



## Better Tools for Startup Co-ops

BY JACQUELINE HANNAH

**B**igger. Better. Stronger. The Food Co-op Initiative, the only national organization that specializes in supporting the formation of new food cooperatives, is ramping up its work to new levels in 2015 and 2016 to support the third wave of food co-op organizing that continues to roll forward across our nation.

### New tools

Tools that are easy to access and easy to use by startups anywhere, at any time, have been a key piece of FCI's support work since its inception. Building on the base of FCI's robust webinar library—utilized by hundreds of groups considering organizing or actively organizing a new food co-op—over the next year FCI will be launching workbooks filled with information as well as ready-to-use development activity guides and new video tools.

This fall, in its "Capital Campaign Workbook" (formerly known as the "Member Loan Campaign Toolbox"), FCI will be issuing a completely new edition as the first in their workbook series. With sections on owner loan campaigns, preferred shares, and up-to-date information on new tools such as direct offerings, this workbook, authored by CDS Consulting Co-op's Ben Sandel and Leslie Watson, will be a valuable resource to startups and mature food co-ops alike.

For the "FCI Guide to Starting a Food Co-op"—with the body of knowledge about third-wave food co-op organizing now 10 years strong and best practices continuing to evolve—nothing less than a book would capture and share all that is now known about what practices lead to success. Underpinned by the early work by Karen Zimbelman in the Cooperative

Grocer Network guide, "How to Start a Food Co-op," the FCI Guide incorporates the best of this early guide while going much further. FCI Executive Director Stuart Reid is building the book around the powerful framework of the "4 in 3" model of food co-op development [see *CG* #176, Jan.-Feb. 2015], incorporating best practices gleaned from supporting dozens of new food co-ops that have successfully opened as well as lessons learned from failed startups. The book will be available by the end of 2015.

The "Branding for Startups Workbook"—coming in early 2016—emerged from growing demand for support tailored to a world where excellent branding is mandatory for getting your message out and being successful. It's a dynamic guide filled with exercises and worksheets to put the information contained within into practice. CDS Consulting Co-op's Nicole Klimek, the author, will cover everything from how to draft a startup mission statement, to developing a logo, to integrating the startup's brand into the store design. While aimed at startups and their specific needs, this workbook will have much to offer mature food co-ops as well.

FCI Video Series—a dynamic next step forward from FCI's highly utilized webinar series—will be on average 15 minutes in length, focusing on specific aspects of the knowledge needed to launch a successful new food co-op. The FCI video series will continue to grow through 2016 and will cover topics ranging from planning a first ownership campaign to hiring a general manager.

### New partnerships

The Up & Coming Conference for startup food co-ops began as the

brainchild of Debbie Trocha, executive director of the Indiana Cooperative Development Center, and George Huntington, then general manager of Bloomingfoods, to support the growing number of startup food co-ops in their region. In its sixth year, Up & Coming has grown into a nationwide conference with dozens of workshops, drawing startup co-op organizers from Alaska to Maine to learn from experts in food co-op development as well as from their startup peers. FCI, a major presenter at the conference from the start, is stepping into the role of full partner with the Indiana Cooperative Development Center. The 2016 conference will be held March 10–12 in Bloomington, Ind.

Getting more direct support to more startups in more regions is a constant challenge. To address this, FCI has entered into a support agreement with the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA) in the Northeast region to amplify the support available to startups in this region. Through trainings and group support calls for startups, aimed at learning together and developing peer networks, the two organizations will be fine-tuning ways that regional support partnerships can be used to strengthen startups.

### The staff

FCI has recently welcomed two new members to its team, and they bring extensive experience to the work of supporting food co-op startups.

Jacqueline Hannah, FCI's food co-op development specialist, served as the general manager of Common Ground Food Co-op in Urbana, Ill., from fall 2006 through spring 2015. During her time with Common Ground, she led the co-op through two expansions, the founding of their Food For All economic access program, and to its being the fastest-growing retail food co-op in the nation from 2008 to 2013.

Hannah joined the FCI team in March of 2015 so she could fully commit herself to new food co-op development. Prior to her joining the FCI team, she founded the Illinois Food Co-op Startup Day event at Common Ground, presented frequently at the Up & Coming Startup conference, and served as a mentor to several food co-ops in her region. She received the Cooperative Service Award at the 2013 Crossroads Cooperative Summit and the 2014 Illinois Cooperative Council's Outstanding Cooperative Manager Award.

Mary Stennes Wilbourn, FCI's outreach and operations coordinator, joined the FCI team in October of 2014. She had 12 prior years of experience in nonprofit environments with office and operations management, communications and advocacy, writing tutorials and training people on various systems, resource and data management, and supporting volunteers and interns both in-person and remotely. Wilbourn is the first point of contact with new co-op organizers at FCI. She acts as the recruiter who builds excitement for new organizers.

### The future

The calls from communities desiring to start their own food co-ops not only continue, they are coming from new types of communities. In the last few years, many new queries have been coming from communities in low-income areas that want to use the food co-op model to address food access in their communities. To support these startups and their unique needs, FCI is working to build additional staff capacity to focus on studying and addressing the needs of these startup co-ops.

With the ongoing support of FCI's key funders at the Blooming Prairie Foundation, the National Cooperative Bank, National Co+op Grocers, and the USDA, as well as the growing fiscal support from established food co-ops all over the U.S., we can keep this wave swelling for years to come. If the support for startup food co-ops and the work of building powerful tools to guide their growth continues within our community, we could see the largest wave yet in the history of America's food cooperatives. □

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