

Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Annual Narrative Report to W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Project Summary

Over the past year and the previous three-year period of this grant, Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness (FFI) continued to make steady progress toward our goals. As planned, we employed four strategies. A brief summary of each follows.

Strategy 1: Establish school district policies and practices that support healthy living of children, families, and community members. As we described in our theory of change, the development of the Iowa Food Hub in northeast Iowa has contributed significantly to the ability of school districts to purchase local foods. We met our goal of having 14 school districts purchase local food. This number increased by one over the three years. The value of local food purchased by these districts increased by almost 190% over the past three years. During the past year one school district doubled its local food purchases.

In 2015 FFI reached 86% (1,283) of non-white pre K-12 students in Northeast Iowa through its work in schools. Because vulnerable children in this region attend school, we have been able to change conditions for them by changing practices and policies in schools.

Strategy 2: Ensure that caregivers and parents of children from birth to 5 provide health-promoting food and active play. We are especially encouraged that even as early childhood settings had personnel changes, the level of participation and demand for FFI programs in early care and education settings has remained strong. In the last school year, 100% of Head Start and Early Head Start settings in our six counties participated in Farm to Early Education programs. FFI's Farm to Preschool program reached an estimated 1,200 preschool students (which includes Head Start, voluntary preschools, and private preschool programs). Three hundred twenty-seven, more than 25%, of these were Head Start or Early Head Start students, all of whom are from low-income families. We reached all low-income children who are enrolled in Head Start or Early Head Start.

Strategy 3: Ensure that local, health-promoting food is available and affordable in all communities, neighborhoods and institutions. In 2015, 16 local food farmers reported an average of \$161,416 in local food sales, an increase of over \$50,000 per farmer (44% increase) over the 2014 average, and across three years an average increase of \$96,635 (149% average increase per farmer). Over the past three years farm businesses and related local food institutions created 56 jobs, with 35 of those being full-time jobs. Purchases made by the Iowa Food Hub from local farmers and processors more than doubled (115%) in 2015, and increased 583% since 2013 (from \$74,491 to 508,439.)

Strategy 4: Ensure that people use the built environment for physical activity, play and active transportation. Our most vulnerable children, those enrolled in Head Start and

Early Head Start, are receiving at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day. In 2015-16 32 walking school buses operated in 14 communities, involving 275 students and 75 adults. This year 18 new routes were developed.

Schools continued their funding or co-funding for FoodCorps/AmeriCorps service members. In a time when rural schools are experiencing significant budget cuts and pressures to focus resources on reading, these schools placed a high enough priority on wellness and FFI programs to assure that a service member would be available to work in their schools.

Factors Affecting Progress

Perhaps the most significant factor positively affecting progress over the course of the grant has been the “Can do, Make do” culture of people in Northeast Iowa. Collectively people throughout the region assumed a high level of responsibility and accountability for the resources that WKKF entrusted to them on behalf of their communities. Being accustomed to carefully managing resources, people in six counties and our institutional partners volunteered their time, requested compensation that was a mere fraction of their market worth, and at each turn collectively asked how work could be done as frugally as possible in order to assure that the maximum amount of resources went directly toward accomplishing their shared vision of health for all children.

A second significant positive factor was our early commitment to the value of transparency. We were able to establish trust across county, institutional, and sector lines by engaging people in authentic decision making about strategies, tactics, activities, and resources. We distributed the budget and budget reports in meetings and made it available to anyone upon request. Everyone could see the compensation for staff, who received mini-grants, and how the budget changed from year to year.

Our most significant challenge has been limited resources available at the national level for supporting work in rural areas. We understand that decision makers see the more visible need in urban areas and the potential for affecting a larger number of people in those areas. In addition, many of our families in poverty are working poor who do not choose to access available public programs. This leads to misconceptions about the level of poverty and how it appears in rural areas. For example, we wish that national funders could accompany us to schools in when we’ve helped the school nurses take BMI measurements. We wish they could see children with shoes that barely support them in active living, with ill-fitting, soiled clothing and looks of embarrassment on their faces as they removed shoes to reveal soiled and holey socks. The idyllic landscape and homes orderly on the exterior belie the stress, lack of resources, and hard lives of rural working poor.

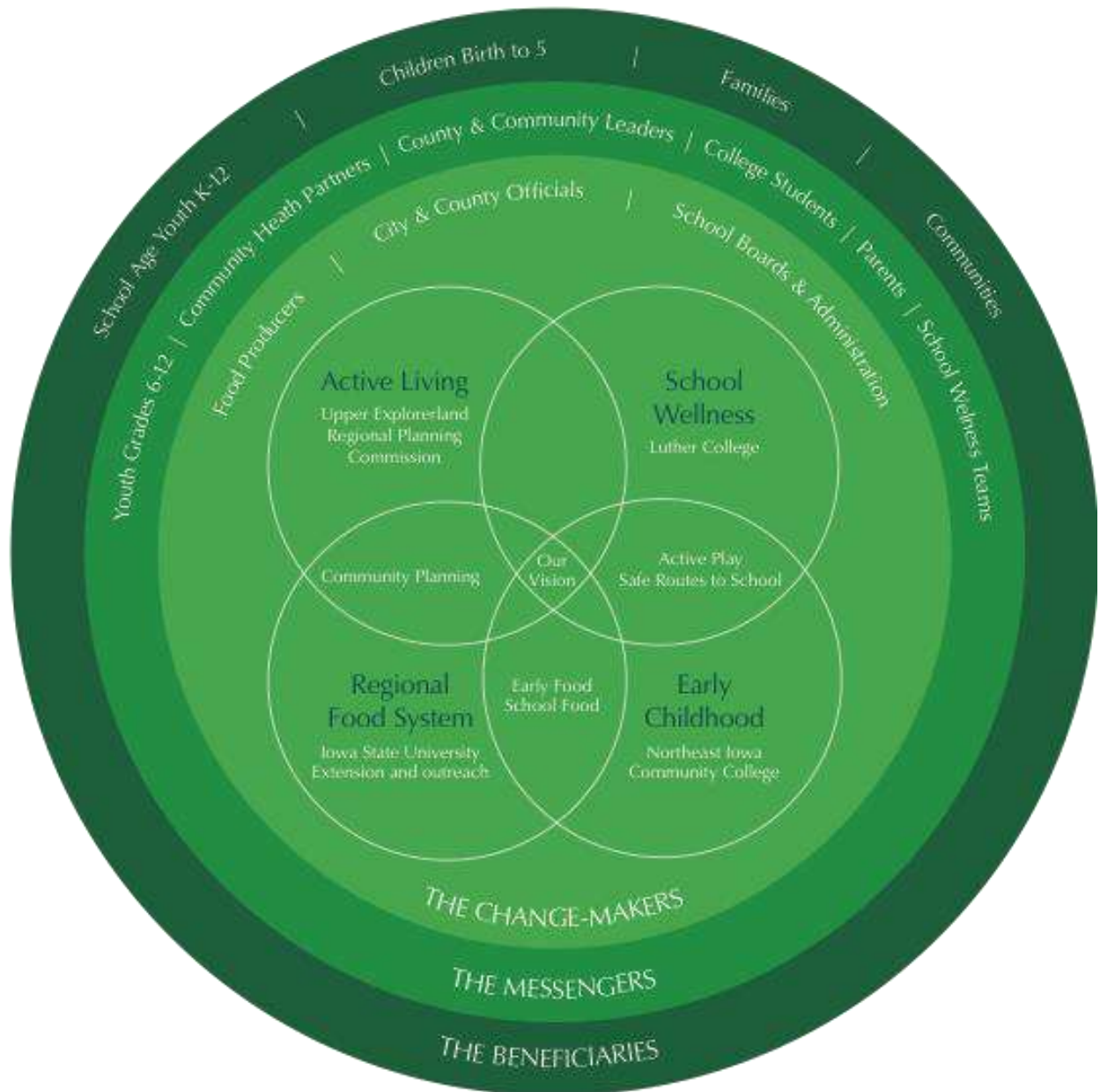
Structure and Governance

Over the history of FFI we have allowed our structure to emerge as appropriate for each phase of the work. The way we define our structure has continued to align with the major components of the system we believe will achieve our detailed vision. The illustration on the next page shows the high-level relationship among the components of the initiative, core partners, key messengers, and beneficiaries of the work. Articulating these relationships and the complexity of the work have led us to consider the structure and leadership we will need to move our work from here forward, and to sustain it beyond the last four years of WKKF funding.

In the current phase of the work, preparing for a phase where we have much more limited funding, we consulted with the regional leadership council. They decided that meeting regularly was no longer necessary. Members of the council are engaged in various work groups and local implementation efforts. Day to day management of overall FFI is a combination of the Work Group Leaders, Project Coordinator, key staff supported in a variety of ways, Core Partner meetings, and Operations Team meetings. The Project Coordinator, Work Group Leaders and Core Partners assure that a systems approach and strategic directions are maintained, that work is aligned throughout the region, and that emerging opportunities are assessed and pursued as appropriate.



Relationship Among FFI's Four Core Partners



High Level View of the FFI Structure

Demographics of Leadership

Overall women comprise 83% of our leadership team. Our greatest success is our engagement of youth. Of 121 community members engaged as leaders, 45% are youth. Among our Regional Youth Leadership Team and FEEST interns, at least 12% are youth of color from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. (Note: The percentage is likely higher, but we do not have complete data for all youth leaders and we do not feel comfortable making a judgment about individuals without that data.) All of our adults leaders are of European descent.

Use of evaluation to track relationships

FFI's ongoing evaluation has focused primarily on outcomes evaluation. However, we frequently stop and reflect with our evaluation team on our structure, needs, challenges, and successes. For example, FFI transitioned to a new leadership structure at the beginning of 2013. During and since the transition, FFI's evaluation team has interviewed numerous individuals involved in the old and new structures and offered those results to the FFI Operations Team for reflection. These results have shown that FFI continues to engage diverse leaders, but, ironically, because of high levels of trust between community members and paid staff, many leaders to feel comfortable leaving most decision making to paid staff.

Progress Toward Goals

In detail for each strategy, what follows are the results for 2015-16 and the four years of the final grant period.

Strategy 1: Establish school district policies and practices that support healthy living of children, families, and community members:

- Double school spending on local food in 2 years, triple in 4 years ***ACTUAL: We met this goal.***
- 75% of schools achieve the bronze or above level in the Healthier US Schools Challenge ***ACTUAL: 35% currently meet the standard, representing no change from last year, but an increase from 12% in 2013.***
- Increase engagement and capacity of school wellness committees; 50% of participating schools at a high level of engagement in three years. ***ACTUAL: 90% of schools rate as intermediate or high level of engagement on the school wellness team scorecard.***
- Increase capacity of school wellness committees to engage the community in parent education about healthy lifestyles and active transportation to and from school. ***ACTUAL: 45% of schools have an intermediate level or higher of parent engagement.***
- All schools in NE Iowa have a youth coach and youth NEIF&F team ***ACTUAL: During the last school year 15 out of 18 schools have a youth coach and active youth***

team, with 50% rated as having intermediate or high level of engagement on the scorecard.

Strategy 2: Ensure that caregivers and parents of children from birth to 5 provide health-promoting food and active play:

- 25% of Head Start centers incorporate local healthy food and appropriate daily minutes of physical activity **ACTUAL: 96% of the time (based on documentation)** *Head Start and Early Head Start centers reported that they met the requirement of 60 minutes of physical activity.*
- Six Head Start centers participate in Farm to Preschool programming (building on the NEIF&F Farm to School model) **ACTUAL: 100% (10 sites, 15 classrooms)** *participate in Farm to Early Education*
- FFI's Farm to Early Education program is expanding statewide while deepening in Northeast Iowa:
 - FFI is working with the Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children to develop a statewide coalition to expand Farm to Early Education program, with plans to pilot test it in two new communities.
 - We hired a Farm to Early Education Associate who is working in Fayette County to expand and deepen the program in that county.
- 528 early childhood care providers received training from FFI to promote wellness and engage parents, including an estimated 250 from other parts of the state.

Strategy 3: Ensure that local, health-promoting food is available and affordable in all communities, neighborhoods and institutions:

- Double school spending on local food in 2 years, triple in 4 years; **ACTUAL: Spending doubled over the course of three years.**
- Double the number of institutions purchasing local food in 4 years;
- At least 40 new local food producers (10 of which will be youth or youth organizations) sell food to local markets; **ACTUAL: To date we have 32 new local food producers in the last three years, 42 in the last four years.**
- Five businesses or organizations increase aggregation, storage and processing capacity for local foods in the region **ACTUAL: Five additional businesses in 2015, for a total of 18 in the past three years**
- Five venues implement programs or infrastructure to increase affordability and accessibility of local food **ACTUAL: Nine in the last year, a total of 24 in the past three years.**

Strategy 4: Ensure that people use the built environment for physical activity, play and active transportation:

- Triple the number of communities with regularly scheduled walking school buses (WSB); **ACTUAL: In the last school year the number of WSB increased from 21 to 32, which is more than quadruple the number in the 2011-12 school year. 14 communities have a WSB; up from 5 in the first year.**

- 5 communities within the region incorporate elements that support active transportation into significant infrastructure projects; ***ACTUAL: This year 4 projects in 3 counties, a total of 17 projects in 6 communities over three years.***
- 5 communities within the region engaged in community planning and development efforts incorporate active transportation as a central consideration in their strategies; ***ACTUAL: 9 communities in three years.***
- Youth leaders participate in planning, advocating and implementing active transportation activities and community efforts ***ACTUAL: 83 youth leaders participated during the past year, an average of 86 in each of the past three years.***

We are seeing significant progress in all our primary areas of work. Building on the foundation of school wellness, local food system development, and built environment work, the early childhood strategy has moved more quickly than we anticipated. We are finding that the thirst for approaches to integrate healthy living into early childhood settings has created readiness for what FFI has to offer. This year we built the capacity of 502 early childhood teachers and staff and 24 early childhood education students. We developed their abilities to make environmental, policy, and curriculum changes to promote wellness and engage parents. We have developed a Farm to Early Childhood Education curriculum that has been adopted by many of our settings and incorporated into the Northeast Iowa Community College curriculum for early childhood education majors.

The Iowa Food Hub (IFH), a non-profit food hub that emerged out of the NIFF Coalition and the FFI, continues to aggregate and distribute foods produced in Northeast Iowa, lessening the effects of poverty. By July 2016, 67 farmers or farmer groups were selling their products to the IFH.

In Active Living/Safe Routes to School we have focused on creating community partnerships to sustain programs. For example, police departments have partnered to conduct Bike Rodeos in several communities (public safety/active living). All three IWALK projects in 2015 had support from city council, mayors, and city administrators. Walking school buses are managed by the local community coalition and the Regional SRTS Coordinator. Volunteers, teachers, seniors, invested community members and older siblings, champion the day-to-day walking efforts.

FoodCorps/AmeriCorps service members implement FFI work in schools. Schools have allocated funds to secure these service members. The service members are now living in more communities throughout the region, rather than living only in Decorah but serving schools elsewhere.

FFI and Luther College nursing students collaborate with 13 school nurses in the region during the current school year to collect BMI data on K-6 students. The data are being used to better understand the weight status of children in the region to inform schools' work and create community conditions where the healthy choice is the easy choice. Reflection on

results generated concern that schools cannot achieve health outcomes alone and need the broader community to engage. The overweight/obese rate was much higher than expected and it helped school administrators, teachers and nurses see that their effort alone was not having a significant impact on student weight status.

We have noted some of the opportunities in our environment—early childhood readiness, partnerships for SRTS and active living, Iowa Food Hub growth, and emerging interest in the work from public health and community hospitals. One continuing challenge is the lack of a backbone organization for the work. As is true in many systems, our greatest strengths—collaboration among four core partner organizations, and true community ownership—are also our shadow weakness. Because we do not have one central organization as a home, we also do not have an FFI office location, support staff, and basic equipment. This has meant that more of our funding goes into direct work with the community. But it also means that our ongoing administrative needs are not met efficiently, which results in our project coordinator adding these responsibilities and taking time from higher leverage activities.

New Opportunities Pursued in 2015-16

The Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative (FFI) is working to sustain itself long term by aligning and/or embedding into the work of partnering organizations both in Northeast Iowa and statewide.

FFI was successful in engaging community health stakeholders, including eight community hospitals, six public health departments, school nurses and other health stakeholders, starting in the fall of 2015. FFI coordinated the first-ever regional Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) process where childhood and adult obesity, physical inactivity and poor nutrition were identified as top priorities in all six counties.

That group has continued to meet and is developing a regional messaging campaign and community programs focused on walking/walkability. The initial target audience for the campaign is women, since women are more likely to also influence children and other family members. The group will also build on two new statewide initiatives, “Step It Up Iowa” and “Healthy Hometown”, part of the Iowa Healthiest State Initiative. Three work groups are currently developing plans to bring to the next work session. This decision was influenced by the FFI project coordinator’s participation in the America Walk’s 2015 Walking College Fellowship, a national capacity building program, and the Surgeon General’s Call to Action for Walking/Walkability.

In 2006, before FFI began, a group of community members came together to create a strategic plan for developing the local food system. That effort gave birth to NIFF (Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition), and ultimately morphed into the food system work we pursued with FFI. Two FFI partners, the regional office of ISU Extension and Outreach and the Luther College Center for Sustainable Communities, have begun the process of convening a diverse group of residents to create the Regional Food System Strategic Plan for the next ten years. The FFI vision statement paragraphs related to the

food system, and three strategies will serve as the basis for collective thinking. The strategies include:

- Increase production of healthy local food
- Continue to develop aggregation and distribution channels for local food
- Increase access for all to healthy local food

This work will extend the FFI food system work for the next decade.

Finally, the desire to further analyze BMI data illustrates the power of a network of relationships. Calling on a long-term relationship through a previous position with Mayo Clinic, Ann Mansfield contacted a former Mayo colleague for a recommendation of someone at Mayo to peruse the data and analysis methods. The colleague returned with the name of a pediatrician/pediatrics researcher who is focused on community interventions on behalf of children's health (focus on obesity). The pediatrician also happens to have his undergraduate degree from Luther College. Already the developing partnership has resulted in the next version of a journal article being submitted and ideas for how their new center for population health at Mayo can become involved with FFI.

Engagement and Leadership

Grassroots community engagement has been a hallmark of FFI work for the past eight years. From its inception people from 14 to 80 have worked together to provide direction and to accomplish FFI goals. Unlike many urban communities, the people who work in our organizations and institutions live in the area. They are grassroots leaders. A woman who works a farm with her husband, also provides leadership for changing the food and active living practices in the Head Start Center where she works. The county public health nurse works to influence built environment policies in her own community. With a small, dispersed population everyone must serve multiple roles. This has been reflected in how grassroots leaders have been engaged with FFI.

FFI engaged 148 youth through 15 FFI Youth 4-H Teams in 2015-16. High school youth provided cross-age local foods and nutrition education to 535 elementary students. Youth served as cafeteria coaches in four schools. Three youth participated in the National 4-H Healthy Living Summit in Washington, DC, where they presented about Cafeteria Coaching. Three FEEST teams met regularly in 2015-16 to cook healthy meals using local ingredients without recipes. Over the course of the grant youth leaders have planned and implemented bike rodeos for younger children. They influenced what is served in school cafeterias. They have served as role models for younger children and adults alike.

In 2015-2016 FFI focused on developing the capacity of systems leaders to foster healthy communities in Northeast Iowa as well as statewide. FFI's School Outreach Coordinator organized a year-long Systems Leaders Learning Community. Ten school champions, along with all of the FFI Resource Contacts participated to improve leadership skills and develop a school wellness project that would move school wellness forward within their district.

FFI hosted a Leadership in Community Health Innovation workshop for three days in June 2016 for communities that applied to send a team. Teams from seven Iowa communities participated, with an average of three people from each community. Three communities from within FFI's six-county region and four communities or counties from other parts of Iowa participated. Key FFI grassroots leaders and staff served as resource people, providing detailed presentations and field trips on all strategy areas, with a focus on changing the community conditions to support improved access to healthy choices through policy, systems and environmental change in the following areas: food systems, school wellness, early childhood, active living-SRTS, and youth as partners.

Participants engaged in leadership skill capacity building with a focus on systems thinking and collective impact. Each community team completed the workshop with a draft action plan for the next steps of a community health initiative in their own community. Example goals of participating community groups include: promoting walking/walkability, strengthening local food systems, building coalitions and community engagement, developing a shared vision, and community action planning. In follow up to the workshop, participants submitted a Community Action Plan and mini-grant proposal to support implementation. They have participated in a learning community via monthly teleconferences to build a network, share insights, and provide accountability as they implement their action plans.

In spite of significant resource challenges in rural schools, private colleges, and state funded organizations, our core partners have done their best to realign resources in support of FFI work. ISU Extension and Outreach in the region is now fully funding the position to lead local food system work. Luther College has been able to integrate FFI work as much as possible into the Center for Sustainable Communities by engaging Luther students in community work, thus providing a reasonable avenue for the Center to continue its work. Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission has written grants and committed to continue funding for Safe Routes to School work. Northeast Iowa Community College has only been able to realign limited resources, though students in their early childhood education program have begun to be more active in learning from our early childhood work.

Stories of engagement. FFI has provided channels for new leaders to emerge. From youth to adults, people have found their passions and their voices through engagement that turns to leadership.

Elaine Govern is a retired long-time high school English and drama teacher. She started a realty business in her 60s after her husband passed away at a young age. Elaine was engaged at the beginning of FFI. She came with an agenda to obtain funding to finish building a biking/walking trail. Although the WKKF grant did not fund infrastructure, the regional leadership team eventually endorsed the project and wrote a letter of support. She

received funding from an alternative source. But she also remained committed to FFI and is active to this day.

Jessica Wegner, Fayette County Community Health Nurse, works to influence built environment policies in her own community. Among other accomplishments, through Jessica's efforts the city council in West Union created a cost-sharing program for creating ramped curbs at intersections in town. The city will pay for materials; the initiator will pay for labor.

Scot Michelson is now an Iowa Department of Natural Resources State Parks District Supervisor. When he was a park ranger he participated in all of the county-level discussions regarding increased access to physical activity and healthy local food. He was selected to represent his county on the initial regional leadership team and then became one of the vision work group members committing at least 15 hours a month to build and plan capacity for using a systems approach to change school, food and active living environments. Scot actively participated in the development of the only rural regional Safe Routes to School program in the country and has been a member of the FFI Active Living Work Group for nine years. He has advocated for access to physical activity in schools, early childhood, and communities, including improving walkability and access to trails, as well as promoting getting children and families out into our parks. Recently the National Park Service Healthy Places Healthy People program informed us that Scot will receive a national award, recognizing his commitment and contribution to NE Iowa FFI over the years.

Stories of youth engagement. One of the challenges of investing in youth living in a rural area is that youth often move away, commonly called the "Brain Drain." This drain contributes to an overall decline in population, a decrease in the number of families raising children in rural places (thus contributing to declining school enrollments), and a decrease in the number of new young farmers ready to take over operations from the older generation. It also means that efforts to invest in youth may benefit the cities they move to rather than the small towns they come from. Yet, despite the loss of youth in Northeast Iowa, FFI has invested in many who have chosen to stay. We interviewed five young people who have been impacted by FFI and are choosing to live in Northeast Iowa. Our interviews help us understand how FFI has impacted their life course and has contributed to their leadership today. Each interviewee has a unique story of how they've been involved with FFI, how they've been impacted, and how they are serving in their communities.

Brandon Friedlein grew up in Clayton County and first got involved with FFI when he received a mini-grant from the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition to purchase lighting for a greenhouse, which he started as an FFA project. While still in high school, he served on Clayton County's FFI team and on the Regional Youth Leadership Team. Later, while attending college at Northeast Iowa Community College, he joined FFI's Regional Leadership Council.

Today, Brandon is living on the family farm, working as a banker at a new branch of Community Savings Bank in Guttenburg, and planting an orchard. Brandon has worked with the bank to sponsor the Guttenburg Farmers Market. The bank pays vendor fees for all farmers and advertises and promotes the farmers market through signs, banners, and radio and print advertisements. The farmers market currently fills a city block and continues to grow.

Kayla Koether grew up near McGregor. She first got involved with FFI as an AmeriCorps service member serving as a Resource Contact in the MFL MarMac school district in 2012-13. Following seven months traveling New Zealand and Australia to learn about rotational grazing and biodynamic farming, she worked for the Winneshiek Energy District helping farmers improve energy efficiency on their farms. She was recently hired by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Region 4 as a beginning farmer coordinator for five Northeast Iowa counties.

Kayla is also an aspiring farmer, planning to return to her family's farm. She believes working to make Northeast Iowa a good place to live is closely intertwined with her own farming aspirations. "I see myself in the future as a person that would farm in Northeast Iowa, but for that to happen these communities must be vibrant [...] I want this area to be a good place to live because I want to live here, and I want to live here because I think the more we improve our food systems and create a healthy, vibrant culture, it will be a good place to live."

Jesse Waller began implementing Farm to Early Education in her preschool classroom in 2014, her second year of teaching at Rainbow Land Preschool and Daycare, of which she is also the director. She joined FFI's Systems Leaders class in 2015, meeting monthly with leaders from school districts in Northeast Iowa to talk about leadership and being role models, and to set goals for making changes in their communities. Her goals were to host a family night highlighting the Farm to Preschool program and to get families more involved in physical fitness activities through a walking club.

Jesse describes how participating in the Systems Leaders group helped her in the process of attaining her goals, "When you set a goal and feel you haven't mastered it, you can go [to the Systems Leaders meeting] and get tips and support and you never feel like you failed." She explained that she started a walking club for the daycare's families, but it had low participation. Other participants in the Systems Leaders class offered suggestions to make it more successful. As a result she will try it during a different season of the year.

Through FFI, Jesse has started to see herself as a leader and take initiative to make changes at Rainbow Land. After learning that children's food preferences are formed by the age of two, Jesse realized they needed to expand their Farm to Early Education program building-wide. Through her leadership, Rainbow Land, which serves children from two weeks to 12 years of age, began offering taste test to all children 12 months and older, decided the preschool garden is now the responsibility of everyone at the center, and changed the

snack menu so that all snacks include a fresh fruit or vegetable, whereas in the past snacks often included processed foods like cereal bars and crackers.

Jesse describes how until recently she has always seen herself as a follower, rather than a leader. Her involvement with FFI's systems leaders class helped her to see herself as a leader. She describes her leadership at Rainbow Land as "not hypocritical." She says, "I always try to model so families and staff always see me doing it. I don't say we need to do this, and then walk out. I encourage staff to give water breaks, so one thing I've done is I've started carrying a water bottle and I talk about how much I drink and my students drink. I am trying to be positive role model."

Kate Lower joined Central School's FFI Youth 4-H Team when she was a student at Central High School and represented her school on the Regional Youth Leadership Team. She later studied Health and Wellness Promotion at Luther College and served as a summer intern with FFI's Early Childhood program. Following the internships, she continued to volunteer with FFI's early childhood and safe routes to school work.

Today Kate has completed her degree and is preparing to be FFI's first FoodCorps member to work exclusively in early childhood starting in August 2016. She says, "Food and Fitness completely influenced my career choices," including her chosen major and her decision to pursue becoming a FoodCorps service member. Kate describes how FFI has taught her perseverance, "I've learned the importance of being patient and pushing through when it's tough and you're not seeing the changes that you want."

Flannery Cerbin-Bohach first joined FFI in 2009 as an AmeriCorps member serving as the Farm to School Co-coordinator. She continued to work for FFI as a Communication Liaison until 2012, when she entered into service as the first FoodCorps Fellow for the state of Iowa. She later received a masters degree in public health and is now the wellness coordinator for Northeast Iowa Community College, a new position.

FFI set Flannery on her current life course by helping her understand public health in a different way, "In my undergraduate coursework I had never really thought about public health issues in the way they were exposed to me through Food and Fitness. For example, addressing what is the obesity epidemic and what are policy level changes? I'd never encountered that. Those things resonated with me and helped me make sense of the world." She described working for FFI as the equivalent of graduate school in terms of exposure and education, except that it didn't provide a diploma. When she did return to graduate school, she often thought back to FFI as an example that helped her understand the material better.

Flannery describes how through FFI she learned a style of "quiet leadership," where one "watches the process and guides it along." She gives an example of providing a wellness committee member with funding to attend a wellness summit. The member returned excited to share all she had learned with the rest of the committee. Flannery says that she

learned being a good leader includes creating space for others to speak, which she did by allowing the wellness team member unlimited time during a wellness team meeting to share what she learned at the summit, “It was good for her to share it and for it to come from her.”

Flannery explains that she learned relationship building is central to creating systems change. She added, “I do know that relationships take time and I learned that at Food and Fitness[...] I went into [my job as wellness coordinator at NICC] knowing that and having comfort with that.”

FFI also influenced how Flannery chooses to go about her work today as the first staff wellness coordinator at NICC. “My first instinct when I got here was to find other people that could help shape the program[...] And much like [FFI’s project coordinator] taught me, you have to include people. People support what they help create.” Her first step as wellness coordinator was to form a wellness committee.

FFI is investing in youth through high school FFI Youth 4-H clubs, internships, and systems leaders classes (although this is open to all ages) with the hope that the youth who stay in Northeast Iowa will become leaders in their communities with the knowledge and skills needed to build and maintain vibrant rural communities. Youth are doing just that through a variety of professions, describing themselves as role models, promoters and supporters of local food, leaders, and educators.

Additional Information

Lessons Learned

Relationships across the work are fundamental. And yet, maintaining engagement is harder now than when we began and at the same time has never been more important. Especially in a rural setting people must play multiple leadership roles within our communities. This has influenced how we have managed. We learned to remain vigilant regarding meeting people, groups, and organizations where they’re at and building on whatever readiness they have. Sometimes this means convening small groups or even having one-to-one conversations. The project coordinator role has been to weave a tapestry of ever-expanding relationships, all focused on building communities and systems that support healthy development and access for all children. We have balanced creating enough structure for coordination, evaluation and communication but not “over-defining” the structure. We became adept at understanding and watching for emergence and being ready to learn and adapt.

Greatest Challenges

We have said repeatedly that this scope of systems change is complex and takes time. In the language of systems thinking, “slower is faster.” Communicating the systems (multi-pronged, community-driven) approach to the broader community in a way that they can

see value/impact has been a significant challenge. In a world of quick fixes, fixes that are doomed to failure—or worse yet compound problems, asking people to slow down, maintain focus, and think systemically before reacting to each event in current reality is essential, but daunting. This challenge has also contributed to the difficulty of finding resources for ongoing funding of the backbone support needed to continue the work. Food and fitness systems change work is not a term-limited project. We will need decades, if not generations, of intentional, strategic, collective focus to create the policies and practices that will result in sustainable communities that support healthy eating and active living for all children and families.

Mental models about healthy food and daily physical activity are very different for different people. Place these different beliefs in the current cultural phenomenon of opinions being as valid as facts, and we face the struggle every day. Being able to simultaneously transform the system to support healthy living and transform people's perceptions about the value and impact of the work remains a significant communication challenge. Keeping people focused on comprehensive system change versus individual strategies and activities is a constant challenge.

Technical Assistance

Organizational learning and systems thinking technical assistance has been essential in our progress toward building a movement, changing the culture, and transforming systems to achieve our vision. The original investment came from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, with a modest amount of TA resources continuing over time. Seeing the value of it, we used our own funds to deepen our capacities and hire the expertise we needed.

Our work with Iowa State University evaluators has been invaluable. Together we have transformed how evaluators partner with community members to develop and monitor indicators and use the data to guide action. We developed structures and protocols that help us continuously refine implementation of our community action plan and set goals for future years.

The University of Michigan evaluation team has facilitated our cross-site reflection and learning through the cross-site evaluation process. They have also been in conversations with our local evaluators from ISU. This collaborative approach is a model that other funders should learn from.

The technical assistance provided by the Wallace Center has been key to the development of the Iowa Food Hub. Site visits and network webinars have led to the development of a worksite food box program, a production planning framework, truck financing and a GroupGAP food safety team.

In preparation for the just completed four year grant, Fourth Sector Communication helped us create a communications plan that is foundational to our communications work today.

Katie Eukel worked collaboratively with Kathy Zurcher to build on the systems thinking work we had done. Katie facilitated sessions with our leadership team, developing our capacities as she structured our work sessions.

One characteristic of the TA we accessed through WKKF was most powerful. By having an integrated TA team, each TA provider who worked with us was aware and aligned with the other TA providers. WKKF facilitated the sharing of information among TA providers. We had a coherent TA experience, rather than competitive frameworks. All of the TA providers were dedicated to our community-based, community-led approach. They contributed expertise without having to be the expert.

Participation in WKKF Grantee Meetings & Convenings

Grantee meetings and technical assistance have been greatly beneficial to the NE Iowa work. Without these meetings we would not have access to these kinds of conversations, sharing/learning from other communities, or the content expertise. The grantee meetings were a tremendous opportunity to hear about similar policy, systems and environmental change work in very diverse settings and to understand how much we could learn from each other. The things we saw, heard and experienced in the grantee meetings deepened our understanding of broad, systemic issues that we need to address to change the conditions in our communities, and promising practices for doing so. Bringing larger teams that included community members has built our local capacity in ways that would not have happened otherwise. Those capacities will continue to have impact in our communities long after funding has ended.

Unanticipated Outcomes

We entered this work knowing nothing about systems thinking. Some of us were natural systems thinkers, but without the tools or capacities to lead a significant multi-county initiative using a systems approach. One unanticipated outcome is fully realizing that *“how” (systems thinking) we’ve approached the work is as important or more than the “what” (expert content, best practice)*. Utilizing a systems approach with a commitment to ongoing learning and capacity building for it has created the conditions for collective impact in our region. We have a shared vision and common agenda among diverse partners and stakeholders. We own our assessment data because we developed, refined, and committed to shared measures. Our community action plan is a framework for mutually reinforcing activities. We have developed and refined vehicles for constant communication. We understand the critical importance of ongoing backbone support that includes coordination, evaluation, and communication.

Recommendations for Others

People are most interested in how we have gone about creating and sustaining this work in the region. In some cases, people are seeking shortcuts to systems change. We are always clear that there are no shortcuts. Community engagement is central to all we do, and that

engagement takes time. One of the systems thinking axioms, “Slower is faster”, is what we tell them. Unfortunately, too many other approaches suggest recipes (“Implement these 5 things as individuals and you will have a healthy community.”). The message we give is, “People will only support what they help to create.”

The implications for funders are clear, but not easy for some institutions, especially governmental funders, to hear or to implement. Cookie cutter, expert-driven, three-year prescriptive programs will not result in sustainable community-owned change. Perhaps in the politically charged two- to four-year election cycle it is impossible for most public funders to invest in systemic change. We were only able to use a systems approach and to see sustainable changes in policies and systemic structures in our region because the W.K. Kellogg Foundation took a risk and invested in our work for several funding cycles, each commitment depending on seeing progress from the previous cycle. We were only able to own the systems changes and sustain them because WKKF had just two non-negotiables: the work be community-driven and focused on changing conditions for vulnerable children and their families. People in the six counties of Northeast Iowa own the vision, policy targets, strategies, tactics, activities, and evaluation. They own FFI because of WKKF’s commitment to community engagement and ownership, and because of the multiple cycles of funding that supported relationship building, collective thinking, and implementation.

Attachments

We are attaching one additional document for your information, a timeline entitled “Local Food System Innovation”. This document traces the development from 2006 through 2015.