

Hunger Relief Innovation through Collaboration: The future of an equitable food ecosystem driven from a multi-sector, community centered approach.

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Abstract

Hunger and food insecurity persists even in the face of global food abundance. The world's farmers produce enough food to feed 1.5x the global population. In the United States, despite being home to 350+ food banks and 60,000 food pantries, 1 in 10 households experience food insecurity. Moreover, families of color are twice as likely as white families to face food insecurity. As a result, we must reframe the problem of hunger from being a problem of scarcity of food to instead being an access and affordability problem. As a society, we have not invested enough in innovation to solve for food access and affordability. When thinking about the future of our food ecosystem, in order to make it more equitable and sustainable, we must invest in solutions that connect rather than compete. Food Connect, a Philadelphia based non-profit hunger relief organization, focuses on bridging the gap between surplus food and hunger. The article outlines how Food Connect is pushing hunger relief innovation through technology, organizational development, pilot programming and partnership management to help build long term sustainable solutions that empower local communities to harness the power of local food players already within the food system.

Introduction

Food insecurity is a chronic social and health issue affecting more than 1 out of 10 families in the United States, only worsened by the pandemic and disrupted food supply chains. While indications are that the pandemic is in retreat, food insecurity will persist and will continue to disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, People of Color communities. Many factors contribute to food insecurity at an individual, family and community level. One critical factor is access. Little to no access to fresh, nutritious food in food deserts existed before and will exist after the pandemic because the fundamental dynamics of why a food desert develops persist. It is why Food Connect focuses on building and implementing innovative, long term sustainable solutions to increasing food access at a hyper local level in communities.

Food Connect Model and Innovation

Founded in 2014, Food Connect is mission-focused on bridging the gap between surplus food and hunger through innovative logistics technology and programming. Two main areas of

programming are food rescue / redistribution and last mile meals delivery. The Food Connect model connects food donors, food distribution program partners, drivers, and vehicles to create a seamless network of real-time collaboration resulting in maximized impact. No matter where partners are in the food redistribution chain, Food Connect enables them to eliminate overlapping efforts, streamline their capacities, and become more visible and efficient. In addition, Food Connect's user-directed technology fills the gaps of more traditional models by accepting donations (healthy food and small donations) or going where they cannot. The second programming category enables last mile meals delivery in partnership with organizations launching food insecure programming in need of logistics support. These partner organizations span across different sectors including healthcare and education, among others.

The entrance of non-traditional partners into the hunger relief space points to a critical trend with the potential to transform the hunger relief space and has tested organizations to become more nimble and agile in the face of a true crisis. Flexibility to react to changes in environment and programming is built into the Food Connect model. From 2019 to 2020, Food Connect increased 478% in the volume of meals provided to those in need. During this time, the organization worked diligently to ensure staffing and resourcing were in line to accommodate the explosive growth in activity. Through 2021, partnership and activity growth continued at a significant pace with 79% growth and in 2022 that growth trajectory continues. In comparing January and February 2022 meals delivered, Food Connect growth is up 68% over total 1st quarter 2021. Continued demand and activity are expected in the remainder of 2022 and beyond.

As we rebuild following the pandemic, we will have the opportunity to correct some of the deficiencies in our food system and better prepare for future disasters. New technology, new information, and new ideas can lead to big changes that make food systems stronger.

How Food Connect is Different

Traditional food relief models are fragmented and siloed — many food organizations operate under exclusive partnerships and closed networks. These exclusive and closed network approaches, while they have many successes, often fail to reap the benefits of a larger ecosystem of support. In addition, conventional hunger relief efforts fall short in addressing equitable food access due to logistical limitations. From a food rescue standpoint, standard practices place restrictions on the weight and type of food donations because fresh or perishable and small food donations are considered too costly and inefficient to use. This creates more barriers for food donors, especially restaurants serving fresh meals, to get involved in the food relief space, and it restricts food recipients' access to healthier meals and limits them to packaged food donations.

Despite an abundance of food banks/pantries and organizations focused on hunger relief, long term sustainable solutions are elusive. These factors make collaborative and real-time hunger relief solutions crucial in democratizing food access. From a meals and fresh food distribution view, Food Connect's innovative approach has bloomed among non-traditional channels including the healthcare and education sectors that are at the forefront of identifying food insecurity. Our model embraces non-traditional players entering the hunger relief space who are

looking to make a direct impact with patients, students and other food insecure segments. While the traditional model plays an important role through serving meals and providing food boxes on a regular basis, it lacks the flexibility to serve and reach remote communities and vulnerable populations such as seniors, people and children with disabilities, and minority populations who lack transportation resources and cannot visit meal sites.

Food Connect's view is that the solution to increasing food access is through building and employing a comprehensive toolkit that blends three key components and relies on community engagement:

- **Hyperlocal Community:** Focus on empowering those in need at the front lines specifically within communities suffering from 30-50% poverty levels.
- **Pilot, Scale, and Sustain Programming Model:** Every current program in place originated from a pilot to test out and develop new processes. A standard pilot program lasts 4-8 weeks. Program planning with the partner establishes key parameters to ensure program sustainability, maximized program impact, and direct feedback from program participants and program stakeholders. Through this close partnership process, Food Connect actively identifies program expansion opportunities and contributes to partner primary research by providing extensive tracking, feedback and other key performance indicator data that our partners would not typically have access to.
- **Noncompetitive, wholly collaborative approach:** to break down existing silos piecing together the fragmented landscape

Consistent feedback from partners and participants has been critical in adjusting processes to better meet stakeholders' needs. In a survey conducted in Q4 2021 with a meal program, 93% of food recipients said the delivery component was "very important" to them. Meanwhile, Food Connect partners report saving an average of \$450 weekly on food budgets. The savings can be redirected to other community needs which creates a multiplier effect on local impact. Addressing both access and affordability at a local level demonstrate Food Connect's success in creating sustainable food ecosystems that are equitable for local communities.

Financing Food Connect Work

As a 501c3 non-profit, Food Connect balances innovation with program sustainability through blending our revenue mix of for-fee programming with sponsored pilots testing new approaches that will maximize impact. Food Connect also pursues development and funding opportunities through grants.

Implications to Scale with Intentional Social and Policy Impact

Scalability and sustainability are at the forefront of Food Connect strategy and implementation. Through process development, Food Connect is structured to enable turnkey scaling for both internal management but also external expansion for program size (delivery activity and volumes). In the past year, Food Connect programs have grown by 30% in terms of reach and

300% in growth in delivered meals volumes over the past year with recurring / renewing programs. The recurring programming is critical and speaks to the Food Connect focus on making lasting change in the communities we serve.

From a social perspective, Food Connect believes its work changes the narrative on food deserts through empowering overlooked communities at the front lines. This work helps to strengthen communities one individual and one family at a time as healthy, nourished individuals collectively are better able to contribute positively to their environments. Through collaborative programming with partners, Food Connect is helping to shape new ways to help food deserts start to flourish in non-traditional ways. This unconventional approach has the potential to reshape current ineffective policy for many in-need communities. Future policy could redefine the food desert at a community level and help hyper local retailers be a part of the solution through potential incentives to build thriving food sanctuaries that better reflects the community's unique needs and qualities. Also, instead of a singular reliance on for-profit retailers directly determining food access at the community level, potential future policy could encourage and incentivize new solutions redefining ways to increase access by leveraging technology. Throughout the pandemic, all communities faced a largely virtual, social distancing food access experience with home grocery delivery offered and encouraged at its highest levels ever. Could increased access for all simply be an extension of a model that has proven to be effective through the worst humanitarian crisis of this century?

Conclusion

Food Connect is focused on integration and collaboration across the hunger relief space. Through ongoing technological innovation, it is now possible for multiple sets of data to interact with each other in real time to make meaningful decisions as it relates to hunger relief solutions. Smart technology enables people to be connected with life sustaining resources faster than ever before. The future of food insecurity rests on our collective ability to support cross-sector collaborations and support investments in innovation and testing to further unlock efficiencies that are ripe within the hunger relief space. Our global food system is fragile and limited by its ability to reach those in need. Food Connect recognizes that the true gap is not supply, but access and has built sustainable programming and technology to achieve growing social impact in the years to come.