

# Community Food Security Programs: What Do They Look Like?

*Community food security is a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally appropriate, nutritionally sound diet through an economically and environmentally sustainable food system that promotes community self-reliance and social justice.*

—Based on a definition by Mike Hamm and Anne Bellows

At a basic level, community food security (CFS) is about making healthy food accessible to all, including low-income people. But, as this definition suggests, it's about much more than that. It's about making nutritious and culturally appropriate food accessible, not just any food. It is about promoting social justice and more equitable access to resources, and building and revitalizing local communities and economies. It's about supporting local, regional, family-scale, and sustainable farmers and businesses. It's about empowering diverse people to work together to create positive changes in the food system and their communities... and much more.

## **Community Food Security programs typically strive to attain many of the following goals:**

- ☼ Develop just, sustainable, and diverse food systems
- ☼ Meet the food needs of everyone, including people with low incomes
- ☼ Promote good nutrition and health
- ☼ Revitalize local communities and build self-reliance and collaboration
- ☼ Foster community economic development and strengthen local and regional food systems
- ☼ Link farmers and consumers, and support sustainable and family-scale farming
- ☼ Promote good working conditions and sustainable livelihoods for farmers and food system workers
- ☼ Change policies and institutions to support community food security goals
- ☼ Honor and celebrate diverse cultures and traditions
- ☼ Enhance the dignity and joy of growing, preparing, and eating food
- ☼ Build capacity for people to create change through education and empowerment

# Examples of Community Food Security Activities

CFS activities are integrative in nature and usually encompass multiple goals and activities. Some of the key types of activities are listed below. Such activities often are pursued within a broader framework such as making nutritious food more accessible to low-income people and/or building a stronger local or regional food system.

**Community Supported Agriculture (CSA):** A CSA is a system that connects consumers and growers in a mutually beneficial relationship. Consumers purchase a share in a growers' harvest at the beginning of each season and then share in the risks and bounties of farming. Growers then provide a weekly harvest that is distributed to the CSAs shareholders. Consumers benefit by receiving fresh, high-quality products and learning about new and seasonal foods and sustainable agriculture. Farmers benefit from the secure market for their crops, and both parties benefit from having a more personal connection with each other. CSAs have expanded rapidly in recent years, with more than 1,000 in operation in the U.S. and Canada in 1999. A CSA that wishes to strengthen their community food security approach may include the following strategies:

- ⊗ Provisions to make it more accessible to low-income shareholders, such as targeted outreach, sliding-scale fees, a donation process, working shares, and/or payment plans.
- ⊗ Educational programs on sustainable agriculture, nutrition, and/or food preparation.
- ⊗ Farm events and work days that create opportunities for community building and skill development.
- ⊗ Feedback loops to incorporate shareholders' ideas into the farm planning.
- ⊗ Donations of extra produce to programs that feed the hungry.

**Farmers' Markets:** Farmers' markets provide consumers a local place to gather, to meet farmers and to purchase a variety of fresh produce and food products. Their popularity has been growing rapidly the U.S., with the number of markets increasing by almost 80% over eight years, to 3,100 markets in 2002. Farmers' markets that are working to strengthen their community food security approach may include the following strategies:

- ⊗ Locations in areas where access to fresh, affordable produce is limited.
- ⊗ A program to accept Woman, Infants & Children (WIC) coupons and/or Food Stamps.
- ⊗ Guidelines ensuring that products at the market are locally or regionally produced.
- ⊗ A gleaning program that gives farmers an opportunity to donate produce to feed the hungry.
- ⊗ Educational activities that provide information on food preparation, agricultural practices, nutrition and other topics.
- ⊗ Opportunities for consumers and farmers to share ideas and concerns about the market's operation.

**Community Gardens:** Community gardens are places where neighbors gather to grow food and plants together. Such gardens provide fresh produce, urban greening and an opportunity for neighbors to get to know each other and improve their community. They can involve reclaiming vacant land and help to renew blighted neighborhoods. Gardens that are working to strengthen their community food security approach may include the following strategies:

- ☼ Efforts to include and benefit low-income residents and neighbors of various ages, races and ethnic backgrounds.
- ☼ A democratic organization that allows gardeners to make decisions about garden management.
- ☼ Opportunities to gather for community and family events.
- ☼ Education on organic and sustainable gardening practices.
- ☼ Opportunities for gardeners to market their produce, or to donate it to the hungry.

**Farm to Cafeteria Initiatives:** Farm to Cafeteria programs are becoming increasingly popular among schools, colleges and other institutions. They focus on creating direct links between growers and institutions in order to increase the amount of fresh, locally or regionally grown products used in the cafeterias, and to provide a reliable source of income for family farms. Farm to cafeteria programs that are working to strengthen their community food security approach may include the following strategies:

- ☼ Efforts to target schools or institutions that serve low-income people.
- ☼ Guidelines to purchase produce from local and/or sustainable growers.
- ☼ Links with grower cooperatives and family-scale farmers.
- ☼ Educational programs that help students learn about nutrition, cooking, gardening and where their food comes from.
- ☼ A parent or student organization that provides leadership and assistance to the program.

**Community Food Assessments:** A Community Food Assessment is a participatory and collaborative process that examines a broad range of food-related issues and resources in order to inform actions to improve the community's food system. Through such assessments, a diverse group of stakeholders work together to research their local food system, to strategically communicate their findings, and to implement changes based on their findings. Community food assessments that are working to strengthen their community food security approach may include the following strategies:

- ☼ A participatory process that involves diverse stakeholders in planning and implementing the assessment, including community residents.
- ☼ An emphasis on shared leadership and collaborative decision-making.
- ☼ Education and empowerment strategies, like training young people in survey methods.
- ☼ A focus on meeting the needs of low-income and other marginalized populations.
- ☼ A broad, food systems perspective that examines a variety of issues and the connections between them.
- ☼ An emphasis on generating specific recommendations and actions aimed at improving the local food system.

**Food Policy Councils and Related Initiatives:** A food policy council is a group of stakeholders who advise a city, county or state government on policies related to agriculture, food distribution, hunger and nutrition. They perform a variety of tasks, from researching food production and access issues, to designing and implementing projects and policies to address those issues. Such councils provide an effective forum for diverse stakeholders to work together to create positive changes in their food system. Food policy councils that are working to strengthen their community food security approach may include the following strategies:

- ☼ Diverse representation from various community members.
- ☼ Collaborative decision making processes.
- ☼ A food system perspective that leads to integrated approaches to local issues.
- ☼ A focus on addressing the needs of low-income and marginalized communities.

**Community Economic Development:** Community economic development initiatives include projects that give people the opportunity to start or enhance food-related small businesses and cottage industries, as well as efforts to bring supermarkets to underserved areas. Projects that are working to strengthen their community food security approach may include the following strategies:

- ☼ Initiatives that target job creation for people in low-income communities.
- ☼ A focus on businesses that use locally, regionally and/or sustainably grown foods and that market products locally or regionally.
- ☼ An emphasis on nutritious food products and/or products for ethnic and specialty markets.
- ☼ A youth element that builds young people's job skills while giving them work experience.

**Youth Programs:** The principles of community food security support an appreciation for individual gifts and talents. This is especially true with youth, whose contributions and capabilities are often overlooked. Community food security programs of various types (farmers markets, community gardens CSAs, etc.) often include a youth aspect to their programs. These may include:

- ☼ Apprenticeship opportunities for youth to learn valuable job skills and to earn an income.
- ☼ Youth leadership programs and volunteer opportunities.
- ☼ Community building activities that encourage youth to share feelings and perceptions with their peers and with adults in the programs.