



Promising Practices

Increasing Access to Fresh, Locally Grown Produce: The Aggregation and Distribution Table

In 2013, through their Health Equity in Prevention (HEiP) initiative, the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross) awarded contracts to 13 organizations working to implement policy, systems, and environmental changes to support health and advance health equity. In 2015, 11 of the HEiP organizations received two years of additional funding to support their work. The Promising Practices series highlights successful strategies used by these organizations and important lessons learned that can be used by other organizations to inform their work. The series also serves as a reference for other funders interested in supporting effective strategies to promote health.

Appetite for Change: Supporting local growers through the Aggregation and Distribution Table

Appetite for Change (AFC) is a nonprofit organization located in North Minneapolis that uses food to build connections, wealth, and health among community members. AFC believes that engaging people around food helps create social, racial, and economic change. Through its Fresh Corners initiative, AFC works with urban farmers to help them sell their produce to local restaurants, corner stores, and farmers markets. Fresh Corners is focused on creating a locally owned food system that increases community members' access to fresh foods and addresses the health inequities of Northside residents.

What is the Aggregation and Distribution Table?

The Aggregation and Distribution Table (Aggregation Table) is a community-led farmers market vendor that sells both local and non-local produce from small, community-based growers who do not grow enough food to have their own table at the West Broadway Farmers Market. It allows small growers the ability to aggregate and sell their produce with other growers. AFC buys produce directly from the growers and sells it at the Aggregation Table.

In 2012, Northside resident and grower, Starr Carpenter, sought to connect residents to locally grown, fresh produce. Inspired by the Greening of Detroit, an organization dedicated to turning vacant lots into urban gardens, Starr and other growers organized the Aggregation Table at the West Broadway Farmers Market to help small growers sell fresh produce locally (see sidebar). In 2013, AFC began operating the Aggregation Table under their Fresh Corners initiative.

What has been the impact of the Aggregation Table?

Since beginning in 2011, the West Broadway Farmers Market has struggled to attract consistent participation from large-scale produce vendors. However, the Aggregation Table has become a reliable vendor that regularly takes part in the market, having sold over \$22,000 worth of produce since 2013. Its distribution license from the City of Minneapolis allows it to purchase and re-sell non-local produce, such as tropical fruit, which has attracted more customers to the farmers market. As a result, North Minneapolis residents are able to purchase the foods they want at an affordable price from the Aggregation Table, which accepts EBT, SNAP, and WIC. In addition, families who participate in Northside Fresh Bucks are able to access the Aggregation Table's produce through a Fruit and Veggie Prescription Program administered at Northpoint Health and Wellness Center, as well as double-up bucks when they use their EBT card.

There are additional benefits, beyond income, to the growers and youth who run the Aggregation Table. Small-scale growers are able to experiment with growing and selling produce through the Aggregation Table. Some have increased their capacity and are growing on a larger scale. Two growers recently secured contracts to provide

produce to two local nonprofits and a local food company. Participants through AFC's youth employment program are also playing a pivotal role in helping run the Aggregation Table along with learning customer service and sales skills. Youth are also learning about nutrition, food preparation, and how to grow fruits and vegetables in North Minneapolis.

Although more difficult to measure objectively, AFC staff have also observed a number of ways in which the Aggregation Table has supported new connections between individuals and strengthened residents' ties to North Minneapolis. For growers, selling produce locally is a way of supporting and giving back to their community. Community connectedness is also supported by residents who purchase food from the Aggregation Table and share their appreciation for the growers. In addition, AFC staff have seen that food can be a starting point for deeper conversation and individual connections that may not otherwise occur in the community. Children who come with their parents to buy food from the Aggregation Table ask questions about the vegetables they see and how they are grown. Adults also share their story and history by introducing youth to the types of food they ate as a child.

What were some of the lessons learned from implementing the Aggregation Table?

AFC highlighted some creative strategies they used to overcome the challenges they encountered in operating the Aggregation Table:

- **Deciding on the best approach for selling growers' produce.** Initially, the Aggregation Table sold growers' produce and paid them for what was purchased by consumers at the West Broadway Farmers Market. AFC felt this approach would incentivize growers to

cultivate quality produce. However, a number of challenges surfaced, including managing complex labeling and tracking of produce and selling or using unpurchased produce. These leftovers were used in AFC's Community Cooks program, sold to corner stores and restaurants, donated, or composted. To address these challenges, AFC decided that the Aggregation Table would purchase produce directly from growers and sell it at the Farmers Market. AFC worked with growers to purchase high quality produce and bundled vegetables to maximize the amount sold. For example, if one grower's kale was small and another's was larger, the kale could be bundled together and sold. This change in approach led to very little unpurchased produce at the end of the Farmers Market and greater income for all growers. The growers also worked together to understand what community residents wanted so that they could focus more of their production on high-demand produce.

- **Finding the best way to purchase non-local produce.** One of the key features of the Aggregation Table is its ability to sell non-local produce. This allows consumers to purchase a larger variety of fruits and vegetables. Initially, AFC worked with multiple wholesalers and locations to purchase non-local produce; however, this became logistically complex and time consuming. In 2015, AFC started buying reasonably priced non-local produce from Hmong farmers at the Minneapolis Farmers Market, which was then sold at the Aggregation Table. This approach was less complicated and allowed AFC to sell non-local produce at a low price as a result of the cost savings in working with the Hmong farmers.

- **The cost of staffing the Aggregation Table.** The Aggregation Table requires support from grants and contracts as it does not yet generate enough revenue to cover the cost of AFC staff who support it. Participants in AFC's youth employment program help support the Aggregation Table by growing produce and working with staff to help run the table at the farmers market. This experience teaches them basic business and entrepreneurial skills.
- **Building customer demand.** The Aggregation Table has been well received at the farmers market and in the neighborhood. However, to be financially viable, the Aggregation Table will need a consistent customer base. The Aggregation Table has been supported through partnerships with organizations, like NorthPoint Health and Wellness, which provide programs incentivizing residents to purchase food at the farmers market. In addition, AFC began to provide cooking and nutrition classes through their Community Cooks program so that community residents feel comfortable using fresh produce to prepare meals.
- **Finding space to process and aggregate growers' produce.** Growers need a physical location to clean, process, and bundle their produce before selling it at the Aggregation Table. AFC's recently opened Kindred Kitchen, a shared commercial kitchen, offers some space for growers; however, it also supports a café and other community food businesses. AFC is looking to develop a space that would support an indoor farmers market and commercial kitchen that growers could use to prepare their produce.
- **Addressing growers' capacity.** AFC discovered that a number of local growers needed to develop their business and gardening skills in order to successfully sell produce to the Aggregation Table. AFC contracted with a local professional

to provide growers with training and technical assistance on growing their gardens and tracking what they grow and sell. AFC is also helping the growers form a cooperative so they can strengthen their capacity and sell to more buyers.

Efforts similar to AFC's work

The Greening of Detroit

While this summary focuses on the work of Appetite for Change, there are also similar efforts occurring across the U.S. One of the key organizations working on urban sustainability and local food systems is the Greening of Detroit (the Greening), a nonprofit established in 1989 dedicated to re-growing the urban forest, supporting urban farms, producing local food, and increasing knowledge about gardening, nutrition, and local food systems. Since its founding, the Greening has brought the Detroit community together to plant 82,000 trees. It also started to address food insecurity by transforming vacant lots into gardening and farming spaces, eventually supporting 1,300 gardeners throughout the city. In 2012, the Greening help establish the 2.5 acre Detroit Market Garden, which distributes food to local restaurants, farmers markets, and food banks.

The Greening's work focused on gardening eventually led to the creation of a new organization, Keep Growing Detroit (KGD), which focuses on establishing food sovereignty by having a majority of the fruits and vegetables eaten by Detroiters grown within the city. KGD operates a program called Grown in Detroit (GID), which sells produce and other items cultivated by local community members. GID trains local growers on record keeping, harvesting, handling, and selling produce. It also operates a Community

Supported Agriculture (CSA) program and sells locally grown produce to Detroit restaurants.

The Food Bank of North Alabama

Another organization working on growing the capacity of local farmers is the Food Bank of North Alabama. The food bank works with historically disadvantaged farmers to help them link to markets, along with providing training, mentorship, and access to credit. The food bank's Farm Food Collaborative, a local food hub, connects farmers to buyers such as public schools, hospitals, grocery stores, restaurants, and workplace cafeterias. The collaborative's goal is to craft a local food supply chain guided by farmers and buyers. As of June 2016, the collaborative has helped broker \$600,000 in sales.

Suggestions for organizations considering an Aggregation Table

AFC identified some lessons learned that might be helpful for organizations or groups considering an Aggregation Table:

- **Secure adequate space to prepare and aggregate produce.** Growers need to have access to space such as a commercial kitchen where they can clean, prepare, bundle, and store produce to be sold at a farmers market or other venues. Shared commercial kitchens with sufficient cold storage space is one option for growers.
- **Support growers' capacity.** Depending on their experience, some growers may need support in planning and developing their gardens and learning about basic business practices such as tracking sales and inventory. AFC doesn't ask growers to adopt a specific business model; they want to encourage

creativity and foster a broad learning community. AFC contracted with a local professional to provide this flexible support to the growers. Organizations looking to adopt a similar approach could also look for resources from nonprofits focused on community gardening or university agriculture, business, and extension programs.

- **Develop a strong relationship with a farmers market.** AFC and the Aggregation Table cultivated a key connection with the West Broadway Farmers Market. The executive director of AFC and the market manager had a close relationship as result of their work coordinating the Northside Fresh Coalition. The market is supportive of the Aggregation Table's mission and willing to work with AFC staff and local growers. AFC highlighted that it would be difficult for a group to develop and sustain an Aggregation Table if they did not have the support and buy-in of a local farmers market.

- **Create a clear plan.** AFC pointed out that it did not have a clear documented plan of action for the Aggregation Table after it took over operations. A group or single organization looking to develop an Aggregation Table should organize a plan that clearly outlines the roles of growers and staff, the pricing of produce, the approach to selling produce, and an analysis of the local market and customers' preferences. While AFC did not conduct a formal market analysis, they made key observations such as the lack of vendors consistently attending the West Broadway Farmers Market, that fruit was not available at the market, the limited retail opportunities for local growers, and that there was an overall lack of fresh produce available to Northside community members.

Resources

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