


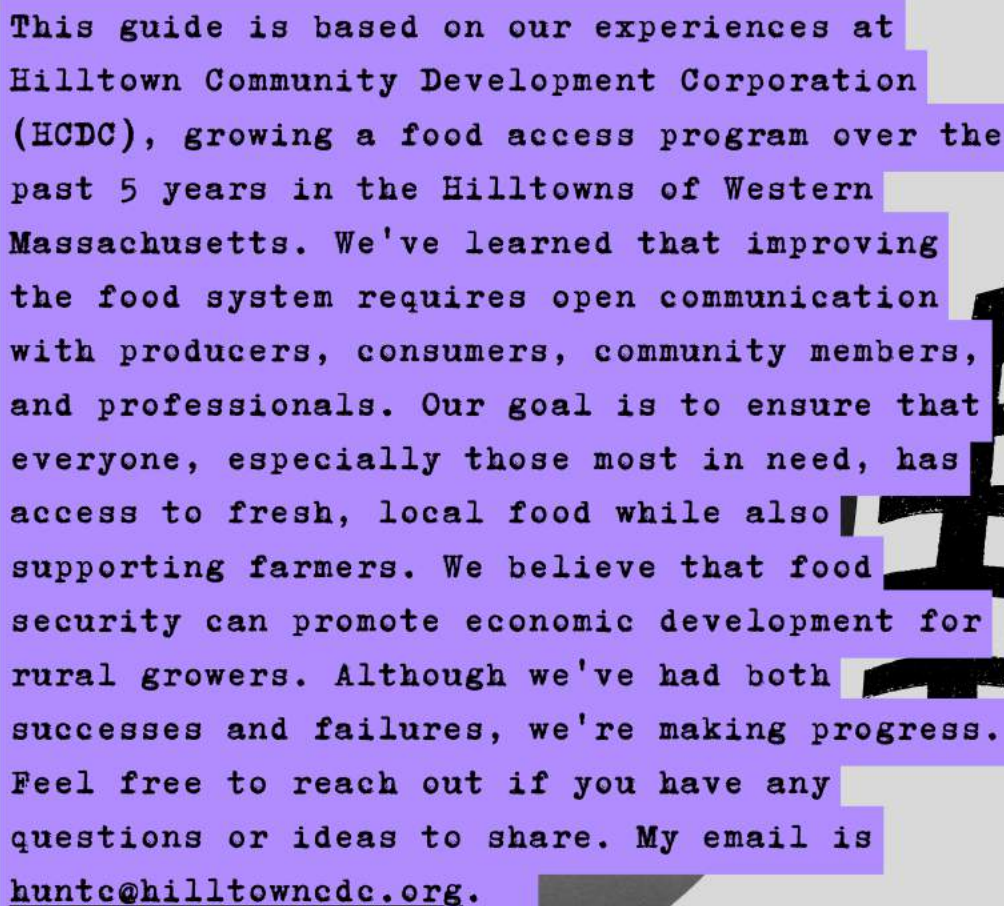
A JOURNEY TO IMPROVE RURAL FOOD ACCESS

Lessons learned in the Hilltowns of
Massachusetts.





To all the new food system warriors stepping into this arena, take heart in the transformative power of your efforts. Embrace the lessons learned, celebrate the victories - big and small - and know that your commitment is shaping a future where access to fresh, locally sourced food is a right, not a privilege. As you embark on this journey, may your passion drive you, your resilience sustain you, and your impact resonate throughout the community. Here's to the growth ahead and the positive ripples of tomorrow's food revolution!



This guide is based on our experiences at Hilltown Community Development Corporation (HCDC), growing a food access program over the past 5 years in the Hilltowns of Western Massachusetts. We've learned that improving the food system requires open communication with producers, consumers, community members, and professionals. Our goal is to ensure that everyone, especially those most in need, has access to fresh, local food while also supporting farmers. We believe that food security can promote economic development for rural growers. Although we've had both successes and failures, we're making progress. Feel free to reach out if you have any questions or ideas to share. My email is huntc@hilltowncdc.org.

-Hunt Chase





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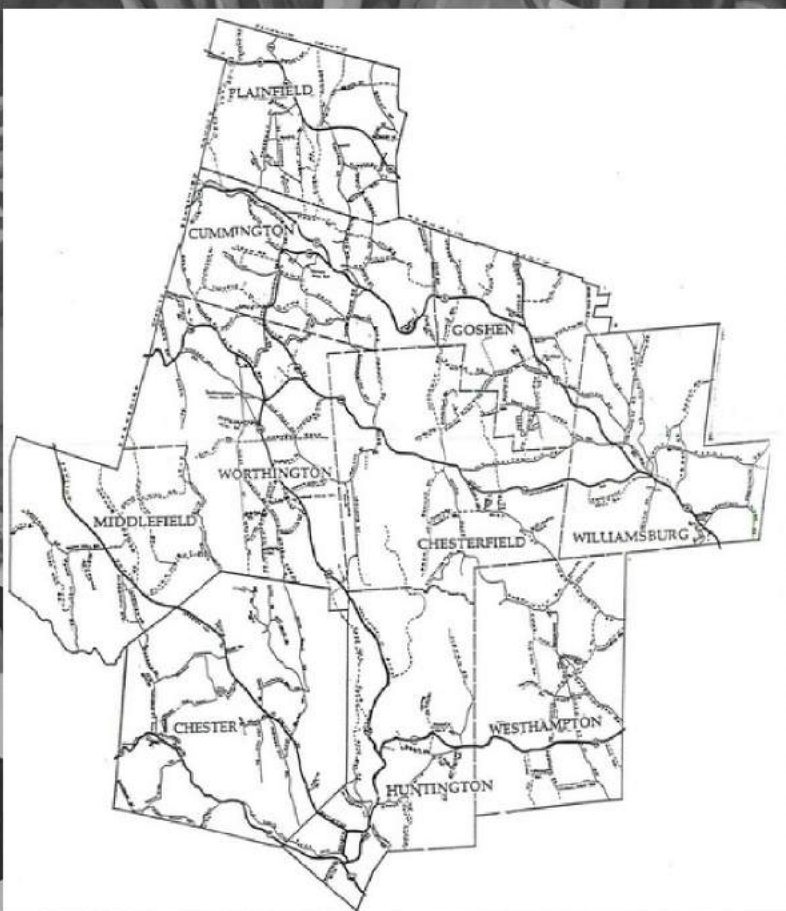
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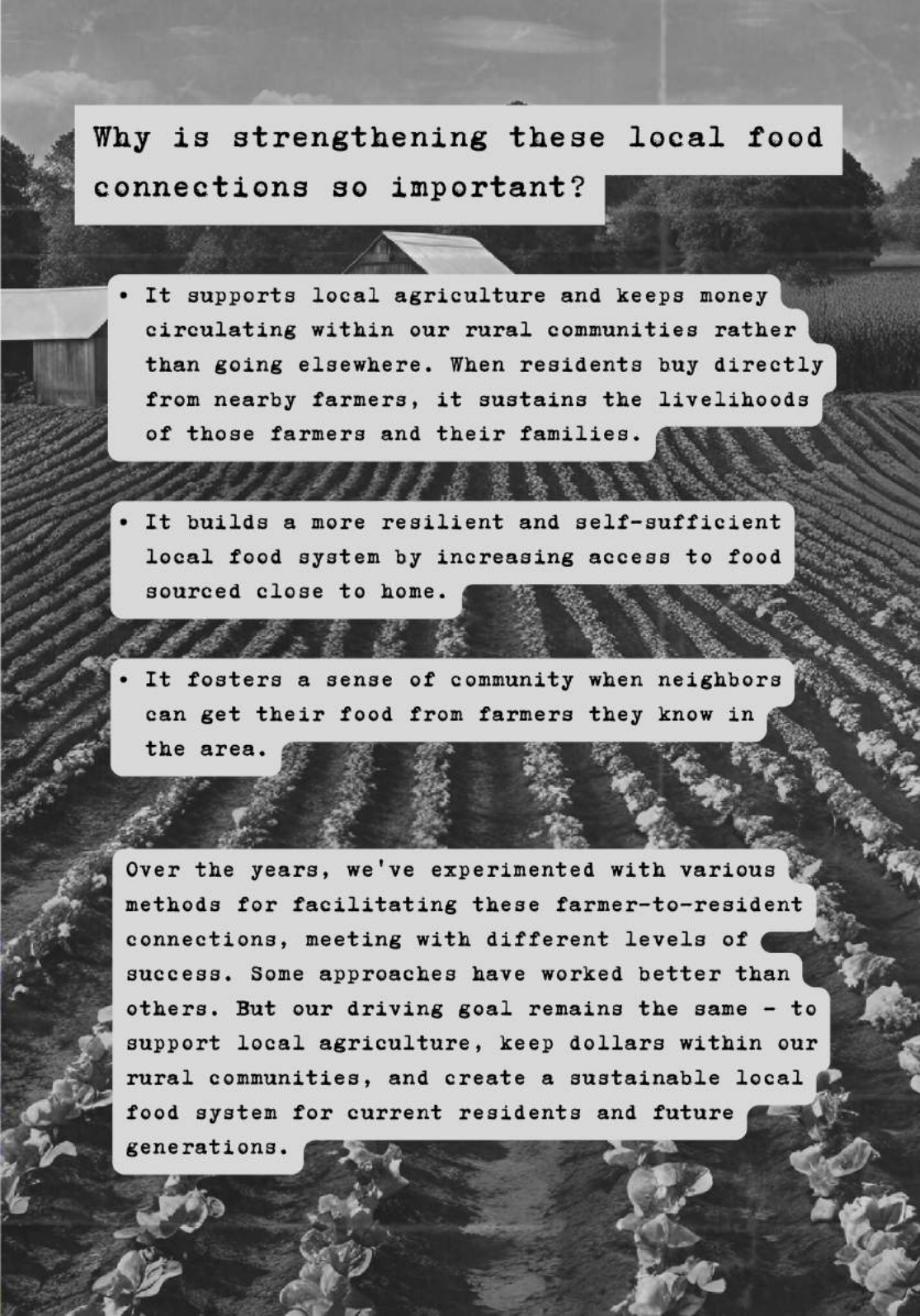
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We've been working hard to strengthen the connections between local farmers and residents in the rural Hilltowns of Massachusetts. These are the mountainous communities located west of Northampton and east of Pittsfield. People living in the Hilltowns face challenges like not having centralized locations, limited public transportation options, and a lack of conventional grocery stores within a 45-minute drive.





Why is strengthening these local food connections so important?

- It supports local agriculture and keeps money circulating within our rural communities rather than going elsewhere. When residents buy directly from nearby farmers, it sustains the livelihoods of those farmers and their families.
- It builds a more resilient and self-sufficient local food system by increasing access to food sourced close to home.
- It fosters a sense of community when neighbors can get their food from farmers they know in the area.

Over the years, we've experimented with various methods for facilitating these farmer-to-resident connections, meeting with different levels of success. Some approaches have worked better than others. But our driving goal remains the same - to support local agriculture, keep dollars within our rural communities, and create a sustainable local food system for current residents and future generations.

Market Timeline

2017

PLANNING

Meetings with community, food assessment of region, built relations with farmers, researched funding opportunities

2018

SOFT LAUNCH

Held Markets at 2 locations, served around 40 people, purchased produce from 5 farms, 11 week season, began SNAP/HIP vendor process

2019

ACTUAL LAUNCH

11 week season, serving 75 people at 4 locations, continued to work with 5 farms for produce

2020

GROWING PAINS

11 week season, serving over 120 people at 4 locations, grew community donation fund, started offering subsidies, became difficult predicting veggie quantities for each market

2021

SWITCHED ONLINE

Developed online store, grew farmer participation to 24, started carrying meat and dairy, distributed to 10 communities, 18 week season.

2022-2023

OPENED STORE

Opened year-round walk-in grocery store, working with 37 farmers, serving about 1,000 people, delivery service, grew the free food program to provide 40K of food to self identified food insecure folks.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

Before starting our Hilltown Market, we worked with Healthy Hampshire to start the Hilltown Food Policy Council. Together, we held meetings where community members identified key food outlets in the region. We also encouraged people to share their ideas for an ideal food system. To ensure diverse perspectives, consider these strategies:

INCLUSIVE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT:

ENSURE REPRESENTATION FROM DIVERSE DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS, INCLUDING DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS, ETHNICITIES, SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS, AND CULTURAL COMMUNITIES.

COLLABORATE WITH LOCAL COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, SCHOOLS, AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS TO REACH A BROAD AUDIENCE.

STORYTELLING AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES:

ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO SHARE PERSONAL STORIES AND EXPERIENCES RELATED TO THEIR FOOD ACCESS, PREFERENCES, AND CHALLENGES.

HIGHLIGHTING REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES CAN CREATE EMPATHY AND A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE COMMUNITY'S NEEDS.

FACILITATED VISIONING SESSIONS:

ORGANIZE FACILITATED WORKSHOPS OR VISIONING SESSIONS WHERE COMMUNITY MEMBERS CAN ACTIVELY CONTRIBUTE THEIR IDEAS FOR AN IDEAL FOOD SYSTEM.

USE CREATIVE TOOLS SUCH AS BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS, VISION BOARDS, OR MAPPING EXERCISES TO CAPTURE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES.

A Food Policy Council is an organization that enables citizens to influence food policy, generally on a local level. The concept originated in the United States, where the first council was founded in Knoxville in 1982 to battle the effects of an economic recession on the local food supply system.

Food Policy Councils bring together different stakeholders that want to work on making healthy, local and sustainable food available for people in a certain region. In this way the councils connect representatives of consumers, producers, non-governmental organizations, and governments to find solutions suitable to their region (Wikipedia).

SURVEYS AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS:

DESIGN SURVEYS OR FEEDBACK FORMS TO GATHER OPINIONS AND PREFERENCES FROM A LARGER AUDIENCE.

UTILIZE ONLINE PLATFORMS OR MOBILE APPS TO REACH A WIDER DEMOGRAPHIC AND FACILITATE CONVENIENT PARTICIPATION.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS:

COLLABORATE WITH LOCAL NON-PROFITS, COMMUNITY GROUPS, AND ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS TO AMPLIFY OUTREACH EFFORTS.

LEVERAGE EXISTING NETWORKS TO ENGAGE WITH HARD-TO-REACH POPULATIONS AND ENSURE THEIR VOICES ARE HEARD.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS:

PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES ON FOOD SYSTEMS, SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES, AND THE IMPACT OF LOCAL CHOICES ON THE COMMUNITY.

RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESSES AND FARMERS.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE:

Cultural competence — loosely defined as the ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one's own (American Psychological Association)

BE MINDFUL OF CULTURAL NUANCES AND TRADITIONS RELATED TO FOOD WITHIN THE COMMUNITY.

ENSURE THAT THE FOOD SYSTEM ENVISIONED IS CULTURALLY COMPETENT AND RESPECTFUL OF DIVERSE DIETARY PREFERENCES.

INTERACTIVE EVENTS:

ORGANIZE INTERACTIVE EVENTS SUCH AS COOKING DEMONSTRATIONS, TASTINGS, OR FARM TOURS TO CONNECT COMMUNITY MEMBERS WITH LOCAL FOOD PRODUCERS.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIRECT INTERACTION BETWEEN CONSUMERS AND PRODUCERS TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY BONDS.

FEEDBACK LOOPS:

ESTABLISH CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK LOOPS TO KEEP THE COMMUNITY INFORMED ABOUT THE PROGRESS OF THE FOOD SYSTEM INITIATIVES.

REGULARLY REVISIT THE VISIONING PROCESS TO INCORPORATE EVOLVING COMMUNITY NEEDS AND PREFERENCES.

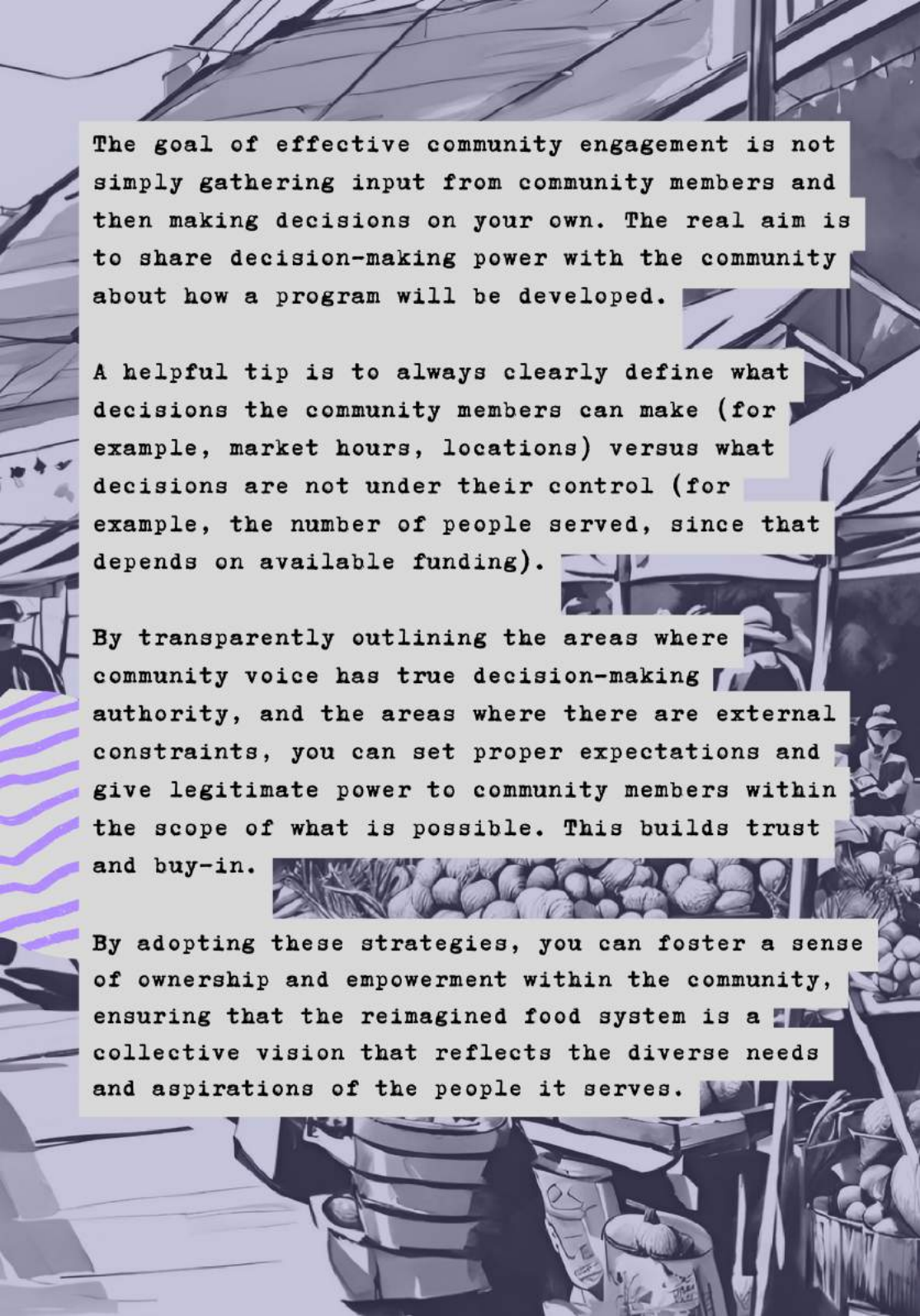
TRANSPARENT DECISION-MAKING:

MAINTAIN TRANSPARENCY IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES RELATED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOOD SYSTEM.

COMMUNICATE HOW COMMUNITY INPUT HAS INFLUENCED DECISIONS AND OUTCOMES.

Steps to Transparent Decision-Making:

- 1. Define the Decision Context:**
 - Identify the problem or decision to be made.
 - Gather relevant information and data.
- 2. Stakeholder Involvement:**
 - Identify all stakeholders affected by the decision.
 - Engage stakeholders through consultations and discussions.
- 3. Criteria Establishment:**
 - Define clear criteria for evaluating options.
 - Ensure criteria are aligned with stakeholder values and organizational goals.
- 4. Option Generation:**
 - Brainstorm and list all possible options or solutions.
 - Encourage creative and diverse ideas.
- 5. Evaluation and Analysis:**
 - Assess each option against the established criteria.
 - Use quantitative and qualitative analysis to weigh pros and cons.
- 6. Decision Making:**
 - Make the decision based on the analysis and stakeholder input.
 - Document the rationale behind the decision.
- 7. Implementation:**
 - Develop an action plan for implementing the decision.
 - Assign responsibilities and timelines.
- 8. Monitoring and Feedback:**
 - Monitor the implementation and outcomes.
 - Gather feedback from stakeholders and adjust as necessary.
- 9. Communication:**
 - Communicate the decision and its rationale to all stakeholders.
 - Ensure transparency in the communication process.



The goal of effective community engagement is not simply gathering input from community members and then making decisions on your own. The real aim is to share decision-making power with the community about how a program will be developed.

A helpful tip is to always clearly define what decisions the community members can make (for example, market hours, locations) versus what decisions are not under their control (for example, the number of people served, since that depends on available funding).


By transparently outlining the areas where community voice has true decision-making authority, and the areas where there are external constraints, you can set proper expectations and give legitimate power to community members within the scope of what is possible. This builds trust and buy-in.

By adopting these strategies, you can foster a sense of ownership and empowerment within the community, ensuring that the reimagined food system is a collective vision that reflects the diverse needs and aspirations of the people it serves.



FARMER ENGAGEMENT

The other piece of the puzzle is the farmers; it is important to ensure that agricultural producers have a voice in redeveloping a food system. We as future food system workers need to understand the capacity, seasonal fluctuations in both pricing and availability, and help shrink the learning curve for beginner farmers. We found that it is important for us to have yearly winter meetings with our farmers. During these meetings we discuss various aspects of farming, share insights, and address any challenges or concerns they may have. These interactions provide an opportunity to build a strong rapport with farmers, fostering a collaborative approach to food system development.



We found it useful to incorporate the following elements into our winter meetings:

KNOWLEDGE SHARING:

SHARE INFORMATION ON BEST PRACTICES, MODERN TECHNOLOGIES, AND INNOVATIONS IN AGRICULTURE. DISCUSS CROP ROTATIONS, SOIL HEALTH, AND SUSTAINABLE FARMING PRACTICES. PROVIDE UPDATES ON MARKET TRENDS AND CONSUMER PREFERENCES TO HELP FARMERS MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS.

CAPACITY BUILDING:

OFFER WORKSHOPS OR TRAINING SESSIONS TO ENHANCE FARMERS' SKILLS IN AREAS SUCH AS CROP MANAGEMENT, PEST CONTROL, AND IRRIGATION TECHNIQUES. COLLABORATE WITH AGRICULTURAL EXPERTS TO CONDUCT SPECIALIZED TRAINING SESSIONS BASED ON THE NEEDS IDENTIFIED BY THE FARMERS.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES:

CREATE AN OPEN FORUM FOR FARMERS TO EXPRESS THEIR CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS. WORK TOGETHER TO FIND SOLUTIONS AND IMPLEMENT STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME COMMON ISSUES IN AGRICULTURE, SUCH AS WEATHER-RELATED CHALLENGES OR MARKET UNCERTAINTIES.

NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES:

FACILITATE NETWORKING AMONG FARMERS, ALLOWING THEM TO SHARE EXPERIENCES AND LEARN FROM EACH OTHER.

ENCOURAGE THE FORMATION OF FARMER COOPERATIVES OR ALLIANCES TO COLLECTIVELY ADDRESS ISSUES AND LEVERAGE ECONOMIES OF SCALE.

PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES:

EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABLE FARMING PRACTICES AND ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP.

DISCUSS WAYS TO REDUCE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT AND PROMOTE BIODIVERSITY ON FARMS.

FINANCIAL EDUCATION:

PROVIDE INFORMATION ON FISCAL MANAGEMENT, BUDGETING, AND ACCESSING FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES.

SHARE INSIGHTS ON RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES TO HELP FARMERS NAVIGATE ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTIES.

POLICY ADVOCACY:

STAY INFORMED ABOUT RELEVANT AGRICULTURAL POLICIES AND REGULATIONS.

ADVOCATE FOR POLICIES THAT SUPPORT SMALL-SCALE AND SUSTAINABLE FARMING PRACTICES.

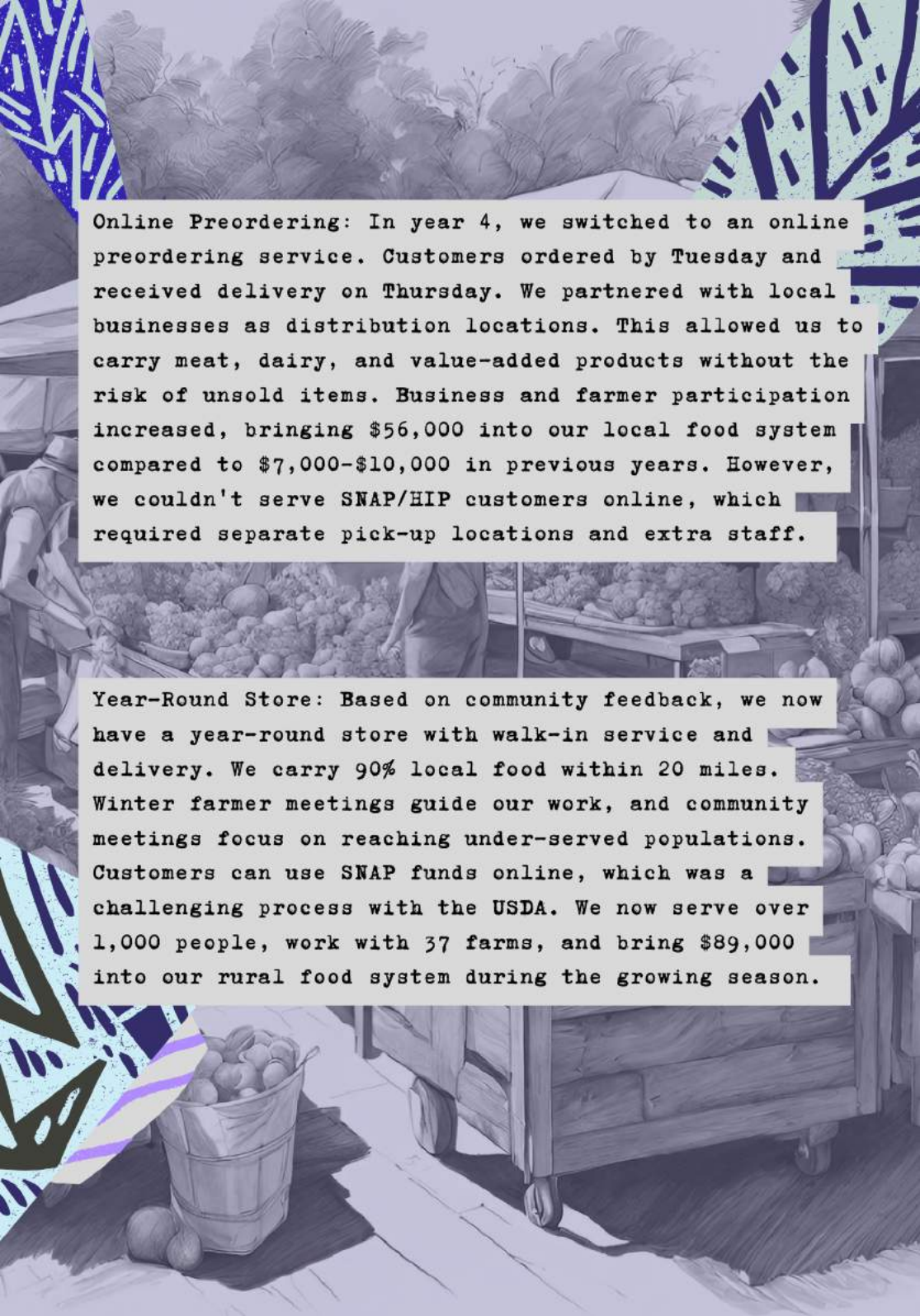
By including these components in your meetings, you can empower and support farmers, helping to build a strong and sustainable food system. This cooperative strategy ensures that the perspectives of agricultural producers are valued and considered in the ongoing development of the food system.



MARKET TYPES

We have been fortunate to try a few different models over the years, we are still growing and figuring out how to handle the ever-increasing demand, but that journey is part of the excitement.

Mobile Markets: We ran pop-up farmers markets for the first 3 years, using community input to find convenient locations. We collected produce from farms and displayed it for customers to buy. This worked well for small customer bases but became challenging as we grew.

The background is a stylized illustration of a market scene. It features various stalls and produce. In the foreground, there's a wooden cart on wheels filled with produce, and a metal bucket overflowing with round items like tomatoes. The background shows more stalls with different types of produce, including what looks like leafy greens and other vegetables. The style is somewhat abstract and artistic, with a muted color palette. There are decorative elements on the left and right sides, resembling stylized trees or patterns in shades of blue and green.

Online Preordering: In year 4, we switched to an online preordering service. Customers ordered by Tuesday and received delivery on Thursday. We partnered with local businesses as distribution locations. This allowed us to carry meat, dairy, and value-added products without the risk of unsold items. Business and farmer participation increased, bringing \$56,000 into our local food system compared to \$7,000-\$10,000 in previous years. However, we couldn't serve SNAP/HIP customers online, which required separate pick-up locations and extra staff.

Year-Round Store: Based on community feedback, we now have a year-round store with walk-in service and delivery. We carry 90% local food within 20 miles. Winter farmer meetings guide our work, and community meetings focus on reaching under-served populations. Customers can use SNAP funds online, which was a challenging process with the USDA. We now serve over 1,000 people, work with 37 farms, and bring \$89,000 into our rural food system during the growing season.



SIGNING UP TO ACCEPT SNAP

About 1/3 of our customer base uses SNAP or HIP. It is important to integrate both payment processes into your market, as this ensures economic barriers are not a limiting factor on who you can serve.

We utilize grants as another way to serve people, one example would be our "Golden Ticket" program funded through the Local Food Purchasing Assistance Grant, with this we are able to offer \$150 to any community member that self identifies as food insecure.

One of the difficulties with signing up to accept SNAP is that you already must be in operation, so do not be defeated, start small and begin the process once you have established a presence in your community.

Steps for accepting SNAP

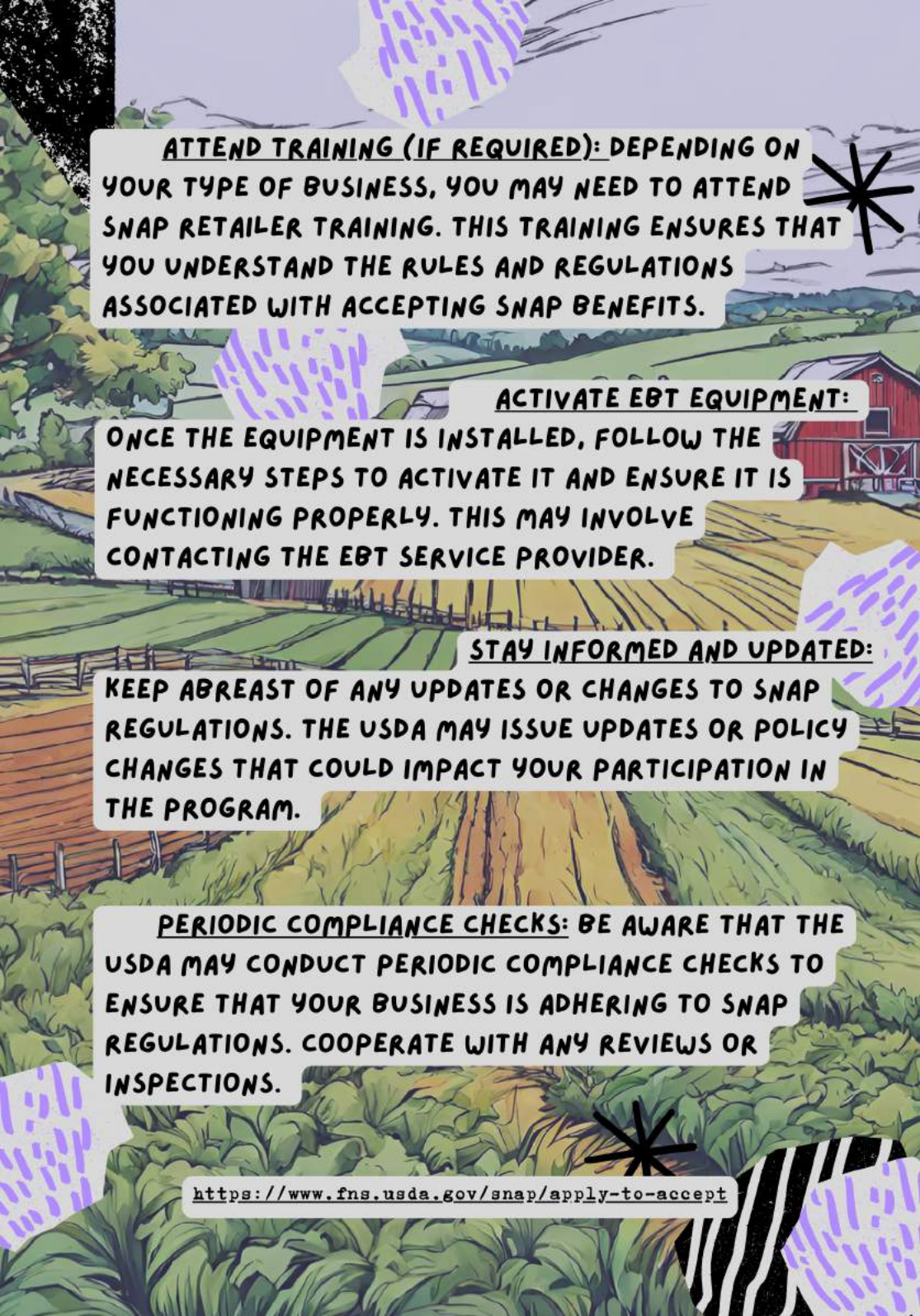
Accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits involves several steps to ensure that your business or organization complies with the regulations and requirements set by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Here are general steps for signing up to accept SNAP:

DETERMINE ELIGIBILITY: VERIFY THAT YOUR BUSINESS OR ORGANIZATION IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SNAP PROGRAM. MOST RETAILERS, INCLUDING GROCERY STORES, SUPERMARKETS, AND FARMERS' MARKETS, CAN QUALIFY.

GET A USDA FNS NUMBER: OBTAIN A USDA FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE (FNS) NUMBER BY COMPLETING THE ONLINE APPLICATION ON THE USDA WEBSITE OR CONTACTING THE USDA SNAP RETAILER SERVICE CENTER. THIS NUMBER IS A UNIQUE IDENTIFIER FOR SNAP RETAILERS.

COMPLETE THE SNAP RETAILER APPLICATION: FILL OUT THE SNAP RETAILER APPLICATION FORM (FORM FNS-252-2). THIS FORM IS AVAILABLE ON THE USDA WEBSITE OR CAN BE OBTAINED BY CONTACTING THE USDA SNAP RETAILER SERVICE CENTER.

SUBMIT REQUIRED DOCUMENTS: PROVIDE ALL REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION ALONG WITH YOUR APPLICATION. THIS MAY INCLUDE PROOF OF IDENTITY, BUSINESS LICENSES, SALES TAX PERMITS, AND OTHER RELEVANT DOCUMENTS.



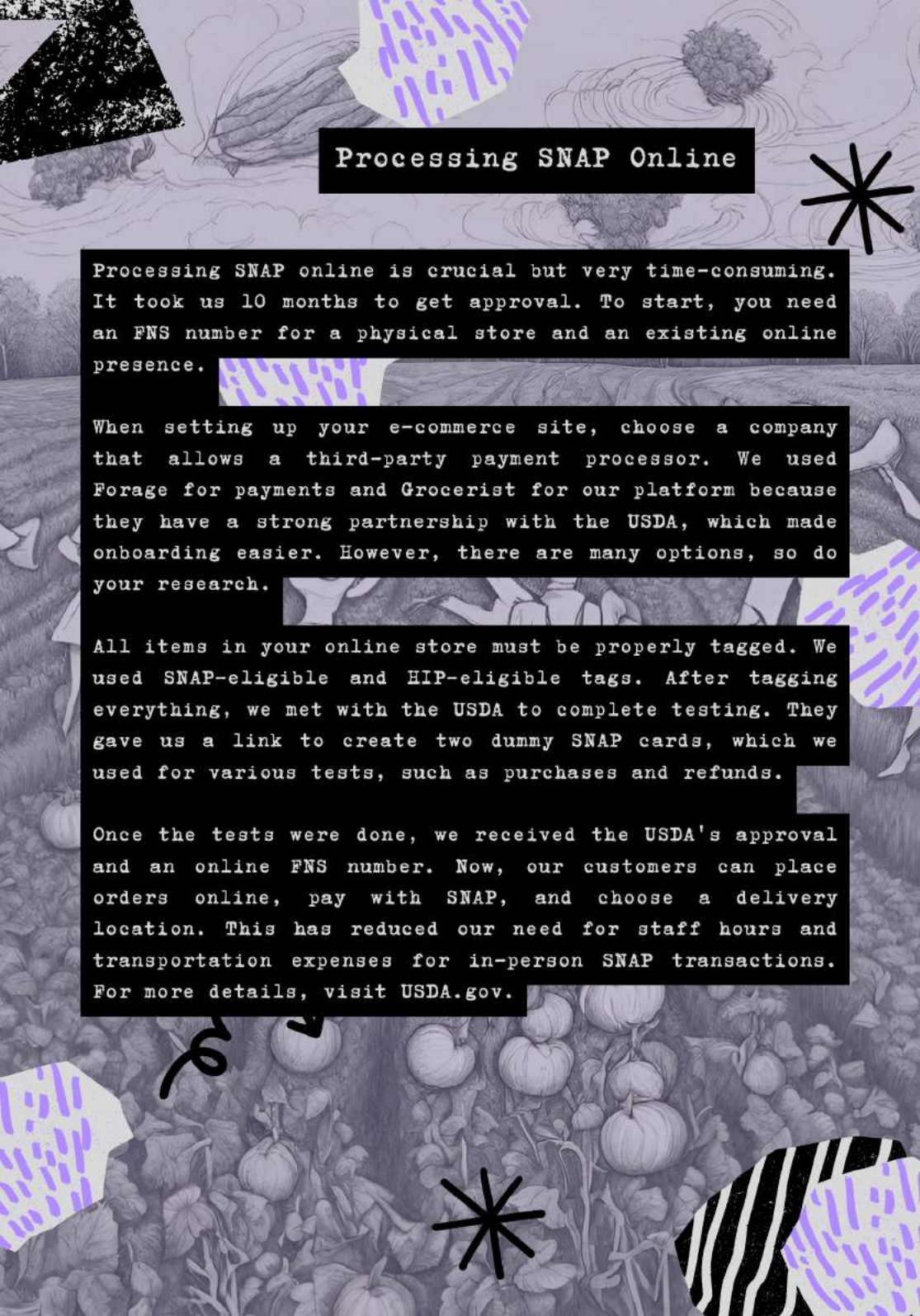
ATTEND TRAINING (IF REQUIRED): DEPENDING ON YOUR TYPE OF BUSINESS, YOU MAY NEED TO ATTEND SNAP RETAILER TRAINING. THIS TRAINING ENSURES THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THE RULES AND REGULATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH ACCEPTING SNAP BENEFITS.

ACTIVATE EBT EQUIPMENT: ONCE THE EQUIPMENT IS INSTALLED, FOLLOW THE NECESSARY STEPS TO ACTIVATE IT AND ENSURE IT IS FUNCTIONING PROPERLY. THIS MAY INVOLVE CONTACTING THE EBT SERVICE PROVIDER.

STAY INFORMED AND UPDATED: KEEP ABEAST OF ANY UPDATES OR CHANGES TO SNAP REGULATIONS. THE USDA MAY ISSUE UPDATES OR POLICY CHANGES THAT COULD IMPACT YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THE PROGRAM.

PERIODIC COMPLIANCE CHECKS: BE AWARE THAT THE USDA MAY CONDUCT PERIODIC COMPLIANCE CHECKS TO ENSURE THAT YOUR BUSINESS IS ADHERING TO SNAP REGULATIONS. COOPERATE WITH ANY REVIEWS OR INSPECTIONS.

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/apply-to-accept>



Processing SNAP Online

Processing SNAP online is crucial but very time-consuming. It took us 10 months to get approval. To start, you need an FNS number for a physical store and an existing online presence.

When setting up your e-commerce site, choose a company that allows a third-party payment processor. We used Forage for payments and Grocerist for our platform because they have a strong partnership with the USDA, which made onboarding easier. However, there are many options, so do your research.

All items in your online store must be properly tagged. We used SNAP-eligible and HIP-eligible tags. After tagging everything, we met with the USDA to complete testing. They gave us a link to create two dummy SNAP cards, which we used for various tests, such as purchases and refunds.

Once the tests were done, we received the USDA's approval and an online FNS number. Now, our customers can place orders online, pay with SNAP, and choose a delivery location. This has reduced our need for staff hours and transportation expenses for in-person SNAP transactions. For more details, visit [USDA.gov](https://www.usda.gov).

BUILDING PROGRAM SUSTAINABILITY

Our mission has been to uplift our local community and ensure everyone can access locally sourced, real food. Yet, we're also committed to weaving sustainability into the fabric of our program, especially if our grant funds take a hiatus. After crunching the numbers, we've found that a 20% price increase enables us to carve out extra funds for our staff. While we'd love to aim for a 30% increase, we're cautious about pricing out essential items for many of our customers.

Enter our sliding scale pricing structure. Items that can gracefully handle a 30% markup, such as greens, garlic, select value-added products, and indulgent delights like maple syrup and ice cream, will carry a slight premium. Meanwhile, essentials like milk, eggs, and meats will only see a modest 10-15% mark-up. This way, we're not just nourishing our community today; but actively attempting to make this program self sustaining.

SLIDING SCALE PRICING STRUCTURE

If you're embarking on community food programming and looking for ways to incorporate sustainability into your project, introducing a sliding scale pricing structure is one approach that aims to find a balance between generating more revenue and ensuring accessibility for a wide range of customers. Here are some ideas to consider to effectively implement and communicate this flexible pricing model.

TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION:

CLEARLY COMMUNICATE THE REASONS BEHIND THE PRICING ADJUSTMENTS TO YOUR COMMUNITY. EMPHASIZE YOUR COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY, LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION, AND THE GOAL OF ENSURING THE LONG-TERM VIABILITY OF THE PROGRAM.

EDUCATE YOUR COMMUNITY:

PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS OR HOLD COMMUNITY MEETINGS TO EXPLAIN THE CONCEPT OF THE SLIDING SCALE PRICING STRUCTURE. HELP CUSTOMERS UNDERSTAND HOW IT SUPPORTS LOCAL PRODUCERS, SUSTAINS THE PROGRAM, AND MAINTAINS AFFORDABILITY FOR A MAJORITY OF PRODUCTS.

CLEARLY DEFINE CATEGORIES:

CLEARLY DEFINE THE CATEGORIES OF PRODUCTS THAT FALL INTO THE 20% AND 30% MARK-UP RANGE. HIGHLIGHT THAT ESSENTIAL ITEMS LIKE GREENS AND GARLIC HAVE A LOWER MARK-UP TO KEEP THEM ACCESSIBLE, WHILE LUXURY OR LESS ESSENTIAL ITEMS MAY BEAR A HIGHER MARK-UP.



COMMUNITY INPUT:

SEEK INPUT FROM YOUR COMMUNITY ON THE SLIDING SCALE PRICING STRUCTURE. GATHER FEEDBACK THROUGH SURVEYS OR COMMUNITY MEETINGS TO ENSURE THAT THE PRICING ADJUSTMENTS ALIGN WITH COMMUNITY VALUES AND EXPECTATIONS.

LABELING AND SIGNAGE:

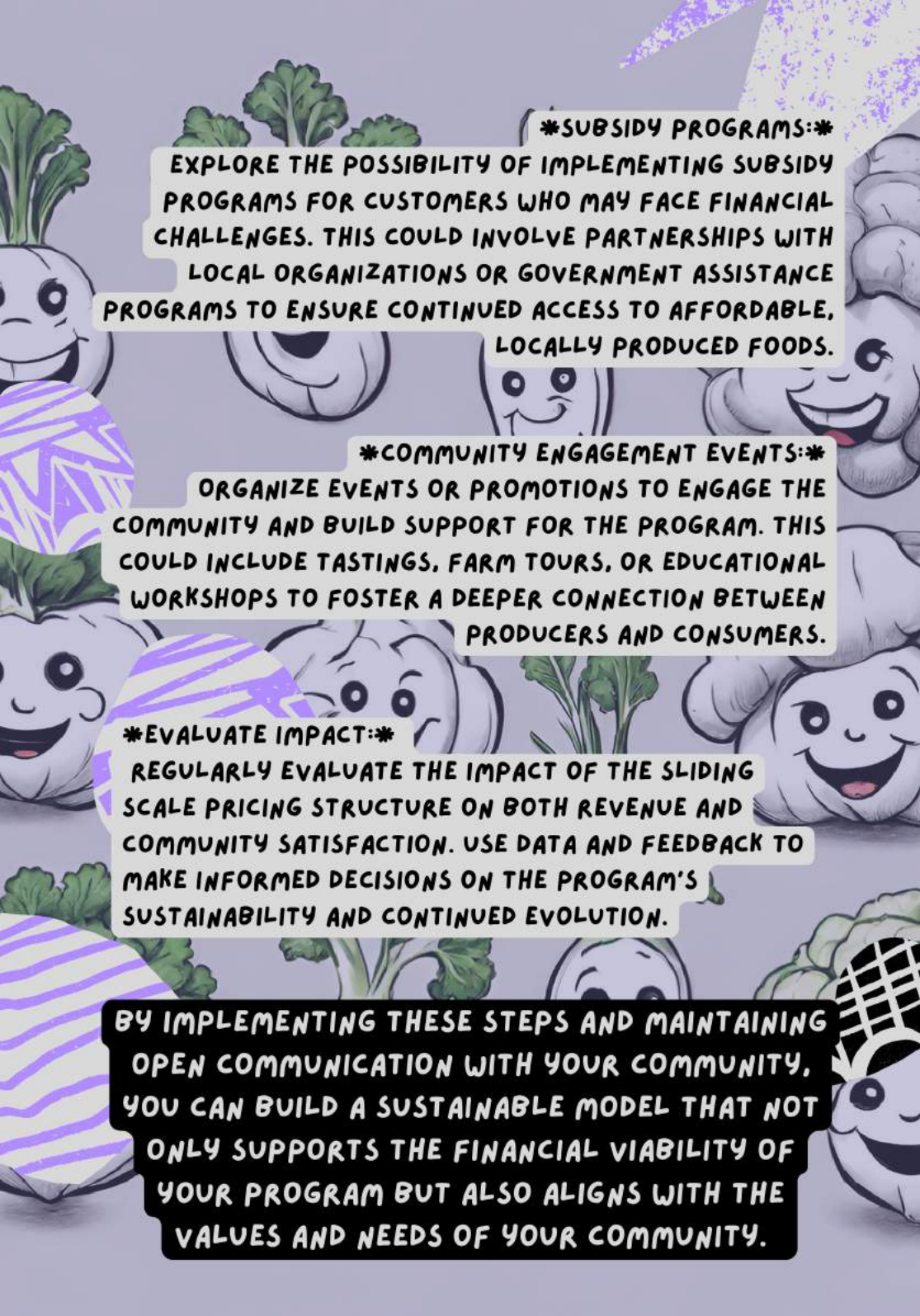
USE CLEAR LABELING AND SIGNAGE TO DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN ITEMS WITH DIFFERENT MARK-UPS. THIS HELPS CUSTOMERS MAKE INFORMED CHOICES AND REINFORCES THE TRANSPARENCY OF YOUR PRICING STRATEGY.

REVIEW AND ADJUST:

PERIODICALLY REVIEW THE SLIDING SCALE PRICING STRUCTURE BASED ON COMMUNITY FEEDBACK, CHANGES IN PRODUCTION COSTS, OR SHIFTS IN GRANT FUNDING. BE OPEN TO ADJUSTMENTS TO BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY AND SUSTAIN THE PROGRAM.

PROMOTE VALUE-ADDED PRODUCTS:

PROMOTE VALUE-ADDED PRODUCTS THAT CAN BEAR A HIGHER MARK-UP, SUCH AS SPECIALTY ITEMS LIKE MAPLE SYRUP AND ICE CREAM. HIGHLIGHT THE UNIQUE QUALITIES OF THESE ITEMS TO ENCOURAGE CUSTOMER INTEREST.



SUBSIDY PROGRAMS:
EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITY OF IMPLEMENTING SUBSIDY PROGRAMS FOR CUSTOMERS WHO MAY FACE FINANCIAL CHALLENGES. THIS COULD INVOLVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS OR GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS TO ENSURE CONTINUED ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, LOCALLY PRODUCED FOODS.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS:
ORGANIZE EVENTS OR PROMOTIONS TO ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY AND BUILD SUPPORT FOR THE PROGRAM. THIS COULD INCLUDE TASTINGS, FARM TOURS, OR EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS TO FOSTER A DEEPER CONNECTION BETWEEN PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS.

EVALUATE IMPACT:
REGULARLY EVALUATE THE IMPACT OF THE SLIDING SCALE PRICING STRUCTURE ON BOTH REVENUE AND COMMUNITY SATISFACTION. USE DATA AND FEEDBACK TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS ON THE PROGRAM'S SUSTAINABILITY AND CONTINUED EVOLUTION.

BY IMPLEMENTING THESE STEPS AND MAINTAINING OPEN COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR COMMUNITY, YOU CAN BUILD A SUSTAINABLE MODEL THAT NOT ONLY SUPPORTS THE FINANCIAL VIABILITY OF YOUR PROGRAM BUT ALSO ALIGNS WITH THE VALUES AND NEEDS OF YOUR COMMUNITY.

Expanding your Reach

Expanding the customer base for a food access program requires a strategic approach to outreach, marketing, and community engagement. Here are some effective strategies to help you reach a wider audience:

BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS:

COLLABORATE WITH LOCAL COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, SCHOOLS, CHURCHES, AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS TO SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT YOUR FOOD ACCESS PROGRAM. BY PARTNERING WITH ESTABLISHED GROUPS, YOU CAN TAP INTO THEIR EXISTING NETWORKS AND GAIN CREDIBILITY.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA:

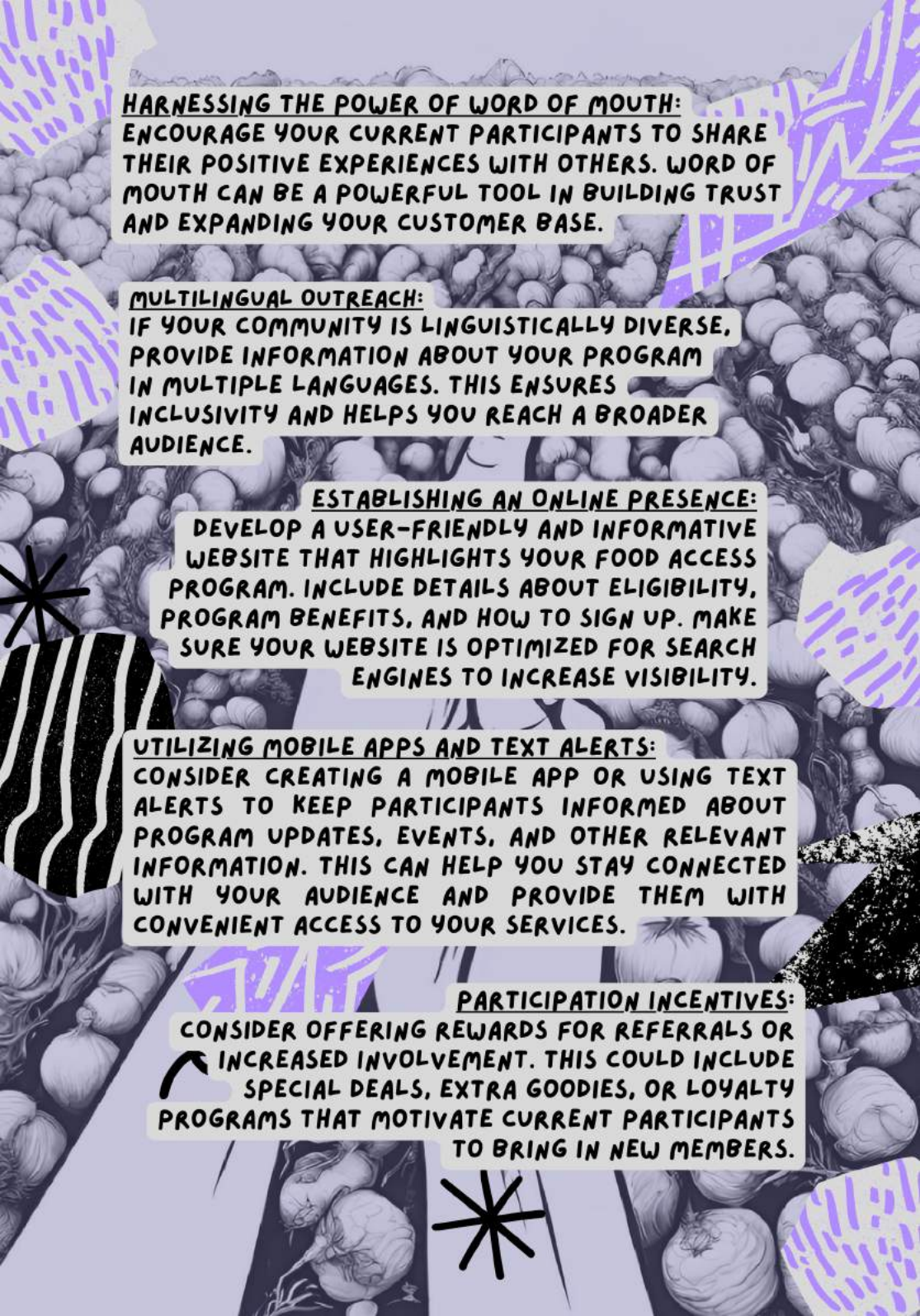
UTILIZE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS TO PROMOTE YOUR FOOD ACCESS PROGRAM. SHARE ENGAGING CONTENT, SUCCESS STORIES, AND INFORMATION ABOUT UPCOMING EVENTS. CONSIDER RUNNING TARGETED ADS TO REACH SPECIFIC DEMOGRAPHICS WITHIN YOUR COMMUNITY.

LEVERAGING LOCAL MEDIA COVERAGE:

REACH OUT TO LOCAL NEWSPAPERS, TV STATIONS, AND RADIO STATIONS TO SHARE THE STORY OF YOUR PROGRAM. OFFER TO PROVIDE INTERVIEWS, PRESS RELEASES, OR FEATURE ARTICLES TO RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT THE PROGRAM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY.

HOSTING COMMUNITY EVENTS AND WORKSHOPS:

ORGANIZE EVENTS OR WORKSHOPS RELATED TO NUTRITION, COOKING, OR SUSTAINABLE LIVING. USE THESE OPPORTUNITIES TO SHOWCASE YOUR FOOD ACCESS PROGRAM AND ATTRACT NEW PARTICIPANTS. COLLABORATE WITH LOCAL CHEFS, NUTRITIONISTS, OR INFLUENCERS TO MAKE YOUR EVENTS MORE APPEALING.



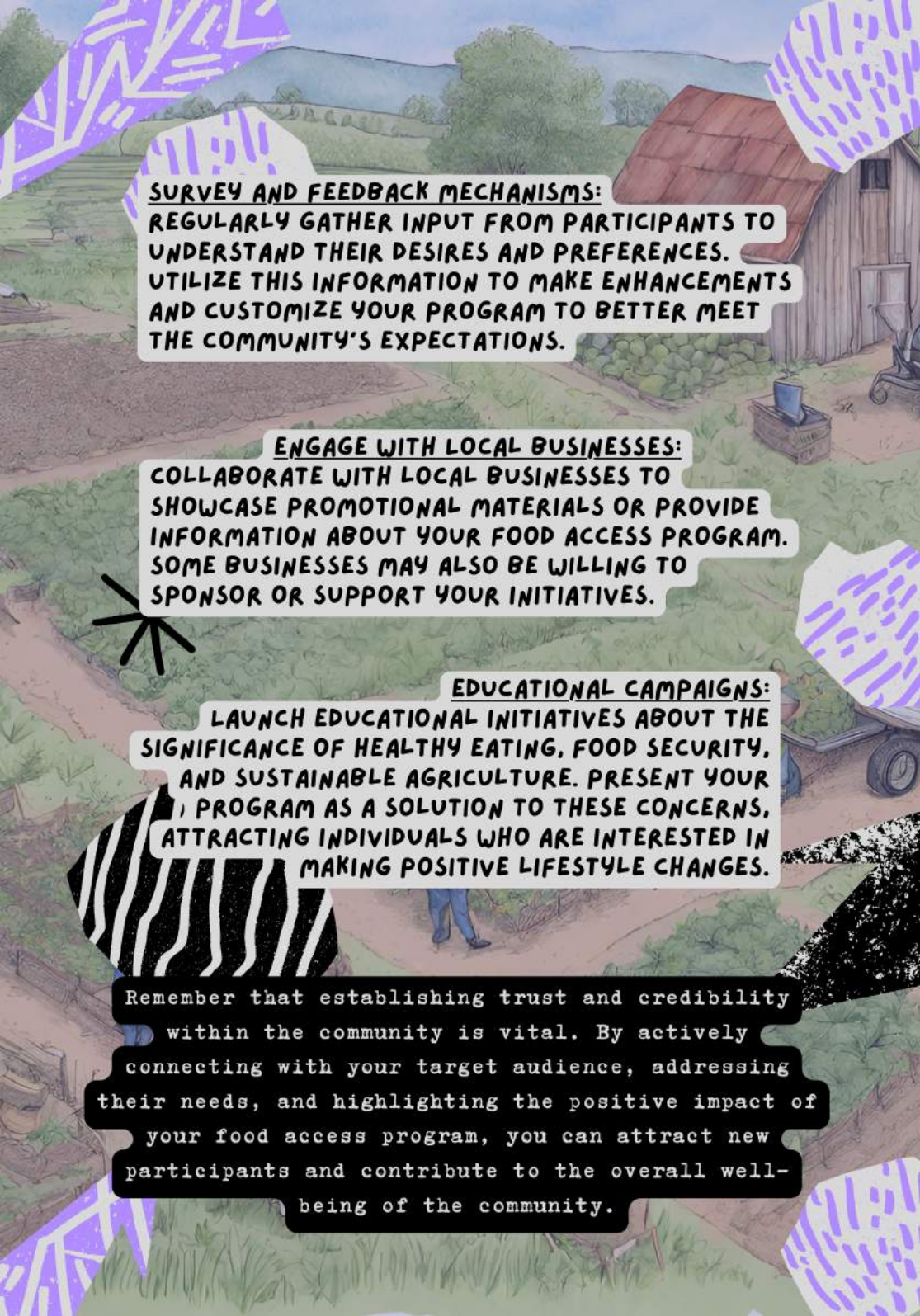
HARNESSING THE POWER OF WORD OF MOUTH:
ENCOURAGE YOUR CURRENT PARTICIPANTS TO SHARE THEIR POSITIVE EXPERIENCES WITH OTHERS. WORD OF MOUTH CAN BE A POWERFUL TOOL IN BUILDING TRUST AND EXPANDING YOUR CUSTOMER BASE.

MULTILINGUAL OUTREACH:
IF YOUR COMMUNITY IS LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE, PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR PROGRAM IN MULTIPLE LANGUAGES. THIS ENSURES INCLUSIVITY AND HELPS YOU REACH A BROADER AUDIENCE.

ESTABLISHING AN ONLINE PRESENCE:
DEVELOP A USER-FRIENDLY AND INFORMATIVE WEBSITE THAT HIGHLIGHTS YOUR FOOD ACCESS PROGRAM. INCLUDE DETAILS ABOUT ELIGIBILITY, PROGRAM BENEFITS, AND HOW TO SIGN UP. MAKE SURE YOUR WEBSITE IS OPTIMIZED FOR SEARCH ENGINES TO INCREASE VISIBILITY.

UTILIZING MOBILE APPS AND TEXT ALERTS:
CONSIDER CREATING A MOBILE APP OR USING TEXT ALERTS TO KEEP PARTICIPANTS INFORMED ABOUT PROGRAM UPDATES, EVENTS, AND OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION. THIS CAN HELP YOU STAY CONNECTED WITH YOUR AUDIENCE AND PROVIDE THEM WITH CONVENIENT ACCESS TO YOUR SERVICES.

PARTICIPATION INCENTIVES:
CONSIDER OFFERING REWARDS FOR REFERRALS OR INCREASED INVOLVEMENT. THIS COULD INCLUDE SPECIAL DEALS, EXTRA GOODIES, OR LOYALTY PROGRAMS THAT MOTIVATE CURRENT PARTICIPANTS TO BRING IN NEW MEMBERS.



SURVEY AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS:

REGULARLY GATHER INPUT FROM PARTICIPANTS TO UNDERSTAND THEIR DESIRES AND PREFERENCES. UTILIZE THIS INFORMATION TO MAKE ENHANCEMENTS AND CUSTOMIZE YOUR PROGRAM TO BETTER MEET THE COMMUNITY'S EXPECTATIONS.

ENGAGE WITH LOCAL BUSINESSES:

COLLABORATE WITH LOCAL BUSINESSES TO SHOWCASE PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS OR PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR FOOD ACCESS PROGRAM. SOME BUSINESSES MAY ALSO BE WILLING TO SPONSOR OR SUPPORT YOUR INITIATIVES.

EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGNS:

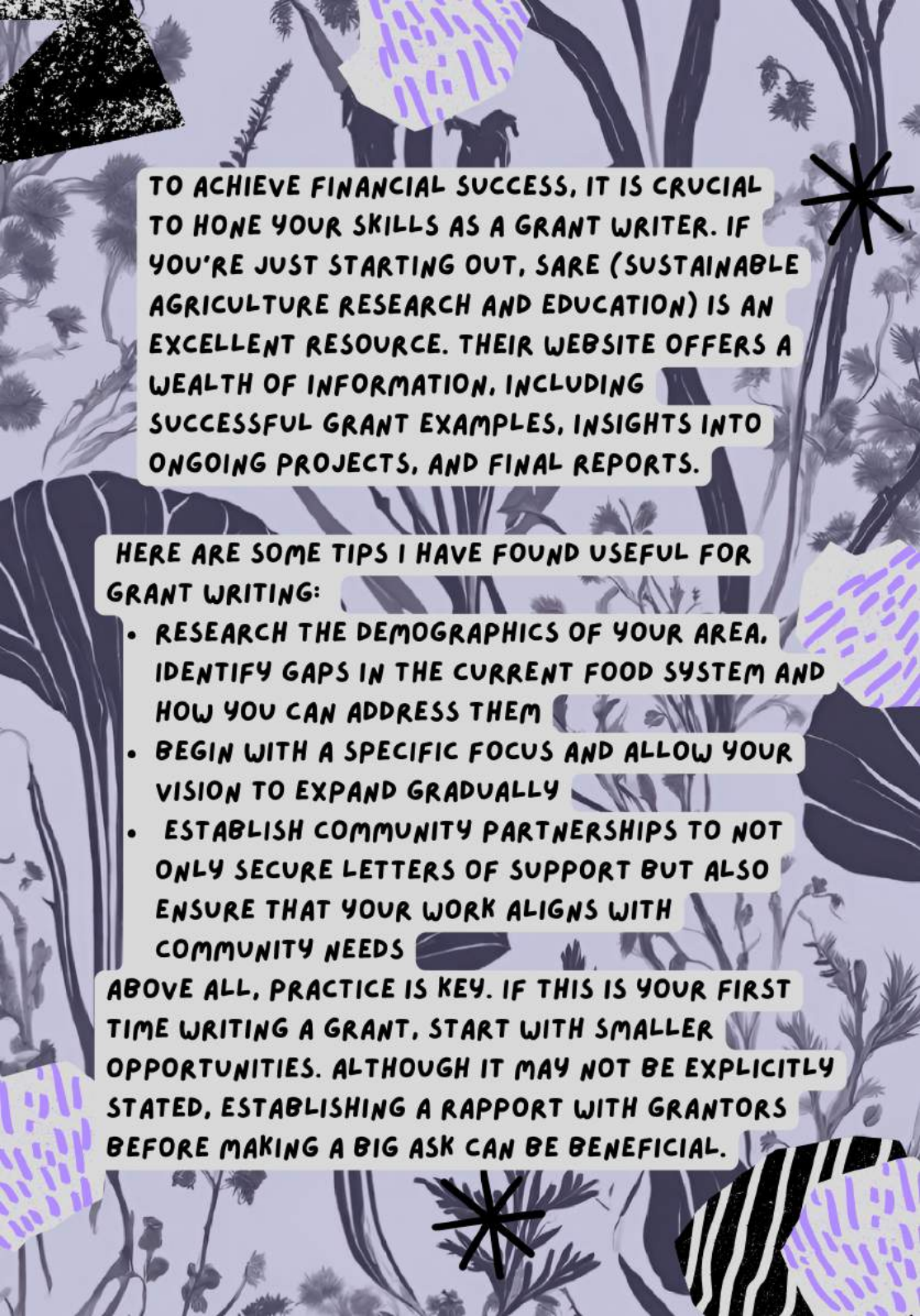
LAUNCH EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES ABOUT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HEALTHY EATING, FOOD SECURITY, AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE. PRESENT YOUR PROGRAM AS A SOLUTION TO THESE CONCERNS, ATTRACTING INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE INTERESTED IN MAKING POSITIVE LIFESTYLE CHANGES.

Remember that establishing trust and credibility within the community is vital. By actively connecting with your target audience, addressing their needs, and highlighting the positive impact of your food access program, you can attract new participants and contribute to the overall well-being of the community.



FUNDING SOURCES

IN WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS, WE RELY ON FUNDING FROM MDAR (MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES) AND PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS. GRANTS LIKE THE SPECIALTY CROP BLOCK GRANT, LOCAL FOOD COUNCIL GRANT, FOOD SECURITY INFRASTRUCTURE GRANT, AND MASS FOOD VENTURES PROGRAM HAVE BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN COVERING STAFF COSTS, TRANSPORTATION, PLANNING, AND INFRASTRUCTURE. EXPLORE [GRANTS.GOV](https://www.grants.gov), JOIN THE MDAR NEWSLETTER, CONNECT WITH OTHER FOOD SECURITY VENTURES, OR REACH OUT TO LOCAL HOSPITALS AND HEALTH CARE CENTERS FOR FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES.



TO ACHIEVE FINANCIAL SUCCESS, IT IS CRUCIAL TO HONE YOUR SKILLS AS A GRANT WRITER. IF YOU'RE JUST STARTING OUT, SARE (SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE RESEARCH AND EDUCATION) IS AN EXCELLENT RESOURCE. THEIR WEBSITE OFFERS A WEALTH OF INFORMATION, INCLUDING SUCCESSFUL GRANT EXAMPLES, INSIGHTS INTO ONGOING PROJECTS, AND FINAL REPORTS.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS I HAVE FOUND USEFUL FOR GRANT WRITING:

- RESEARCH THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUR AREA, IDENTIFY GAPS IN THE CURRENT FOOD SYSTEM AND HOW YOU CAN ADDRESS THEM
- BEGIN WITH A SPECIFIC FOCUS AND ALLOW YOUR VISION TO EXPAND GRADUALLY
- ESTABLISH COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TO NOT ONLY SECURE LETTERS OF SUPPORT BUT ALSO ENSURE THAT YOUR WORK ALIGNS WITH COMMUNITY NEEDS

ABOVE ALL, PRACTICE IS KEY. IF THIS IS YOUR FIRST TIME WRITING A GRANT, START WITH SMALLER OPPORTUNITIES. ALTHOUGH IT MAY NOT BE EXPLICITLY STATED, ESTABLISHING A RAPPORT WITH GRANTORS BEFORE MAKING A BIG ASK CAN BE BENEFICIAL.

Starting a Food Access Project: A Simplified Checklist

1. Community Engagement

- Identify key stakeholders in the community (e.g. farmers, consumers, local organizations)
- Hold meetings to gather ideas and feedback on the ideal food system
- Ensure diverse perspectives by engaging people from different backgrounds
- Collaborate with local partners to reach a wider audience
- Provide educational resources on food systems and local choices

2. Farmer Engagement

- Hold regular meetings with farmers to discuss challenges and opportunities
- Offer support and resources to help farmers improve their practices
- Facilitate networking and knowledge-sharing among farmers

3. Choose a Market Type

- Evaluate different market types (e.g., mobile markets, online ordering, physical store)
- Consider factors like customer base size, location, and community needs
- Start small and adapt based on community feedback and demand

4. Accessibility and Pricing

- Integrate SNAP/EBT and other assistance programs to ensure accessibility
- Develop a pricing structure that balances affordability and sustainability
- Communicate the pricing structure clearly to the community and seek their input

5. Funding and Partnerships

- Research and apply for relevant grants and funding opportunities
- Build partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and institutions
- Develop grant writing skills and start with smaller opportunities to build credibility

6. Outreach and Promotion

- Develop a clear and consistent brand identity for your project
- Use social media and local media outlets to promote your program
- Host events and workshops to engage the community and raise awareness
- Encourage word-of-mouth referrals from satisfied participants
- Collaborate with local partners to expand your reach

7. Program Development and Evaluation

- Set clear goals and objectives for your food access project
- Develop a system for tracking progress and measuring impact
- Gather regular feedback from participants and stakeholders
- Be flexible and adapt your program based on community needs and feedback
- Celebrate successes and learn from challenges along the way

Food Access Project Pocket Guide

Starting a food access project can be a rewarding way to improve your community's access to healthy, local food. Here are some key steps to help you get started:

1. Engage Your Community

- Listen to the needs and ideas of diverse community members
- Collaborate with local organizations and partners
- Educate and raise awareness about food systems and local choices

2. Build Relationships with Farmers

- Regularly communicate with local farmers to understand their challenges and opportunities
- Provide support and resources to help farmers succeed
- Foster networking and knowledge-sharing among farmers

3. Select a Market Type

- Consider options like mobile markets, online ordering, or a physical store
- Start small and adapt based on community feedback and demand

4. Ensure Accessibility

- Accept SNAP/EBT and other assistance programs
- Develop a pricing structure that balances affordability and sustainability
- Clearly communicate your pricing structure to the community

5. Secure Funding and Partnerships

- Explore grants and funding opportunities
- Build partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and institutions
- Develop grant writing skills and start small to build credibility

6. Promote Your Program

- Establish a clear brand identity
- Leverage social media and local media outlets
- Host engaging events and workshops
- Encourage word-of-mouth referrals
- Collaborate with local partners to expand your reach

7. Evaluate and Adapt

- Set clear goals and objectives
- Track progress and measure impact
- Gather regular feedback from participants and stakeholders
- Be flexible and adapt based on community needs
- Celebrate successes and learn from challenges

(SAMPLE) Food Access Community Needs Assessment Survey

We are conducting this survey to better understand our community's needs and preferences related to food access. Your responses will help us develop a food access project that best serves our community. This survey should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. All responses will be kept confidential.

1. How would you rate your current access to fresh, healthy food?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

2. What are the main barriers you face in accessing fresh, healthy food? (Select all that apply)

- Cost
- Transportation
- Limited availability in local stores
- Lack of time for shopping or preparation
- Lack of knowledge about healthy food options
- Other (please specify): _____

3. How often do you purchase locally grown or produced food?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

4. What types of local food products are you most interested in purchasing? (Select all that apply)

- Fruits and vegetables
- Meat and poultry
- Dairy products
- Eggs
- Baked goods
- Prepared meals
- Other (please specify): _____

5. Where do you currently purchase most of your food?

(Select all that apply)

- Supermarkets
- Convenience stores
- Farmers markets
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs
- Food pantries or banks
- Other (please specify): _____

6. What would make it easier for you to access and purchase local, healthy food? (Select all that apply)

- More affordable prices
- Convenient location(s)
- Extended hours of operation
- Online ordering and delivery options
- Accepting SNAP/EBT and other assistance programs
- Educational resources and workshops
- Other (please specify): _____

7. How interested would you be in participating in the following food access programs?

- **Mobile markets:** Very interested Somewhat interested
 Not interested
- **Online ordering and delivery:** Very interested
 Somewhat interested Not interested
- **Community gardens:** Very interested Somewhat interested
 Not interested
- **Cooking and nutrition classes:** Very interested
 Somewhat interested Not interested

8. What is your age?

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 or older

9. What is your household income?

- Less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 - \$34,999
- \$35,000 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$74,999
- \$75,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 or more

10. Please share any additional thoughts or suggestions you have about improving food access in our community.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your input is valuable and will help us shape our food access project to best serve our community. If you have any questions or would like to get involved, please contact **[Your Name]** at **[Your Email Address]**.

Food Access Project Logic Model

Inputs:

- Funding from grants, donations, and partnerships
- Staff and volunteers with relevant skills and experience
- Community partnerships and support
- Facilities and equipment for food storage, processing, and distribution
- Technology and software for program management and evaluation
- Research and best practices from other successful food access projects

Activities:

1. Community Engagement

- Conduct community needs assessments and surveys
- Hold community meetings and focus groups
- Develop partnerships with local organizations and stakeholders
- Provide education and outreach on food access and healthy eating

2. Farmer Engagement

- Identify and recruit local farmers to participate in the project
- Provide support and resources to help farmers scale up production
- Facilitate networking and knowledge-sharing among farmers
- Develop fair and transparent contracts and pricing structures

3. Program Development

- Select appropriate market types (e.g., mobile markets, online ordering, etc.)
- Develop logistics and infrastructure for food storage, processing, and distribution
- Establish policies and procedures for food safety and quality control
- Integrate SNAP/EBT and other assistance programs to ensure accessibility

4. Marketing and Outreach

- Develop branding and marketing materials for the project
- Conduct outreach and promotion through social media, local media, and events
- Encourage word-of-mouth referrals and community-driven marketing

5. Evaluation and Reporting

- Develop indicators and metrics for program success
- Collect and analyze data on program participation, sales, and impact
- Gather feedback from participants, farmers, and partners
- Prepare reports and presentations for funders, stakeholders, and the community

Outputs:

- Number of community members engaged and educated
- Number of farmers recruited and supported
- Number of market locations or distribution points established
- Number of participants enrolled in SNAP/EBT and other assistance programs
- Number of marketing and outreach events conducted
- Number of reports and presentations delivered

Short-term Outcomes:

- Increased awareness and knowledge of food access issues and resources
- Increased participation in local food markets and programs
- Increased sales and revenue for local farmers
- Improved access to fresh, healthy food for under-served communities
- Strengthened partnerships and collaboration among community stakeholders

Long-term Impact:

- Improved overall health and well-being of the community
- Reduced health disparities and food insecurity
- Strengthened local food systems and economies
- Increased community engagement and empowerment
- Contribution to broader goals of sustainability, equity, and social justice

Assumptions:

- There is sufficient community interest and demand for local, healthy food
- Local farmers have the capacity and willingness to participate in the project
- Partnerships and collaborations will be effective and sustained over time
- Funding and resources will be available to support the project's activities and goals

External Factors:

- Economic and market conditions that affect food prices and supply chains
- Political and policy changes that affect food assistance programs and regulations
- Social and cultural factors that influence food preferences and behaviors
- Environmental and climate factors that affect local agriculture and food production

This logic model provides a framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating your food access project. It helps to clarify the relationships between your inputs, activities, outputs, and desired outcomes, as well as the assumptions and external factors that may influence your project's success. Use this template as a starting point and adapt it to fit the specific needs and context of your project.



Lessons learned while
working to improve rural
food access in the
Hilltowns of Western
Massachusetts

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