

Expanding Healthy Food Access at New England Co-ops

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In 2011, the Neighboring Food Co-op Association, Cooperative Fund of New England, and Hunger Free Vermont came together to launch the Healthy Food Access project. We wanted to help food co-ops become more inclusive, particularly in strengthening access to healthy food and membership for people on limited incomes. In the process, we hoped to empower more people to become agents of change in their communities, while challenging assumptions about the role of co-ops in addressing food security.

Much has happened since our last report here. During its first five years HFA has helped over a thousand low-income households access co-ops' healthy food and has worked to ensure that the affiliated needs-based discount program, Food For All, complies with United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulations. We hope to advance the conversation of how co-ops can better serve low-income community members and inspire readers to explore existing HFA resources to help their food co-ops become more accessible to all members of their community.

Food co-ops and food security

Recent years have provided many opportunities to promote co-ops as part of a food security system. These have included First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" initiative, increased funding for healthy food retail development in marginalized communities, and a new wave of food co-op start-ups. However, when we sought partners in the broader healthy food movement, we encountered con-

fusion and resistance and, sometimes, experiences that food co-ops pioneered healthy food access, from the focus on pure food in 1840s Britain movement, we must push ourselves to do all community members through product mix, pricing, market-outreach. Even with the best intentions, this can be an uphill battle since our food co-ops struggle to achieve the scale, convenience, and visibility of conventional grocers while prioritizing other values such as fair compensation for producers and employees. Efforts to address food security can also be obscured by assumptions of "sandals and candles"—white middle-class counter-culturalism. These challenges limit the relevance of co-ops and their ability to reach potential members and shoppers.

In an effort to support the success of our region's food co-ops, HFA has focused on three primary goals:

- 1) To increase access to healthy food and co-op membership among low-income households in New England;
- 2) To support information sharing among food co-ops regarding programs that expand the participation of low-income individuals and

communities; and

- 3) To raise the profile of food co-ops as a solution to the challenge of food security through community empowerment.

With these goals in mind, HFA emphasizes a five-part framework to help co-ops improve healthy food access:

- 1) Collaboration with partner organizations;
- 2) Inclusive marketing and educational opportunities;
- 3) Addressing affordability;
- 4) Flexible membership options; and
- 5) Addressing other barriers such as language, product mix, and transportation.

HFA leverages the relationships, information sharing, and infrastructure of the Neighboring Food Co-op Association, a secondary co-op of food co-ops, to maximize peer networking and resource development (marketing materials, staff trainings, implementation timelines, and evaluation tools) for member food co-ops. This occurs at regional gatherings and conference calls for participating member co-ops.

These efforts build on the programs of food co-ops in our region, including "Co-op Basics" programs that promote more-affordable natural products and Food For All, a needs-based program that offers a discount at the register for members who demonstrate financial need to the co-op or a community partner (e.g., a food pantry). This program was developed in 2008 in Vermont by City Market/Onion River Co-op and Hunger Mountain Co-op. Food For All demonstrates the co-op's commitment to low-income community members by directly addressing one of the biggest issues facing healthy food access: affordability.

"City Market's Food For All program allows us to offer a welcoming shopping environment to customers and members of all income levels," said Allison Weinhagen, City Market's director of community engagement. "This program has helped us break down the perception that co-ops are only for a certain segment of the population and diversified our membership in a way that brings value to the entire organization."

In tandem with community partners helping to promote co-op membership, easily understood marketing materials, education opportunities, and staff trained to help shoppers who are unfamiliar with the co-op, Food For All has helped over a thousand low-income households access healthy food across 11 NFCA food co-ops.

Engaging the USDA

With all of this success, there was still a lingering concern. USDA regulations prohibit treating SNAP and WIC recipients differently than other customers. Since Food For All initiatives often rely on participation in these programs to demonstrate eligibility, some advocates, including one state WIC office, raised concerns about regulatory compliance.

We contacted the USDA's Food and Nutrition Services agency and requested their opinion. The USDA's response was encouraging: Food For All programs, as implemented with the structure document we created, do not violate SNAP or WIC regulations.

