

CHOOSE HEALTH: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, LOCAL FOODS, AND WEALTH CREATION IN MINNESOTA

In central Minnesota, locally grown, healthy foods are increasingly getting into the hands of the region's residents, beyond the consumers who attend farmer's markets. Through the work of a network of partners to support growers, increase markets, and improve health outcomes, the region's local, healthy foods value chain is increasing economic opportunity and improving quality of life in multiple ways.

The region's work in this topic began in 2011 with the receipt of a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant, which led to the completion of the Resilient Region plan in 2012. The Resilient Region plan created a new vision for the five-county region, the only planning region in Minnesota where all the counties are classified as economically distressed. Through extensive and targeted public outreach and university assistance, the region gathered ideas and analysis to create a plan with guiding principles, vision and values, recommendations and action steps, and implementation strategies for economic development, community development, housing, and related areas such as land use and transportation. In addition, the effort resulted in a policy toolkit, model comp plan, and list of references for area municipalities in the rural region to utilize. Supporting the region's agriculture and health as both an economic sector and quality of life outcome were priority areas identified through the planning process.

A related initiative led to the staff of Region Five Development Commission, which serves as the area's U.S. Economic Development Administration-designated Economic Development District (EDD), and partners to work with area municipalities to analyze each community's assets to help them identify their own paths forward.

BUILDING WEALTH WITH LOCAL, HEALTHY FOODS

From these two efforts, the region has applied a wealth creation framework to move both the agricultural and health sectors forward, and to consider them together. The region was already considering regional assets in its economic and community development work, but Region Five



Development Commission Executive Director Cheryal Lee Hills explains that employing a wealth creation framework “took us from intuition to intention.”

Arlene Jones, executive director of the region's food hub called Sprout explains further, “We already were looking at multiple forms of wealth, but without the language. Wealth creation gave us a way to measure how we were

filling up the various asset banks, or forms of capital, that we were looking at within our region.” According to Jones, training in wealth creation helped to refine strategies and to ensure a commitment to building multiple forms of wealth rather than focusing on single outcomes for individual initiatives.



The area’s first rural and regional food hub, Sprout serves to aggregate and distribute agricultural products to institutional customers. Sprout also builds the individual wealth of growers by offering training such as business planning, food safety, post-harvest handling, Good Agricultural Practices, and other topics that improve growers’ bottom lines and increase their earnings. Growers participate in offering up training topics they need, and the value chain partners are able to engage upcoming leaders by enlisting growers and other areas as trainers as well.

Area partners have worked together to write grants to build new infrastructure supporting the hub, such as a Grower’s and Maker’s Marketplace, as an indoor, year-round market for food and artworks hailing from central Minnesota. The physical structure housing the marketplace was finished in 2015, with two initial events attracting 28 vendors and almost 300 attendees spending considerable amounts of money on the locally produced items. A grand opening in April kicked off a series of more regular marketplace events, providing a market for sellers to interface directly with individual consumers.

The unique prescriptive model of Choose Health uses the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model to bring local, healthy foods to individuals, including food insecure families. A partnership with Region Five Development Commission and Sprout, as the region’s value chain coordinators, as well as Lakewood Health System, University of Minnesota Extension, and many others are working together with funding from Hunger-Free Minnesota, Catholic Health Charities, The Bush Foundation and Blue Cross/Blue Shield to improve individual wealth through health. In this program, doctors in the health systems prescribe CSA shares to over 175 families, with pre- and post-program health screenings and regular participation by over 80% of those families. The families pick up biweekly CSA boxes provided by 60 low-income minority growers, who participate in Sprout, alongside employees of the healthcare system at weekly farmer’s markets. The families also receive education provided by public health, hospital nutritionists, and extension nutrition education providers, as well as cooking demonstrations. They are also eligible to receive cooking utensils and essential tools for free.



IMPROVING LIVELIHOODS AND LEVERAGING ADDITIONAL INVESTMENTS

Most of the food insecure participants of Choose Health and its partner programs had incomes of \$20,000 or less, and half were eligible for food support such as the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Women, Infants, and Children program. Assessments from the first year of CSA prescriptions, in 2014, show that participants indicated improvements in their own skills to plan and prepare a healthy meal and shop for healthy foods. Twenty-nine percent saw improved blood pressure, and patients with diabetes reported increases in following care providers' recommendations for meals and blood sugar testing. Another 46 percent gained access to resources for households at the economic margins, including healthcare, food assistance, and energy assistance. More gauged their own health as good or better in the post-program evaluation than in the pre-test, and participants reported higher consumption of produce in their diets.



Importantly for the program, 100 percent of the participants who completed a post-program evaluation would recommend it to others, with positive feedback about regular access to food, access particularly to fresh produce that might otherwise be too expensive, and healthy meal ideas. One participant remarked, "It was such a relief to know that we would be getting fresh local produce biweekly." Some families, whose identities are protected from being released under federal privacy regulations, have chosen to become outspoken advocates of the program, recruit new participants based on their positive experiences, and to model the program through peer-to-peer training for future recipients.

By combining their training in wealth creation with their historical work in regional resilience and asset mapping, the region has been able to leverage significant funding from area foundations and others. With Region Five Development Commission and Sprout as grant writers, the region has secured over \$850,000 in philanthropic investments and regional funding. This funding comes from the National Joint Powers Alliance through Innovation Funding, a competitive regional funding where area residents choose priority areas of focus on which to build resiliency; and philanthropic investments from the Bush Foundation, Blandin Foundation, McKnight Foundation, and Northwest Area Foundation to support aspects of this work, as well as federal agency program investments from USDA Rural Development in specific projects that implement the vision, goals, and strategies developed in the Resilient Region plan and subsequent work. Discussions at the state level have led to state investments in technical assistance on local, healthy foods, as well as using Community Development Finance Institution funds more effectively. These investments are supporting future work in Choose Health and its partner programs with other aspects of supporting the local foods value chain and quality of life for all residents in the region, as well as many throughout the state through the adoption of new policies.

INCLUSIVENESS AND BUILDING OWNERSHIP

The local, healthy foods value chain partners have learned to bring opportunities for inclusion and ownership to leaders, participants, and beneficiaries in various ways and at points where each person or organization sees value in engaging. The input from the initial season of Choose Health CSA prescriptions came directly from people at the economic margins, and it has been used in program design to continue and expand in subsequent years. Safeguarding both the privacy of Choose Health participants was an important concern from the outset, as was a concern to help participants feel comfortable participating, so food secure members were recruited to participate alongside food insecure families with no distinction.

From the supply side, growers participating in Sprout take ownership in the training programs by providing feedback and, where possible, serving as trainers themselves on issues that they have become experts in. Sprout intentionally reaches out to low-income growers and minority growers such as Hispanic, Amish, and Tribal growers in the region. Through the work of the food hub, these and other individuals at the economic margins, as well as those operating more securely, are able to increase their productivity, have better access to institutional and consumer-direct markets, and reduce some of the risk of farming.

These and other related efforts have taken the work of central Minnesota's partners from identifying assets and strategic plans into implementation and building multiple forms of wealth, improving outcomes for the region's residents and making an impact on the state's policy; as well as on the decisions of philanthropic funders looking to maximize the impact of their giving.

To learn more about wealth creation as an economic development strategy, visit www.wealthworks.org. For more information on the work occurring in Central Minnesota, visit www.regionfive.org, www.resilientregion.org, and sproutmn.com.

ABOUT THE NADO RESEARCH FOUNDATION

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