



Seeding Insights and Nourishing Change: a Case for Participatory Evaluation in Place-Based Community Food Systems

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Abstract

In the United States, achieving equitable food security requires innovative system-level solutions that address complex intersecting factors. Food insecurity is intricately connected to poverty and access to food, and has short- and long-term impacts on individual health, quality of life, and healthcare costs. Fostering food security demands innovation: new collaborations, approaches, and fresh measurement models that can address food insecurity at a systems level. Through a sophisticated place-based approach, Full Lives is a complex but promising food security community impact grantmaking strategy that leverages the resources of different partners, organizations, and components of the food supply within a concentrated geographical area. Furthermore, transformation of a community's food system requires a combination of technical knowledge and authentic community engagement in order to effectively yield and measure community change. This case study provides an in-depth look at:

- How grant makers can work in partnership with a diverse set of non-profit organizations in developing solutions;
- Co-creation of a community engaged food security program evaluation characterized by shared measurement of community-level indicators;
- Strengths, challenges and limitations of a community-engaged approach to food security program evaluation.

Keywords Place-based · Community indicators · Participatory evaluation · Community food systems · Food security · Food justice

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Introduction

In 2017, Greater Twin Cities United Way (GTCUW) developed a new community impact strategy, Full Lives, to work with 11 organizations working to address healthy and affordable food access in a neighborhood, North Minneapolis, facing some of the greatest barriers to economic prosperity in the Twin Cities. According to a market scan of North Minneapolis' West Broadway commercial corridor, there is approximately \$24 M demand vs \$17 M supply in the food place industry in North Minneapolis (Cureton 2017), illuminating a need for additional food access opportunities that support food related business, retail and infrastructure development. The Full Lives grant program invested \$1.5 million in grants over 2 years with the goal of strengthening the neighborhood's food system. Fourteen different projects received funding as a place-based investment to enhance and strengthen the food system serving the geographic neighborhood. A unique aspect of this initiative was the participatory approach in both the program design and evaluation, which included the co-creation of a shared measurement system.

The broad diversity of project types required developing a set of shared outcomes and indicators in partnership with the Full Lives grantees. Importantly, the evaluation of Full Lives included individual grantee evaluation capacity-building and coaching to support and ensure that grantees had the capacity to effectively track, analyze, use, and report on key indicators of programmatic impact. The Full Lives grant program helped grantees understand how their efforts contribute to a broader ecosystem of food systems change happening in their neighborhood. The following case article provides an in-depth look at the grant program and evaluation approach and the impact participatory measurement process and outcomes had on the community food system.

Understanding the Food System and Food Insecurity

For decades, much of the movement to address hunger and food insecurity has centered around trying to meet the immediate needs of individuals and families, often through the distribution of food via emergency food programs like food banks, congregate dining, food shelves and other emergency food services. While emergency food programs are a crucial and necessary part of addressing food insecurity, many are often limited in their capacity to do long-term work that addresses the root causes of hunger or determinants of food insecurity (Bazerghi et al. 2016).

Additionally, emergency food solutions only make up part of the many ways in which residents access the food they need within a local food system, such as purchasing items from a local grocery or convenience store, local farmers markets and/or growing one's own food. Local community food systems are dynamic and comprise a complex web of interdependent components. Illustrations such as the Fig. 1 can aid to visualize and distill the complexity and interconnections between different components of a local food system and further illuminate the myriad ways in which residents interact and experience their local community food system.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA 2010) identifies five components of a local food system: land conservation; production; processing; aggregation and distribution; and markets and consumers (U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing



Fig. 1 Food system illustration

Service n.d.). Prior work by the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) defined food systems as “an environment in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution, and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, and social and nutritional health of a particular place” (Hamm and Bellows 2003). They characterized healthy food systems as sustainable, just, and democratic, which are achieved through building community voice and capacity for change. The Minnesota Food Charter (2014) includes the following as main components of a food system: the growing and production of food, the processing, the distribution, the purchasing, the cooking, eating, and the disposal of food. These definitions help to illustrate many ways in which people interact with their local community food system and where there might be needs and opportunities to improve its functioning within a particular geography and/or population. Strengthening local community food systems can help to improve food security, community health and well-being; however, it is important to understand the community context and unique factors for why some geographies and communities experience food insecurity differently.

Many communities across the US struggle with food insecurity and face barriers to fresh and affordable food. In 2018, roughly 11.7% of households were food insecure at least some time during the year, including 4.3% (5.6 million households) that had very low food security (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service 2017). Consistent access to fresh, affordable, healthy food profoundly impacts a person’s overall quality of life and health outcomes. Poor nutrition and food insecurity can have detrimental outcomes on diet-related chronic diseases, quality of life, and increased healthcare costs (Liu et al. 2014). The interplay between factors such as poverty, race, and geography, among other social determinants of health (SDoH), is complex and significantly impacts health (Food Research and Action Center 2017) and well-being. The SDoH model shifts the burden of negative health outcomes away from

the individual and considers the environment and conditions in which an individual is born, lives, works, and plays (Artiga and Hinton 2018). Research on SDoH has shown that health-related behaviors, socioeconomic factors, and environmental factors can account for up to 80–90% of health outcomes (Hood et al. 2016).

A SDoH framework identifies root causes of issues like food insecurity and associated risk factors, and in turn, the appropriate solutions (World Health Organization, Commission on Social Determinants of Health 2019). Individual and household characteristics (such as race, age, etc.) as well as contextual or environmental characteristics comprise a myriad of determinants that impact food insecurity. For example, food insecurity is linked to low household income, but related factors, such as insufficient public benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Access Program (SNAP), exacerbate the issue. Additionally, residing in areas that are both low-income and have low-retail access to full-service grocery amenities further compound the issue.¹ This is particularly challenging for residents of lower income urban neighborhoods where there is easy access to a plethora of unhealthy foods (e.g. fast food or processed food) but few fresh fruits or vegetables. Significant economic and health disparities across geographies are also reflected in disparities among communities' food environments. Zip codes can also be a predictor of the adequacy or inadequacy of the relative quality of the community's food supply (Rhone et al. 2017). Research shows that where you live—the economic environment, social environment, physical environment, and service environment—has a strong influence on how you live (Story et al. 2008; Bell and Rubin 2007, b). Issues of food insecurity and low-income and low-retail access food environments are interrelated yet distinct issues that adversely impact communities of color. Furthermore it is also important that community food security solutions examine the inequitable planning policies and systems that aided in disparities in food insecurity and neighborhood food environments in the first place (Raja et al. 2008).

In Minnesota, significant disparities and injustices exist in how food insecurity impacts different geographic communities. Minnesota is the seventh-worst state for retail access to healthy food, and nearly a third of Minnesotans (1.6 million) have low retail access to healthy food (Rausch and Mattessich 2016). At the metropolitan level in 2015, 26.6% of the Hennepin County population (comprising the city Minneapolis) and 21.9% of Ramsey County residents (comprising the city of St. Paul) had low access to a grocery store (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services). When examining food retail access as it overlaps with other factors such as race, unemployment, homeownership, education in addition to distribution of emergency food shelves, the perspective on which geographies are most disproportionately impacted by food insecurity is more often than not concentrated in neighborhoods with larger populations of people of color with low incomes (Leonard et al. 2018).

¹ **“Food deserts”**: It is important to note that up until 2018, census tracts that were both low-income and low-access (defined as being far from a supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store) were defined by the USDA Economic Research Service, and often referred to across the field, as **“food deserts”**. The USDA has since stopped using the term, calling their data tool the “Food Access Research Atlas.” GTCUW supports efforts to move away from the term. Additionally, in its work, GTCUW has found that the negative connotation of the word desert discounts the history, diversity, and complexities of the communities that reside in these areas. In this brief and subsequent materials, GTCUW avoids the term **“food deserts”** in describing neighborhoods challenged by food insecurity.

Many households of low-income receive various forms of federal supplemental nutrition assistance programs like SNAP and WIC, which provide critical financial support to help individuals, mothers, children, and families meet their nutritional needs (Wolkomir 2018). Supplemental income is an important economic input to local food systems and a critical resource, giving people increased access to local food retail outlets like grocery stores, convenience stores, and farmers' markets (Bertmann et al. 2012). More transdisciplinary research that explores the relationship between federal nutrition assistance programs and local community food systems could enable more nuanced understanding of how the broader food environment could improve the food security needs of residents of low-income.

Nourishing Communities: Innovating to Improve Food Security Solutions

There is an emergence of philanthropic entities like Greater Twin Cities United Way (GTCUW) that are exploring innovative collaborations, approaches, and fresh models to strengthen food security that meet the needs of communities who have significant assets but also experience a high burden of disparities.

Founded in 1915, GTCUW has invested in the Twin Cities metropolitan area for over a century. While addressing hunger has been a long-time focus, the changing community needs spurred a recalibration of its grantmaking strategy to include comprehensive programming to support community food security and food systems development. GTCUW's grantmaking strategies are grounded in an effort to disrupt inequities and foster a region where all can thrive, regardless of income, race or place. GTCUW adopted strategies within its food security portfolio to support holistic efforts that include: 1) preventative, "upstream" approaches that address long term food insecurity, and 2) an explicit focus on community driven food security solutions that advance racial equity. The innovation to GTCUW's food security portfolio recognized the need for targeted place-based solutions, that health and economic outcomes are interwoven with food-related issues, and that history has played a significant role in shaping those outcomes (Bell and Rubin 2007, and Banks et al. 2019). Furthermore in leveraging community wisdom, GTCUW recognized the opportunity to further expand its food security strategy to incorporate a broader and more holistic continuum of solutions (Hendriks 2015), and in particular, those that prioritize long-term, place-based, community-driven and systems change strategies that strengthen and diversify a local neighborhood's food environment.

The community of focus for the new strategy was North Minneapolis, which flanks the west bank of the Mississippi River in the northwest corner of the city. North Minneapolis faces many of the same food affordability and access challenges visible in communities across the country. A mosaic of 14 neighborhoods (North Minneapolis Neighborhoods 2019) and home to over 60,000 residents, most of whom are Black and People of Color, the poverty rate of approximately 40% has historically ranked higher than most other regions of the metro area and state (North Minneapolis Workforce Report 2014). These figures along with other community challenges, often covered by local and national media, have drawn the attention of local leaders who have been

working hard to shift the community narrative from deficit to an asset-based frame (Eligon 2016). Furthermore, there is a rich and deep history of North Minneapolis residents who have worked hard together to advance justice and equity via the development of their community's food supply (Amin et al. 2018; Swingley 2011, and Saadeh 2015). The community has worked hard to move from one with limited healthy food options to one in which food is grown, sold, consumed, sourced, and recycled locally (Horowitz 2018). These factors and so many more were important contextual factors that informed and shaped the approach of the Full Lives program.

In 2017, GTCUW launched the Full Lives initiative, a grantmaking program that takes a place-based, community-driven approach to strengthening community level food security in North Minneapolis. The strategy was grounded in a vision to support a *“Healthy, equitable and secure food system in North Minneapolis where all residents can thrive.”* In designing the grant program, GTCUW reflected upon the history and progress of the local food systems movement and other important work in North Minneapolis, as well as recognized past investments and the ongoing need for investment in existing community food systems activities. Prior to launching the grant program, GTCUW met with key stakeholders, leaders, and community members involved in North Minneapolis' food system to understand:

- Perspectives on the history, successes, challenges, and lessons learned from North Minneapolis' food system development efforts
- Opportunities to amplify and catalyze vision and aspirations of North Minneapolis food systems leaders
- Assess existing assets, resource gaps, and strategic opportunities for further investment
- Values and principles that the grant program should embody and support in order to create the most authentic engagement and impact
- Strategies for diverse and equitable engagement with a network of key stakeholders to inform desired grant program priorities, design components, and outcomes.

To inform the initiative, GTCUW benchmarked existing local and national food security comprehensive plans, community impact and grantmaking strategies, as well as considered numerous definitions and models of community food systems (Community Food Security Coalition 2009 and Community Food Projects Indicators of Success 2011). Furthermore, in understanding key opportunities and gaps, GTCUW's grantmaking approach focused on reviewing evidenced based and promising practices in food security and community food systems change (Greater Twin Cities United Way 2019). Additionally, GTCUW sought to focus on the neighborhood-level food system with a strong emphasis on prioritizing culturally specific, non-profit and grass-roots efforts. The grantmaking approach and funded projects in North Minneapolis targeted solutions that aimed to advance many components of the neighborhood's local food system—including production, processing, and distribution, as well as getting, preparing, consuming, and disposing of food. The program identified catalyzing change within six core objectives:

1. Access and Availability of Healthy Food
2. Food Affordability
3. Food Skills
4. Income and Jobs
5. Self-Reliance
6. Community and Economic Development

Some of the key values embedded in the design and programming included a belief that locally focused strategies are strengthened when communities are deeply engaged in authentic relationships built on trust and respect, and they can inform, influence, and have agency to design the solution to the problem. By doing so, solutions are well-suited to address problems because they are developed by those with intimate knowledge of local challenges, needs, and opportunities. Additionally, GTCUW believes that the disparities and inequities impacting the local community must be deeply understood and racial equity prioritized throughout all stages of the development and implementation of solutions.

The Full Lives initiative represented an innovative and holistic adaptation to previous investments with the goal of improving the environmental conditions and overall long-term food security in the community. In alignment with the values and approach of the overall grant program design, GTCUW committed to an inclusive and participatory evaluation approach that engaged grantees as partners in defining and measuring indicators for collective impact.

Collaborative Evaluation for Community Food Systems Change

Fostering food security through a place-based, community approach to develop local food systems is a complex undertaking, involving many partners, organizations, and components of the food supply. As such, food security can be understood and measured in different ways. At the household level, food insecurity can be understood across four categories of high, marginal, low, and very low food security (Feeding America 2017). Food insecure households can be characterized by household members needing to skip meals and reduce the amount and/or quality of food consumed (Kaiser 2017). Interventions to address household food insecurity tend to focus on public food assistance programs. While household-level measures remain important, the interplay between household variables and community-level variables are important to consider. At the community-level, food security includes access to healthy and affordable food through a sustainable food system that strengthens community self-reliance and social justice. Food secure communities ensure availability, stability, and access to food at the community level and connect these issues to the community food production and distribution system (Wei-ting Chen 2015).

The Full Lives initiative sought to further strengthen a complex ecosystem of efforts within a local food system that would lead to community change, and GTCUW recognized the importance of measurement as a tool to advance that change (Harley, Stebnicki and Rollins 2000). An intentional collaborative and participatory approach was rooted in guiding values and principles of both the

program design and evaluation design. Furthermore, the choice in measurement approach needed to support community wellbeing by not only measuring meaningful programmatic changes, but more importantly, by being inclusive in engaging grantees as collaborators in co-defining what and how the program assessed and assigned value to impact. Using this approach to design the objectives, outputs and indicators helped ensure that what was being measured was appropriate and realistic, relevant not only to funders but also to the grantees. Recognizing the diversity of levels of organizational development among grantees, the evaluation design also aimed to support and build capacity where needed for grantee data collection and reporting and balance the power and ownership of the collective results.

Full Lives Evaluation Design

Following a call for evaluation proposals in 2016, GTCUW chose to partner with Rainbow Research, a Minneapolis-based non-profit evaluation firm with over 40 years of experience. GTCUW and Rainbow sought to incorporate various principles of a community-based participatory approach in the design of the evaluation (Minkler et al. 2012). They recognized the importance of enabling a collaborative process to involve all grantees and other stakeholders throughout all stages of the evaluation process in a way that would build off of unique wisdom, assets and community knowledge to improve the local food system. Collaborative and participatory processes were used to co-design the shared measurement system of outcomes and indicators and ensure the: (a) indicators were relevant to the actual practices and programmatic activities across distinct organizations; and (b) community-level data were useful to both the grantees and funder. The evaluation design of Full Lives also included individual grantee evaluation capacity-building and coaching to support and ensure accurate grantee tracking, analyzing, utilizing, and reporting on key indicators.

Rainbow Research's evaluation plan prioritized mutually beneficial interactions with grantees and supported their efforts to:

- co-create measurements,
- facilitate collective learning at grantee gatherings,
- provide individual evaluation technical assistance and coaching to each grantee, and
- review collective data about their community.

Rainbow Research engages stakeholders in diverse communities to provide capacity building, organizational planning, and research and evaluation services. They approach each evaluation and research project as an opportunity to support deep inquiry and transformational learning. Participatory, culturally responsive evaluations are the foundation of all the work at Rainbow Research. Rainbow Research evaluates grantee's impact on the local food system.

Based on the purpose of the evaluation, the team prioritized developmental and utilization-focused evaluation approaches.

- Developmental evaluation supports the process of innovation where the path and the destination are evolving. It uses “rapid” or ongoing feedback supported by data to help innovators fine-tune and learn from the process (Patton 2010).
- Utilization-focused evaluations ensure that data collected will ultimately be useful to and used by the organization or program (Patton 2008).

Rainbow Research staff met with GTCUW to develop the approach, overlapping phases of exploration and assessment, design, coaching, and learning (Fig. 2), and the broad evaluation questions that would guide the evaluation:

1. To what extent and in what ways has Full Lives made progress in reaching their long-term objectives?
2. What unanticipated outcomes occurred?
3. What are the essential programmatic elements of the Full Lives model?
4. What does it take to do this work well?
5. What are some of the major accomplishments and challenges?
6. How can Full Lives be improved?

Capacity-Building and Technical Assistance

Grantees who were a part of this initiative had access to an array of learning opportunities to support and ensure their success towards advancing impact in their community. Full Lives provided nonprofit development training and workshop options for grantees, organizational development capacity building grants in addition to a cadre of technical assistance providers that were able to provide on demand customized assistance as requested by grantees. Rainbow Research was one of the technical assistance

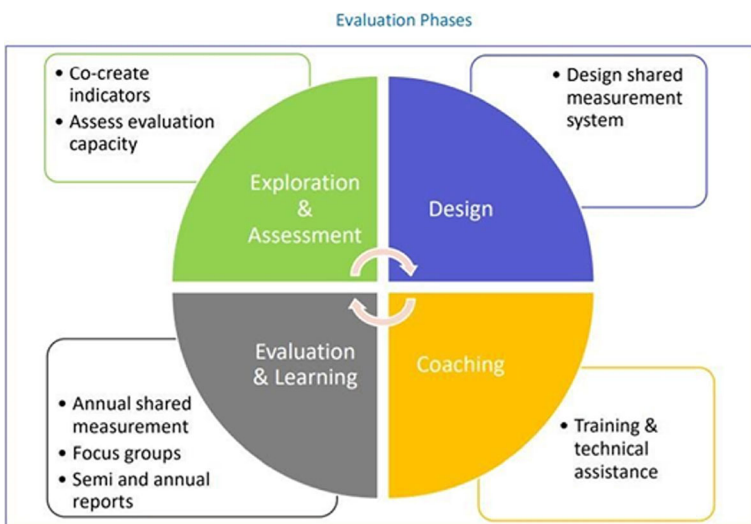


Fig. 2 Full lives evaluation phases

providers and worked directly with grantees to provide training and customized evaluation and measurement assistance. The capacity-building played a critical role in working with the grantees to develop a shared measurement framework. Data demonstrated that the impacts of the additional funds for organizational capacity building and technical assistance were enormously positive. Grantees reported:

“We appreciated working with Rainbow Research to “train the trainer” model for data collection. We were able to identify some resident leaders who were able to get trained on administering community needs assessments throughout the community. This is now a sustainable method to reuse this training on an annual basis. It proved an effective way to engage residents, fill any gaps (language, culture, age), and get efficient and genuine responses from the community. This data will continue to be helpful for baseline and trendline data on the needs of residents at a community level.” – Full Lives Grantee

“Project staff feel better prepared to ask evaluation questions that result in more meaningful qualitative and quantitative data.” – Full Lives Grantee

The evaluation assessment period began as grantees were announced in April 2017. The assessment focused on individual visits and interviews with all grantees to gain full understanding of their programs and intended impact. These visits also explored grantee plans for measuring their impact and overall grantee evaluation capacity. Rainbow Research worked with each program to help ensure that they had a way of tracking, analyzing and learning from their data. During the first year, Rainbow Research provided over 120 hours of technical assistance to grantees in support of evaluation goals. The design process, a highly iterative 6-months process involving grantee convenings to identify and deliberate on potential indicators and obtain grantee feedback, resulted in a tailored set of outcomes and indicators for the six Full Lives objectives. This iterative process enabled grantees to propose measures that were meaningful and in alignment with their work and values, clarify definitions and further articulate nuances between indicators and decide what specifically to measure and report on based on their intended project activities. Evaluators also created a shared set of demographics and other outputs (e.g. number of people served), based largely on what grantees were already tracking. The process of co-creating a shared measurement system to understand collective impact was a new experience for most grantees as they typically report only on their individual program, not on systems-level, shared data.

Shared Measurement System

The shared measurement system included a menu of roughly 36 different quantitative indicators across the six Full Lives objectives (Table 1). While no single grantee was expected to report on all 36 different quantitative indicators, each grantee had the opportunity to prioritize and select which of the indicators from the menu were most relevant to their work and that they would be able to measure and report on as part of the grantees’ annual reporting requirements. Additional open-ended, qualitative questions were included in the semi-annual and annual report. This article presents evaluation findings based on the quantitative data from the shared measurement system as well as qualitative findings related to program implementation and capacity building.

Table 1 Select Shared Measurement System Indicators

Objective	Description	Sample outcome indicators
Food access & availability	Greater access to a diverse variety of healthy and culturally appropriate foods in close proximity to where residents work, live, learn and play.	# <i>new food sector business</i> # <i>people served</i> # <i>transactions in 1 year</i>
Food affordability	Improved ability to purchase the affordable, nutritious foods needed to sustain a healthy lifestyle.	# <i>and \$ EBT/Market Bucks transactions</i> # <i>and \$ Health Savings Coupons distributed</i>
Food skills	Increased knowledge and skills necessary to prepare healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate meals.	# <i>people report changed food habits, buying more healthy food, eating more fruits and vegetables, learning how to prepare healthy meals, willing to try new food/recipes, read nutritional labels</i>
Income & jobs	Increased opportunities to earn an income and develop job-related skills within the food systems sector.	# <i>new food sector jobs</i> # <i>youth</i> ; # <i>adults</i> ; # <i>seniors employed</i> % <i>of new jobs held by North Minneapolis residents</i> # <i>permanent</i> ; # <i>seasonal/part-time</i>
Self-reliance	Increased self-reliance for north Minneapolis residents and the community as a whole in providing for their food needs.	# <i>personal, community, market gardens</i> # <i>acres</i> # <i>plots in North Minneapolis</i> # <i>plots owned</i> ; # <i>plots leased</i>
Community & economic development	Movement toward the north Minneapolis community's economic and community development goals to build a healthy, equitable food secure community.	\$ <i>in sales</i>

Community Impact and Results

Full Lives was a short-term impact investment initiative that was funded for 2 years. The intent was to spark or catalyze change within the six long-term objectives. A brief summary of quantitative results from the shared measurement system are described in Fig. 3 below, followed by key findings from the qualitative analysis of grantees' perceptions of "key elements" of the program model.

There were many quantitative indicators that could have been defined and measured under several different domains of outcomes—for instance, is 278 new food sector jobs an indicator of "income and jobs" or "self-reliance," or perhaps "economic development"? Engaging grantees in identifying, definition and categorization of these indicators was important to understanding their perceptions of what constitutes meaningful community impact. While grantees had the choice to report on their impact from a menu of 36 different indicators, given the broad spectrum of indicators and the diverse nature of projects in the cohort, measurement can be perceived as somewhat dispersed as most of the grantees chose to only report on the few select indicators that were most relevant to their programs and that they had capacity to measure. So, while the shared impact at the community level is significant, it also tells a story of a neighborhood level system that is relatively dependent on a few larger anchor organizations and the collective impact and connections of smaller organizations between them.

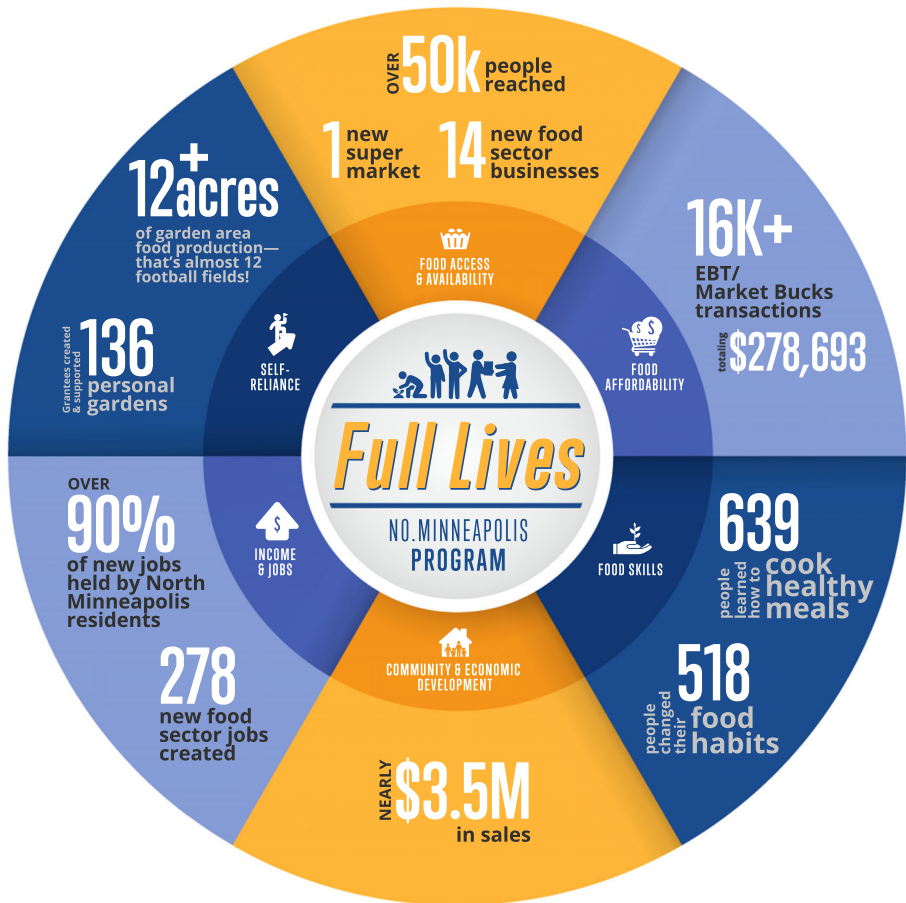


Fig. 3 Full lives program results 2017–2019

“The narrative around food systems in north Minneapolis has changed recently, accelerated in the last year by the opening of (grocery stores) and other healthy food options. There are places to buy groceries in North, and there are local restaurants that attract neighbors as well as people from other neighborhoods in the Twin Cities. Overall, Full Lives is contributing to changing how we think about food access and food systems in north Minneapolis.” – Full Lives Grantee

The grant program results drawn from the final independent evaluation report reflect a 2-years investment to help catalyze growth and strengthen the food system in North Minneapolis, as indicated in Fig. 3.

Grantees share important feedback on their perceptions of the essential elements of the grantmaking approach and what it takes to advance equitable food system change and improve community food security. The following insights of key features of the Full Lives approach surfaced through an analysis of the qualitative data gathered from grantees’ semi-annual and annual reports, focus groups, and grantee interviews. NVivo software was used to code the qualitative data.

When asked what the greatest strength of the Full Lives program was, 100% of grantees talked about the new partnerships and connections that were developed through the grantee convenings and the focus on advancing change at the systems level of this place-based cohort model. Several of the grantees knew each other prior to Full Lives but had not necessarily collaborated previously; other grantees had no previous connections. In addition to collaborating in the grant program evaluation shared measurement system, grantees reported that participating in grant program activities, such as the regular facilitated grantee and community convenings and a coordinated bus tour of over a half dozen sites to learn and see other food system efforts happening across North Minneapolis, helped them fully understand how interdependent all of the growers, sellers, and consumers are within a food system. This awareness subsequently spurred more collaborative partnerships, as illustrated by the following quotations from different Full Lives grantees:

“What we found to be the most valuable was the opportunity to establish partnerships with other food resources in the area. The connections made provided us with a way to utilize existing resources and tap into the expertise that the staff from the other groups possess. This was instrumental in allowing us to not only complete our project activities but reach out when we experienced some problems.” – Full Lives Grantee

“I also just think that us all being funded at the same time, and having a funder intentionally bringing us together, it’s like in the past we looked at funding as a competition when we’re all trying to address the same need. In order to make systems change, that kind of intentionally encouraging collaboration instead of competition is essential.” – Full Lives Grantee

By creating an infrastructure to share measurement, new understanding of the most important impacts and drivers for change was gained in North Minneapolis. New linkages between organizations enhanced the entire community-based food system:

“The greatest strength of the Full Lives grant program lies in its ability to gather together — and fund — a group of smaller nonprofits and unite them toward a common goal. By bringing together nonprofits that share similar visions, are working toward complementary missions, and have varied skill sets and areas of expertise, Full Lives facilitates the creation of alliances that make each organization better able to serve the community.” – Full Lives Grantee

“Being part of the Full Lives cohort facilitated partnerships and increased collaboration to look at the food system as a whole. We are able to understand food production and distribution in a more nuanced way as a result of the conversations we’ve had with other grantees.” – Full Lives Grantee

This process of collaborating to create a system that measures things community-based organizations identified as important and the inherent focus on the interconnected system helped to strengthen community power and the food system’s ability to provide healthy food to its residents. It also helped ease the burden of evaluation and measurement on any single organization.

Conclusion

The evaluation scope and scale chose to focus on grantee level data to understand broader community change, and the data indicate the Full Lives grantees and program made progress toward advancing the vision of a “*Healthy, equitable and secure food system in North Minneapolis where all residents can thrive*”. Full Lives has worked to strengthen a broad spectrum of needs within the local food system for the Northside, encompassing the increase in production and sales of locally grown healthy food; development of new employment opportunities and food skills; expansion of personal, community and market gardens; and establishment of over a dozen new food businesses, including a supermarket.

Co-creation of a shared measurement system is an important practice for creating useful and relevant data systems for grantees; however, the diversity of programs—which was the cohort’s strength—makes methods for measurement challenging, as there may be only one or two grantees reporting on a single indicator. Yet, when communities understand the system-level changes that are happening and impacting their program, they gain appreciation for the impact they make as a contributor within a larger ecosystem. Sharing impact data back at the collective cohort level, rather than the individual level, helped grantees see their work as a part of something larger. They learned from their data and data of other organizations through a continuous feedback loop that allowed them to build relationships through shared data. By illuminating new insights, organizations were also able to see gaps and opportunities for new indicators to measure important features and aspects of community issues that had not previously been identified.

Data from the effort highlight many unique design elements of Full Lives, including the place-based cohort funding model, organizational capacity-building resources and funds, community-based participatory design principles, and the community of practice among the cohort that enabled organizations to get to know, trust, and work together to reach and serve more people through a more interconnected and circular local food system. Therefore, using participatory and community engaged evaluation practices and shared measurement systems to understand community impact efforts can be an important driver for systems-change and innovation within a local community food system.

Lastly, big and complex challenges require innovation and courageous ideas. Foundational to the success of Full Lives was a commitment by GTCUW to help advance bold approaches to disrupting inequities in local community food systems. Through the initiative’s authentic community engagement, radical listening, power sharing and investing in new and innovative ways of working alongside community leaders, GTCUW helped to amplify community voice and catalyze their vision for how to seed and nourish community food systems change.

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Full Lives Grantees and Partners: Appetite for Change and the Northside Fresh Coalition, CAPI, Northpoint Health and Wellness, Northside Economic Opportunities Network (NEON), Pillsbury United Communities, Project Sweetie Pie, Urban Strategies, Victory Neighborhood Association, West Broadway Business Area Coalition, Youth Resources, Wilder Foundation. Rainbow Research: Rebecca Saito, Misty Blue, Mary McEathron; Terra Soma, LLC: Maggi Adamek, Nadja Berneche; Movement Center for Deep Democracy, Julie Murphy and Associates and so many more of the community partners, businesses and residents that helped to make this work possible.

Data Availability Not applicable.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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