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A SNAPSHOT OF ARIZONA FOOD POLICY COALITIONS: STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Introduction

Across the country, the formation of food policy councils (FPCs) is rapidly increasing. John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future attributes this growth to an increased desire among more food system stakeholders to work collectively at the local and state levels in hopes of achieving more together than they would alone. There is a growing recognition by those stakeholders that government has a greater role to play in addressing food system challenges, thus an increased interest in policy.

This report explores the status of FPCs or similar organizations in Arizona and the potential of developing a statewide network of these groups. Based on conversations with leaders in Arizona food systems, six groups were identified as possible FPCs or organizations with similar goals. Up to two representatives from each group were selected for phone interviews, which were conducted in January and February of 2017. Other food system organizations were identified through the interviews, but not interviewed for the purposes of this report. These include the Dine Policy Institute working on Food Sovereignty in Navajo Nation and Cornucopia Community Advocates working to address hunger in Yavapai County. The following is a summary of findings from the interviews.

Trends

History, Structure and Priorities

The creation of organizations or coalitions working to address food system challenges is a relatively new practice in Arizona with most organizations forming in the last 8 years. The driving force behind the creation of these organizations is most commonly passionate community members coming together to talk about food system challenges. They are often initially supported by grant funding, either from a philanthropic organization or government entity. For example, the Pima County Department of Public Health received a large Communities Putting Prevention to Work grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which contributed to the development of two coalitions in Southern Arizona in 2009. Most of the organizations are volunteer-based grassroots coalitions and two organizations are designated non-profit 501(C)(3).

Sustaining membership in these organizations can be challenging. Organizations spoke about a core of members that most often did the work. There is a wide variety of sectors represented in the organizations, including emergency food providers, public health departments, local municipalities, and small scale growers amongst the most common members. The business sector was mentioned as part of multiple coalitions, mostly in the rural communities. Often Local First Arizona was mentioned as this business partner. The sectors least represented include philanthropy, businesses not directly tied to the food system, healthcare systems, tribal members, and the media. Multiple organizations mentioned the lack of diversity in the membership, both in race and ethnicity and in geographic representation. It was harder to engage more rural areas of the community as well as underserved populations to be part of the coalition or participate in events sponsored by the coalition.

The structure of the organizations varies from a formal board of a non-profit agency with voting rights to an informal membership that makes decisions through consensus. Consensus decision making is most commonly employed by these organizations. All organizations met monthly and often in the same location. Priorities are typically set on an annual basis and workgroups or committees form around these priorities. A committee that many organizations have in common is a community outreach/community engagement group. Most organizations host a website, email to a listserv, host community events, such as Food Day, or host booths at farmers' markets. There is a varying degree of use of social media outlets and one organization spoke of utilizing electronic petitions to help make voices heard on policy issues. Generally, community outreach was an area where organizations felt they could improve the outreach and engagement in their community. Community outreach and engagement was discussed with two goals in mind. The first was the need to improve communications and marketing of the organizations to raise awareness, educate on issues,

and drive more public demand for food system change. The second outreach need was to engage missing sectors to participate in the coalition and increase the capacity of the organization through membership.

Common priorities discussed were equity and resilience. Organizations are particularly concerned about ensuring food insecure and low income residents have access to quality locally sourced food. Tactics used to achieve this priority are increasing SNAP and WIC redemptions at farmers' markets, forming community or school gardens, participating in the Double Up Food Bucks program, or coordinating with emergency food providers. Developing a resilient sustainable food system that acknowledges the challenges Arizona faces with climate, water rights and usage, and appropriate farming practices is another area of concern. Tactics used to address this are often educational in nature, teaching residents how to grow crops in Arizona or how to use the United States Department of Agriculture's Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification program.

Most organizations have completed or are in the process of completing assessments on portions of the food system in their community; however, only one organization is currently undertaking a comprehensive food system assessment which was made possible through a grant opportunity. Examples of completed assessments include food security assessments and mapping emergency food provider networks, assessment on consumer interest in locally grown food, food hub feasibility assessment, and mapping of community and home gardens. Organizations identified the need for more current and comprehensive assessments, but identified limited resources to complete this work as a primary challenge.

All organizations pride themselves on the passionate individuals dedicated to the food system work. However, there are also challenges in moving the work forward as most of these individuals also have full-time jobs elsewhere. Often organizational leaders spoke about the challenges in filling dual roles managing the day to day administrative tasks and doing the actual work. The non-profits are the only organizations with paid staff and only one of those organizations has full-time paid staff. All organizations felt dedicated staffing for the organizations would alleviate some of the challenges of getting work done while recognizing this is common for all coalitions.

Evolutionary process

Organizations pride themselves on their ability to adapt to changing demands, resources and needs. In fact, many organizations spoke of previous attempts to create a food systems or food policy coalition that were unsuccessful. Organizations that formed prior to 2010 discussed a phase of redevelopment. Redevelopment was often driven by a loss of funding, lack of capacity to do all the work, or shifting priorities and goals. Two coalitions spoke about the importance of taking time to develop relationships and trust among members and identifying how to work together to keep transparency and trust at the forefront. Outside consultants were employed by philanthropic organizations to navigate these difficult conversations which both organizations described as critical to the future success of the coalition.

Role of Policy

Overall the organizations interviewed are not solely focused on policy efforts, but rather filling gaps and advancing the local food system. When policy is a priority, the organization has a policy workgroup or committee that is mostly focused on local policies at the municipal or county level. One organization has experience working on state-level policy where they contributed to the passage of a bill supporting school gardens. Almost all members shared that their organization is currently discussing its role in advocacy and policy work recognizing the importance of this work to advance food system efforts. However, organizations are unclear how they can interact with policy makers and the policy decision making process. All organizations identified the need to advance policy work in Arizona and were supportive of a statewide network or coalition to enhance this part of their work.

Statewide Network Opportunities

Recognizing the limited resources and increasing demands on the food system organizations, capacity building opportunities came to the forefront to move the food system forward. Within organizations, there is opportunity to enhance members' ability to use data and complete assessments to develop and evaluate work strategies. Some organizations' members talked about assessments that were completed five or more years ago and did not know where to access the assessments since it was done before those members joined. Other organizations undertook an assessment process they did not have the capacity to complete. Helping organizations better understand their current capacity to complete assessments and implement strategies could help organizations grow or prioritize their work. In addition, helping organizations develop sustainable practices and processes knowing members may join and leave the organization would greatly help keep momentum moving forward. This may include identifying how to store documents or where to publish reports so they are accessible to new members.

At a statewide level, the opportunity to network with one another and learn from each other was enticing. Organizations recognize that the priorities their councils may be working on are not necessarily unique and there may be others in the state who have experience working on a similar policy or program. The challenge is figuring out how to connect with one another. Knowing who to call or what each coalition is working on would support making these connections. In addition, there was an identified need for members to learn about policy work and how to get involved in the policy making process. There is concern around how policies will be prioritized at a statewide level when rural and urban food systems can face different challenges. When discussing policy initiatives, rural members expressed need to understand the rural communities' perspectives and needs which are different from urban environments. Food system work still feels heavily urban focused and policy that is developed at the state and county level reinforces this. There is also opportunity to talk about the various levels of policy making that may help alleviate some confusion around state, local and organizational policy work. Other capacity building opportunities identified include ways to increase engagement with the community and ensure diverse membership in the organizations, especially from more vulnerable communities. Overall, there is strong interest in creating a statewide coalition or network of food system coalitions.

We are far enough along in Arizona in our food system evolution that we are ready for this type of conversation. We have enough experience of success and challenge and richness of examples to really benefit from work at a statewide level." – Liz Taylor, Flagstaff Foodlink

Structure

It was difficult to think of how the statewide network would be structured given the challenges of travel, time, and funding. Most respondents talked about meeting in person in the Phoenix area annually and via phone or video conferencing the remainder of the year. There were also discussions about convening the statewide network quarterly in different parts of the state. There was shared concern about how to create an engaging network meeting that was useful and meaningful and not duplicating the local efforts. To elicit better feedback on the structure of the statewide network, it is recommended that Vitalyst Health Foundation draft a few possible structures for the statewide network and share this with local organizations. By providing more concrete scenarios, local organizations will be able to see how they could be part of a statewide network and provide inciteful feedback.

Benefits

When asked about how their local organization may benefit from the statewide network, members had clear ideas. The benefits of having a statewide network were described as:

- An opportunity to network and learn from other's challenges and successes.
 - Having model sample policies or ordinances, especially from a local Arizona community would be helpful in advancing policy work in other areas of the state.

- More coordinated ways to interact with the state legislature and monitor state bills.
 - For example, this group could rate legislative representatives on how they support the food system
- Increased awareness, education and outreach across the state to ensure local food access, bolster the emergency food system, build equity in the food system, and promote local food economic development.
- Opportunity to look at food production and distribution beyond the county or municipal boundaries.
- Recruit, develop, and coordinate local producers, especially in rural communities.
- Help build capacity of local food system organizations.
 - Administrative duties are challenging for all organizations, but particularly for the grassroots coalition. How can administrative duties be distributed among coalition members or how does a coalition bring on staff?
 - Identify sustainable funding sources to provide better continuity of the work.
 - Identify common data that all coalitions can use to better describe the need in their communities.
 - Methods for outreach and engagement to vulnerable populations.

Considerations

When thinking about the structure and purpose of the statewide network, two key considerations must be taken. The first is engaging local growers in this work. The local growers that were interviewed indicated that the statewide group would need to address more than just policy for their participation. Right now, local producers are responsible for growing, harvesting, distributing, marketing and selling. The statewide group needs to help keep producers in the field where they grow and harvest and take away responsibilities on the distributing, marketing and sales side to give them a business reason to participate. It may be more realistic to look for key individuals that also belong to a network of local growers, like a food coop or food hub, where there can be a representative that attends the statewide network and acts as the link between the statewide network and local growers.

The second consideration is engaging with rural communities. The statewide group will need to quickly show benefit to the rural communities for true statewide engagement. Rural communities are hesitant to join statewide groups due to prior experiences where these groups tended to lean towards urban environments. Therefore, the network needs to establish a culture where rural perspectives are equal to urban perspectives and creates a space to allow for dialogue about the different challenges and solutions in each environment. It is important for the statewide network to honor the largely rural environment of Arizona.

Other State Examples

To identify strategies to overcome some of the challenges identified in this report, we explored the structure of three existing statewide networks in New Mexico, Michigan and Minnesota. The following are the key takeaways from reviewing these statewide networks.

Create a Network of Networks

Convene a statewide network that serves the needs of local food system organizations. The convener of the network creates the container for the work to be completed while keeping in mind the work is driven by the local food system organizations. The network must take time to develop a shared vision and measurable objectives with timeframes to achieve the vision. The process to develop the vision or food charter in each state varies from 8 months to multiple years. This process should use a data to drive decisions when possible. By creating a network of networks that shares a vision, collective objectives, and common data the local organizations will see where they fit in the big picture, where activities align, and how to build and learn from one another.

Identify a Convener

Each state has a different convener or backbone organization to facilitate the statewide network's work. In New Mexico, a local non-profit, Bioneers with its board members, handles the administration and coordination of Dreaming New Mexico. The Michigan Good Food Initiative is coordinated by staff at Michigan State University's Center for Regional Food Systems and guided by a steering committee. The Minnesota Food Charter Network is hosted by the University of Minnesota's Healthy Food, Healthy Lives Institute. No matter where the network is housed, it is important that the convener be able to interact at the 30,000 foot view as well as on the ground in the soil. The convener must be able to interact in the political environment at both the state and local levels to be successful. In Arizona, a non-profit will likely be a better convener to meet the political and practical needs of the network.

Develop diverse funding streams

In all three states, there are a variety of funders behind the work.:

- In New Mexico, diverse funding stream composed of private and philanthropic donations and multiple grant funding supports their work. They have been successful in attracting out-of-state donations and funding with funders interested in learning how to bring a similar process to their state. They operate on an annual budget of \$225,000 to \$400,000.
- Michigan Good Food Charter has three key partners that provide a level of in-kind support to the Network. In addition, Michigan Good Food Fund, a \$30 million public-private partnership loan fund that provides financing to good food enterprises that are working to increase access to affordable, healthy food in low-income and underserved communities in Michigan, is helping implement the work of the charter.
- The Minnesota Food Charter Network is supported by the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, the Minnesota Department of Health, and the University of Minnesota Extension.

Funding must be flexible and support systems approach

In all three states, the network is working on leverage points in the food system to reach its goals, visions and dreams. Inherently in system level work, there is a need for funders to be willing to test and pilot innovative solutions and involve multiple partners. The New Mexico Community Foundation was willing to fund Dreaming New Mexico plus two partner groups to work alongside each other to achieve specific goals and deliverables. This "cluster" model of co-funding several groups under one umbrella encourages and brings value to collaboration and a systems approach.

To learn more about the history and development of these statewide networks click on the links below:

Dreaming New Mexico: <http://www.dreamingnewmexico.org/files/Dreaming-Planet-Earth-Methods.pdf>

Minnesota Food Charter: <http://mnfoodcharter.com/about/history/>

Michigan: <http://www.michiganfood.org/about/background>

Local Profiles

Ajo Regional Food Partnership

Year Formed: 2009

Type of Organization: Grassroots Coalition

Staffing: Volunteer

Membership: There are 10-15 active members that meet monthly. There is no formal committee structure, but work committees have and can form around specific projects.

Current Priorities: The mission of the Ajo Regional Food Partnership is to turn Ajo in to a food oasis. The partnership focuses on economic development activities, like establishing a successful farmers' market and increasing the number of small, backyard growers in the community, and food justice issues, like SNAP utilization at farmers' market, school garden projects and youth gardening internship.

Lessons Learned: The first two years of the partnership focused on relationship building, conflict resolution, establishing values and how to work together. A grant provided funding for an outside facilitator to create a safe space to have transparent conversations. This resulted in a well-developed partnership that allows members to coordinate and amplify efforts recognizing no one agency owns the food system.

Accomplishments: To date, Ajo Regional Food Partnership increased the agricultural surfaces from 10,000 square feet to almost 40,000 square feet, and increased local food production from 1,000 lbs/year to 8,000 lbs/year. It developed the year-round Authentically Ajo Farmers' Market, which currently supports 39 local growers, including some from the Tohono O'odham Nation, and value-added producers who offer specific regional and cultural foods not available at the local grocery. The market accepts WIC vouchers, SNAP benefits and the Double Up Food Bucks program. The Partnership was awarded the Local Foods, Local Places (LFLP) technical assistance grant from the Environmental Protection Agency in the fall of 2014, with the stated objective of developing and implementing an [action plan](#) promoting local foods and fostering entrepreneurship to create an economically vibrant Ajo.

Website: <http://isdanet.org/ajo-regional-food-partnership/>

Flagstaff Foodlink

Year Formed: 2005

Type of Organization: Non-profit 501(C)(3)

Membership: Flagstaff Foodlink has a five-person board with a president, vice president, treasurer, secretary, and board member. There are approximately 30 individuals actively involved in committee work. They reach over 1,000 individuals through workshops and events. Currently, they have two committees: Economic Development and Resiliency.

Staffing: Very part-time Executive Director

Current Priorities: Flagstaff Foodlink is currently focused on two priorities: 1) economic development - focused on growing the economic strength of our local food system through creating new connections between eaters, growers, and restauranteurs and 2) resiliency - coordinates educational opportunities for community members to learn how to grow food responsibly in Flagstaff's challenging climate.

Lessons Learned: Flagstaff Foodlink is working towards more focused and mission-driven work. Initially, Flagstaff Foodlink found itself spread across many initiatives. Recently, they've identified other non-profit partners that are better suited to lead initiatives. Currently, the board is in a strategic planning process to evaluate the effectiveness of current projects and identify priorities for future work.

Recent Accomplishments:

- Administer [Grower Grants](#) that fund Flagstaff area small-scale growers and producers to expand or enhance their operations funded through private/philanthropic donations and Restaurant Week proceeds.
- Played a strong role in the creation and passage of the City of Flagstaff's [livestock keeping ordinance](#).

Website: www.flagstafffoodlink.com

Maricopa County Food System Coalition

Year Formed: 2015

Type of Organization: Grassroots Coalition

Staffing: Volunteer

Membership: There are approximately 150 members that have been involved in the coalition since inception and approximately 40-60 active members that regularly attend the monthly coalition meetings and/or the committee meetings. There are two committees, the program support and communications committee and six workgroups: Urban Agriculture, Food Assessment Coordination Team, Food Distribution, Policy, Certification, and Food Day.

Current Priorities: The Coalition received a grant from the Gila River Indian Community to complete a comprehensive food system assessment and this year will focus on completing this assessment to inform the work moving forward. The coalition partners with the City of Phoenix to host Phoenix Food Day held in October annually and is partnering with the Arizona Department of Agriculture to plan a Food Summit in the Spring of 2017. More information on priorities can be found in the coalition's adopted [workplan](#) that is developed annually by each workgroup and committee.

Lessons Learned: It is important to take time to build relationships and identify how to work together in the beginning. This work is challenging and the solutions are often long-term. This can make it difficult to keep momentum going in a coalition. It is important to celebrate the small wins and keep action moving forward to keep members engaged.

Accomplishments:

- In the process of implementing a grant from Gila River Indian Community to complete a comprehensive food system assessment for Maricopa County and parts of Pinal County.
- Established and adopted a [charter](#) for the coalition that describes how the coalition will function and work together towards its mission and values.
- Successfully co-hosted Phoenix Food Day held in a food desert community with more than 2,000 attendees. The event provided education, resources and hands-on activities related to healthy food, gardening, cooking, and fitness.

Website: www.marcofoodcoalition.org

Pima County Food Alliance

Year Formed: 2009

Type of Organization: grassroots coalition

Membership: Pima County Food Alliance (PCFA) is composed of 12-18 member leadership council who serve two-year terms. There are two to five working groups identified each year and at least one is focused on Policy. Through outreach methods, the Alliance has mobilized over 2000 individuals to act, such as sign a petition.

Staffing: Volunteer

Current Priorities: PCFA hosts annual retreats to select annual priorities. Each year, the members select one to two policy priorities typically on the local level, but have experience working on state level. This year, the Alliance has four main priorities:

- Engaging Policy Makers: whose goal is to develop a broader policy platform with and for PCFA as part of a larger strategy to strengthen PCFA's rapport and working relationships with elected representatives at the city, county, school board, state and federal levels.
- UNESCO Designation: whose goal is to research models from other cities and work with the Commission on Food Security, Heritage and Economy to develop and lobby for food system improvements such as a pro-local institutional purchasing policy and a "Good Food/Made in Baja AZ" product designation.
- Internal Capacity Building: whose goal is to develop and facilitate a series of skills sharing and internal trainings to increase PCFA's collective efficacy and cohesion.
- Community Engagement: whose goals are to broaden PCFA's grassroots reach by networking with and supporting other community and social justice organizations; to foster greater awareness of community issues and causes and effectively disseminate information between PCFA and community partners; and to translate the PCFA website and printed materials into Spanish.

PCFA is also active in Food Day celebrations and other outreach events in the community. The goal is to develop a food system that supports local farmers through education, outreach, networking and policy change.

Lessons Learned: In the early years of the Alliance hosted larger public meetings every month. Public meetings were challenging to manage from an administration stand point and, at times, the purpose of the meetings were unclear. The Alliance changed its model and now focuses on harnessing the leadership council's efforts and strengths using its outreach methods for public engagement.

Accomplishments:

- PCFA was active in the passing of [House Bill 2518](#) to allow school garden food to be served in the cafeteria.
- PCFA developed educational material for farmers on the difference between [USDA's Good Agricultural Practices \(GAP\) and group GAP Certification Program](#). They published a [cost calculator](#) that USDA promotes in other parts of the country.
- PCFA was actively involved in getting changes made to City of Tucson's zoning code that make urban gardening easier and locally grown food more accessible.

Website: www.pimafoodalliance.org

Pinal Local Food Project

Year Formed: 2015

Type of Organization: Grassroots Coalition

Staffing: Volunteer

Membership: Pinal Local Food Project has a three-member steering committee that was responsible for the implementation of the work and convened an advisory committee of local growers to guide the work.

Current Priorities: This organization conducted a needs assessment and feasibility study to determine the viability of a county-wide food hub. The assessment and plan to move forward are currently under review at USDA. The group will reconvene after USDA's review to talk about how to continue to educate consumers about local foods, recruit local farmers to diversify crops, and start identifying a business owner that can garner trust and operate a food hub.

Lessons Learned: It is difficult to engage local growers in these conversations and even more difficult to get local growers to convert crops to produce. The financial incentive is not there yet and local growers are already working long days for little pay. To engage local growers, there needs to be some financial incentive and a focus on how to keep the grower in the field producing and not responsible for sales and marketing too.

Accomplishments: Completion of feasibility and needs assessment to develop a county-wide food hub in Pinal.

Yavapai Food Council

Year Formed: Cornucopia Community Advocates started the food policy council in 2009 as a grassroots organization. In 2013, with support of United Way of Yavapai County, the Food Council was established a non-profit organization.

Type of Organization: Non-profit 501(C)(3)

Staffing: There are 5 full-time positions in the Yavapai Food Council: one executive director, administrative assistant, and three project coordinators.

Membership: Yavapai Food Council has a formal board composed of five voting members and one non-voting member. They meet ten times a year. Currently, the Council has a fundraising committee and a community outreach committee. Yavapai Food Council hosts an annual celebration event for community volunteers and distributes 1,200 annual reports to key persons across Yavapai County.

Current Priorities: Yavapai Food Council has focused on increasing the number of food-insecure persons receiving food assistance. It initiates new programs to support those who feel the hungry. Its Yavapai Food Neighbors Project holds bi-monthly food collection events in Sedona, Village of Oak Creek, Cottonwood, Prescott, and Prescott Valley. It will next expand to Chino Valley. Its SNAP Outreach program seeks to provide food in food desert communities in partnership with the Arizona Community Action Association. The Food Council is working to bring food to these communities through pop-up markets, community meals from [Bountiful Kitchen](#), and training food assistors how to overcome barriers to participating in SNAP. The board is starting advocacy activities in collaboration with the Association of Arizona Food Banks.

Lessons Learned: Yavapai Food Council prides itself on being innovative and supportive of its partners in the county food system. The council is willing to pilot approaches despite potential hurdles of staff time and resources.

Accomplishments:

- [Bountiful Kitchen](#): In 2014, Cornucopia Community Advocates published an assessment of school meals in the county and found one-third of public schools did not serve food on campus despite high eligibility rates for the federal free and reduced lunch program. This led the Council to create the Bountiful Kitchen program that prepares and caters quality meals to schools lacking kitchens, creates opportunities for farm to school programs, and offers National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs for nutrition standards and reimbursement.
- [Yavapai Food Neighbor Project](#): In 2013, Yavapai Food Council invited emergency food providers across the county to convene to learn about each other, identify gaps in the system, and improve relationships among emergency food providers. YFC developed the Food Neighbor Project to increase the amount of local food available to local food assistance programs. This is a community-based donor program where 1,500 donors set a reusable green bag of food at their front doors. Volunteer coordinators deliver the full bags to five collection sites where food is sorted for food banks and school backpacks for students programs. On average, the program collects 15,000-20,000 pounds of food every month.

Website: <http://yavapaifoodcouncil.org/>