



# 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.

MORE THAN

**90**

CROSS-SECTOR PARTICIPANTS

### A broad range of organizations representing the food sector attended:

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

Learn more about ECCF's Think Labs at [eccf.org/insights](https://eccf.org/insights).

# Think Lab Session

## 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?

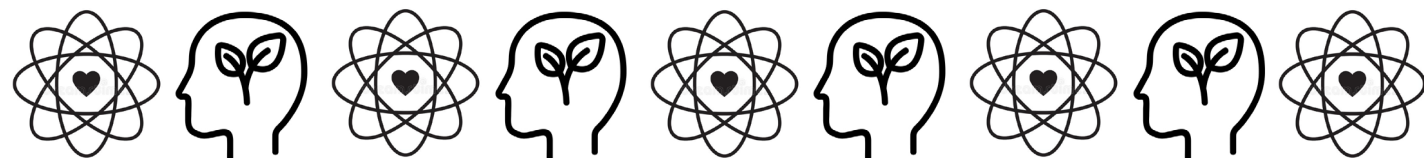
Community leaders Education sector Food producers and distributors	Funders Government/municipalities Healthcare sector	Nonprofits Residents Small and large businesses
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### What are the PRINCIPLES that will guide this journey and matter the most?

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?

Below is a sampling of major themes that emerged from more than 200 observations reported.



#### 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.



#### 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.

# Think Lab Session

\*Indicates the frequency of the idea

## 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

### 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

### 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

### 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\*\*\*

# Think Lab Session

## THE PITCH CONTEST: OUR BEST BIG IDEAS

After generating and sharing as many ideas as possible, groups were asked to rank each and choose one to “pitch” to the larger group. This exercise gave each team the opportunity to deepen their collaboration, define tangible next steps, have fun and be inspired by what could be the future of the food sector.

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

### 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:

- Convene and build advisory group
- Run a pilot on small scale, in one community
- Engage with schools to seek partnership
- Seek state funding opportunities

### 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:

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

### ESSEX COUNTY EATS Food justice through collaboration

#### TAGLINE:

North Shore Food Systems Resource Sharing

#### HEADLINES:

The Essex County food system is more collaborative, just, equitable and inclusive – centering the most marginalized and actively working to share resources and create opportunities.

#### PROBLEMS TO ADDRESS:

- More efficiencies with existing resources
- Income inequality
- Creating transferable job skills
- Last mile distribution
- Legislation, zoning, living wages

#### HOW THIS ADDRESSES THE PROBLEM:

- Comprehensive database mapping assets/resources to maximize utilization
- Food waste as an opportunity for workforce development
- Build a shared, centralized storage facility

#### PARTNERS TO INVOLVE:

Colleges and universities, community organizers, technology companies, food banks, food producers, growers, farmers

#### 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](http://eccf.org).

LAUNCHING  
**MARCH 1**

### QUESTIONS?

[Carol Lavoie Schuster](#)  
Vice President for Grants,  
Nonprofit and Donor Services

## 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

## 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!

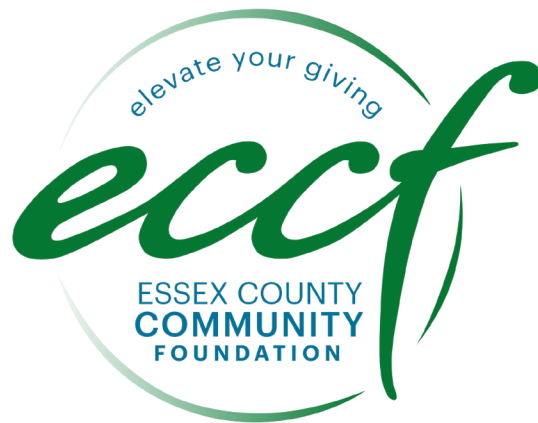
The think lab was so, so interesting and wonderful to see so many thought leaders together sharing information and ideas.

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

This was a terrific experience. Thank you for hosting!

Great conversation! Five hours of dialogue stuffed into two efficient hours. Great collaboration and idea generation!

This has been powerful and productive!



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](http://eccf.org)**  
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