

CSAs as a Strategy to Increase Food Access

Models of Success



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About ASAP (Appalachian Sustainable Agricultural Project):

ASAP has been a national leader in the local food movement for more than a decade. ASAP's mission is to help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters, and build healthy communities through connections to local food. The organization's work includes a broad array of planning, communication, grassroots organizing, research, and advocacy in order to generate awareness and increase consumer demand for local food and farms, develop the regional capacity to support local farms, expand the availability of locally grown food, and foster systemic change in agriculture and the food system.

www.asapconnections.org

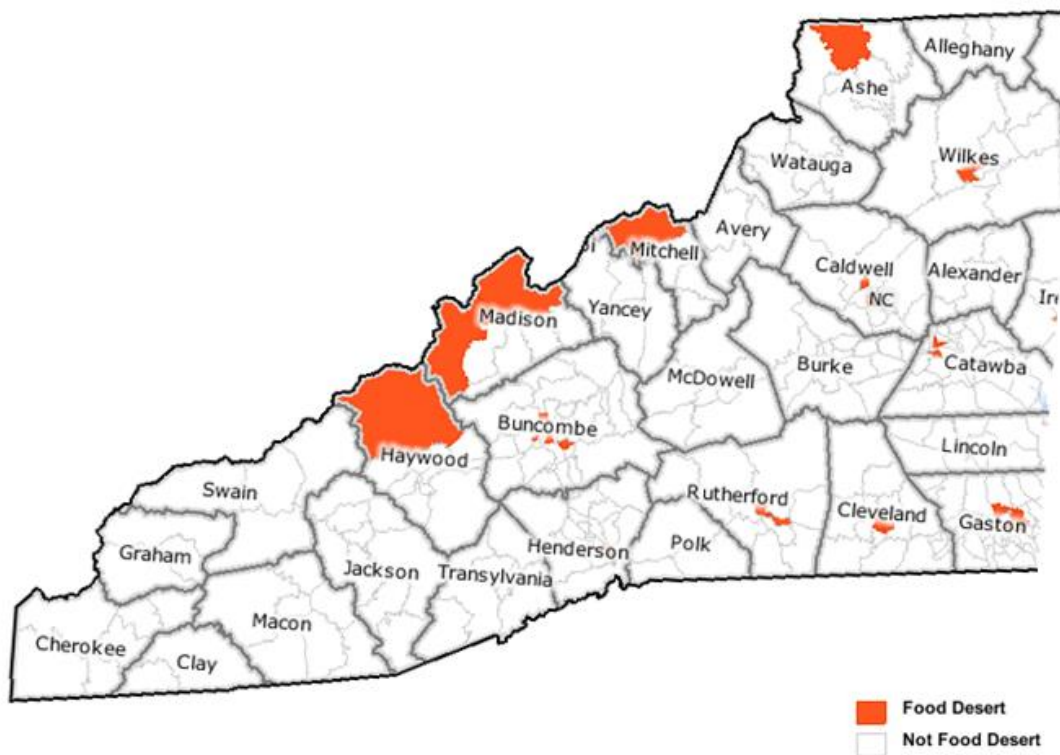
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Western North Carolina is home to 16 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) identified food deserts, or areas with little or no access to the foods required to maintain a healthy diet (see Figure 1). Research conducted by PolicyLink¹ and the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service² indicate that participation in and increased access to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is one way to address food insecurity and improve access to healthy, direct market food outlets in food deserts. For this report, ASAP’s Local Food Research Center identified 14 initiatives from around the country that are currently using customized CSA food access models to address food insecurity in their communities. The projects presented cover a range of approaches to address food access and include information for assisting specific at-risk populations: those with meager food budgets, those who participate in federal nutrition assistance benefits programs, those suffering from food-related health issues, and seniors on fixed incomes.

Figure 1. Food Deserts in WNC by Census Tract

Food Deserts by Census Tract



¹ Rebecca Flournoy, “Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: Promising Strategies to Improve Access to Healthy Food and Transform Communities” (PolicyLink, 2010), 18.

² Katherine Adam, “Community Supported Agriculture” (ATTRA-National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, 2006), 4.

CSAs to Address Affordability

Many factors contribute to a person's ability to access fresh, healthy food: physical mobility, proximity to a store that offers healthy choices, access to transportation, etc. However most discourse around food access, or the lack thereof, centers around the affordability of fresh food and the resources available to low income individuals to help them access local produce. It is not always true that produce purchased directly from farmers is more expensive than that produced in grocery stores,³ but in the case of a traditional CSA program where customers are expected to pay for their \$300-\$600 shares up front, the financial barrier can be insurmountable for people on meager, fixed food budgets.

CSA models are emerging around the country to specifically address the issue of CSA affordability. The following nine examples offer solutions to help low income individuals access CSA programs, and CSA producers to access new clients.

Uprising Organics (Anacortes, WA)

Uprising Organics is a small, diversified organic vegetable farm with a mission to serve whole, healthy foods to underserved communities. In 2007 Uprising Organics began a Food Stamp-only CSA to supply Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients in the Washington area.

In a traditional CSA structure, customers purchase a "share" of the harvest prior to annual planting. In return, they receive a weekly or bi-weekly box of fresh produce, meats, cheeses, or flowers throughout the growing season. However, federal law prohibits SNAP recipients from paying in advance with their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) funds. To get around this obstacle, the farmers of Uprising Organics were able to use seed money to cover their early planting expenses and then allow their subscribers to pay each week for their box. These EBT payments are then used to replenish the seed money for the next year's planting. In their first year of operation the farm was able to raise enough capital to underwrite eight shares.

Uprising Organics offers three levels of subscriptions:

- \$10 per week for an individual (\$200 per season)
- \$15 per week for couples or a small family (\$300 per season)
- \$20 per week for a full-family share (\$400 per season)

The program has now successfully been in operation for five years. When asked for advice for other farmers considering accepting EBT as payment for a CSA share, the owners of Uprising Organics have this to say:

³ Anthony Flaccavento, 2011. "Is Local Food Affordable for Ordinary Folks ? A Comparison of Farmers Markets and Supermarkets in Nineteen Communities in the Southeast." *SCALE, Inc.*
<http://www.ruralscale.com/resources/downloads/farmers-market-study.pdf>.

“Start early! It took six to eight weeks to get set up and get the machine. Don’t listen to [state bureaucrats] if they say you have plenty of time. Budget in extra time so that you will be set up and ready to go with machine in hand when it is time to deliver your first CSA share.”

For more information see: <http://www.greentowns.com/initiative/community-supported-agriculture/uprising-organics-farm-bellingham-wa>

Chelsea Community Supported Agriculture (Chelsea, NY)

Like the state of Washington, New York State places limits on the way SNAP recipients are able to spend their funds, prohibiting a lump sum payment for a CSA. In response, the Chelsea Community CSA in partnership with Chelsea residents, Stoneledge Farm, and the nonprofit Hudson Guild decided to work together to find a way for local low income residents to more easily access CSA programs in their area.



The Chelsea CSA project obtained a \$4,000 grant from Hunger Action Network to establish a revolving loan fund for CSA members. The revolving loan fund allowed the group to pre-pay farmers for the season. The fund is then replenished throughout the growing season by members as they pay for their shares on a bi-weekly basis. Though anyone is eligible for a share, discounted shares and payment plans are offered to families earning under \$25,000 per year, SNAP recipients, residents of public housing, or others with extenuating circumstances. Funds from full-paying members are used to help subsidize the share price of lower-income members.

Members receive vegetable shares sufficient to feed a family of two to three people. Add-ons of fruit and meat are also available. Any uncollected shares are delivered to a local Children’s Center which provides food to over 1,100 people daily, further increasing the local community’s access to fresh, healthy foods.

For more information see: <http://www.hungeractionnys.org/faces7.html>

Canticle Farm CSA (Allegheny, NY)

Allegheny County New York is home to Canticle Farm, a nonprofit CSA farm sponsored by the Franciscan Sisters of Allegheny. The farm offers traditional CSA packages that range from \$85 for a small spring share to \$640 for a large summer share. In addition, the farm has incorporated special programs for those who might not be able to afford the up-front costs of CSA membership: a revolving loan fund and a working share option.

Just like the Chelsea Community Supported Agriculture project, Canticle Farm received funding from Hunger Action Network to establish a revolving loan fund to allow low-income shareholders to pay for their boxes throughout the season rather than in one lump sum. The initial fund amount was used to purchase farm inputs for the first season, with CSA members replenishing the fund with their weekly payments over the course of the first year of the program.

In addition to flexible payment options, Canticle farms also offers members with annual income below \$25,000, those on Medicaid, those on Social Security, those on SNAP, or those who live in public housing to participate in a work share program. For every hour a low income member works on the farm, they receive a \$6 discount from their share price. In this way, Canticle farms not only addresses the inflexibility of Nutrition Assistance Benefit payment plans, but helps members to subsidize the cost of their food through labor, all while connecting them to the process of growing healthy, fresh food.

For more information see: <http://www.canticlefarm.org/>

Solidarity Food Network, a project of Future Farm (Van Etten, NY)

The Solidarity Food Network CSA began as an effort to attract low income customers to the Future Farm CSA program. Realizing that a payment of \$300 up front for a season's share might not be doable for low income residents, the farm instituted a program where families with incomes below \$20,000 per year could pay their subscription fees in \$30 monthly increments.

In general, farming is a business with slim profit margins, and offering 20 shares such a low price wasn't going to be easy. To help alleviate the burden, Future Farm implemented a number of measures to offset the financial losses. For instance, CSA members are required to work on the farm twice per season to reduce labor costs. The farm also uses solar panels for electricity and a compost-heated greenhouse. The farm uses cold-frames to extend the growing season, and all plant beds are fenced in to control predation from large pests.

Even with all of their cost saving strategies, the only reason the farm is able to absorb the cost of the reduced price shares is because of the farm owner's outside job. However, the owners of the

farm believe that as they build their membership, the farm will grow sufficiently stable to be economically viable, independent of outside support.

For more information see: <http://www.hungeractionnys.org/CSAProfiles.pdf>

Corbin Hill Road Farm (Bronx, NY)

Corbin Hill Road Farm (CHRF) is a for-profit social venture that believes in empowering its CSA members by making them shareholders in the company. Of the \$500,000 in capital that was raised to get the project going, 72 percent came from African American and Latino residents of the Bronx community. Once the venture becomes profitable, CHRF plans to offer members the

opportunity to own equity in the venture, giving members a stake in CHRF's success.



CHFR works with a group of 13 small New York farms to aggregate and distribute product to CSA members. The membership terms of the program are flexible, allowing members to pay on a rolling basis with cash, check, SNAP benefits, or credit card. What's more, members are able to give input on what the farmers grow each season for shareholders. In the Harlem and Bronx neighborhoods that the program serves, this

means "fewer 'crazy' herbs and more potatoes." CHFR is an opportunity for local residents to not only access fresh and healthy food from local New York farms, but as the project continues, an opportunity for them to shape their local food environment.

For more information see: <http://corbinhillfarm.com/>

El South Bronx CSA (Bronx, NY)

El South Bronx CSA uses a two pronged approach to help all local residents access fresh, local foods: a sliding scale payment system and a restaurant subsidy program.

The El South Bronx CSA sliding scale system is a straightforward model that uses full priced shares to help subsidize the cost of shares for low income members. The sliding scale is based on the combined household income or the combined incomes of all individuals splitting a share. At the beginning of the season, El South Bronx meets with its partner farm to determine the price of a share. Once the price is set, El South Bronx staff can determine the division of that cost among members. For example, if the farm sets the share price at \$200, El South Bronx will charge higher-income patrons \$300 and the lower-income clients \$100. Low-income clients are able to pay their fee using an onsite wireless EBT terminal.

In addition to the sliding scale, El South Bronx CSA is able to further subsidize low-income residents' shares through a restaurant CSA program. Small New York City restaurants are able to purchase CSA shares, but are charged an additional 20 percent per order. The 20 percent charge is used to further subsidize the cost of shares for low-income shareholders.

For more information see: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/South-Bronx-CSA/143395409060622?sk=info>

Groundwork Lawrence Share-a-Share Program™ (Lawrence, MA)

The Groundwork Lawrence Share-a-Share Program helps low income individuals or those facing financial hardship to access their CSA program through the generosity of established shareholders. CSA members are able to make tax-deductible donations to the Share-a-Share fund to subsidize the cost of a CSA share for a needy family. The Program reports that in 2011 their shareholders raised \$10,000 through the program, and in 2012 that number increased to \$12,000. With small vegetable shares costing as little as \$86 per month, the Share-a-Share Program provides many families in the Lawrence area with access to fresh, local foods.



For more information see: <http://www.groundworklawrence.org/shareashare>

Harvest Dinners on the Farm by Healthy Food for All (Ithaca, NY)

Healthy Food for All is a collaboration between local CSA farms in New York and the Cornell Cooperative Extension Tompkins County. The CSA farms that are part of the group already take EBT payments for CSA shares, but Healthy Food for All thought that they could do even more to help low income residents in their community access fresh, local foods. The group came up with the idea of Harvest Dinners: nights of farm-to-table meals, local spirits, and community fun with all proceeds going to the subsidy of CSA shares for low income families.

Harvest Dinners are held once a month with tickets starting at \$75 per person. For every four tickets sold, the program is able to offer one family a season of fresh produce. Diners are treated to a multi-course meal complete with local wines or beers, music, and stories from the farmers, winemakers, brewmasters, and chefs who have made the evening possible. The events are very popular; all of the dinners held in 2012 sold out.

For more information see: <http://www.healthyfoodforall.org/harvestdinners.htm>

CSA to Address Hunger Relief

Many communities are home to food assistance programs that work to help residents struggling with food insecurity and hunger acquire the food they need. Most of these food assistance organizations rely on shelf-stable, non-perishable items to serve their clients. However the following CSA programs have found strategic and creative ways to get fresh, local foods into local food pantries, food banks, and soup kitchens.

Local Produce Link by Fresh Food for All (New York, NY)

Working in partnership with the United Way of New York City, Local Produce Link brings fresh local vegetables to needy residents through their Fresh Food For All program. Using funding from the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), the program pre-purchases boxes of produce from local farmers who provide a weekly delivery of six to eight boxes of produce to a centralized “hub” each week. Four nearby food pantries pick up the boxes and distribute 180 pounds of vegetables to their clients within two days of harvest. In addition to providing fresh produce, the program goes even further by offering cooking demonstrations to food pantry staff to help them learn to cook with local vegetables, and by taking pantry staff on farm visits to learn about where their local, fresh cooking ingredients come from.

For more information see: <http://www.justfood.org/fresh-food-all/local-produce-link>

Rochester Roots School-Community Garden Club (Rochester, NY)

In an innovative melding of Farm to School activities and hunger relief, the students who help out in the Rochester Roots School-Community Garden Project learn about nutrition, organic gardening, ecology, and community while providing fresh local produce to local needy families. In addition to retail sales of heirloom vegetables, herbs, flowers, and skin salves to local restaurants and residents, the program is responsible for four CSA shares that provide food for a local soup kitchen. The proceeds from sales to residents and restaurants help to subsidize the cost of the CSA shares and, in this way, Rochester Roots is able to work towards its goal of promoting community food security and fostering community development through sustainable urban agriculture activities.

For more information see: <http://www.rochesterroots.org/>

CSA to Address Diet-related Disease

Poor nutrition and diet related diseases affect individuals from all cultural and economic backgrounds. However, a balanced diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables is associated with lower rates of chronic disease and overall improved health. The following CSA models provide examples of the ways that some groups are using CSA shares to promote health and wellness among community members.

Highland General Hospital (Oakland, CA)

Highland General Hospital began its CSA program as a way to promote health and wellness among employees and patients. Using funding from the hospital's Physician Foundation, and with support from the California Endowment funded Healthy Eating, Active Communities Initiative, the hospital partnered with West Oakland's Peoples Grocery to have a truckload of



fresh fruits and vegetables delivered to the hospital each week. People's Grocery, which is a community-based organization that operates a network of food projects in West Oakland, runs the GRUB Box, a flexible CSA program that allows members to choose from a variety of subscription packages and then delivers produce on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

For \$24 per box, Highland General Hospital staff members receive 12 to 14 pounds of fresh produce. Additionally, the hospital has

structured the program so that part of the payment for each share goes toward helping subsidize a free or reduced-price produce box for low-income patients. The hospital promotes the program by offering free samples of produce to department personnel to try, as well as providing cooking demonstrations for staff to teach them different ways to prepare the fresh produce. The partnership between Highland General Hospital and People's Grocery is viewed as another way that hospital doctors and staff promote a culture of wellness in their community.

For more information see: <http://www.californiaconvergence.org/gallery/story/oakland-hospitals> or <http://oaklandlocal.com/article/highland-hospital-peoples-grocery-partner-affordable-produce-grub-box>

Phat Beets Produce (Oakland, CA)

Established in 2007, the Phat Beets Produce collective works to support food justice in Oakland, California through a variety of programs including farmers markets, workshops, co-ops, and more. One of these offerings is the Beet Box CSA program, which offers shares of pesticide-free and/or organically grown local produce grown on a diverse group of minority-run North Oakland farms. Going beyond providing fresh, healthy food to their share members, Phat Beets Produce works to help improve the diet and health of other community members through their Beet *Bux* program. Each full share Beet Box purchase provides a \$2 Beet Bux voucher for a family suffering from diet related illness (families are identified at a clinic located in the same location as the Phat Beets Produce farmers market). The Beet Bux are redeemable at the farmers market, and the program enjoys high participation rates and great success.

For more information see: <http://www.phatbeetsproduce.org/the-beet-blog/home/>

CSA for Seniors

Older adults can face a variety of obstacles that limit their ability to access fresh, healthy food including issues with transportation, working with a moderate fixed income, or personal issues with mobility that might limit their ability to shop for and prepare foods made from fresh food items. The following CSA models focus on seniors in an effort to decrease the obstacles that can limit seniors' access to fresh local foods and increase their participation in the local food and farm community.



Senior FarmShare Vermont

In an effort to help Vermont seniors living in senior residences access fresh fruits and vegetables, the Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living (VDAIL) and the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) partnered to develop the Senior Farm Share Program. Vermont residents age 60 or older living in a senior residence and earning an annual income that meets 185 percent of the federal poverty income limit may register to receive a weekly box of fresh produce. The senior shares are subsidized through the program, so seniors do not have to pay to participate. Over the course of the 5-10 week summer, housing coordinators pick up and deliver produce to a common kitchen or community space at each senior residence; participating seniors each receive approximately \$50 worth of fruits and vegetables over the course of the season. In addition to having the products delivered, the program provides activities to connect members in shared, hands-on food and farm experiences by offering cooking demonstrations, food preservation lessons, and ‘meet the farmer’ events.

For more information see: <http://nofavt.org/programs/farm-share/senior-farm-share-program>

Senior FarmShare Maine

To support the health and vitality of Maine farms and provide healthy food options to Maine’s citizens, the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry offers its FarmShare program to residents over 60 years of age (55 if Native American) with an annual household income equal to or less than \$21,257 for a household of one or \$28,694 for a household of two. The Main Department of Agriculture provides a list of eligible Main farms and seniors are able to sign up directly with the CSA farm of their choice. Like the Vermont program, the Maine program is subsidized, providing each senior member with about \$50 worth of local produce over an eight week season.

For more information see:

<http://www.getrealmaine.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/home.showpage/pageID/77/index.htm>