

Case Study: Mainers Feeding Mainers, a State Farm-to-Food Bank Model

Spotting an opportunity to source food locally

In 2010, [food insecurity and demand at food pantries was alarmingly high following the Great Recession](#). More people were relying on charitable food as a primary source of nourishment. Yet, donations from grocery stores that food banks relied on were down. Food banks needed to source more food and started to recognize that it should be healthier and fresher than the salty canned soups and white bread loaves of the past.¹ In response, [Feeding America began sourcing more produce for the food banks in its national network](#). But Good Shepherd Food Bank had a problem. They were in Maine. Much of the produce that they were now receiving through the national network — at \$6,000 a truckload — came from California.² By the time it reached Good Shepherd’s warehouse, the once-fresh produce was spoiling too quickly.³ The food bank looked around — why not source nutritious food locally?⁴



Bar Harbor Farm

Maine’s farm-to-food bank program (FTFB)

Mainers Feeding Mainers, a program through which Good Shepherd mostly buys — but also accepts some donations of — Maine agricultural products, [started in 2010](#). Today, the program provides Good Shepherd with [two million pounds of food per year](#). Eighty producers participate, including fruit and vegetable growers, dairy farmers, fisherman, and a grain producer.⁵ The program has also started sourcing from BIPOC-owned farms and buying traditional Wabanaki foods, like trout.⁶

Mainers Feeding Mainers helps Good Shepherd give clients visiting the food pantries in its network healthier, fresher, and more varied food options. Food from the program is nutritious: fruits, vegetables, fish and meat, milk, and whole grains. By sourcing locally, the food bank can offer a wider variety of produce than the potatoes, onions, and carrots that are often the bulk of out-of-state purchases because their shelf lives are conducive to transportation.⁷ Clients experience “a beautiful array of produce at pantries that sends a powerful message that they are worthy of such food,” says Kristen Miale, Good Shepherd’s President.⁸

Encouraging healthier choices

Good Shepherd thinks that clients accessing such vibrant produce are likelier to pick healthy options when they have money to spend on food.⁹ Miale has heard stories about pantry clients shopping directly at local farm stands after previously eating, enjoying, and learning how to prepare produce through Mainers Feeding Mainers.¹⁰ Kristina Kalolo, the Markets Manager for Liberation Farms, a program of the

Somali Banu Community Association in Lewiston, Maine that sells to Mainers Feeding Mainers, has seen this openness to trying new produce in action. She shares that when Liberation Farms first delivered a variety of Russian kale to a pantry, the pantry volunteers and clients were skeptical about this new item, but “when I explained it’s a kale and went back the next week, one of the volunteers had found a recipe, made a kale salad, and was giving it out to clients so they could taste it...the pantry then kept ordering it for the rest of the season.”¹¹



Habiba Salat, Liberation Farms – Photo by Kelsey Kobik

Boosting local economies

In addition to the positive benefits for pantry clients, Mainers Feeding Mainers boosts Maine’s economy. The program [invested \\$750,000 directly into Maine’s agricultural economy in 2019](#). While a fraction of the [\\$700 million in agricultural receipts generated in the state during the same year](#), sales to Mainers Feeding Mainers are financially meaningful to participating farmers. Liberation Farms, which provides new Americans originally from Somalia the opportunity to farm, began selling to Mainers Feeding Mainers in 2016 as their first market. In 2021, they sold \$7,451.90 of produce to the program. Selling to the program boosts Bar Harbor Farm’s sales in two ways: Rose Avenia of Bar Harbor Farm shares that after starting to participate in Mainers Feeding Mainers in 2019, “we increased our growing quantities with the idea that Good Shepherd is interested in buying from us” and that they also turn to Good Shepherd when they have surpluses of what they’ve previously agreed to sell to other customers.¹²

Good Shepherd had farmers at the table from day one when planning the program. Their input led the food bank to structure Mainers Feeding Mainers largely as a purchase program that also receives some surplus product donations because of their conviction that farmers should be paid for their work. The food bank and farmers enter into ‘letters of understanding’ in which the farmers agree to grow and sell certain crops but there is flexibility for substitutions. Good Shepherd generally pays wholesale price for crops, and while these prices are higher than what they would pay for out-of-state produce, the food bank finds that it gets more donations from farmers because of their knowledge of the program, which actually makes the price differential lower.

A model for state FTFB programs

Mainers Feeding Mainers [began receiving state funding in 2016](#) after originally operating out of Good Shepherd’s purchased food budget.¹³ The food bank made the case to the state that the program successfully combined feeding people experiencing food insecurity with economic development.¹⁴ [Maine’s state budget appropriated \\$1 million dollars in Fiscal Year 2020-2021 to Mainers Feeding Mainers](#). Along with the [Pennsylvania Agricultural Support System](#), Mainers Feeding Mainers has been a model for statewide FTFB programs and an example of how state funding can strengthen these programs’ purchasing power and reach.

Looking ahead

Foods provided by the charitable food system could be healthier. [A 2018 study by MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger and the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health found that 25 percent of food bank distributions were unhealthy foods.](#) Of the five billion meals that food banks in the Feeding America network—the country’s largest food banking network—provided in 2020, [1.7 billion came from federal commodities and 1.5 billion came from retail donations.](#) Federal commodities programs that serve the charitable food system [do provide some fresh fruits and vegetables, but many of these products are in a processed form.](#) While retailers donate some produce, it is often close to spoiling by the time clients receive it, and food sellers also donate a significant amount of less healthy items, including sodas, snack foods, and candy that many food banks do not want.



Muhidin Libah, Executive Director, Liberation Farms – Photo by Kelsey Kobik

People who rely on the [charitable food system both prefer](#) and deserve nutritious food that supports their health. Many food banks are making efforts to increase nutritious donations by adopting nutrition guidelines, policies, and ranking systems. State funded FTFB programs, like Mainers Feeding Mainers, provide a key opportunity to supply food banks with fresh, nutritious food while investing in local agriculture.

For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

¹ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

² Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

³ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

⁴ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

⁵ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

⁶ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

⁷ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

⁸ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

⁹ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

¹⁰ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

¹¹ Kalolo K, personal communication, 2021.

¹² Avenia R, personal communication, 2021.

¹³ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.

¹⁴ Miale K, personal communication, 2021.