

FOOD HUB CASE STUDY

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FoodShare's Good Food Programming: Hubs Within a Hub

1 July 2015

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This work was made possible through generous funding from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. Thank you to Erin Nelson for her editing, research, and writing support, and to Phil Mount for his work on the VUE map. Thank you to the FoodShare staff, volunteers, and produce suppliers who so graciously gave their time for interviews, and for the outstanding work that they do in their communities.

Rationale

FoodShare was chosen as an example of a multi-faceted not for profit food hub. It consists of “hubs within a hub” and accomplishes much of its interconnected food distribution and community building work through connecting with other community based food organizations and agricultural food hubs. FoodShare created the first Good Food Box program in Canada in 1994 and, since then, it has developed the infrastructure, supply chains, and distribution networks of its entire Good Food Program. The largest Good Food Box program in Canada, it has been the inspiration for many other programs and represents an innovative leader in not for profit community food hub work.

Background

Overview

FoodShare approaches the issues of hunger and food justice through a series of complex, multifaceted programs. While examining particular programs in detail is useful, these programs must also be considered within the context of the larger organization. Four specific programs – the Good Food Box, Bulk Produce, Good Food Markets, and Mobile Good Food Markets – comprise FoodShare’s Good Food program, which focuses on the distribution of fresh produce. FoodShare’s Executive Director Debbie Field notes that while the Good Food Box was the first program established in this category, “they all piggyback on each other, and none could exist without the synergies of all of the programs working together.” Each facet of the Good Food program utilizes the same warehousing and distribution infrastructure and staff, and orders are



Four specific programs – the Good Food Box, Bulk Produce, Good Food Markets, and Mobile Good Food Markets – comprise FoodShare’s Good Food program, which focuses on the distribution of fresh produce.

combined to create the volume necessary for FoodShare to act as a wholesale purchaser at the Ontario Food Terminal as well as to purchase from family farms. In Debbie’s words, “these programs all work based on the same infrastructure and values to connect individuals and communities with healthy, fresh, affordable, culturally diverse fresh vegetables and fruit.” Other FoodShare programs also tie in to the fresh produce infrastructure: the organization’s kitchen utilizes produce that cannot be included in the boxes, markets, or bulk produce orders, and FoodShare’s intensive mid-scale composting facility recycles food waste to be used in its urban agriculture and food education programs. Moorthi Senaratne, the Good Food Warehouse and Produce Coordinator, says that one of the benefits to this model is that, “When you have lots of different programs, it helps to share the costs between one program to another.” This model allows

combined to create the volume necessary for FoodShare to act as a wholesale purchaser at the Ontario Food Terminal as well as to purchase from family farms. In Debbie’s words, “these programs all work based on the same infrastructure and values to connect individuals and communities with healthy, fresh, affordable, culturally diverse fresh vegetables and fruit.” Other FoodShare programs also tie in to the fresh produce infrastructure: the organization’s kitchen utilizes produce that cannot be included in the boxes, markets, or bulk produce orders, and FoodShare’s intensive mid-scale composting facility recycles food waste to be used in its urban agriculture and food education programs. Moorthi Senaratne, the Good Food Warehouse and Produce Coordinator, says that one of the benefits to this model is that, “When you have lots of different programs, it helps to share the costs between one program to another.” This model allows

FoodShare's food hub role to include other activities beyond distribution, such as education, cooking, and other community-based initiatives.

History and Outline of the Good Food Program

FoodShare was founded in 1985 as a "hunger hotline," a \$30,000 pilot program with one staff member begun by Art Eggleton in response to issues of hunger in Toronto. It has since grown into an organization with close to 60 staff members and an annual budget of over \$6 million, operating numerous programs and initiatives in the categories of Cooking, Growing, Fresh Produce, and Schools. Programs include baby and toddler nutrition classes, student nutrition programs, community gardens, fresh produce distribution, food literacy and education, and social enterprise initiatives such as a catering program and the School Grown market gardens.

In 1991, Mary Lou Morgan and Ursula Lipski were hired as consultants for the Toronto Food Policy Council to research ways in which farmers could be connected more directly with urban consumers, particularly those living in poverty. Based on their findings, in 1992 FoodShare piloted the Field-to-Table Traveling Food Truck, an early predecessor of the Mobile Good Food Markets, which morphed into the Good Food Box (GFB) program in 1994. On the first day of the GFB program, 40 boxes were packed with fresh produce. Increasing exponentially in scale from this point, the GFB program has delivered over 4,000 boxes of fresh produce to customers per month at its peak. In 2013, the program delivered an average of 3,000 boxes per month with gross annual sales of over \$600,000¹.

The Bulk Produce Program for Schools and Agencies was introduced roughly concurrently with the GFB program. It entails schools and other community agencies ordering large quantities of fresh produce to be delivered from FoodShare's Good Food Warehouse. While the Good Food Box initially brought in the greatest revenue, the Bulk Produce program has grown steadily in recent years to become the greatest source of sales and revenue within the Good Food program.

In 2005, FoodShare established its first Good Food Markets. The Good Food Market Senior Coordinator Afua Asantewaa states the importance of every market existing "for the community, by the community." This model requires that a community organization, such as a health centre, partner with FoodShare and purchase a minimum of \$200 in produce per market. This produce is sold at a market hosted by the organization and staffed by community volunteers. The community organization agrees to purchase all of the food and then can use leftovers in its own programming. A spin-off of this model is the Mobile Good Food Markets program, which in many ways represent a return to the original Field to Table Traveling Truck. These mobile markets serve high-density areas with poor food access, such as high-rise apartments. They are staffed by trained FoodShare volunteers, who run the market for about 90 minutes before moving

on to a new location. If a mobile market location proves to be successful for more than a year, it can be turned into a Good Food Market site.

Goals

FoodShare’s mission of “Good Healthy Food For All” guides its numerous programming and food distribution initiatives. Operating almost exclusively within the City of Toronto’s 416 area code, it serves a diverse population with a focus on healthy food and food education. This influences its top purchasing priorities: delicious, healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food. Debbie states that these priorities allow for an imported mango, as well as a local apple. This highlights the important role of diversity and culture in the community food work that FoodShare does. It also clarifies FoodShare’s perspective that within the current food system, addressing complex concepts such as hunger and culture precludes focusing entirely on local food. However, within this framework, FoodShare strives to purchase produce that is as local and seasonal as possible by buying directly from family farms, as well as



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communicating its purchasing priorities to a buyer at the Ontario Food Terminal. About half of the food purchased for the Good Food program is from Ontario. FoodShare also offers an organic food box, and will include organic and fair trade items in its other food boxes and programs

when the price is comparable to that of conventional products.

Overall, FoodShare strives to make good, healthy food affordable and accessible to all populations. All of its programs are universal, meaning that there are no eligibility requirements for becoming a customer. This is intended to eliminate associated stigma as well as to support FoodShare’s belief that “everyone deserves access to affordable, high-quality fresh food.”² Patrons are paying customers, rather than clients, which denotes an important philosophical difference between FoodShare’s work versus that of a food bank. Patrons of the Good Food Box and Mobile and Good Food Markets pay for the cost of the food plus a small markup to cover some program costs. This facilitates improved financial sustainability, and maintains the dignity of customers as they are receiving a “hand up, and not a hand out.” Staff are paid through funding from the City of Toronto, the United Way, the Sprott Family Foundation, and other grants and donations. The schools and agencies that participate in the Bulk Produce program are able to absorb a slightly higher markup than individual customers, and that helps to support the Good Food program as a whole.

The same philosophy applies to FoodShare's relationship with its suppliers, and farmers are never asked to donate items for the Good Food programs. As Debbie states:

[farmers] should be selling their product, gain a good price, and [we should] try to make this a peaceable solution for farmers and low income people with the subsidy coming from government and donors, not from the individual farmer. The fact that we pay full price and don't nickel and dime farmers is a huge part of the story, which is very important in terms of [our model].

In accordance with this model, farmers are paid fair market prices for their produce while the cost of the food to consumers is kept as low as possible.

How the Good Food Box Works

As outlined above, each of the Good Food Box, Good Food Market, Mobile Good Food Market, and Bulk Produce programs are interdependent and rely on the infrastructure and support of the entire Good Food program. Three of the



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four programs are briefly described above, while this section presents a more detailed description of the Good Food Box program.

Individuals interested in purchasing a Good Food Box contact FoodShare to determine if there is an established drop-off point nearby. If there is, and the volunteer coordinator is able to accept new customers, they can begin ordering a box through this venue. If there is not an established drop-off point, any person can become a volunteer coordinator by recruiting other customers to a minimum of ten box orders at one time. If they do not have ten orders, they can begin by ordering less boxes, but are expected to increase their orders to a minimum of ten. For every ten boxes ordered, the coordinator receives a free box. Customers can choose from a large (\$18) or small (\$13) conventional box, a large (\$34) or small (\$24) organic box, a "wellness" box consisting of pre-cut, pre-portioned fruits and vegetables (\$13), or a fruit box (\$13)³.

Volunteer coordinators collect orders and payment from their customers, and send this information and money to FoodShare by Wednesday for delivery the following week. Orders are compiled and farmers are contacted through Thursday and Friday to see what they have available. An order is then sent to the buyer at the Ontario Food Terminal on Friday for the remaining produce. Produce from the terminal is delivered on Monday, and the Good Food Boxes are packed by assembly lines of volunteers and warehouse staff on Tuesday. Customers do not choose the contents of their box, which are determined by what is available and reasonably priced that week, although customer feedback does influence the

contents. All contents of the box are top-quality, fresh produce, not seconds. Drivers deliver the packed boxes to volunteer coordinators on Tuesday and Wednesday. Volunteer coordinators then invite their customers to pick up their boxes.

Individuals and groups tend to find out about the Good Food Box program through word of mouth. FoodShare staff also do presentations for community groups if requested. There is little, if any, formal marketing associated with the program. There are no specific eligibility requirements for participating in the program; rather, access is available to anyone interested. However, it tends to serve neighborhoods where food access is limited, either through a lack of affordable grocery stores or affordable transportation to grocery stores or farmers' markets.

Actors Involved

FoodShare hires a buyer at the Ontario Food Terminal, who makes purchasing decisions according to FoodShare's purchasing priorities. FoodShare also purchases produce directly from family farms. At the beginning of the Good Food program, the organization was purchasing directly from 1-2 family farms, and has since built its number of direct purchasing relationships to 25 family farms, all of which are considered to be small businesses. These relationships have developed over time, with some farmers approaching FoodShare, FoodShare reaching out to farmers, and engaged farmers encouraging other farmers in their communities to sell their products to FoodShare. Many farmers aggregate their products in order to deliver them to FoodShare. For example, the Norfolk Fruit Grower's Association aggregates fruit from 9 family farms in Norfolk County and delivers their product to FoodShare when they are making a delivery to the Ontario Food Terminal. Pfenning's Organic Farm delivers their produce to FoodShare while aggregating and delivering produce from nearby organic and conventional farms.

FoodShare sells to individuals across Toronto through the Good Food Box program; however, they require volunteer coordinators to create drop-off points with a minimum of ten individual orders. FoodShare also works directly with both institutional and organizational customers by partnering with health centres, churches, schools, and other groups through the Good Food Markets, Mobile Good Food Markets, and Bulk Produce ordering.

FoodShare engages over 5,000 volunteers each year through all of its programs. The Good Food programs engage over 500 volunteer coordinators each year, as well as volunteers that pack the Good Food Boxes on a regular basis, and other volunteer groups such as corporate businesses who volunteer periodically.

Scale of Operation

FoodShare's Good Food programs primarily serve the GTA. The projected revenue for all Good Food programs in 2015 is \$2.8 million, \$2.4 million of which comes directly from the sale of food, while the remainder comes from grants and donations⁴. FoodShare leases a 7,000 square foot warehouse from the Toronto District School Board, and owns a 3,500 square foot cooler, a smaller cooler, several delivery trucks, and other equipment such as forklifts.

Stories From Up and Down the Food Chain

Impacts and Benefits to Farmers

FoodShare's commitment to working with local farmers and communities is evident in a number of stories shared by its suppliers. For example, Jenn Pfenning from Pfenning's Organic Farm commented that, in the past, when a local farmer has been struggling to move a product, they have contacted FoodShare and FoodShare has been able to buy their product and support the farmer. Pfenning's grows and distributes certified organic produce only, but they have connected conventional farmers and farmers who are transitioning to organic practices to FoodShare in order to find a market for their produce. As Jenn states:

We love working with FoodShare. FoodShare offers us good volume on specific items. They're easy to work with. They understand food, which is a relief. [They understand] seasonality and expectations for what things look like, and it's a really pleasant relationship. Clearly as an organization we support what FoodShare does, and so we have fairly high motivations to want to work with them.

Tom O'Neill, the marketing director for the Norfolk Fruit Growers' Association, shares the story of selling "school apples" to FoodShare. FoodShare wanted to buy small apples better suited to younger eaters, and through site visits and conversations, the Norfolk Fruit Growers' Association was able to start packing these apples in 3lb bags, providing more convenient packaging for FoodShare's uses and cutting packaging costs slightly. The main advantage Tom notes is, "We're using a small piece of fruit that's either not desirable in the marketplace or would end up going to processing, so we're able to sell them at a better return for the grower than processing and then it's still an advantage for FoodShare." While their main motivation is that this relationship makes good economic sense for the Association's farmers and for FoodShare, Tom also states that, "If you look at it really long term, if you can get kids to eat apples then they eat apples their whole life, so hopefully we're building future consumers."

The Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association's program manager, Alison Robertson, recently took a group of her members to Toronto to visit the Ontario Food Terminal, a food processing plant, and FoodShare. She noted that touring FoodShare was a very positive experience for those involved, and she took the opportunity to speak to her group specifically about FoodShare's important role as a food hub. A farmer from Carron Farms shared during the tour that, while he had been initially hesitant to sell to FoodShare, he has found the relationship to be economically viable as well as socially beneficial. Alison states that FoodShare's stability, professional reputation, and sound business model can help to alleviate growers' concerns about working with a community food hub. She explains that the people at FoodShare are "ambassadors for food hubs.

So growers would be more willing, then, if they



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were approached by somebody [else about working with a food hub]." From her perspective, food hubs such as FoodShare provide an avenue to value farmers, and for small-scale farms to compete with the

amalgamated supply chains of their larger counterparts.

These examples also illustrate FoodShare's model of forming networks of food hubs. Pfenning's Organic Farm and the Norfolk Fruit Growers' Association both operate in their own right as aggregation and distribution centres for local farmers, while other farms aggregate and deliver their produce more informally.

Impacts and Benefits to Local Communities

Volunteer coordinators have countless stories of the impacts of the Good Food Box program in particular, and the Good Food program by extension, on the individuals and communities to whom they distribute the boxes. All noted that while some individuals prefer to choose the groceries they buy, many enjoy the surprise of opening their Good Food Box. Some customers said that, "it's like Christmas every other week" and enjoyed receiving "treats" that they would not normally buy for themselves. Coordinators shared that many customers felt they ate more fruits and vegetables because of receiving the box, and choose to continue their orders because it positively impacts their health. For some, the lack of choice means they are exposed to new fruits and vegetables or those they would never buy on their own.

There are also many social benefits to receiving the Good Food Box. Coordinators shared that the GFB program supports their community values, and they see it as an opportunity for building community. For example, some coordinators hold a community cooking night with the free boxes they receive. For many customers, picking up their box is an opportunity to connect with other

community members, and share resources, recipes, and special moments – for example, a young family brought their newborn baby to meet their GFB volunteer coordinator.

The social impacts of the GFB program can run much deeper. One volunteer coordinator shared that, for a while, the free box was the only source of fresh fruits and vegetables for her and her son as she lived on the Ontario Disability Support Program. She also shared the story of a mother who told her, “Because I am purchasing [the GFB], [because] I am paying for the vegetables like everyone else, this empowers me enough for tomorrow when I



“Because I am purchasing [the Good Food Box], [because] I am paying for the vegetables like everyone else, this empowers me enough for tomorrow when I go to the food bank and I lose all of my dignity.” ~ a mother and customer of the Good Food Box program

go to the food bank and I lose all of my dignity.” One volunteer coordinator shared that she has some families who are not always able to pay for their boxes, and she uses the free box to support them. At other times, she takes the free box and gives the equivalent cost to her

church drop-off point as a donation. Another coordinator gave the example of how her customers that use wheelchairs are only able to access limited produce from the displays at the grocery stores. She says that the GFB provides these individuals with high quality produce, in amounts that they can manage, at prices they can afford. As a universal program, some GFB customers are food secure, while others may not be. Particularly vulnerable groups include single mothers, the elderly, students, and many others.

Coordinators commented that many customers want to support local farmers and see the GFB as a tangible way that they can make a difference. One coordinator joined the GFB program after reading a FoodShare newsletter about local asparagus. She shared her views on why customers choose the GFB:

I think that they’re all worried about the [environment] and what’s happening there. They’re worried about the farmers and they want to help them. They’re looking at themselves and thinking ‘I would be a lot healthier if I ate better’ [...] They want their children to know that food is celery and cucumbers and tomatoes, it’s not frozen stuff from Loblaws.

As an expansion of the Good Food Markets, FoodShare recently began distributing produce to the True North Food Co-operative in Fort Albany, a community in northern Ontario where grocery stores were taking advantage of consumers through outrageous markups. The True North Food Co-operative sends an order to FoodShare on behalf of five communities. FoodShare orders

the food and pays for it to be shipped north, a cost that is later covered by a combination of produce markup and government subsidy. The True North Food Co-operative distributes this fresh produce to communities with a markup to

cover transportation. While obviously improving access to healthy food, this program has also seen grocery stores begin to drop their prices as they realize they no longer have a monopoly on fresh fruits and



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vegetables. FoodShare's goal with this partnership is to build the capacity for the True North Food Co-operative to eventually order produce from the Ontario Food Terminal directly, on behalf of participating northern communities. The Northern markets program has most recently been on hiatus as operational issues are resolved.

Potential for Expansion

The greatest factor determining the ideal scale of FoodShare's Good Food program is economic viability. Debbie suggests that, while the GFB program is very important, there may be more efficient methods of distributing produce, such as the Good Food Markets. Programs that can afford a higher margin, such as the Bulk Produce program, or that make use of community resources, such as the Good Food Markets, could continue to grow to a much greater size. There is ongoing interest in all of the Good Food programs and, with the appropriate resources, any of these programs could serve a larger population of interested customers.

FoodShare relies on grants and donations to support the staff and infrastructure that make the Good Food program possible. The more stable its funding, the greater the potential for expansion. FoodShare currently leases its warehouse space from the Toronto District School Board and may need to change locations when its lease ends in 2016. Thus, having a stable, long term space would facilitate plans for program expansion as well. With the long history of the GFB and Good Food programs informing their decisions, FoodShare staff are also working on "operational excellence," refining the systems they use to better suit their current operations and strategic direction. As a result, in May 2015 Good Food program sales amounted to \$206,432, the highest monthly sales in the history of the program (Debbie Field, personal communication).

Challenges and Limitations

As with many not-for-profit organizations, FoodShare experiences ongoing funding and staffing challenges. Faced with recent staffing reductions, the staff running the Good Food program balance numerous responsibilities and feel the pressure of their positions. While FoodShare receives significant funding from several groups, finding sufficient, stable funding was cited as a challenge by a number of staff. As noted above, accessing a stable, long term location has been an additional challenge.

Debbie summarizes the challenges FoodShare faces as follows:

If we can only grow if things are subsidized, how can we grow in a climate of declining revenues everywhere? [...] Can we create a program that continues to grow and also make sure that it is not confused around [being] universal or not? Money, location, and really strategic direction are all challenges, in a really positive way as we're moving forward.

FoodShare faces limitations in supporting local food due to its focus on working with traditionally underserved populations. As stated above, its purchasing priorities focus on distributing delicious, healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods, which include imports as well as locally available items. From Debbie's perspective, FoodShare will always purchase food from the Ontario Food Terminal and will always need to purchase some imports. However, opportunities exist to supply certain culturally diverse foods locally. Moorthi noted a prior relationship with Vineland's World Crops program, that involved locally grown world crops being included in Good Food programs. The produce was well received by customers, and he feels that there would be a market through FoodShare should farmers grow these crops in the future. Debbie also notes that within the realm of local, seasonal produce, there are great opportunities to increase purchasing. FoodShare's suppliers tend to run out of stored local produce such as pears and carrots well before the next growing season. One of the current challenges to purchasing more local produce is that peak demand from customers occurs during the school year, when the Bulk Purchasing program is running, while peak produce availability is in the summer. With increased production and storage, FoodShare would be able to buy greater volumes of these local products throughout non-harvest months.

Within the programs themselves, some volunteer coordinators faced challenges in terms of managing their volunteer workload. However, they all felt that the work that they were involved in was meaningful and worthwhile.

Strategies for Success

As is clear through the evolution of FoodShare's Good Food program, the organization has adapted to and learned from a number of experiences. For example, over time staff have learned from customers' preferences and adapted the size and style of the Good Food Boxes. For those interested in starting or supporting a GFB program, FoodShare has published a 2nd edition of "The Good Food Box: A Manual." This document outlines the details of the GFB program and lessons learned, and includes sample order forms, recipe sheets and flyers, and program reports. Perhaps the greatest lesson learned from their experiences is summarized in the Good Food Box Manual:

Having a warehouse, experienced, dedicated staff, relationships with farmers, and an account at the Ontario Food Terminal allows FoodShare to develop a variety of produce distribution options of which the Good Food Box is one. FoodShare's goals remain the same: to improve access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate and sustainable food. We have a variety of programs that all work toward this goal using a variety of distribution mechanisms.⁵

FoodShare's experiences have allowed them to build the infrastructure of the entire Good Food program, opening up greater possibilities for future expansion.



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FoodShare has also found ways to engage with the communities they work with, particularly in implementing the Good Food Markets and Mobile Good Food Markets. Embedding these programs in established community organizations and with

community volunteers helps to ensure their success. FoodShare hopes to continue to grow these community partnerships, and reach out to underutilized organizations such as a greater variety of faith-based groups.

FoodShare intends to continue building its relationships with local farmers. In support of this goal and with funding from the Local Food Fund, it is holding several farmers' meetings in 2015 to introduce farmers working with FoodShare as well as farmers new to the organization to FoodShare's programs. One of these meetings was held in June 2015, along with a meeting geared toward helping community agencies to establish coordinated food purchasing, and FoodShare would like to continue this series of meeting in the fall of 2015. The hope is that these meetings will foster the relationships FoodShare currently has with farmers, and establish new direct purchasing relationships with other family

farms. In particular, FoodShare hopes to build more relationships with non-organic farms producing sufficient volume to supply its Good Food programs, and able to deliver directly to FoodShare's warehouse. While FoodShare offers certified organic products to customers and prioritizes purchasing organic produce when it is near the price of conventional, offering fresh produce at an affordable price precludes a strictly organic sourcing policy. FoodShare currently has a number of successful relationships with conventional farms, many of which have Local Food Plus and other certifications, and it hopes to build on these successes with more direct purchasing moving forward.

FoodShare's Good Food program has great relevance for other organizations, providing models for different ways to distribute food, address food insecurity, consider culture and food justice, and support local farmers. As Debbie states:

Knowing that our model is only successful in Toronto where we have access to the Ontario Food Terminal and population density, we try to work very closely with Good Food Box programs in other communities. We're always learning from them as well as them learning from us. Because they're in a different sized city, in a different context...their challenges help us figure some of this stuff out that we would not understand otherwise.

Debbie notes that many organizations do not have sufficient resources to implement Good Food programs on the same scale as FoodShare, which can limit the shared support and infrastructure they are able to take advantage of.



“I think a lot of new organizations in the food system that are working to change things owe their ability to have formed and be successful to the work that FoodShare has done.” ~ Jenn Pfenning, Pfenning's Organic Farm

On a systemic level, FoodShare's greatest success seems to have been in demonstrating the potential for food system change. In Debbie's words, “I think we have given people some real hope about how this new supply chain could be made and we demonstrated and modeled the possibility of these

food hubs pretty intensely, so that makes me very proud. I think we also have created a non-charity based market for farmers.” Jenn Pfenning echoes these words, stating, “I think FoodShare really has had the kind of impact [on the food system] that was intended, it's just incrementally slow...I think a lot of new organizations in the food system that are working to change things owe their ability to have formed and be successful to the work that FoodShare has done.”

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