



WESTERN NEW YORK REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEM INITIATIVE





A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

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The completion of this report comes less than two months following the horrific massacre of ten African Americans by a white supremacist at a Tops grocery store in Buffalo's east side. Though we do not live in Buffalo, we visited the city, and that particular neighborhood, a number of times. We witnessed both the extreme poverty and disinvestment alongside vibrant urban farms, an emerging Black-owned food co-op, and other initiatives, led by people of color committed to overcoming the deep and long-term inequities that have kept this community from thriving.

In the words of Rebekah Williams, an active participant in this project and a co-founder and leader of the Buffalo Food Equity Network, "Intentional and systemic racism and historic disinvestment in Black communities has led to the circumstances of the tragic white supremacist terrorist attack that left ten people dead and three wounded at a neighborhood grocery store on Saturday. No one should lose their lives while shopping for food."

This report is dedicated to those leaders fighting for justice in Buffalo, as well as their farmer, business, and activist colleagues across the Western New York region who are building a more just and resilient food system every day.

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Michael Shuman**

July 15, 2022



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The food system of Western New York demands understanding and targeted recommendations to make it more equitable.

To meet this challenge, a funders collaborative called Moving Forward Together (MFT) launched the **Western New York Regional Food System Initiative (WNYRFSI)** in January 2021. The project sought to improve the viability, resilience, and wealth-creating opportunities via a strong food system for communities throughout the nine-county region (Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Monroe, Niagara, Orleans, and Wyoming counties), in rural and urban communities alike.

This report is the culmination of the first 18 months of work—and, through its recommendations, lays a foundation for future action. As we move to that phase of action, our name will also evolve, becoming **Food Future Western New York (FFWNY)**.

Leading the work was SCALE, Inc., a four-person consulting team, who then engaged more than 70 regional food-system leaders in a Regional Advisory Council and five topic-specific Work Groups. Additionally, several dozen other food-system stakeholders

provided time and insights through interviews or in-person meetings. The findings and recommendations contained in this report reflect their diverse expertise and perspectives.

The report is divided into seven core sections: Introduction; Overall Findings; Access, Equity and Sovereignty; Farmers and Producers; Markets, Infrastructure, and Supply Chain; Finance and Investment; and Organizational Infrastructure. For more detailed information, please refer to the 14 appendices included at the end of the full report.



OUR KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

There are many strengths in the region's food system.

The high-quality soils and abundant rainfall in WNY make it a “breadbasket” for people within and beyond its borders, producing a wide range of food and farm products. However, the system itself is under threat.

Growing inequities pose a key threat.

While many urban neighborhoods in Buffalo and Rochester lack access to healthy food, small farms and rural communities are simultaneously struggling to keep their businesses afloat. Both sets of communities struggle with long-term disinvestment and a wavering public commitment to address racial justice. (The mass shooting at the Tops Market—which was all the more painful because it occurred at one of the successful initiatives to reduce food inequality—happened in the last weeks of this phase of the project.)

Farms face critical concerns.

The increasing competition for scarce land from both residential and commercial developers, the weakening of some critical farm infrastructure, and the buying and consolidation of many farms and processors are top concerns. While regional farm sales have risen over the past few years, profitability remains largely elusive or nonexistent. Recent events, especially the rising costs of land, inputs, and labor, may drive many farms into bankruptcy.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE REGION INCLUDE:

Ongoing regional initiatives connect farmers with local purchasers, including three food hubs, three food e-commerce businesses, and at least seven mobile markets.

A significant regional commitment to increased local purchasing from educational and health anchor institutions, which in turn creates the potential for a significant expansion in both markets for farmers and the availability of healthy foods for tens of thousands of people in the region.

Vastly more investment capital can be injected into food and farming businesses and projects by mobilizing grassroots investors. Through investment crowdfunding, regional investment funds, and other tools, a new marketplace can be created that connects local investors with exciting new businesses.

It is worth saying that this project was designed to produce not just a report, but action. We encourage those in the region interested in strong food systems to read the summary of the 32 project recommendations on the next pages, as well as the detailed elaboration of these recommendations available in the full report, intended to give a wide range of actors—farmers, business people, consumers, activists, investors, funders, and policymakers—guidance and inspiration for next steps.





SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations span all dimensions of this project. For greater detail, please view the **Recommendations** sections of the full report.

*A note on organization names: the Western New York Regional Food System Initiative (WNYRFSI) was created for the first phase of our project: generating this report. Moving forward into the next phases, the initiative will be known as **Food Future WNY (FFWNY)**. Our recommendations reference the latter name.*

ACCESS, EQUITY, AND SOVEREIGNTY

- ① **Establish a Food and Racial Equity Council** to develop a set of decision-making criteria and/or guidelines across the Western New York region to ensure that racial equity is a priority in the decision-making process for FFWNY and new and existing investments.
- ② **Dedicate a stream of funds that will direct capacity-building investments toward initiatives that prioritize Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) food system actors** by investing in new and existing projects in urban, peri-urban, and rural geographies that are majority BIPOC and BIPOC-led.
- ③ **Invest in the formation of a food sovereignty capacity-building partnership** that can provide agricultural technical assistance and demonstration sites of self-sufficiency across the WNY region.
- ④ **Identify ways to increase control of and ownership of land for low-wealth communities and individuals**, whether through individual or shared ownership.
- ⑤ **Mobilize local and regional planning** to effectively shape local community-led response, decision-making, and policy outcomes to critical food distribution and supply challenges.

- ⑥ **Make a significant investment in a wealth creation value chain approach** in poor rural and urban areas through supporting community-driven health and positive nutrition education, food and health marketing, and physical activity habits to address chronic illnesses in Healthy Food Priority Areas (HFPAs).
- ⑦ **Address the digital divide by creating a multilingual social network communications** and an information hub by engaging multiple modes of delivering information.



FARMERS AND FOOD PRODUCERS

- ① **Increase the viability of WNY farmers**, particularly newer, limited resource, or BIPOC farms, through systematic efforts to:
 - Increase demand for local foods
 - Improve access to well-paying markets
- ② **Increase access to quality, affordable farmland** with particular focus on new farmers, BIPOC farmers, and urban growers.
- ③ **Help cultivate and support the next generation of farmers** through investment in farm and food apprenticeships, farmer networks, and programs to link new and aspiring farmers with retiring farmers.
- ④ **Dedicate a stream of funds for investment in critical on-farm infrastructure**, particularly for newer, limited resource, and BIPOC farmers.



THE REGION'S SUPPLY CHAINS, INCLUDING MARKETS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

For Markets and Buyers

- ① **Significantly increase values-based procurement**, including local and regional and equitable food purchasing, by anchor institutions including universities, hospitals, and public schools.
- ② **Identify local, regional, and state level policies that hamper values-based procurement by institutions** and the policies that would enhance values-based food procurement. Leadership of FFWNY should work in partnership with regional and state level organizations to secure the needed policy changes.
- ③ **Increase community food sovereignty and equitable access to fresh and healthy locally produced foods through alternative retail options**, such as cooperatives, farm stops, e-commerce, and other models.
- ④ **Help local and regional emergency food distributors shift to a greater emphasis on local capacity-building and food sovereignty** versus only emergency food distribution.



Infrastructure

- ① **Expand meat processing capacity throughout Western New York** through strategic investments in local, farmer-driven models.
- ② **Increase market access for small to midsize farmers, and increase consumer access to local food** by pilot testing a network of "sub-hubs" that link producers with food hubs, food distributors, e-commerce platforms and end buyers.
- ③ **Increase access to commercial kitchen processing opportunities for aspiring food entrepreneurs and for groups focused on food sovereignty** by partnering with and expanding the capacity of existing commercial and shared-use kitchens.
- ④ **Expand processing and value adding options for dairy farmers,** potentially including through investment in small processing facilities – micro-dairies or creameries – that add value and enable direct sales of local milk.
- ⑤ **Work with existing BIPOC-owned businesses and BIPOC-run organizations to identify and implement opportunities for investment** that both supports their enterprises and, more specifically, builds opportunities for expanded BIPOC ownership within the WNY food system.





FINANCE AND INVESTMENT

- ① **Create an online regional repository resource available to help food and farming businesses (FFBs) access capital.** This will be especially helpful for women and BIPOC entrepreneurs who have historically been excluded from the traditional entrepreneurship ecosystem. This repository can build off the work the Food Finance Work Group has done on the Food Future WNY website.
- ② **Create a new regional fund that invests in FFBs.** Because funds provide investors with diversification, liquidity, and professional management, an FFB fund can serve as a more attractive way for residents to invest in FFBs. It also can increase the ability of women and BIPOC entrepreneurs to find needed capital for their FFBs.
- ③ **Expand the local investment marketplace in the region for FFBs** to promote local economy-building and to make the economy more inclusive of BIPOC businesses and investors. This means putting effort into preparing, both more FFBs to be “investment ready,” and more investors to be ready for local investment opportunities.
- ④ **Mobilize policymakers in the region (state, county, and local)** to embrace simple, low-cost ideas for accelerating the flow of local capital to FFBs.

ORGANIZATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE TO GUIDE AND MANAGE FOOD FUTURE WESTERN NEW YORK

- ① **Continue to embrace, develop, and use the operating principles** developed by the Regional Advisory Council (RAC) and applied across the initiative.
- ② **Continue the Regional Advisory Council (to be renamed the Regional Council)** as a core structure and means for stakeholders to meaningfully lead FFWNY as it works to use and implement the phase 1 findings and recommendations.
- ③ **Establish food and racial equity as an integral part of FFWNY** that advances the initiative's collective understanding and work on food and racial equity.



- ④ **Revise and empower the Work Groups** with resources that support the development and implementation of focused work plans with realistic goals.
- ⑤ **Develop a shared governance approach for FFWNY** that supports efficient management of the initiative and implementation of concrete actions that reflect the diverse range of perspectives and needs.
- ⑥ **Clarify the initiative's branding** and be proactive in internal and external communications.
- ⑦ **Expand the initiative's capacity and staffing.**
- ⑧ **Build awareness of and the capacity to inform local and state policy** processes in support of a more resilient and equitable food system.





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HOW TO TAKE ACTION

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The goal of this initiative goes far beyond creating a report—our collaborative goal is to inspire action. To join us, view the full report and learn more about the future of food equity, please visit:

www.foodfuturewny.org



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support and involvement of scores of people, working groups, partners, funders, advocates, organizations and more who collaborated to make it all possible. To all of you, we give a hearty "thanks" for your critical contributions.

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Site Visit Hosts

Abers Acres
African Heritage Food Co-op
Burley's Berries & Blooms
Brigiotta's Produce
Buffalo Food Equity Network
Burchfield Penney Art Center
Chautauqua County Food Policy Council
The Commissary
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Genesee County
Eden Valley Growers
EPIC
FeedMore WNY
Field and Fork Network
Foodlink
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Innovation Center
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Massachusetts Avenue Project
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Roycroft Campus Corporation
United Apple Sales
Upstate Niagara Cooperative
Urban Fruits & Veggies/
Buffalo Go Green
Wilson Beef Farms
Wyoming County Ag and Business Center

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