

HOW CAN COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE IMPROVE WELLNESS?

An Exploration of Physical, Social, and Economic Health



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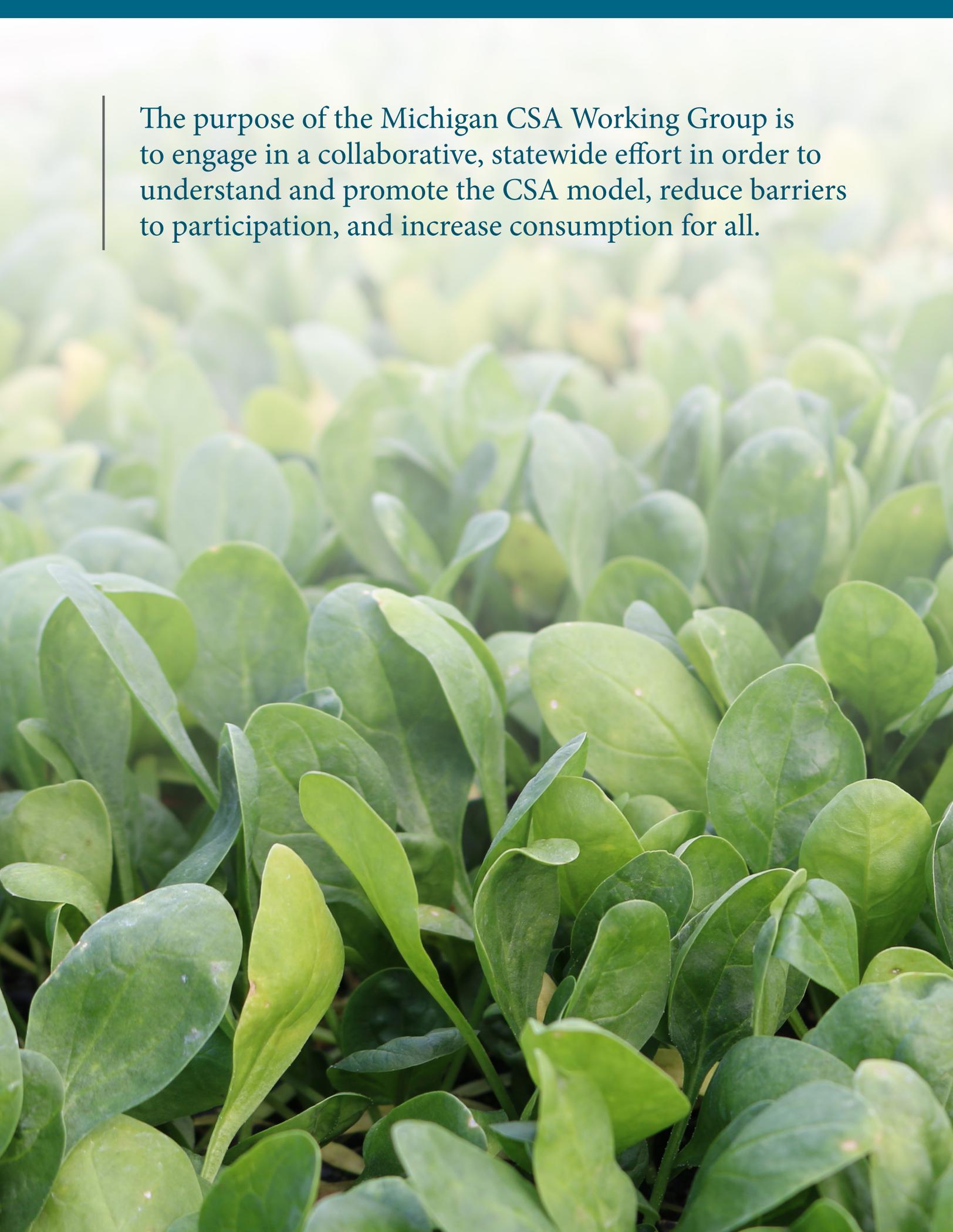
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The purpose of the Michigan CSA Working Group is to engage in a collaborative, statewide effort in order to understand and promote the CSA model, reduce barriers to participation, and increase consumption for all.



Community Supported Agriculture **Can it have a positive impact on community wellness?**

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is most often thought about as a strategy that supports farmers by providing payment at the beginning of the season when costs are the highest. While that purpose of the CSA is clear and established, should we also be considering how CSA programs can improve wellness in communities?

What is Community Supported Agriculture? CSA is a direct to consumer sales model where the consumer buys a share of produce from the farmer early in the season, then receives regular distributions of produce throughout the season, similar to a subscription service. What is wellness? This report defines wellness as physical, social, and economic health.

The Michigan CSA Working Group began meeting in 2016 with the ongoing purpose to engage a collaborative statewide effort to understand and promote the CSA model, reduce barriers to participation, and increase consumption for all. The working group consists of farmer advocates, food system educators, public health professionals, farmers, community groups, research institutions, and universities. This group views CSA as a strategy for increasing access to fresh, nutrient rich foods in food insecure communities, while at the same time increasing the economic viability of beginning farmer businesses producing food within those same communities. A challenge that continues to arise is how to increase access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables without harming the businesses of limited resource producers who are farming within those same at risk communities. The vision of the working group is that Michigan residents are healthy, diversified family farms are viable, and our public is food secure.

In 2017, the working group developed a logic model with one, three, and five year goals. This report is one of the products of this statewide effort to begin identifying CSA strategies from across Michigan that are being used to improve wellness, in the physical, social, and economic sense. With a better understanding of these strategies, this group can continue working collaboratively to determine next steps.



Community Supported Agriculture in Michigan

A statewide survey leads to a better understanding of CSA farms & farmers.

In 2018, the working group conducted a statewide survey of CSA farms to help develop strategies to support Michigan CSA farms and farmers and better understand how to proactively address educational, marketing, production, and financial needs. The survey included questions on demographics, farm information, land ownership, participation in food safety programs, growing practices, type of CSA model, participation in food access programs, business finances, and labor.

The survey results demonstrated that farmers who chose to participate in the CSA survey were younger compared to the age distribution of farmers on a state level according to the 2012 census of agriculture. Of



the 125 CSA survey respondents, 39% were under 35, while only 8% of all farm operators in the state are under 35 according to the census. In contrast, 6% of survey respondents were over 65, while 26% of farm operators in the state are over 65 according to the census.

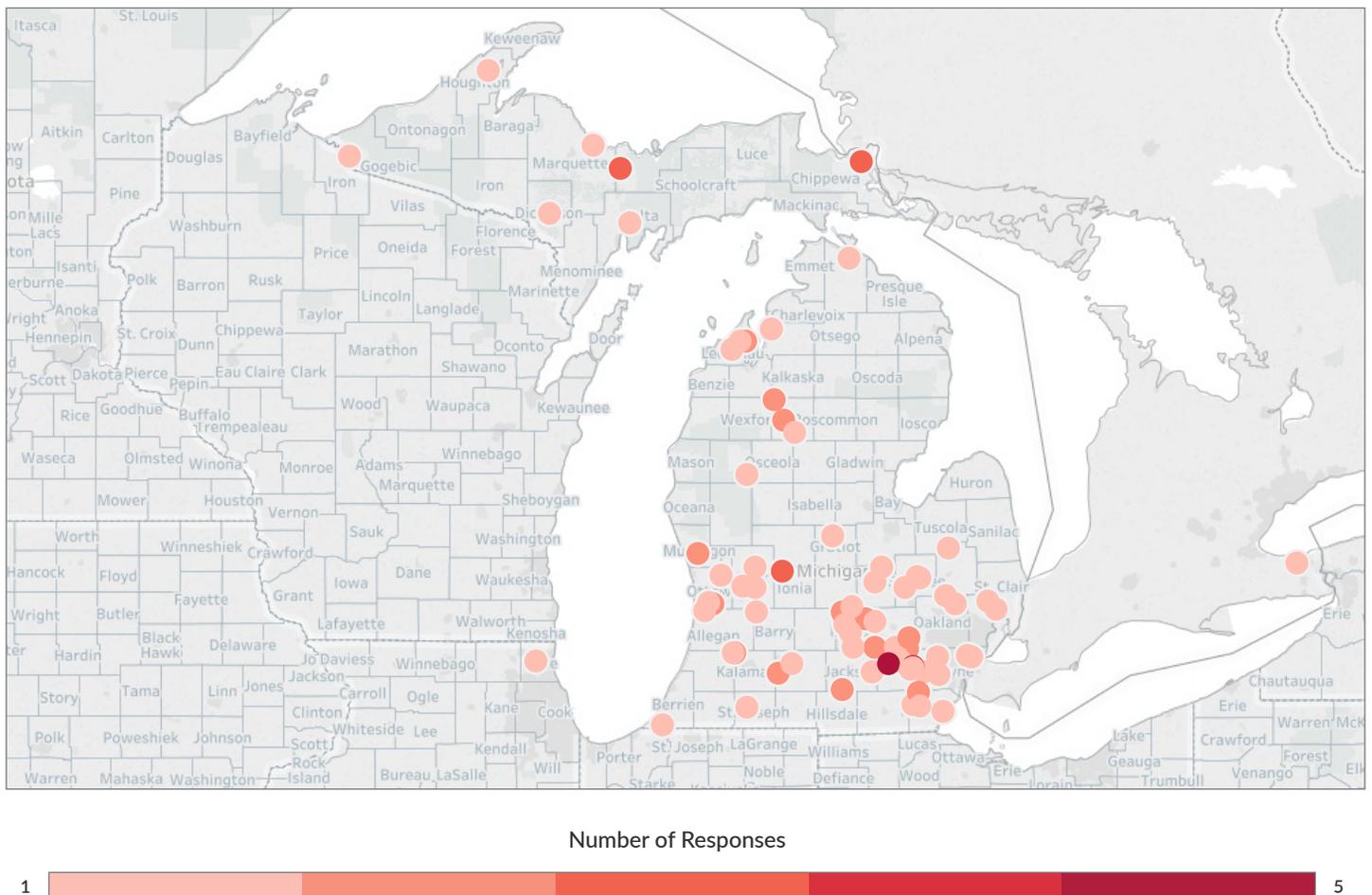
Of the 20% of survey respondents who are not currently operating a CSA program, 15% reported their reason to be “lack of members/demand,” another 15% reported a “change in family circumstances,” and 10% reported “insufficient income for the amount of work.” Forty-two percent of respondents indicated “other,” with some reasons including involvement in a multi-farm CSA, competition issues, and capacity of the farm.



57% percent of survey respondents said they depend on off-farm income to support their CSA farm.



FIGURE 1. Spatial representation of CSA for survey respondents



The survey included four strategies that CSA farms could be involved in to improve food access in their communities and asked about participation in those strategies. When responding to a question about “accepting food assistance benefits for share payment (SNAP/Double Up Food Bucks),” 37% of 75 respondents indicated they participate in this program. When asked about “offering subsidized or sliding scale share prices for low-income customers,” 47% of 69 respondents do not participate, but 31% said they would like to. For “donate shares to local food pantries,” 47% of 72 respondents said they currently participate. For “provide pick-up locations in low-income neighborhoods (including farmers markets),” 42% of 69 respondents said they participate in this strategy. The barrier to participating in these programs that was most frequently reported was not knowing how to use food access programs for CSA shares. Of 76 respondents, 31% indicated that they are working with external organizations (Growers groups, nonprofits, MSU Extension, etc.) on developing strategies for food access through CSA.

Respondents also had an opportunity to describe other strategies they use to help improve food access. Some examples included participation in a farm to pantry CSA program, offering shares in exchange for volunteering on the farm, workplace CSA, and asking paying members if they would pay extra to support members who can’t pay the full price.

On the topic of farmer viability, it was difficult to separate results of the farm’s CSA program from their overall operations and financial stability. Of 73 respondents, 70% consider their farm to be a viable business. When asked if the farm/CSA program depends on off-farm income for support, 57% of 73 respondents indicated that it does. To better understand the reliance on off-farm income, 45% reported needing it to cover household expenses, 19% to cover farm expenses, and 35% to provide health insurance for their family.





Case Studies

How can different CSA models support local farmers?

This report explores how different CSA models can increase consumption of local food, improve food access in low-income and underserved communities, and support local farmers through the case studies that follow. The case studies demonstrate the variety of CSA programs and strategies being used in Michigan, ranging from subsidized to employer-sponsored CSA models.

Taste the Local Difference

Employer Sponsored CSA Model

Taste the Local Difference (TLD), a social enterprise of the Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities, is a food marketing agency that implements a CSA Employee Wellness Program. The program's purpose is to support workplace wellness programs that encourage healthy, productive employees and improve overall wellness. The perceived benefits of this program include providing employees with produce at peak freshness ensuring they receive the highest quality foods, both in nutritional value and superior taste, while also supporting farmers by keeping farms in production, competitive, and economically viable.

Once an employer is identified, TLD matches the worksite with a local farm. TLD then promotes CSA signup to employees, and from there the farmer coordinates delivery directly with the worksite for each weekly drop off. Through a grant that TLD received, 30 incentives were offered as discounts to families with children to be used as a wellness benefit where the employee receives an additional \$100 if they have a child at home. Employers also have the option to offer payroll deductions for the cost of the CSA. The program is currently being implemented in Traverse City.

Participating employers allow TLD to gather data on health improvements, perception of the employee benefit, and more. A pre-survey was completed by 147 employees, and 148 completed a post-survey. The program was implemented at five work sites with five participating farms. Data collected for evaluation purposes included average fruit and vegetable intake, perceived health, weight status, typical shopping location, and addressing shopping concerns including how to choose products and determining access to locally grown food of participants.

Preliminary results from the project indicate that participants in the CSA had a higher average intake of fruits and vegetables compared to non-participants, though the results are not statistically significant. Additionally, a smaller percentage of participants reported gaining weight and perceiving their health as just "fair." While these results are not conclusive, they do build on existing evidence and research that diets high in fruits and vegetables can lead to lower rates of chronic disease and obesity. Taste the Local Difference has concluded that with the scope of their project there is not enough evidence to prove workplace CSA can improve employee health, but that there is potential for future research and program evaluation to continue exploring this relationship.



Oakland Avenue Urban Farm

Subsidized Model: Michigan Health Endowment Funded CSA

Unsubsidized Model: Oakland Avenue Urban Farm

The Oakland Avenue Urban Farm (OAU) is a program of Detroit's North End Christian Community Development Corporation, a nonprofit, community-based organization dedicated to cultivating healthy foods, sustainable economies, and active cultural environments. Jerry Hebron is the founder and Executive Director of Oakland Avenue Farm. The farm has been operating for seven years with the CSA piloted three years ago. The OAU has a number of different programs: a traditional CSA that runs from late spring until Thanksgiving, a fully subsidized CSA that runs for 20 weeks, a farm stand at three separate assembly plants that serves more than 400 people, and a regular farm stand at the farmers market. Each one of the components has a different revenue stream that adds to the farm's viability.

The traditional CSA offering is part of the farm stand at the Chrysler assembly plant. Each of the subscribers pick up the CSA at the farm stand at a cost of \$375 for the season. This CSA is difficult to manage due to the floating schedule of the employees at the plant. This program is coordinated by Jerry Hebron and one administrative assistant.

OAU is also part of a fully subsidized CSA with Michigan Environmental Council (MEC) that enables 40 families to have a weekly box of produce for 20 weeks. The funding for the program is provided by MEC from a secured grant as a part of the Healthy Kids Healthy Michigan coalition. The project is challenging because so many families receiving food assistance are used to a large monthly distribution of mostly processed and canned foods. Participants in the program are not accustomed to picking up a share of food for themselves and are not used to the individualized box of produce made for them to pick up. Although the model is a challenge, the numbers improved from 2017 to 2018. Being more available for different days of pickup has helped to get the produce to the families in need. The program has been effective, it just requires more time to manage. Some of the additional features of this CSA include cooking demos provided by the Ford Health Center and supplies like chopping boards, knives, and cookbooks.

Marketing and recruitment for the program is coordinated with local daycare centers and schools. Jerry and her team found that working with the local daycare centers were a great way to bring the subsidized CSA information to the individuals that would benefit. The team also went door to door in the Oakland Ave neighborhood to find subscribers. This year, the subsidized program has sold out and they are on a waiting list for the remainder of the program, so if an individual does not pick up for a couple of weeks they will be dropped and replaced.

Oakland Ave Urban Farm supplies over 80% of all the produce for this program with the remaining produce sourced from other local growers. Jerry has seen an increase in interest in the CSA model over the past couple of years with a 10% growth rate this past year. Customers like to see the farmer who is actually growing the produce and really like how fresh the products are. This CSA program is perceived as important for farmer viability because it provides seed money for farmers when they really need it. It helps with planning in the early stages and the level of comfort is higher and stress is lowered. "In spite of the bumps in the road trying to build out the models, from a farmer's perspective, this is the way to go. We need this customer!"

“In spite of the bumps in the road trying to build out the models, from a farmer’s perspective, this is the way to go. We need this customer!”



Jerry Hebron, Oakland Avenue Urban Farm



Flint Fresh and The Local Grocer

Subsidized CSA Model: Flint Fresh Veggie Box

Unsubsidized Model: Local Grocer CSA

The Local Grocer (LG) CSA and the Flint Fresh Veggie Box (FFVB) are programs that are both managed by Erin Caudell in Flint. The FFVB is a subsidized program that delivers the CSA direct to consumer and accepts multiple food benefit programs for payment. The LG accepts EBT food benefits for payment but is an unsubsidized model. The two programs are similar in structure but also very unique.

The FFVB was heavily marketed in the city of Flint, with a door hanger going on virtually every home in the city. The target audience was residents in the city of Flint to ease the delivery of produce. The boxes come in two sizes with two tiers; the farmer choice and the consumer choice. The number of participants vary from week to week from 35 to 100 boxes due to the choice of size and timing. The price range is from \$15 to \$30 depending on size and choice. There are 12 farms that are involved in the CSA that have a lot more capacity to offer for expansion. Flint Fresh is a food hub that is involved with the Veggie Box and Erin sees the Flint Fresh Veggie Box as a program that is great for farmer development. The Veggie Box offers immediate feedback to farmers about the quality and quantity of the produce and is an excellent way for small farmers to start and gain access into a new market. Each spring, Erin holds a meeting with the farmers to organize and prepare for the new season. The Veggie Box has seen growth every year and is helping to improve farmer viability through opening new markets and offering trainings to increase capacity year over year.

The Local Grocer (LG) CSA was marketed through Facebook and by word of mouth. The LG CSA is a traditional CSA that offers pickup at the store or delivery to worksite. Currently the CSA program partners with three additional farmers that coordinate each week to include the best products in the box week to week. LG CSA cost ranges from \$200 to \$575 per share depending on season and how often the share is received. This CSA is also looking to grow capacity. The LG CSA is working with farmers that are known in the industry already and keeping the conversation going towards stronger farmer growth and viability.



Allen Neighborhood Center

Subsidized Model: Michigan Health Endowment Funded CSA

Unsubsidized Model: Allen Neighborhood Center Veggie Box

The Allen Neighborhood Center is a place-based organization that serves as a hub for neighborhood revitalization and for activities that promote the health and well-being of Lansing's Eastside community and other stakeholders. The Veggie Box is a multi-farmer CSA that is unsubsidized and the Michigan Health Endowment Fund (MHEF) CSA is a fully subsidized CSA.

The Allen Neighborhood Center (ANC), like Oakland Ave Urban Farm, is part of the fully subsidized Michigan Health Endowment Fund CSA with Michigan Environmental Council (MEC) that allows for 40 families to have a weekly box of produce for 20 weeks. The funding for the program is provided by MEC from a secured grant as a part of the Healthy Kids Healthy Michigan coalition. The marketing for the program was geared to low income families with kids. This audience is reached through other programs offered at ANC (food pantry and food benefit enrollment assistance) and through the local church. Currently there are 30 participants in the program. Making the boxes more personal by adding the name on the outside and having leeway on pickup times have helped the program to run smoother.

The Veggie Box (VB) is a multi-farmer traditional CSA. This is the fifth year of the VB and the growth of the program has been excellent. This year, the program doubled in size for the third year in a row. The current CSA has 206 participants and offers delivery to 16 registered worksites. The program is open to anyone in the Lansing area that is interested in local food and/or fresh produce. The cost is \$280 plus the cost of any additional items the participant would like to order as a part of the VB and it runs over two 14- week sessions. Currently 15 farms are involved and they are able to provide all of the produce needed. This model is seen as positively impacting farmer viability and health because it is a guaranteed sale for the farmer each week, without having to sell at a store or market.



Access of West Michigan

Subsidized Model: Farm to Pantry

The vision of the Farm to Pantry program at Access of West Michigan is simple; it aims to address food insecurity by increasing access to locally grown fruits and vegetables. Access of West Michigan works to build a more resilient food system by investing in local farmers and creating affordable healthy food retail sites through partnering pantry resource centers. The Farm to Pantry program is available at five sites in low-income neighborhoods in Kent County: North Kent Connect, The Other Way Ministries, The Pantry, United Church Outreach Ministries, and SECOM Resource Center. Participants in the CSA to Pantry program participate in classes on how to use CSA products to prepare fresh and healthy meals and techniques for storage and preservation. The curriculum also covers other topics related to the food system, agriculture, community, and justice, with a focus on how participants can help make local neighborhoods places to live and grow through food system change.

The Farm to Pantry program has been operating for four years. The CSA is coordinated by Hannah Fernando from Access of West Michigan, farm partners, and community members at each pantry resource center. The program is supported by funding from private donors, as well as Michigan Health and Wellness 4x4 Plan funding from Kent County Health Department.

There are approximately 15 families for each pantry site who participate in the Farm to Pantry program, including the CSA class. Participants are typically neighbors in the area surrounding each pantry site. There is no cost to participate. The class has grown significantly each year, and almost every site currently has a waiting list. Five farms participate in this program and have more than enough production to cover the need.

The program coordinator believes there is a correlation between the CSA program and classes and support for farmers as reported to them by both the farmers involved and partners of the program. Each CSA share is a full investment and partnership with the farmer for a full growing season. Data is collected for this project through a pre- and post-survey that assesses the satisfaction, impact, and effectiveness of the class, organization, and curriculum.

Each CSA share is a full investment and partnership with and for the farmer for a full growing season.



Lessons Learned

Subsidized CSA shares are a win for both the farmers and those with limited access to food.

After reviewing case studies of CSA strategies from across the state, this report found that a common theme for CSA models with the specific purpose of addressing food access is that they depend on subsidized shares, typically supported by grants. Whether the share was free or offered at a reduced rate, this was true for each of the case studies in this report. While the goal of many programs is to be self-sustaining, having subsidized CSA shares is at least a short-term win for both the farmers and for food access – the farmers are compensated and populations with limited food access can enjoy fresh and local fruits and vegetables.

Evaluation metrics varied across the CSA programs as there were different data needs from different funders. For instance, the grant supporting Taste the Local Difference CSA Employee Wellness program provides extra incentives for employees with children, so their data covers children’s health, in addition to employee health and behaviors. The Farm to Pantry program at Access of West Michigan previously focused more on measuring access, consumption, and social wellbeing of participants in the CSA, and in the fall of 2018 will be able to report on health outcomes such as diabetes, obesity, heart disease, hypertension, and cholesterol.

Success of the CSA programs reviewed in this report appear to be strongly tied to the reputation of the organization as a community center and an access point to low-income populations. Additionally, these programs all had strong partnerships that allowed for streamlined logistics connecting the farmers to the CSA participants. The strong community aspect of these programs means they are more successful in addressing health and wellness because their holistic approach does more than just provide food – they also offer education, resources, and other services.



Recommendations

Through discussions with different CSA managers, the Michigan CSA Working Group, and analysis of the CSA farm survey, we see a strong potential for CSA to be a mechanism to support farmer viability and improved health of low-income populations through increased consumption of fruits and vegetables. Below are potential next steps to continue this exploration.

Conduct additional research on CSA models across Michigan.

A primary goal of this report was to begin identifying common metrics used to measure food access, health, and farm viability across the state in relation to participation in CSA programs. A limitation of this project was that the timing spanned October to September and most programs do not yet have data available to share from this season. We recommend extending the duration of future projects for the purpose of data collection. An initial review of a few participating programs was completed that compared their metrics with credible sources (Center for Disease Control, National Cancer Institute, etc), however much more research needs to be conducted to represent the data being collected in Michigan. Through standardizing metrics we can help demonstrate collective impact and gaps in our progress towards increased wellness.

Explore long-term sustainable solutions for meeting needs of food access & farmer viability.

After reviewing CSA models across Michigan, none of the models reviewed could meet both food access and farmer viability needs without being subsidized. While acknowledging that innovative programs such as Double Up Food Bucks, Prescriptions for Health, and Hoophouses for Health have made great strides towards this goal bridging wellness and farmer viability, we're interested in how CSA can be incorporated into more accessible programs.

Create more resources to help farms participate in food access programs.

According to the CSA farm survey conducted in 2018 by the Michigan CSA Working Group, a major barrier to farmers' participating in food access programs is a lack of understanding of how to use programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Farmers markets have worked hard to document this process, so we recommend looking at how to expand these programs beyond markets. The working group has identified a priority in 2019 to help farmers increase participation in food access programs as we see a need for more resources and technical assistance for farmers.

CONCLUSION

From the environmental scan and exploratory case studies, we can see that farmers will continue to sell their produce through the Community Supported Agriculture model, and that many farmers are interested in how they can help address food access. Likewise, charitable food organizations and the public health sector are also recognizing the benefits of supporting local farmers to achieve their goals of increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The next step is to take this mutual understanding further to explore how we might leverage this strategy to achieve wellness for farmers and for the communities they serve. As CSA models diverge from the traditional model for many reasons (including competition from fresh food delivery systems), there may be more opportunities to rethink the bridge between farm businesses and communities with limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Regardless of your role in the food system, of which we all play several roles, we urge you to continue thinking about important and interconnected possibilities of how Community Supported Agriculture can support improved wellness.





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