

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a bunch of fresh, vibrant green cilantro. The person is wearing a black cap and blue gloves. The background is a blurred garden with more green plants. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent reddish-brown banner at the top and a green banner in the middle.

# ***DANE COUNTY PANDEMIC FOOD SYSTEM STUDY***

• MARCH 2023 •

## **Executive Summary**

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Thank you to all of the organizations and individuals who participated in an interview or focus group for this study.

**Approved by the Dane County Food Council on March 22, 2023**

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*We acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the Ho-Chunk people. The Ho-Chunk Nation - among 11 tribal nations - are still here in Wisconsin. This land acknowledgement serves to make visible what is often erased from our past and present. We understand that it is only a starting point. We encourage all to take meaningful action and support Indigenous-led grassroots change movements and campaigns with time and/or money. In particular, in honor of this food system study, explore ways to support local Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives. They are a valuable part of our food system.*

# Executive Summary

The impacts of the pandemic were mixed: while the pandemic intensified existing inequities and barriers within Dane County's food system, there were also farms, food businesses, and eaters who were able to leverage the massive disruption to create successful and innovative adaptations and interim solutions. Longstanding gaps in food system networks and communication channels have historically excluded Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and other under-resourced persons and organizations from funding and business opportunities, policy creation, and collaboration efforts; these exclusions continued in many of the collaborative efforts of the early pandemic.

Many people, including farmers, restaurant owners, and people working within the food system, suffered from mental, emotional, and physical challenges during the pandemic. This led to a loss of agricultural production, burnout and exhaustion amongst business owners, and in some cases, heavy amounts of debt. This was further exacerbated by the **“essential worker”** status of most within the food system and the absence of support or resources for essential workers.

Despite these negative impacts, there are also many stories of innovation and success. Some of these projects and activities are featured as call-out stories throughout this report; however, there are far more than could be featured in this report. These adaptations and interim solutions were bolstered by an increased consumer connection to local producers, as the local food system was unfaltering while national supplies chains crumbled.

Dane County farmers, restaurants, and small- and mid-sized food businesses reported relying upon financial support from a variety of federal, state, and local sources during the pandemic, oftentimes not fully understanding from whom the money was given. To the extent feasible, this report focuses on county-level interventions and assistance.

While external funding was crucial to the survival of many within the food system, it was also filled with confusing and exorbitant paperwork, a lack of transparency, and little comprehensive reporting. In addition, most of the funding, waivers, and business support to help navigate the pandemic have sunsetted, while farmers, food businesses, and community members continue to navigate threats to our national and global supply chains, such as climate change, the persistent increase in the cost of everything from transportation to supplies, or another future pandemic.

Grounded in the findings of an extensive primary data collection process, this report presents five overarching priorities for the Dane County Food Council and other food organizations to embrace, along with ten distinct actionable strategies for county-level action.

## Key Questions

- What are County and municipal governments' roles in supporting and strengthening our local food system?
- How can the planning activities that are critical for building a resilient food system be integrated into traditional governmental planning processes?
- How can the Dane County Food Council nurture and support civic leaders from communities who have been excluded from leadership roles both in government and our food system?
- How can the Dane County Food Council best prioritize where to focus its efforts?

## **OVERARCHING PRIORITIES**

- 1** Enhance local food system capacity, planning, and connectivity.
- 2** Meaningfully involve the communities most impacted by structural racism in the creation and implementation of food and agriculture policies and programs that impact their lives.
- 3** Leverage public funds to build a more resilient food system.
- 4** Transition gradually from “pandemic-era” programming to new, sustainable offerings.
- 5** Increase the resilience of the Dane County food system in preparation for future emergencies.

## **TOP COUNTY-LEVEL STRATEGIES**

- 1** Fund three food system community connectors.
- 2** Develop a 10-Year Food Plan for Dane County.
- 3** Decenter White voices, White professional norms, and other ways we explicitly and implicitly perpetuate White supremacy culture.
- 4** Examine the relevance and tactics of the Dane County Food Council and reaffirm the role of the DCFC within the community.
- 5** Host a local food summit to bring together food system stakeholders.
- 6** Fund the creation and ongoing maintenance of a Technical Assistance Hub.
- 7** Audit County land use policies through the lens of encouraging and incentivizing small- to mid-sized food production in both rural and urban areas.
- 8** Include local purchasing and equity mandates in all government food purchasing contracts.
- 9** Increase transparency, tracking, and the public availability of information pertaining to County food contracts.
- 10** Reassess and reconfigure current County grant funding opportunities for food system participants to ensure they are maximizing their potential.

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This report draws from secondary data and quantitative data; however, it is primarily grounded in and influenced by a rigorous primary data collection process that aimed to raise up the voices of the Dane County food system. This included not only community and nonprofit organizations, farmers, and food businesses, but also community members who are often forgotten: those who experience **food insecurity**, those who don't speak English as their primary language, and those who continue to be marginalized. Throughout this report, there are times where specific businesses or organizations are mentioned; however, those mentioned are not an exhaustive list of voices that participated in the data collection activities for this report. There are many additional people and perspectives who greatly contributed and influenced the recommendations contained herein.

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