of ‘Let’s produce as many calories as possible for as few dollars as possible...’ How can we create a more resilient local food shed that’s supported by organizations who are paying workers a living wage, who are served in support of unionizing growers and pickers and transportation networks?”¹⁶⁵

However, this would add a level of complexity to the verification process that is not currently feasible due to limited capacity of pantries, producers, and grant administrators to aggregate their purchasing preferences by values. If a pantry wants to purchase from a producer who pays livable wages and supports unions, there is no central database to filter and find producers by their production practices. Values-based aggregators and distributors can help bridge these gaps (*see* “Support Food Hub Creation and Expansion” *below, for further details*).

Additionally, the prioritization of values-based organizations should not be confused with supporting one group over another, nor does it insinuate that the FPAG should exclude pantries without these specific values. Rather, it highlights a key opportunity and area for future focus for the FPAG to support more equitable food systems. Two anonymous pantry leaders embodied the tension in attempting to support historically marginalized producers while not being exclusionary of others:

- “We want to try to not only support local farmers, but BIPOC and farmers of color, and try to think about how we can use this money to support historically marginalized farmers and producers too.”
- “[W]e need to move in that direction, to help different ethnic groups...get back into farming. And I totally support that 100%. But I think in the process of doing that you don’t need to say that if you’re a white farmer, and your family started farming in this country in the 1700s, that you are not valuable. You don’t need to discount one person to value the other person. We need everybody growing all this food, so we have stuff to eat. And not everybody is savvy or politically sensitive, some of them are just trying to pay for their tractor. And put their kids through school. So I think I’d like to really see respect for the full spectrum of people involved in farming and ranching.”

By funding local and values-based organizations, the FPAG has the potential to be a leverage point for beginning farmers or farmers of color to have access to an additional viable market channel,

“and that’s really important when we discuss equity, and racial equity, and historically excluded, marginalized communities. In Colorado for example, over 98 or 99% of the land is owned by white farmers. Whereas previously, mid-century it was up to 50% owned by black and brown farmers - what happened? Right? And why do we still have food insecurity? So

¹⁶⁵ T. Crosby, interview, 2021.



connecting those historically contextualized view points needs to be part of the Food Pantry Assistance Grant's awareness as well.”¹⁶⁶

Addressing Root Causes of Food Insecurity

An additional goal is to move the FPAG beyond just meeting immediate food needs, and to transition the program into an initiative that actively works to reduce food insecurity and reliance on the emergency food system. Of course, there is no replacement for paying people liveable wages (*see* “Strengthen the Social Safety Net,” *below*), but the majority of pantries surveyed did take part in advocacy for policy aimed at addressing root causes of hunger and poverty; some pantries who did not expressed interest in doing so, but stated that they did not have enough capacity to get as involved as they would like. Policy advocacy is one of many strategies to address the root causes of food insecurity. The following sections outline other strategies by which the FPAG can contribute to a broader vision of a more equitable and sustainable food system. As one community partner put it:

“This is not just on any one individual pantry, this is the whole system around it, including this grant, [but if a food pantry] is not working towards solving the core of the problem, which is poverty, then it's really just a nice pat on the back, and a kick in the ass on the way out.”¹⁶⁷

A Roadmap to the Future of Colorado's Food System

“It's sort of like when you're doing a puzzle, and you're finding the right pieces. We haven't put the puzzle together yet... This all gets down to logistics and coordination, right? Which is that missing puzzle piece.”

- Riley Bright, Executive Director, Harvest of Hope Food Pantry

The implementation of the FPAG and the creation of Regional Food Coordinator positions has been a key laboratory in which to experiment with local food procurement and identify gaps in the system. The implementation of the FPAG during a global pandemic laid bare the urgent need to strengthen food security in Colorado via sustainable local food systems and supply chains. The emergency food system, made up of food pantries and food banks, acts as a key short-term solution to immediate need. But to ensure the sustainability of the emergency food system so that it can meet short-term emergency needs without being overstretched at other times, the state should support robust investment in food infrastructure to support Colorado producers, distributors, and food hubs. The farm-to-institution relationship needs to be strengthened, and should include food pantries and food banks. This will build a more resilient Colorado food system and economy.

¹⁶⁶ R. Meza, interview, 2021.

¹⁶⁷ Anonymous community partner, interview, 2021.



Resilience

“In the long term, stimulus measures to address the current threats to food security should be designed with a view to building resilience of food systems to be better prepared for future pandemics. This means transforming food systems, so that they can be more conducive to the nutritional health of small producers, fishers and pastoralists and sustainable use of natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystems services.”

- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020¹⁶⁸

Resilience, in the context of food systems, is a measure of the ability of the system to remain stable or adapt to a new situation without undergoing catastrophic changes in its basic functioning. Systems are “low resilience” when they are at risk of decreasing functionality and provision of services, for example due to a weakened or attenuated public sector or loss of market structures.¹⁶⁹ Pingali et al. posit that food system resilience can be improved by strengthening diversity; rebuilding local institutions and traditional support networks; reinforcing local knowledge; and building on farmers’ ability to adapt and reorganize.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, Bisoffi et al. suggest that essential components of resilience are diversity (of crops and landscapes), redundancy (reduced dependence on external inputs) and modularity (for example, integration of livestock into crop farming) and that resilience and stability would be enhanced by shorter supply chains, local sourcing, and stronger urban-rural relationships.¹⁷¹ Ollove and Hamdi characterize a resilient food system as one that is rooted in collaboration and network-building.¹⁷² Synthesizing these concepts, a resilient food system is one in which (1) both producers and consumers are members of and supported by the same strong social networks and institutions; (2) crops and landscapes are diverse; (3) producers have autonomy and flexibility to adapt to changing conditions; and (4) supply chains are as short and simple as possible.

The emergency food system can build resilience by shortening supply chains. Relying on corporate donors to provide the bulk of emergency food system contributions can be inefficient and unsustainable in the wake of disruptive activities that may throw the food system into disarray. Manning and Soon emphasize that “structural aspects need to be effectively managed and where possible agility enhanced” within the food system to allow for efficient measurement of potential risks and areas of improvement, ensuring food system resilience.¹⁷³ Relying on local donors, such as grocery stores, farmers, and gardens, can reduce the emergency food system’s vulnerability to economic crises, natural disasters, or other detrimental shocks that may prevent donated food from getting to food bank recipients. Moreover, relying on local donors to supply the emergency food system can assist in building community capacity by generating investment in the local economy. Providing technical

¹⁶⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2020). *Hundred and Twenty-eighth Session of the Programme Committee and Hundred and Eightieth Session of the Finance Committee: Update on COVID-19 and its impact on food security and nutrition, and food systems*. 7 pp.

¹⁶⁹ Pingali, P., Alinovi, L., & Sutton, J. (2005). Food Security in Complex Emergencies: Enhancing Food System Resilience. *Disasters*, 29(s1), S14.

¹⁷⁰ Pingali et al. (2005). S14

¹⁷¹ Bisoffi, S., Ahrné, L., Aschemann-Witzel, J., Baldi, A., Cuhls, K., DeClerck, F., DeClerck, F., Duncan, J., Hansen, H. O., Hudson, R. L., Kohl, J., Ruiz, B., Siebielec, G., Treyer, S., & Brunori, G. (2021). COVID-19 and Sustainable Food Systems: What Should We Learn Before the Next Emergency. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 5.

¹⁷² Ollove, A., & Hamdi, S. (2021). Activating the local food system in emergency food response. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 10(2).

¹⁷³ Manning, L., & Soon, J. M. (2016). Building strategic resilience in the food supply chain. *British Food Journal*, 118(6), 1477–1493.



assistance to emergency food providers and helping them build relationships with local producers can increase client access to “local and fresh foods among the food insecure while also creating new market opportunities.”¹⁷⁴ The need for technical assistance is verified both by our research and by the Colorado Farm & Food Systems Response Team: “[I]n addition to funding, there is a clear need for business technical assistance—including for online sales, food assistance programs and other direct-to-consumer outlets.”¹⁷⁵

COVID-19 revealed what may happen as climate change impacts make themselves felt in the state. The financial impacts of the pandemic on Colorado’s producers via the closure of farmers markets, loss of farm-to-school channels, and closures of universities and restaurants, were significant. Thilmany et al.¹⁷⁶ “estimate a \$3.9 million decline in sales (the most conservative estimate for direct sales losses) leading to a payroll decline of up to \$585,000, and a total loss to the economy of up to \$6.7 million from March to May 2020.” Similar impacts could result from climate change:

“Agriculture in Colorado is vulnerable to some of the predicted impacts of climate change [Figure 10], including less reliable water supplies, increased temperatures, and increased pests. Changes in the frequency and severity of droughts, precipitation, and floods could also pose new challenges for farmers, ranchers and land managers. Overall, the effects of climate change need to be considered in conjunction with other evolving factors that affect agricultural production, such as changes in farming practices and technology and the evolution of various support systems like research, government policy, extension, insurance, and other factors. For example, volatility in local, national and international agricultural markets and the cost of energy, fertilizers, and other inputs tend to be major sources of concern among producers of agricultural goods.”¹⁷⁷

A study of the impacts of local procurement policies in Colorado found that “seasonality and weather in Colorado—along with the risks of future water shortages and drought conditions—must always be considered when assessing the impact of food procurement policies due to the uncontrollable variability that can impact local food availability, price and consistency in Colorado.”¹⁷⁸

The Food Pantry Assistance Grant contributed to our understanding of the resiliency and weaknesses of Colorado agriculture and supply chains. The sector has the capacity to adapt to extreme events, but needs to be strengthened, not just because of COVID-19, but because of looming climate change impacts, “this sector... faces challenges from changes in a key production input, water resources, and a

¹⁷⁴ Thilmany, D., Jablonski, B., & Angelo, B. (2021). *Mitigating Immediate Harmful Impacts of COVID-19 on Colorado Farms and Ranches Selling through Local and Regional Food Markets*. Colorado State University and Colorado Food Systems Advisory Council. 4 pp.

¹⁷⁵ Colorado Farm & Food Systems Response Team (CFFSRT)(2021). *Respond and Rebuild Fund Summary Report*. 17 pp.

¹⁷⁶ Thilmany et al. 2021..

¹⁷⁷ Childress, A. (2015). Agricultural Sector. In Gordon, E., & Ojima, D. (Eds.), *Colorado Climate Change Vulnerability Study* (pp. 75-88). University of Colorado, Boulder, CO and Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO (*internal citations omitted*).

¹⁷⁸ Ward, T. & Angelo, B. (2021). *A 50-State Policy Scan on the Role of State Procurement Policy on Buying Colorado Food*. Colorado Food Systems Advisory Council Issue Brief. 33 pp.



key risk, extreme events. Moreover, the sector faces large uncertainties in how climate change will affect agricultural production and markets elsewhere.”¹⁷⁹

	Climate Impact	Key Vulnerabilities
Field Crops	• Rising temperatures	• Crop yields vulnerable to reductions due to heat stress
	• Increasing frequency and severity of drought	• More frequent losses of crops, forage, and soil
	• Earlier onset of spring; longer growing seasons	• Crops vulnerable to increased weeds and pests due to longer growing season
	• Potentially reduced streamflow	• Production losses due to irrigation shortages
	• Increased CO ₂ levels	• Crops potentially affected by weeds encouraged by CO ₂ fertilization
	• Extreme weather events	• Continued losses of crops, facilities (structures, ditches, equipment)
Fruits and Vegetables	• Earlier spring thaws	• Fruit crops vulnerable to frost damage worsened by early budburst
	• Increasing frequency and severity of drought	• Increased potential for water shortages occurring simultaneously with higher crop water demand
	• Reduction streamflow, especially in late summer	• Reduced production due to limited irrigation supply, increased water prices
Livestock	• More favorable conditions for pathogens	• Cattle vulnerable to lower weight gain and other health problems due to higher temperatures
	• Increasing temperatures	• Loss of weight and animal health in higher temperature; increased costs of facilities
Green Industry	• Extreme weather events	• Damage to facilities and products
	• Potential reduction in streamflow	• Loss of production due to water use restrictions

Figure 10. Potential key vulnerabilities to climate change in Colorado’s agricultural sector.¹⁸⁰

The process of strengthening the sector is already underway. “Recognizing that COVID-19 is not over, there is a continued need to provide resources and additional assistance to our grower community. Further, there is a great opportunity to consider long-term change.”¹⁸¹ Emerging to some degree from the COVID-19 crisis, food systems professionals offered visions of the future that leverage the FPAG to create greater resilience in the Colorado food system.

¹⁷⁹ Klein et al., 2011, *cited in* Childress, 2015.

¹⁸⁰ Childress, 2015.

¹⁸¹ CFFSRT, 2021.



Visions for the Future

“Let's continue to leverage this. Let's make the program focus on sustainability, long-term change for these organizations, transforming local communities and economies by empowering farmers and creating these relationships. Then let's expand out into how this program can better serve people with disparate needs.

And then let's talk about poverty itself.”

- Joel McClurg, Policy & Communication Manager, Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger

Many interviewees expressed a desire to see the FPAG leveraged to create longer-term systemic changes in the Colorado food system.¹⁸² Roberto Meza articulated a vision that phased out emergency food: “I truly believe if we act on our values, and honor the the workers in our communities and provide economic opportunities, everybody's economic condition will improve to the point that perhaps someday, we won't need food pantries, and someday people will not think twice about purchasing locally because now they're financially capable of doing so.” Amy Nelms of Nourish Colorado stated, “Our goal is to rebalance the food system... to make sure that our state and federal funding is going into local food systems and local food system resiliency.” These types of sentiments reveal a desire for long-term change.

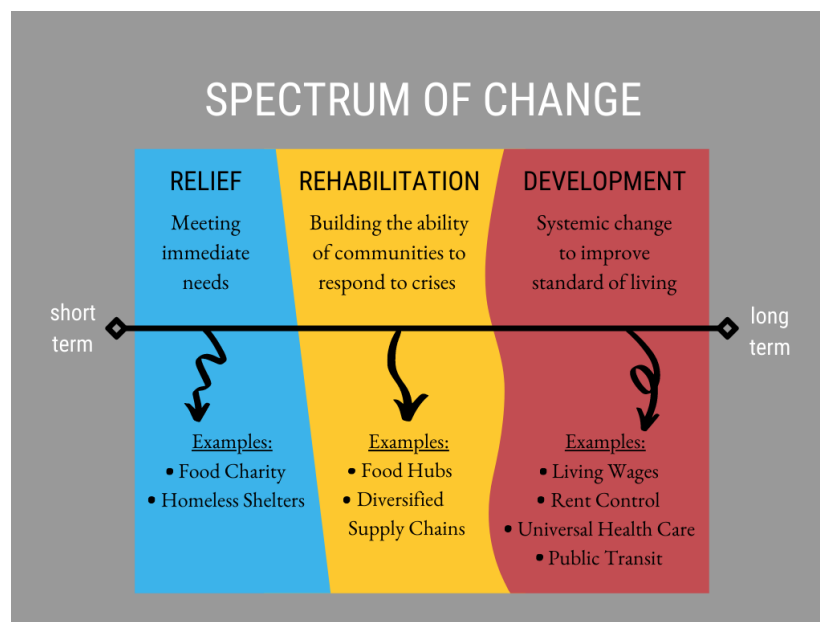


Figure 11. The spectrum of change.¹⁸³

Interventions in food insecurity can be organized in a spectrum from relief (meeting immediate needs, often after an emergency or disaster) to rehabilitation (building the ability of communities to respond

¹⁸² Amy Nelms, Senior Program & Policy Manager of Healthy Food Incentives at Nourish Colorado, interview, 2021; R. Meza, interview, 2021; M. Jacobson, interview, 2021; M. Kalb, interview, 2021; Joel McClurg, Policy & Communication Manager of the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger, interview, 2021.

¹⁸³ Adapted from Fisher, 2017.

to crises) to development (bettering the standard of living)¹⁸⁴ (see Figure 11). All these interventions are necessary under certain circumstances and operate over different timescales: relief for months, rehabilitation for years, and development for decades.¹⁸⁵ However, problems arise when relief interventions, intended for the short-term, are sustained long-term in lieu of rehabilitation or development: “When we respond to chronic need as though it were a crisis, we can predict toxic results: dependency, deception and disempowerment.”¹⁸⁶ Food pantries and food banks, for example, were meant to be temporary when they were developed in response to the recession in the 1980s.¹⁸⁷ Pushing back on the institutionalization of the emergency food system, many food systems professionals are calling for a sustainable local and regional food system, not a food pantry system.¹⁸⁸

The Food Pantry Assistance Grant and/or other state-funded programs could contribute not only to relief, but to rehabilitation and development, through:

- Education about Colorado geography and agriculture¹⁸⁹
 - Producers and community partners mentioned a desire to see grant reviewers, consumers, and legislators gain a deeper understanding of Colorado geography and agriculture.
 - “I think the administrators of the grant need to have farmers at the table to help carry through the parameters and to help ensure the success of the grant.... there needs to be alignment and conversation between the local agricultural community, and the administrators of the grant.”¹⁹⁰
 - “[The farms] that really are feeding most Coloradans are the large commercial farms, let’s be honest. And so I just really want to see consumers supporting that and understanding more about [agriculture].”¹⁹¹
- Funding workforce development and incubating new agricultural businesses¹⁹²
- Funding infrastructure and distribution systems that can be used for farm-to-institution connections beyond the emergency food system¹⁹³
- Funding values-aligned farmers, food hubs, cooperatives, and distributors focused on:
 - Environmental sustainability and stewardship
 - Fair labor practices
 - Animal welfare
 - Community health and nutrition
 - Food sovereignty and choice

¹⁸⁴ Sandberg, *summarized in* Fisher, 2017.

¹⁸⁵ Fisher, 2017.

¹⁸⁶ Lupton, *quoted in* Fisher, 2017, p. 77

¹⁸⁷ Poppendieck, 1999; Fisher, 2017; R. May, interview, 2021.

¹⁸⁸ R. Meza, interview, 2021; R. May, interview, 2021; T. Crosby, interview, 2021; A. Nelms, interview, 2021.

¹⁸⁹ Meredith Rose, Community Agriculture Alliance, interview, 2021; R. Meza, interview, 2021; J. McClurg, interview, 2021; M. Jacobson, interview, 2021; A. Wheeland, interview, 2021; Barbara Moore, JeffCo Eats, interview, 2021.

¹⁹⁰ R. Meza, interview, 2021.

¹⁹¹ Marilyn Bay Drake, Colorado Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association, interview, 2021.

¹⁹² R. Meza, interview, 2021; R. May, interview, 2021; M. Jacobson, interview, 2021.

¹⁹³ A. Nelms, interview, 2021; M. Jacobson, interview, 2021; K. Dix, interview, 2021.



- Equity for BIPOC producers¹⁹⁴
- Improving food rescue efficiency¹⁹⁵
- Creating or strengthening regional coalitions for emergency food providers to share resources¹⁹⁶
- Gaining more media attention for the work and impacts of the emergency food system¹⁹⁷

Invest in Infrastructure

“To really make the Food Pantry Assistance Grant a success, we need to understand the role that infrastructure plays in that—as aggregation, distribution, cold storage, trucks, and drivers and capacity—because otherwise, we’re leaving it up to the food pantries and the producers to carry that burden.”

- Roberto Meza, Regional Food Coordinator and founder, Emerald Gardens

When attempting to supply more perishable foods to their clients by building relationships with local farmers, store managers, and community gardens, food banks and food pantries often run into barriers such as limited storage capacity and lack of refrigeration appliances which limit their ability to increase their supply of perishable foods.¹⁹⁸ Many interviewees recommended that a higher percentage of the FPAG funding be allocated to infrastructure, as lack of storage and distribution capacity was often the largest barrier to purchasing fresh food.¹⁹⁹

Infrastructure improvements needed by pantries that the FPAG assisted with or could assist with in future include:

- Trucks and transportation capacity
- Development of mobile food pantries²⁰⁰
- Freezer and cooler capacity²⁰¹
- Bulk bins and shelving²⁰²
- Architectural improvements to buildings (both structural and space-saving)²⁰³

Building infrastructure is relevant beyond the confines of the emergency food system, and its benefits can expand across the food system as a whole. By creating new, shorter supply chains and building new relationships between food pantries and farmers, “we can understand, ‘What are the kinds of infrastructure needs that we’re learning about ... that are also relevant for [farm to school, farm to

¹⁹⁴ R. Meza, interview, 2021; R. May, interview, 2021; M. Kalb, interview, 2021; T. Crosby, interview, 2021; E. Foster West, interview, 2021.

¹⁹⁵ B. Moore, interview, 2021.

¹⁹⁶ D. Scott, interview, 2021; B. Woodrum, interview, 2021; E. Foster West, interview, 2021.

¹⁹⁷ Roxanne Eflin, Senior Manager of Grants and Innovation at Silver Key, interview, 2021; Genevieve Vialpando, Food Pantry Program Supervisor at Silver Key, interview, 2021.

¹⁹⁸ Barone, A., Krummel, D. A., & Lee, S.-Y. (2020). Availability of Food Options and Nutrition Education in Local Food Pantries. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 52(5), 492–502.

¹⁹⁹ B. Van Wyck, interview, 2021; A. Nelms, interview, 2021; E. Rorke, interview, 2021; M. Kalb, interview, 2021.

²⁰⁰ H. Sedlar, interview, 2021; J. Dougherty, interview, 2021; B. Woodrum, interview, 2021.

²⁰¹ G. Vialpando and R. Eflin, interview, 2021.

²⁰² Sue Fegelein, Executive Director at Lift Up of Routt County, interview, 2021.

²⁰³ G. Vialpando and R. Eflin, interview, 2021; Brandi Adakai, Rocky Mountain SER, interview, 2021.



hospital, whatever kinds of institutions that exist... and broader strengthening of local food systems]?”²⁰⁴

Support Food Hub Creation and Expansion

“I think that aggregation and consolidation for delivery, storage, and distribution is an important next step. So the notion of a food hub is going to be a critical construct as we move forward.”

- Russell Goodman, Former Regional Food Coordinator

Pantries that were able to work with a food hub or a distributor (*i.e.* Skips Farm-to-Market, East Denver Food Hub, Community Agriculture Alliance, Good Food Collective) reported that having someone to tackle logistics made a positive difference in their ability to purchase local food, even describing it as “transformative.”²⁰⁵ Several people stated that a food hub was one of the biggest needs of their community. For example, one of the Pueblo area’s biggest needs is “a food hub with a commissary kitchen and centralized distribution for the region,”²⁰⁶ and the Community Agriculture Alliance mentioned the need for a food hub in the Yampa Valley area, which they are working on creating in Steamboat.²⁰⁷ One producer suggested using existing cooperatives to aggregate and distribute, as smaller producers can’t always produce enough by themselves to meet demand.²⁰⁸

One pantry leader mentioned that if the grant was able to provide consistent incentives to produce providers to purchase locally, that initiative would have a positive impact on the local food system.²⁰⁹ Similarly, a food hub employee stated that their food hub was “competing with Cisco and Aramark” as a result of the removal of the local procurement requirement from the FPAG, “sucking the money out of the local economy.”²¹⁰ If, in contrast, large produce providers had more incentive to procure locally, it could be exceptionally transformative for Colorado producers.

Additionally, when compared with the business practices of farmers’ markets and CSAs, USDA data shows food hubs handled the economic recession of 2008 much better, and “the five-year survival rate for [food] hubs since 2005 is 88%, which is significantly higher than the survival rate for all types of new businesses, at 53%.”²¹¹

Meat Processing and Value-Added Products

Several interviewees mentioned increasing the capacity to process value-added products as an important gap that needs to be addressed in their communities.²¹² Some communities are taking steps to address this need with support from the FPAG. For example, Rocky Mountain SER has plans to

²⁰⁴ M. Jacobson, interview, 2021.

²⁰⁵ T. Crosby, interview, 2021.

²⁰⁶ M. Cochran, interview, 2021.

²⁰⁷ M. Rose, interview, 2021.

²⁰⁸ Blake Knoll, Pinyon Crest Farms, interview, 2021.

²⁰⁹ G. Pratt, interview, 2021.

²¹⁰ K. Ardoin, interview, 2021.

²¹¹ Matson, J., Sullins, M., & Cook, C. (2013). [*The Role of Food Hubs in Local Food Marketing*](#). USDA Rural Development Service Report 73. 56 pp.

²¹² M. Bay Drake, interview, 2021; M. Cochran, interview, 2021.



open a brick and mortar pantry, which they intend to use FPAG funding to stock with fresh produce, meat, and dairy. This pantry may also become a hub for processing and cottage industry.²¹³

USDA-certified meat processing was another gap identified by community partners that needs to be addressed in some areas of the state. USDA certification requirements prevented at least one pantry from being able to procure local meat within the time constraints of the grant. This limitation occurred because “the USDA-certified processing plants were all booked out, sometimes up to a year in advance.”²¹⁴ Another pantry mentioned not having a USDA facility in proximity that would allow them to accept local meat donations.²¹⁵

Invest in People

Emergency Food System Employees

“Food banks can move all the healthy food in the world, but if pantries don't have the facilities, staff, and equipment to accept it, what's the point? So we're focusing a lot on network capacity. And by capacity, I mean equipment, buildings, trucks, reserves, but also staff. Because a pantry with paid staff obviously has a higher capacity than one that's volunteer-only.”

- Effie Rorke, Senior Director of Public Policy, Feeding Colorado

Multiple interviewees mentioned wanting more flexibility for funding worker salaries, which would enable them to distribute more food.²¹⁶ The pandemic revealed the myriad weaknesses of using primarily volunteer labor to supply emergency food. Many food bank and food pantry volunteers are elderly and/or retired, and most were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Russel Goodman, for example, said, “In a lot of food banks, most of the volunteers are seniors. So they were in the highest risk groups, they were the first ones to essentially not be allowed to participate in the process anymore, and so that meant that a much-contracted staff was working with a new model in which they had to prepare boxes for distribution.” The loss of volunteers put additional strain on already overstretched staff and systems.²¹⁷

In addition to the logistical flaws revealed by the pandemic, the use of volunteer labor has numerous structural flaws. As Kathryn Ardoin of East Denver Food Hub put it, “Volunteer labor is unsustainable, it is insufficient, it is exploitative, it also often perpetuates these white savior dynamics, which is so harmful, especially to folks who are coming here because they need food... So you need to be paying people and paying people fairly and paying people from the community.”²¹⁸ Allowing the FPAG to fund salaries would create job opportunities and a reliable labor force for the emergency food system.

²¹³ B. Adakai, interview, 2021.

²¹⁴ Walter O'Toole, Emergency Family Assistance Association, interview, 2021.

²¹⁵ Kathleen Keesling, Executive Director of Dove Creek Care and Share Food Pantry, interview, 2021.

²¹⁶ For example, B. Van Wyck, interview, 2021.

²¹⁷ M. Bay Drake, interview, 2021; Linda Carroll, North Springs Food Pantry at the Sanctuary Church, interview, 2021.

²¹⁸ K. Ardoin, interview, 2021. See also Poppendieck, 1998, and Fisher 2017 for further discussion



The Next Generation of Farmers

“I think capacity to grow farmers is going to be our biggest requirement in order to fill the niche of actually providing the supply. So I think that’s half of the challenge, is just getting farmers in the field.”

- Eden Vardy, the Farm Collaborative

Multiple interviewees brought up the need to grow the number of people farming in Colorado in order to supply sustainable and adequate food for the state.²¹⁹ There is concern that Colorado may not be able to produce enough food within its borders to feed its population; however, as one interviewee pointed out, “How will we know if Colorado agriculture can support the state if we don’t invest in developing it?”²²⁰

Resources interviewees mentioned needing in order to grow the number of farmers in Colorado included:

- Equitable access to land and water²²¹
- Connections to stable markets for farm products²²²
- Help with processing food into value-added goods²²³
- Subsidies for farmworker housing²²⁴
- Education for farmers, particularly beginning farmers, on topics like business management and budgeting²²⁵
- Research and development to help smaller-scale food producers decrease their costs²²⁶

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of racial equity in reaching these goals:

- “I’d like to see farmers and workers compensated equitably. And a part of that [means] more resources directed to BIPOC growers, more resources for our Native communities, Black growers, and Hispanic growers who have been impacted [by] land loss or have not been able to access credit.”²²⁷
- “[I]f we’re looking at real food justice and food sovereignty, we have to get down to the root, which is in fact access to land and access to resources. And when [BIPOC] in our communities don’t have the same access to land and to resources, that’s fundamental, it’s part of the root of everything, because it impacts who can be a vendor at a farmers market, who has access to land and vendors in the first place. It impacts who’s able to make a living from farm production... [A]s long as we’re talking about access, we’re not really there.”²²⁸

²¹⁹ B. Moore, interview, 2021; E. Vardy, interview, 2021; B. Armstrong, interview, 2021; E. Foster West, interview, 2021; K. Keesling, interview, 2021; Sophie Lattes, Elkstone Farm, interview, 2021; R. May, interview, 2021.

²²⁰ K. Ardoin, interview, 2021.

²²¹ E. Foster West, interview, 2021; E. Vardy, interview, 2021.

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ M. Bay Drake, interview, 2021.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ M. Bay Drake, interview, 2021; R. Landis, interview, 2021; S. Lattes, interview, 2021.

²²⁶ E. Vardy, interview, 2021.

²²⁷ E. Foster West, interview, 2021.

²²⁸ R. May, interview, 2021.



Invest in Complimentary Policy

Separate Funding for Food Banks

In contrast to food pantries, which distribute food directly to the clients and communities they serve, food banks are organizations that aggregate and distribute food to food pantries. There are five Feeding America affiliate food banks in Colorado: Care and Share serves the southern 31 counties; Community Food Share Inc. serves Boulder and Broomfield counties; Food Bank for Larimer County serves Larimer County; Weld Food Bank serves Weld County; and Food Bank of the Rockies serves communities across Colorado and Wyoming.

Most food pantries operate on a much smaller scale than food banks. In addition, food banks have exponentially larger food budgets than most food pantries. For example, Food Bank of the Rockies, post-COVID-19, spends almost a million dollars a month on food.²²⁹ Community Food Share, a much smaller food bank, still ordered 22 truckloads of food in seven months in 2020, at a cost of around \$30-40 thousand per truck.²³⁰ For comparison, Community Food Share was awarded \$50,000 through FPAG, which paid for a truck and a half. As Kim da Silva of Community Food Share put it, “I don’t want to say it’s not significant, but it’s a portion of what we do. But for other pantries, it’s huge.”

All the food bank leaders we interviewed expressed concerns about this difference in scale; at its highest-funded, the FPAG provided \$5 million, which would pay for five months of operations at Food Bank of the Rockies. Food banks did not want to compete with smaller organizations over what, to them, was a comparatively small amount of money.

Effie Rorke, Senior Director of Public Policy with Feeding Colorado, put it this way: “What if we apply for too much and then there’s the perception that the big food banks came in and took all the money? And so it’s... an awkward program for us to navigate, to strike the right balance between participating and being supportive, but not taking up too many of the resources. It may or may not be fair for Food Bank of the Rockies to be competing with the First Baptist Church of Lymon. It’s just totally different scales of organizations.”

In addition, food banks have different needs in terms of technical assistance. They have procurement specialists on staff and already focus significant energy and resources on sourcing food, often prioritizing local food for financial, environmental, and logistical reasons.²³¹ When food banks are unable to prioritize local food, it is usually because they need larger quantities than are available locally.²³²

²²⁹ E. Pulling, interview, 2021.

²³⁰ K. da Silva, interview, 2021.

²³¹ E. Rorke, interview, 2021; E. Pulling, interview, 2021.

²³² *Ibid.*



Food banks are often considered a safety net in terms of food security, but it is uncommon for them to be thought of as potential agents for food justice: “As long as food banks are synonymous with distribution of surplus commodities, it is easy to cast their work as antithetical to maximizing justice, democracy, and de-commodification.”²³³ State funding specifically for food banks to purchase local food could change that paradigm, which is something the consortium of food banks in Colorado are already working toward. Advocates of the FPAG should also support separate funding for food banks to purchase Colorado-grown and -produced food, which is currently moving through the legislature: Food banks are asking for \$10 million to purchase Colorado-sourced food, and \$15 million for infrastructure needs.²³⁴ Enacting this legislation would remove the potential conflicts between food banks and food pantries, and would fund food banks at an appropriate scale.

Strengthen the Social Safety Net

“[The pandemic] teaches us again, if we have a stronger social safety net, period, then we have less poverty overall. And we decrease the number of folks that need the help.”

- Ashley Wheeland, Hunger Free Colorado

As the emergency food system has become institutionalized²³⁵ in the United States, so has persistent economic inequality and wage stagnation. The emergency food system grew out of anti-hunger efforts that began in the early 1980s after the collapse of U.S. manufacturing led to massive increases in unemployment that lasted more than a decade, combined with Reagan-era rollbacks in human services. “Emergency” thus refers to a situation emerging from “changes in economic and political policies that moved the country toward austerity and globalization.”²³⁶ The emergency food system has evolved into something far beyond its original temporary intentions. Food charity turned into a tax write-off,²³⁷ or a disposal method for undesirable products or surpluses, for large corporations, further retrenching it. The nature of “hunger” in the U.S. has also changed over time: more part-time workers or workers in low-paying jobs grew to rely on emergency food as a result of stagnant wages, the decline of unions, and the increase in service-sector jobs.²³⁸

The results of the Client Survey support this conclusion. Almost half the respondents to our survey were employed full- or part-time, and the most frequently chosen option that would improve client’s ability to access nutritious and culturally appropriate foods was “higher income” (20%), followed by healthier food options (13%), and housing/rental assistance (11%) (*see* Figure 12). These results echo the results of the 2020 CDHS client survey, which ranked “[b]etter pay (38% of respondents), housing/rental assistance (34% of respondents), a job (29% of respondents), and more work hours

²³³ Vitiello et al., 2015.

²³⁴ E. Rorke, interview, 2021.

²³⁵ “Institutionalization” is the process by which an arrangement, a program, or an activity becomes a relatively stable, predictable part of a society (Poppendieck, 1998).

²³⁶ Fisher, 2017.

²³⁷ “We get so much that’s donated, because [grocery stores get] to write off [this giant donation] on their taxes while they’re donating a lot of—some of it’s great, and a lot of it’s expired and moldy, and punctured, and by the time you get it home, and you figure out what the hell to do with an eggplant you’ve never seen in your life, it’s already moldy. So what is that? That’s just paying somebody else to dispose of your waste so that you get a tax write-off” (K. Ardoin, interview, 2021).

²³⁸ Fisher, 2017.



(28% of respondents)... as the top four needs.”²³⁹ Clients who experienced barriers to visiting a food pantry most often listed transportation (21%) and work (21%), followed by hours of operation (19%) and gas money (17%) (*see* Figure 13). CDHS reported that:

“Over 50 percent of survey respondents (54%) shared that the number one barrier to visiting the food pantry is the hours the pantry is open. Forty-seven percent of clients reported barriers to the days the food pantry is open (32% of clients), and the location being hard to get to (15% of clients). Speaking a language different from pantry staff and volunteers was identified as a barrier for 10 percent of clients, and 9 percent of clients cited stigma as a barrier. The majority of people who reported stigma as a barrier (76%) completed the survey in English.”²⁴⁰

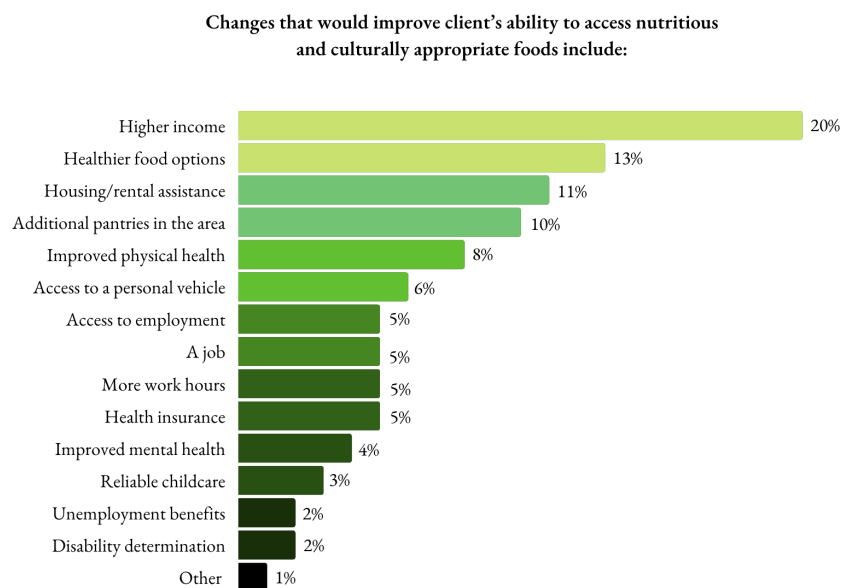


Figure 12. The row chart depicts changes that would improve pantry clients' ability to access nutritiously and culturally responsive foods, as chosen by food pantry clients. Other includes: social security increase and areas to grow their own food. This survey question was created prior to the decision to adopt the term “culturally responsive” in place of “culturally appropriate.” Data collected from surveys.

What factors make it difficult for clients to visit a food pantry?

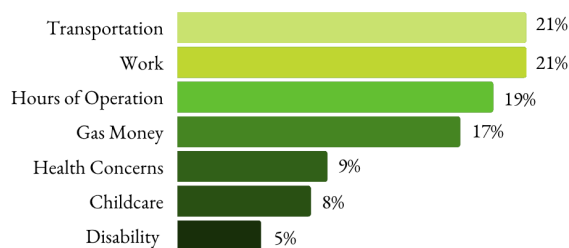


Figure 13. The row chart depicts the barriers and challenges that pantry clients face when visiting a food pantry. Data collected from surveys.

²³⁹ CDHS, 2021.

²⁴⁰ CDHS, 2021.

Interviewees also mentioned that food pantry clients relied on the pantry because of low wages and housing insecurity. For example, Sue Fegelein, Executive Director at Lift Up of Routt County, said of her clients that “we’ve got people who are frontline workers work[ing] two to three jobs, a lot of our clients are in that boat; a lot of people facing the ‘cliff effect,’ where they make too much on paper to qualify for government services, but they really don’t make enough to pay their bills. And so Lift Up [of Routt County] helps them a lot in that regard. We serve folks at 300% or lower of the federal poverty level... because it’s closer to the cost of living here [in Steamboat]... So we’re facing a lot of issues with housing, and we see those folks come through the doors at Lift Up quite a bit.”

Complementary policies to strengthen the social safety net and reduce food insecurity include:

- Liveable wages
 - “I would love to see more policy advocacy around living wages for our communities, that I think food pantries and food banks around the country are now starting to engage in [this type of work] because if we continue to support suppliers that underpay their workers, we’re inadvertently creating more inequities in those communities, as we’re trying to address food security and health equity in other communities.”²⁴¹
 - “[I]f the intention of the Food Pantry Assistance Grant funding is to ensure that communities have the means by which to be nourished and fed, then at the heart of that is not fruits and vegetables, at the heart of that is economic stability for those people.”²⁴²
 - “That person that works on that farm could have been a person coming to your food pantry, because they don’t have a job or they don’t have a job that pays well enough.”²⁴³
- Transportation infrastructure, in particular for rural communities
 - Russel Goodman, formerly the Regional Food Coordinator serving the Northwest region of the state, primarily Routt and Moffatt Counties, mentioned lack of transportation as a barrier to food security, especially when public transport shut down in rural areas because of COVID-19.
- Access to health resources, including mental health
 - “So we have a unique food desert [in Dolores County] where we are 35 miles or 35 minutes in each direction away from a supermarket. We have no mass transportation. And we have no mental health... very little mental health, no hospitals, we just have a clinic, again, 35 miles away.”²⁴⁴
 - “If there’s any positive that came out of COVID-19, it’s that it was recognized that there’s food scarcity, and it’s everywhere. It’s not jurisdiction restricted. It’s not just down in Denver. It’s not just in Golden, it’s up here [in Evergreen, CO] too. And it’s in the mountain communities. It’s everywhere. And we have to do our best that we can to

²⁴¹ R. Meza, interview, 2021.

²⁴² K. Ardoin, interview, 2021.

²⁴³ G. Cameron, interview, 2021.

²⁴⁴ K. Keesling, interview, 2021.



feed people to keep them healthy. Because there again, if you're unhealthy, you'll lose your house.”²⁴⁵

As Janet Poppendieck puts it, “[a] program or a policy that tries only to prevent acute hunger is aiming too low. It is not acceptable to have people in our society too poor to participate and contribute, too poor to provide a decent chance in life for their children, too poor to pursue happiness. We need to aim for the creation of a just and inclusive society that taps everyone’s potential and makes us all better off in the long run, not just a society where no one starves.”²⁴⁶

Food charity provides an important lifeline to people experiencing food insecurity, but also has unintended consequences, including:

- Compartmentalization of issues, leading to a failure to address root causes
- Diverting public resources and attention away from long-term solutions
- Reinforcing the stigma of being reliant on public or private “handouts”
- Dependence on volunteerism and voluntary efforts to solve a structural problem²⁴⁷

Fisher, in his book “Big Hunger,”²⁴⁸ explores some possible solutions such as:

- Federal funding of a more democratic array of producers, retailers, and processors, rather than a continuing focus on commodity programs
- Linking the anti-hunger movement explicitly with the labor movement. For example, supporting minimum wage increases and stronger unions
- Innovation among anti-hunger organizations themselves, with a shift in resources towards addressing root causes of hunger and implementing long-term solutions

Seeds of these structural changes are already germinating in Colorado because of the support the FPAG has given to emergency food providers to directly purchase local food.

Restructure Colorado Tax Law and Adequately Fund State Programs

“There’s always money. Money, money, money, we don’t have enough money. And that’s always how it’s going to be, until we change our tax structure in Colorado.”

- Representative Lisa Cutter

A barrier to the implementation and funding of the FPAG—and multiple other important state-funded social services—that came up several times in interviews was the structure of Colorado tax law, in particular the Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights (TABOR).²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ J. Haynes, interview, 2021.

²⁴⁶ Poppendieck, 1998.

²⁴⁷ Fisher, 2017.

²⁴⁸ Fisher, 2017.

²⁴⁹ L. Cutter, interview, 2021; A. Wheeland, interview, 2021; M. Jacobson, interview, 2021.



TABOR impacts the budget of the State of Colorado by limiting the state to “retain[ing] and spend[ing] an amount based on the prior fiscal year’s actual revenue or limit, whichever was lower, grown by Colorado inflation and population growth and adjusted for any ‘voter-approved revenue changes.’”²⁵⁰ Voter approval is required for tax increases. As long as these constitutional limits remain, the state budget will be constrained when it comes to providing vital services to the people of Colorado.

Conclusion

“When it comes to [the FPAG], I’ll sing its praises any time, any day. I really think it’s a fabulous program. And it’s a program that has broad reach and broad impacts and is something we should all be proud of.”

- Harrison Topp, Rocky Mountain Farmers Union

The results of this evaluation lead to the conclusion that the Food Pantry Assistance Grant:

- Is helping meet the continued need for fresh produce, meat, and dairy
- Is creating new market channels and diversified income streams; and
- With targeted changes, could contribute even more to big-picture visions of resilient regional food systems

The impact of funding the emergency food system while incorporating local procurement is succinctly summarized by Regional Food Coordinator Rosalind May:

“The Food Pantry Assistance Grant is a piece of the puzzle. I think one thing that’s really powerful with it... is that when you bring together people working on local food and food pantries, food pantry managers do absolutely bring a perspective of what it’s like on the ground, in their communities. And that perspective isn’t necessarily front and center for every farmer, or for everyone who’s advocating for local food... Maybe the Food Pantry Assistance Grant is part of a catalyst to ensure that all of these aspects of our food system are front and center.”²⁵¹

This research indicates the FPAG is providing necessary support to food pantries around Colorado to better serve their communities. However, this program alone is not enough to solve food insecurity, and there is a continued, ongoing need for food assistance and equity. The FPAG is providing participating Colorado food producers with a higher level of financial security through diversified sources of income and new market channels for their products. While the program is a success overall, this evaluation generated recommendations to improve it further, and on a larger scale, to continue to build accountability, resiliency, and equity into Colorado’s food system.

²⁵⁰ See [Colorado.gov’s TABOR site](https://colorado.gov/tabor) for more information.

²⁵¹ R. May, interview, 2021.



Appendix A: Educational Materials

[StoryMap: 2021 Evaluation of the Food Pantry Assistance Grant](#)

[FPAG Info Sheet for Food Pantries](#)

[FPAG Fact Sheet for Farmers and Ranchers](#)

[How to Purchase from Local Producers](#)

[Procurement Channels: Pros & Cons](#)

[What Producers Have to Say About FPAG](#)

[Food Hub Guide: Market Channels, How-To, & Tips](#)

[Complete Survey Results](#)