FOOD BANK OF NORTH ALABAMA

Food Bank's Local Food Hub Delivers Results

THE FARM FOOD COLLABORATIVE

June 2016

A Can of Peas

It started in 2008 with a simple can of peas.

The Food Bank of North Alabama purchased a tractor-trailer load of canned peas to distribute to residents at risk of hunger. As responsible stewards of charitable dollars, we bought these peas at the lowest price. When they arrived at our warehouse, we discovered they were grown and processed in China. This shocking discovery that peas from more than 11,000 miles away were cheaper than any grown in the U. S. spurred us to learn more.

Our investigation quickly revealed how U.S. farm policies and trade agreements had led to significant increases in imported foods, particularly fruits and vegetables. That can of peas was pivotal to the Food Bank's change in strategy from a sole focus on feeding the hungry to a dual mission that also searches for solutions to the root cause of hunger.

The Food Bank began in 1984 when a small group of volunteers asked local farmers to donate fruits and vegetables to be given to neighbors in need. Today, the Food Bank supplies over 8 million pounds of food a year to a network of 245 food pantries, homeless shelters and children's programs in 11 counties of North Alabama. Together, we feed over 80,000 people at risk of hunger in this predominately rural region that extends from the Mississippi to Georgia border.

A Crossroad

But in 2007, the Food Bank reached a crossroad. Although we had been operating for over 25 years, the number of our neighbors unable to buy enough food to feed their families continued to grow. We pinpointed poverty as the root cause of hunger, but we questioned whether we had the capacity to address such a complex, systemic issue. If we sought resources to tackle hunger's root cause, would we still be able to provide the volume of food necessary to serve residents in immediate need? We spoke with community leaders from across our entire region and realized that we could effectively take on the search for solutions to hunger without diminishing our ability to feed the hungry if we invested in long-term collaborations.

Expanded Mission

In 2008, we expanded our mission from an exclusive focus on feeding neighbors in need, to also addressing hunger's root cause. Today, our approach to solving hunger centers on local food initiatives that foster collaboration, entrepreneurship and access to healthy food.

To better understand the challenge facing our region, the Food Bank commissioned a study from one of the foremost food system analysts in the United States. The study's results were both sobering and promising. It found that in a five-year span our region had lost over 2,000 farms, and of our remaining farmers, over half were reporting net loses.

Our own experiences backed up the research. Our supplies of local produce had dwindled as local farmers were unable to compete in the global marketplace. These farmers quit vegetable production and either sold their land or went bankrupt. In fact, Ed Rains, a vegetable grower who later became the Food Bank's warehouse manager, lost his farm, which had been in his family for over 100 years. Inexpensive food imports like the cans of peas were costing livelihoods in North Alabama and putting more residents at risk of hunger.

By contrast, consumers in our region were spending $2.2 billion a year on food produced outside our region. We recognized the amount of wealth being exported represented a tremendous turnaround opportunity if we could bring people together and direct their food purchases toward local farms.

Convening Diverse Stakeholders

Stakeholders explored how to support local farmers and create greater access to healthy foods like local apples.

In 2012 with the help of Alabama Agriculture Commissioner John McMillan, we contacted stakeholders from across the state: local farmers, state representatives, food service contractors, dieticians, school nutrition directors, cooperative extension agents, economic develop specialists, regional planners and health professionals.

In a series of meetings, this diverse group strategized how to capture food dollars leaving Alabama's economy, retain wealth in the region and promote the healthiest food choices available – locally grown fruits and vegetables.

Nine months later we launched the **Farm Food Collaborative** – North Alabama's first local food hub helping family farmers sell locally grown fruits and vegetables to local institutional buyers like schools, workplace cafeterias, distributors and grocery stores.

Farm Food Collaborative

The Farm Food Collaborative has a unique structure with three types of members:

- local farmers,
- local buyers like schools and grocery stores, and
- support agencies like the Alabama Department of Agriculture & Industries, Alabama Department of Education, Alabama Cooperative Extension and Top of Alabama Regional Council of Governments.

By joining the Farm Food Collaborative, members choose to participate in an alternative to the conventional supply chain. There is full transparency about where the food is grown, and farmers are equal partners with buyers in determining the Collaborative's direction. Within this cooperative environment, the Collaborative brokers mutually beneficial sales transactions among its members.

When setting up the Collaborative's structure, Collaborative leaders applied lessons learned from past economic development projects that had invested in expensive infrastructure at the outset. Over ten years ago, for example, regional leaders built a hydro-cooling plant in Northeast Alabama. The project soon failed due to infighting and lack of cooperation among the partners. Rather than infrastructure, the Farm Food Collaborative is initially investing in relationship building.

Our goal is to foster long-term, mutual beneficial business relationships between farmers and buyers. The function of the Collaborative is to help members meet each other's expectations and work together to overcome any obstacles impeding the sale of local foods.

Impact

The Collaborative helped Will Scott, a fifth generation farmer, sell his family's apples to every public school in the state.

A primary obstacle impeding local food sales is the lack of food safety certifications among Alabama farmers, without which they are unable to sell to public schools or distributors. The Food Bank, however, has expertise in food safety. For the past 18 months, the Food Bank leveraged this skill-set and conveniently provided farmers one-on-one, food safety training on their farms. When the Collaborative launched in 2012, there were two farms with the required food safety certification in the project. Today there are 29.

To date, the Farm Food Collaborative has facilitated over $600,000 of commercial sales, and this year, helped the Alabama Department of Education purchase $1.6 million worth of fruits and vegetables from local farmers like Will Scott, a fifth generation farmer in his early twenties. Will joined the Collaborative when he decided to return to his family's farm to try to earn his livelihood.

After helping Will attain the needed food safety certification, the Collaborative helped him sell locally grown apples to every public school in the state of Alabama.

These additional sales contributed to the viability of Will's farm, and thousands of schoolchildren ate fresh, local apples in their school cafeteria – apples that had been delivered at the peak of taste and nutritional value.

As a result of the Collaborative's work with local farmers, many farmers are now giving back. For the first time in 20 years, the Food Bank is once again receiving significant donations of locally grown produce including sweet potatoes, apples and squash. These donations mean our region's most vulnerable residents – children, seniors and others at risk of hunger – once again have access to the healthiest food choices available in the region.