Healthy Food for Denver’s Kids
Year 1 Executive Summary
I. Background

Through the 2018 Denver Ballot Measure 302, the Healthy Food for Denver’s Kids (HFDK) Initiative increased taxes to establish a fund for healthy food and food-based education for Denver’s youth. The ballot measure was approved on November 6, 2018, and went into effect in January 2019. The 0.08% increase in the sales and use tax within the City and County of Denver is expected to generate approximately $11 million annually and will sunset after 10 years. Funds will be collected from January 1, 2019, through December 31, 2028, and they will be distributed by December 31, 2029 (Denver Department of Public Health & Environment [DDPHE], 2021).

The HFDK Initiative seeks to build an equitable and strategic approach to increasing access to healthy food and food-based education for children and youth ages 18 and under with these three goals:

1. Increase the number and diet quality of healthy meals and snacks received by children and youth in the City and County of Denver.
2. Increase the number of children and youth receiving nutrition, food skills, and sustainable and just food systems education in the City and County of Denver.
3. Reduce overall food insecurity in households with children and the number of children and youth experiencing hunger in the City and County of Denver.

Since its launch, HFDK has distributed nearly $18 million to more than 80 organizations through a competitive grant process (DDPHE, 2021). HFDK funded 25 organizations in the first cohort (August 2020-July 2021) — collectively referred to as Year 1 grantees — that included 16 nonprofits, eight schools or affiliates of Denver Public Schools, and one city agency. Of these grantees, 52% of the cohort supported both food access and education, 24% provided food education only, 16% focused on food access only, and 8% had capital infrastructure projects. More information about the full list of funded grantees can be found on the DDPHE website.

Description of the HFDK Evaluation

DDPHE contracted with Change Matrix as its evaluation and learning partner. The evaluation is utilizing a mixed-methods approach (using both qualitative and quantitative data), drawing from both primary...
II. Evaluation Findings

The Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The information shared in this section is based on analysis of the grantee survey data and various secondary data sources. The first cohort of HFDK grantees was undergoing implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic. A review of secondary data reinforced that the pandemic significantly impacted food insecurity and related social determinants of health for Colorado and Denver residents. The pandemic-driven economic recession was the first the United States has experienced since 2007. Before the pandemic, the nation’s overall food insecurity rate had reached its lowest point since its measurement began in the 1990s. Since the onset of the pandemic, food insecurity rates are again approaching levels seen during the 2007 recession (Feeding America, 2021). Current levels are still roughly three times higher than they were before the COVID-19 pandemic (Hunger Free Colorado, 2021). Women and populations of color have been disproportionately affected, further exacerbating existing economic, gender, and racial disparities.

Impact of HFDK Funding

It is estimated that nearly 28% of Denver’s 138,897 youth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) were served by the Year 1 grantees in the first cohort. Grantees served primarily low-income children identifying as Hispanic/Latinx. All reporting grantees largely served school-aged children (age 6-18). All grantees served Denver children and youth living in areas identified as at-risk for food insecurity.

How Did HFDK Impact Food Access?

Over the course of the year, 14 grantees distributed over 150,000 food boxes and seven Year 1 grantees served nearly 120,000 meals and snacks, increasing access to healthy foods for families and youth in Denver. Most grantees also distributed nutrition information and recipe cards with meals and food.

Nearly 3,000,000 pounds of food were distributed with HFDK funds by four grantees to other partners in the Denver food system. These four grantees rescued these millions of pounds of food, thereby diverting food that would have ended up as waste in landfills and increasing food access for families and youth who needed it. The rescued food was distributed to 185 schools, 39 community centers, and 52 housing facilities.

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3 KIlls were conducted with 24 professionals with knowledge of the systems serving children and youth in Denver, and specifically those systems that provide food and food-based education. They represented a mix of HFDK Commission members, policymakers, leaders/experts in the food systems space and child food insecurity, direct service staff, and Denver and Colorado-wide food system initiatives (e.g., Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger, etc.).

4 Data sources include Hunger Free Colorado, A Survey of Hunger in Colorado; Colorado Children’s Campaign, KIDS COUNT in Colorado; and agencies such as the Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Denver Public Schools, USDA Food and Nutrition Service, and U.S. Census Bureau.
Grantees reported positive changes among youth served. Among the 23 grantees who provided food access and/or education, many reported increases in: vegetable consumption amongst children and youth (87%); access to fresh, healthy food (83%); the number of youth trying new foods (74%); and youth food security (74%). Additionally, grantees noted increases in coordination among food organizations in Denver (61%) and enrollment in programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and free and reduced-price school meal programs (30%).

What Food and Nutrition Education Was Provided Through HFDK?

Through 15 grantees, HFDK grants provided education and instruction through classes around healthy food and nutrition to over 25,000 youth and family members in Denver. In aggregate, 14,822 youth and 10,457 adults participated in the educational activities created by grantees.

Of the 972 food and/or nutrition education classes held, 78% covered nutrition or healthy eating, 71% had a focus on cooking, 41% included education on food production — such as farming or gardening — and food justice and food advocacy topics showed up in about 25%. Additional topics that a few grantees covered in their classes included how to make healthier versions of traditional recipes, permaculture, food safety guidelines, kitchen safety, and the connection between food and physical, emotional, and mental health.

Eight grantees invested in equitable food education on farms and growing sites and were able to create and support 76 jobs, internships, and apprenticeships for youth to engage more meaningfully in the food system. Gardens served as educational sites. Over 2,523 youth interacted with the gardens and gardens were often used in conjunction with a curriculum. With the shift to almost
all virtual-based learning, the ability to safely interact and learn in an outdoor, in-person format was a welcomed opportunity for many of the youth grantees engaged.

Overall, among the 23 grantees providing food access and/or education activities to youth, the majority noted positive changes in youth knowledge and skills that are likely to have lasting impact on their food security, both short- and long-term. Specifically, they reported increases in youth knowledge of healthy foods (78%), the number of youth preparing healthy meals and snacks at home (70%), knowledge and skills around food production (61%), and food systems knowledge (57%).

How Did HFDK Support Healthy Environments?

Over the course of the first year, HFDK supported the establishment of nearly 500 new growing sites in neighborhoods with higher levels of food insecurity. These sites served as local food sources available to communities and educational environments for youth and families. In the fall and spring, 21,502 pounds of food were harvested from these gardens, farms, and greenhouses, yielding $54,619 worth of produce supported by HFDK funds. This food was then distributed in Community Supported Agriculture boxes and to food pantries; community feeding programs; local children/families; and farmers markets to be sold, provided for free, or bought through a pay-what-you-can model.

III. Implications for the HFDK Strategy

The evaluation identified implications for HFDK’s future grantmaking strategy. This section includes recommendations that emerged from the KIIs. Key informants (KIs) were asked to speak about the current child nutrition and food security landscape in the Denver area. Questions posed to the KIs were fairly broad and without parameters, to help the evaluation team establish baseline knowledge of the current context in which HFDK is operating. The following were themes that emerged from the KIIs as strategies to improve implementation, address gaps, and leverage strengths in the food system, assuming that HFDK was implementing it’s programming without restrictions or limitations.
What Are Opportunities to Improve Implementation?

HFDK should practice proactive communication with potential grantees and community members, including being transparent about funding requirements and clearly defining concepts that are central to this work. HFDK could improve its communication with potential grantees by:

- engaging in focused outreach/relationship-building with grassroots organizations rather than expecting organizations to know about grant opportunities;
- clarifying eligibility criteria;
- having direct conversations with applicant organizations during the application process about the extent to which their programs reflect/embody equitable, culturally responsive, and community-based practices; and
- clarifying where applicants are during the application process.

In particular, what constitutes “healthy food” needs to be defined in partnership with communities. This is viewed as an equity issue and KIs interviewed noted that past efforts to implement guidelines for healthy food have perpetuated inequities and actually created barriers to providing culturally relevant food. For example, one KI described the challenges of “outsiders” determining what healthy food looks like for communities of color, and they suggested that community members should contribute to the process of identifying what is healthy and relevant (i.e., creating healthy menus that are also culturally responsive).

KIs would like to see HFDK also consider investments that indirectly support young people — for example, investments in families — highlighting that much of systems change is indirect work, advanced through ripple effects, rather than linear cause and effect. To facilitate this, several called for HFDK to change the ordinance itself to be more inclusive of families and family members of children experiencing food insecurity. They were skeptical of a funding strategy that treats children’s experiences of hunger as individual, rather than as interconnected with those of their family members. HFDK did, in fact, pursue and successfully change aspects of the ordinance in the summer of 2021. The number and type of organizations eligible to apply for grant funds (including those that may not have feeding children or providing food education in Denver as a “primary purpose” but just a part of their overall work) was expanded and created greater inclusion and diversity for representatives appointed to the HFDK Commission.

HFDK should develop a multi-pronged equity strategy that can adapt to the strengths and challenges of different Denver neighborhoods. Specific ideas for actions HFDK could take include a curb-cut effect approach and prioritizing the most marginalized communities and children, learning from existing models of equitable grantmaking and program practices, and/or taking a long-term approach to funding and funding cycles.
HFDK should pursue strategies that center collaboration with communities and with other funders. KIs suggested that HFDK’s funding strategy should prioritize deep relationships with communities by focusing on organizations that have existing, strong partnerships with their local communities. It was also recommended that HFDK intentionally connect, and potentially coordinate funding strategies, with other funders working on addressing hunger and healthy food access. Specific strategies KIs were interested in seeing HFDK explore included:

- promoting mutual aid/collaboration amongst nonprofits vs. the competitive approach typical of grantmaking;
- exploring participatory grantmaking;
- referring unfunded applicants and grantees to other funders; and
- collaborative grantmaking with other local funders, including funders outside the food system (this practice is one of the characteristics of restorative philanthropy identified by Justice Funders in its Spectrum of Extractive to Restorative Philanthropy).

What Are Opportunities to Address System Gaps and Leverage Strengths?

The interconnectedness of the food system offers opportunities for far-reaching impact if change agents are able to find powerful leverage points. For example, a KI noted how legislative interventions (e.g., supporting a farm workers’ rights bill) can have a variety of positive impacts “on the ground,” including improved labor conditions and pay for farm workers, improving food pantries’ ability to offer local/fresh produce, and increasing access to healthy food.

HFDK needs to prioritize, engage, and uplift/leverage community perspectives and leadership. This reflects an equity-as-process perspective that asserts that those most impacted by food insecurity should be meaningfully involved in the creation and implementation of the institutional policies and practices that impact their lives. This would help ensure that solutions reflect their lived experiences/expertise and are owned by the communities served. Specifically, the KI suggested that HFDK talk with, listen to, and partner with community members directly impacted by hunger. This means partnering with and engaging program providers along with the youth and community leaders is essential.

Noting the above, KIs were also conflicted about using participatory approaches to engage community members and leaders. On the one hand, community participation and leadership was viewed as an important equity practice; on the other hand, KIs were sensitive to the time and capacity burdens of participatory work and the ways in which it can feel extractive to communities. They are adamant that community members and leaders should be compensated for their time and contributions. They know that data collection can be burdensome for community members and community-based organizations. They also stressed that communities should only be engaged if HFDK is committed to acting on the information and expertise shared by community organizations and members.

It would be helpful for HFDK to facilitate or support better communication and coordination amongst actors in the food system. KIs suggested that HFDK could function as a convener, facilitating
connections across organizations across sectors (nonprofits, governmental organizations, social services, local businesses) addressing food insecurity in Denver. HFDK could assist in painting a “big picture” of hunger and anti-hunger work in Colorado — showcasing how everyone’s work fits together — and support data and information-sharing amongst these local actors. This perspective would position HFDK well to encourage a collective impact approach that can successfully leverage resources that could positively impact Colorado and the local Denver community. For example, in the following comment, one KI discussed how HFDK might contribute to the current national conversation about WIC partnering with dollar stores to increase food access in areas with low food access:

Advocacy Priorities:

- Federal-level advocacy priorities include fighting for the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act to lower barriers for participation in federal child nutrition programs.
- State-level advocacy priorities include sorting out the state and federal policy conflicts around the Community Eligibility Provision to pave the way for universal meals.
- Local-level advocacy priorities include supporting land use rights in Denver for urban farmers.

HFDK might consider exploring the potential of engaging with and leveraging social change and advocacy work happening outside of the food system. HFDK could indirectly support local and state advocacy efforts to address and shift policies and other “upstream” factors that contribute to food insecurity by utilizing its leadership’s political capital and funding the creation of artifacts (e.g., briefs, case studies of innovative practices, etc.) that support other organizations’ advocacy work. KIs wondered whether root causes — and potential solutions — for eradicating hunger might exist outside the food system. For example, the local transportation system was highlighted by a number of KIs as a major community-level barrier to food access. Perhaps HFDK could partner with, or contribute resources toward, transportation reform efforts being led by coalitions like Denver Streets Partnership.

References


For questions, please contact: foodaccess@denvergov.org