STRENGTHENING OUR LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM
An Essex County Community Foundation Think Lab

SUMMARY REPORT
Introduction

HOW WE GOT HERE

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, ECCF has convened nearly 200 local leaders to discuss the unprecedented challenges facing our social sector, and together, explore collaborative and innovative solutions for a stronger Essex County.

Through these interactive convenings, food insecurity quickly emerged as a significant area of concern given alarming increases in hunger and unemployment rates in a region where nearly 40% of residents are living below the living wage and already challenged to access food.

1 million people struggle to get enough to eat in Massachusetts.*

1 in 10 children experience food insecurity in Massachusetts.*

Massachusetts saw a 59% increase in food insecurity in 2020

*Feeding America

With most of our cities and towns facing unprecedented need and similar food access and distribution challenges, it was clear that a convening of food sector leaders and advocates was critical to the recovery of Essex County.

WHAT IS AN ECCF THINK LAB?

Essex County Think Labs are interactive community convenings that lead participants through a design-thinking process to creatively problem solve, define common goals and prioritize actions. These sessions are where coalitions are built, creative ideas blossom, priorities are honed and solutions are incubated.

Think Lab Goals:

- Establish the place and space for cross-sector leaders to explore and reimagine the food system in Essex County and the topic of food justice and security.
- Build civic and human infrastructure to strengthen partnerships and collaboratively address food justice and security issues.

IN ATTENDANCE

On Thursday, Jan. 14, 2021 ECCF welcomed more than 90 leaders from across Essex County to the Strengthening our Food System Think Lab.

Participants were invited to attend based on their deep knowledge and experience to identify the sector’s strengths, discuss challenges and explore opportunities for collaboration and experimentation.

A broad range of organizations representing the food sector attended:

Acord Food Pantry
ADAPTIV Architecture & Planning
Anthem, Inc.
Beverly Bootstraps
Bread and Roses
Citizens Inn
City of Lawrence
City of Lynn
City of Newburyport
Community Care Cooperative
Community volunteers
DKH Business Advisors
ECCF Board of Trustees
Essex National Heritage Commission
Farmer Dave’s
First Baptist Church Beverly
Fish Family Foundation
Food For Free
Food security advocates
Greater Boston Food Bank
Greater Lawrence Community Action
Council, Inc.
Greater Lynn Senior Services
Groundwork Lawrence
Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation
Health Care Without Harm
Lawrence Partnership
Lazarus House
LEO Inc.
Lloyd Fleischer Design
Local funders
MA Fishermen’s Partnership
Massachusetts House of Representatives
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Massachusetts Northshore Workforce Board
Merrimack Valley Food Bank
My Brother’s Table
New Lynn Coalition
Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance
Northeastern National Farm Coalition
Nourishing the North Shore
Office of Representative Christina Minutucci
Office of Representative Tram T. Nguyen, Esq.
Office of Senator Brendan P. Crighton
Office of Senator Joan Lovely
Office of Senator Edward J. Markey
Our Neighbors’ Table
Pettengill House
Pohl Consulting
Richard R. Blain & Associates, LLC
RIM Consulting
Root
Salvation Army
SeniorCare Inc.
Shah Family Foundation
The Open Door
The Salem Pantry
Three Sisters
Tower Family Fund

Learn more about ECCF’s Think Labs at eccf.org/insights.
THE WORK

Together, Think Lab participants were asked to bring their expertise to brainstorm and propose ideas and experiments that could produce creative, sustainable solutions to meet the ever-growing food security needs of our Essex County communities.

Their input will inform ECCF’s future systems work in this area.

To begin the journey, groups reviewed data aggregated from the input of more than 140 community leaders on the same topic. The PEOPLE, PRINCIPLES and OBSERVATIONS listed below acted as our baseline information to spark further conversation and brainstorming of solutions.

What PEOPLE, ROLES AND ORGANIZATIONS should be involved in the work to strengthen our regional food system?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community leaders</th>
<th>Funders</th>
<th>Nonprofits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education sector</td>
<td>Government/municipalities</td>
<td>Residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food producers and distributors</td>
<td>Healthcare sector</td>
<td>Small and large businesses</td>
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What are the PRINCIPLES that will guide this journey and matter the most?

Values to guide us: Resiliency, Equity, Transparency, Integrity, Courage

Mindsets to embrace: Systems Thinking, Creativity, Resourcefulness, Inclusive growth, Long-term focus

What are key OBSERVATIONS from the field? What is happening and why?

Organizational financial sustainability is a concern.
- 65% of organizations surveyed reported concerns over adequate operating support.
- 44% of organizations reported having just 4-6 months of operating cash flow.

Innovation and collaboration are happening, but more is needed.
- 74% of organizations reported that they are currently working with partners.
- 100% of organizations reported that they are willing to partner.
- Convening residents is vital to understanding their experiences and the nuances of our challenges.

Food storage, transportation and last-mile distribution are great challenges.
- 61% of organizations surveyed reported that resourcing food storage and transportation were their greatest needs.
- Staffing and funding are needed for new distribution models such as mobile marts, no-touch deliveries, virtual food drives, off-site/in-home food preparation, online ordering, etc.

Food access is an issue for many individuals.
- The local hunger system is fragmented and complex for individuals to navigate.
- Food distribution systems have not kept up with allergy, cultural and ethnic changes.
- New COVID restrictions and safety regulations prevent many people from going to their usual places to get food.

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Demand for food, meals and related services has increased significantly.
- 65% of hunger organizations surveyed reported a 100-600% increase in the number of people served monthly over the past year.

Uncertainty persists and systems are forever changed.
- It is unknown how long the pandemic or its economic impact will last.
- The regional food system has changed dramatically, making challenges and opportunities abundant.
IDENTIFYING BIG IDEAS

Reflecting on the baseline data, each group was asked to use their energy and expertise to brainstorm BIG IDEAS to help strengthen the Essex County food system and foster the spirit of working collaboratively to produce systems-based solutions.

From more than 150 BIG IDEAS, several key themes emerged...

Utilize community spaces to support innovative solutions.

- Utilize traffic islands, dormant buildings, roofs and other uncommon places to grow fresh produce
- Create government subsidized, volunteer-led community gardens in partnership with nonprofits
- Create community refrigerators in central locations for free food sharing, storage and distribution
- Explore expanding local efforts like micro-farming, edible landscaping, hydroponic growing and mobile greenhouses
- Convert brownfield and other unused lands to grow more food and stop over-development

Increase nutrition and cultural education.

- Create local opportunities for organizations to become more culturally and linguistically responsive to each community
- Educate, connect and help register more families for WIC/SNAP to lessen the demand on food banks
- Create targeted educational opportunities for vulnerable populations to better understand nutrition and how it supports overall health
- Create new curriculum for school-age kids to learn about and share different food cultures
- Provide classes for people to learn how to preserve, can and compost food to lessen food waste

Build an ecosystem of support to better advocate and create solutions for the sector.

- Create space for the sector and community leaders to connect and discuss needs and opportunities to strengthen the system
- Advocate as a sector to be involved in and bring expertise to the planning and execution of programs like SNAP, WIC, free school meals and USDA funding
- Work together to better utilize federal funding for local solutions and supports
- Define and declare food justice and security a priority in Essex County; create metrics and track progress
- Partner with municipal broadband providers to support online food systems and solutions

Centralize scale-able sector resources and activities.

- Implement a regional online hub for food producers to centralize data on available food, storage and distribution opportunities, volunteer recruitment, partnerships, etc
- Create a robust online ordering and delivery system for food consumers to consolidate available nutritious and culturally relevant foods
- Consider an affiliation model for food pantries to share data, back-office and distribution logistics while each maintains its own unique identity
- Centralize information on wraparound services to help people move towards self-sufficiency
- Conduct a countywide assessment and mapping of program utilization, needs and effectiveness

Partner with restaurants, grocery and food businesses to share resources.

- Utilize unemployed restaurant employees and dormant kitchens to support hunger organizations produce, store and transport food
- Implement a central kitchen model to share spaces and utilities
- Invest in co-op grocery stores and municipal grocers
- Partner with restaurants to better utilize food waste
- Create regional purchasing coalitions to decrease costs for all
- Create partnerships with local food companies, farmers and fishermen to reinforce supply chains

Involve workforce development opportunities in food justice solutions.

- Create a commercial kitchen program that acts as a CSA, supports food entrepreneurs and includes job training
- Create employment opportunities by using dormant buildings and spaces for new growing and producing opportunities
- Increase training for living wage jobs to end the cycle of food insecurity
- Look at food waste and rescue as an opportunity for employment and workforce development
- Work with farms to create a regional clearing house putting people to work

Bring food one step closer to those who need it.

- Support and create nonprofit programs and partnerships that deliver groceries directly to homes and/or transport people from home to food pantries
- Partner with kitchens to produce/process healthy foods that are hard for people to prepare on their own
- Provide non-perishable food items instead of meals for longer shelf life and less food waste

*Indicates the frequency of the idea
A few of the eight “pitches” generated during our session...

**ESSEX COUNTY FOOD HUB**
Every Person’s Plate

**TAGLINE:** Sustenance, Support, Sustainability

**HEADLINES:**
- New Centralized Food Hub Cuts Food Insecurity in Essex County by 35% in First Year
- Empowering People by Centralizing Food Services

**PROBLEMS TO ADDRESS:**
- Avoid utilizing multiple sources for services
- Easing access for people to get services
- Able to track progress/success by centralizing
- Making it easier for people who have need

**HOW THIS ADDRESSES THE PROBLEM:**
- Centralizing services increases access and makes them more effective
- Encourages more people to use the services
- Utilizing and repurposing underused spaces

**PARTNERS TO INVOLVE:**
Residents, food pantries, farmers, transportation companies, social service nonprofits, schools, food rescue

**KEY FIRST STEPS:**
- Convening key partners – Build Relationships
- Examine individual programs/see where they overlap

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**ESSEX COUNTY FED**
Food, Employment, Distribution

**TAGLINE:** Gleaning with meaning. Everlasting food, farm to table. Zero waste and super delicious. Food you can eat!

**HEADLINES:**
- Essex County FED turns Excess into Success
- Gleaning Nutrition from Waste

**PROBLEMS TO ADDRESS:**
- Production to consumption entirely linked
- Reducing food waste
- Focus on culturally specific food needs and demand
- Job training, in kitchens and production

**HOW THIS ADDRESSES THE PROBLEM:**
A combination of kitchen, CSA and food rescue program with a job training component to make excess waste into a consumable food.

**PARTNERS TO INVOLVE:**
Small farmers, local farmers
Job-training organizations
Municipalities and elected officials
Food pantries and social service agencies
Schools/higher education/tech schools
Employers, restaurants/processing facilities

**KEY FIRST STEPS:**
- Collect broad data through focus groups
- Secure land with healthy soil
- Engage with partnerships
- Determine operations / regional and local
- Seek funding opportunities

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**FRESCO URBANO**
City-owned farms and co-op grocery stores

**TAGLINE:** Countywide network of gateway city grocers.

**HEADLINES:**
- Where I run in to shop and catch up with my neighbors
- My kind of food
- I grew that food

**PROBLEMS TO ADDRESS:**
- Local access to culturally relevant food
- Local employment solution
- Social determinants of health
- Redoing/reclaiming food systems

**HOW THIS ADDRESSES THE PROBLEM:**
- Enhances access
- Creates workforce opportunities
- Keeps wealth local
- Understand multicultural trends

**PARTNERS TO INVOLVE:**
Residents, municipality/state/DHCD/Mass Development, nonprofits, corporations, farm consultants, schools

**KEY FIRST STEPS:**
- Create meaningful links between the community and colleges and universities
- Build a coalition of organizations to support the work and strategy
LOOKING FORWARD

ECCF COLLABORATIVE GRANTS

ECCF is committed to building on the energy, ideas and momentum of the Think Lab to incentivize collaboration and systemic approaches to addressing hunger in Essex County.

Our collaborative grant program will launch by March 1, 2021. Virtual Q&A sessions will be scheduled in February 2021 and more information can be found at eccf.org.

NEXT STEPS

Feb. 5, 2021
Publish summary report and share with Think Lab participants, ECCF Trustees and County Leadership Council for further discussions

March 1, 2021
Launch collaborative grant program to invest in and encourage systems change

Stay tuned!
Explore future food system convenings and additional Think Labs in the intersecting areas of health, mental health and climate resiliency

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR PRESENTERS

Julian Agyeman Ph.D. FRSA FRGS
Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University

ADAPTIV Architecture & Planning
Community rooted planning and architecture

LAUNCHING
MARCH 1

QUESTIONS?
Carol Lavoie Schuster
Vice President for Grants, Nonprofit and Donor Services

VOICES FROM THE THINK LAB

Wow! Thank you so much for putting on such a thought-provoking and engaging event. It was educational, insightful and very, very fun.

I felt honored and happy to be a part of the movement. Let’s do this!

I greatly appreciated the opportunity to participate in the Think Lab and thank you for creating the space for it.

Wish we had more time!

FANTASTIC meeting! Nice to see everybody and thank you, ECCF, for bringing us together!

The think lab was so, so interesting and wonderful to see so many thought leaders together sharing information and ideas.

This was a terrific experience. Thank you for hosting!

This has been powerful and productive!

Great conversation! Five hours of dialogue stuffed into two efficient hours. Great collaboration and idea generation!
Essex County Community Foundation inspires philanthropy that strengthens the communities of Essex County by managing charitable assets, strengthening and supporting nonprofits, and engaging in strategic community leadership initiatives.

LEARN MORE AND JOIN US IN THIS WORK.

Essex County Community Foundation
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