

A Story of Change:



Securing Healthy Food Access in Northwest Michigan

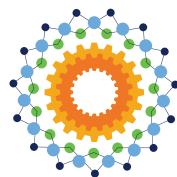
"I was waiting for something like this to happen, and I'm so excited to be a small part of it. I get to see our neighbors choose fresh, healthy food from pantry shelves, feeling a sense of respect and dignity."

— Anneke Wegman, Co-Chair, Northwest Food Coalition Purchasing Committee

"I'm ecstatic about the local fruits and vegetables. My grandson and granddaughter live with me, and fresh produce from the pantry is their special treat. They just love it! With the price of everything so high anymore, the pantry is so helpful. A lot of families like ours depend on it."

— Lisa Tanner, neighbor and visitor, Buckley Food Pantry

Jessica Conrad with



ROTARY
CHARITIES

Resources for change.

This case study originally appeared in *Stories of Change: How a Systems Change Approach is Transforming a Region*, by Jessica Conrad with *Rotary Charities of Traverse City*. *Stories of Change* includes four case studies. Three feature the evolution of multi-stakeholder systems change initiatives in Northwest Lower Michigan working to address youth/young adult homelessness, food insecurity, and barriers to health and health equity. The fourth shares the story of how Rotary Charities, a place-based funder, came to support systems change work.

Stories of Changes offers a unique look at what's possible when many individuals, organizations, and initiatives adopt a shared approach to affecting positive change and align their efforts to address the upstream sources of our toughest community challenges. Full of actionable insights, the case studies are an informative example of purpose-driven collaboration and a source of hope in an unpredictable, fast-changing world.

Acknowledgements

Stories of Change would not have been possible without the contributions of so many who are deeply committed to creating communities where all can thrive, including our storyteller, the dozens of changemakers interviewed for the project, and Rotary Charities' board and staff members, past and present.

Place-based systems change involves many people working across sectors and fields. The stories told here are collective stories of and for the communities from which they have come, and great care has been taken to tell the truest stories possible. Yet with collective stories, there is not one truth, but many. We acknowledge that the stories included here may not represent the whole truth for all involved.

We are deeply grateful for those who have contributed their memories and perspectives to support us in documenting this transformative work and for the skillful storyteller who has woven these threads together to create this narrative tapestry.

About the author

We want to thank storyteller Jessica Conrad for expertly leading this project. Jessica handled each story with care and dedication—careful with its complexity, shared language, and multiple perspectives. Her process embodied values like patience, relationship building and trust, clear communication and roles, and inclusivity, reflecting a deep grounding in systems practice.

For over a decade, Jessica has been working at the frontiers of positive change as a researcher and writer, storyteller, communications strategist, program manager, and curriculum designer. She brings extensive experience designing and delivering strategic initiatives and transformative learning opportunities—including graduate-level courses focused on systems and complexity theory and leadership—in her previous roles at the RE-AMP Network, the Blekinge Institute of Technology, Forum for the Future's School

of Systems Change, and, most recently, the Garfield Foundation. While with the Foundation, Jessica contributed to its collaborative networks portfolio and stewarded a community of practice for grantee partners leading large, multi-stakeholder projects focused on equitable climate change, cancer prevention, community development, and food solutions.

Jessica currently supports purpose-driven people and organizations in a consulting capacity with research and writing, coaching, facilitation, and custom offerings in the realms of leadership, storytelling and communications, organizational learning and development, and program design. You can reach her at hello@jessicaconrad.com.

About Rotary Charities of Traverse City

Rotary Charities of Traverse City is a 501c3 grantmaking public charity. It was founded in 1976 after oil was discovered on property owned by the Traverse City Rotary Club. The organization provides grants, impact investments, and opportunities for connection and learning across a five-county area in Northwest Lower Michigan to contribute to an adaptive and thriving region for everyone.

Learn more about Rotary Charities at:

Website: www.rotarycharities.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/rotarycharities

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Introduction

Over the last five years, the Northwest Food Coalition, Goodwill Northern Michigan's Food Rescue, and Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities have progressively moved into deeper partnership to strengthen the emergency food system in Northwest Lower Michigan. United by a shared commitment to addressing local food insecurity, the three groups work together to create greater access to healthy food for more than 70,000 individuals at risk of food insecurity across five counties—a region twice the size of Rhode Island.

From purchasing locally grown food, to rescuing and distributing food, to operating pantries and community meal sites, the role each group now plays is complementary and vital to providing the community with greater access to high-quality, nutritious food. Yet the success of the Healthy Food Access Partnership doesn't stop there. Their collective efforts have bolstered the local food economy and transformed the relationships among the three groups, amplifying their power to sustain healthy food access for all.

What follows is the story of how these three groups built on the legacy of two decades of work to address food insecurity in Northwest Lower Michigan by overcoming the challenges inherent to high-level collaboration and adapting in mutually beneficial ways to a rapidly shifting context brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. An emergent story of systems change, it is organized into four phases of development that support multi-stakeholder initiatives in creating lasting positive impact.¹

The Healthy Food Access Partnership serves community members in Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Leelanau, and Kalkaska Counties in Northwest Lower Michigan. The Northwest Food Coalition also serves Wexford County.

The issue of food insecurity in Northwest Lower Michigan

Food insecurity, or the condition of having limited or uncertain access to adequate food, is a threat to individuals and families across Northwest Lower Michigan as a result of a confluence of factors, including income levels, unemployment, food pricing and availability, consumer demand, and consumer knowledge of nutrition and cooking.

Data from 2018 shows that 18,200 individuals lived below the poverty threshold in the five-county region and that an additional 52,085 struggled, despite being employed, to afford the basic necessities of food, housing, health care, child care, and transportation due to income constraints. All 70,285 individuals were at risk of experiencing food insecurity.²

The emergency food system serves as an essential social safety net—one that these individuals consistently rely on. Data from 2019 shows that local pantries and community meal sites collectively receive roughly 20,000 visits from neighbors³ experiencing food insecurity each month, including seniors, veterans, disabled people/people with disabilities, and unemployed or low-income individuals and families.

The Healthy Food Access Partnership uses the definition of food insecurity provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture: food insecurity is the condition of having limited or uncertain access to adequate food.⁴



¹ See the appendix, "Using a Systems Change Approach to Address Complex Community Issues," for a description of a systems change approach.

² *ALICE in Michigan: A Financial Hardship Study*, United Way of Northwest Michigan, 2019. <https://unitedwaynwmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2019-ALICE-Report-FULL.pdf>.

³ Here, *neighbor* refers to any individual experiencing food insecurity who visits a local pantry or meal site.

⁴ Available from: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/definitions-of-food-security>

Two decades of work to address regional food insecurity

In 1994, these very pantries and community meal sites came together on the belief that they would be better positioned to address hunger across the region through greater coordination. Together, they formed the Northwest Food Coalition, an informal association of roughly 70 volunteer-run food pantries, faith-based food pantries, baby pantries, high schools, Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians centers, community meal sites, and community mental health centers. Members began meeting monthly to share resources and develop joint programming under the leadership of Val Stone, who has served as the Coalition's coordinator for 28 years.

In 2002, Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities began working to build the regional food economy out of the recognition that supporting local food production benefits community health, increases farm incomes, and protects farmland from development. Over time, Groundwork Center evolved its programming to include working in area schools to connect locally grown food and food education to school children with the purpose of increasing their health and furthering positive economic impacts for farmers. While the early years of Groundwork Center's food and farming programming did not include working with food pantries and meal sites, the organization's early efforts to build a regional food economy provided the foundation it would later use to become a critical partner in the effort to increase healthy food access to individuals and families experiencing food insecurity across the region.

By 2008, the issue of food security attracted the attention of a new group of community members in Traverse City wanting to increase the amount of fresh food available in pantries. They came together to found Food Rescue to address a critical problem they had observed in the local food system: 36% of households in the region struggled with food insecurity, meanwhile, 40% of good food went to waste at local grocery stores, bakeries,

and farms. Food Rescue joined with Goodwill Northern Michigan's logistics, taking advantage of an opportunity for impact. Goodwill provided a home for the Food Rescue program to collect and distribute both "rescued" and purchased food to Food Coalition members at no cost to the pantries and meal sites. All Coalition members are eligible to receive food from Food Rescue. The alignment between the Food Coalition's needs and Food Rescue's operations set the two groups up for a strong, albeit informal, partnership and resulted in the successful diversion of millions of pounds of soon-to-expire food from waste bins into the hands of those who need it most.



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Food Rescue began to prioritize the distribution of healthier food in 2012, stopping pickups of soda, for example, and eliminating other unhealthy products from its distribution. This shift opened up more physical space on Food Rescue trucks to pick up healthier food, and, consequently, set Coalition members up to dedicate more space in freezers, fridges, and other storage shelves for nutritious food, including fresh produce.

By 2014, the need for a clearer picture of regional food insecurity surfaced, and, on behalf of the Benzie Sunrise Rotary Club, Kris Thomas led a Food Security Study⁵ for the five-county region. With the support of other volunteers, Thomas spent seven months interviewing over 400 neighbors who use area food pantries and meal sites. "Not having previously known anyone that I knew was experiencing food insecurity, I was heartbroken to hear the stories of so many of my neighbors who didn't have access to enough healthy, nutritious food, even though we live in a farming community," Thomas recalls tenderly. She found that most neighbors were eager to share their stories and

⁵ Food Security in the Michigan Counties of Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Leelanau, Benzie Sunrise Rotary Club, 2014. https://northwestmifoodcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Food-Security-Study-in-Grand-Traverse-Area_Oct-7_2019.pdf.

discovered a great need to provide more fresh healthy food to neighbors, along with nutrition and culinary education. Her work resulted in a list of 10 recommendations for strengthening the emergency food system.

Thomas presented her findings to the Food Coalition and Food Rescue, among other groups interested in the issue, in the hope of advancing the improvements. Meghan McDermott, who at the time was a FoodCorps service member with Groundwork Center and now serves as the organization's deputy director, recalls concern among some that promoting the need for greater access to healthy food would cause some pantry and meal site volunteers to feel that their work over the last two decades "wasn't good enough." Thomas recruited support from Michele Worden, who went on to become a dedicated Food Coalition volunteer, in approaching the Coalition's membership. Despite the initial concern, an informal survey of members indicated two top priorities: formalizing a leadership structure for the Coalition and increasing the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables for neighbors.

Thanks to Thomas' efforts, the 2014 Food Security Study ultimately became a catalyst. Food Rescue further expanded its healthy food initiatives and redesigned its distribution system to increase food access in the outlying counties, matching rates of poverty with pounds of food received by county. "It started to become clear that the pantries wanted to give neighbors fresh food," says Taylor Moore, who has overseen the Food Rescue program since 2015 and now serves as its director. "I saw the Food Coalition as a conduit to the community and wanted Food Rescue to be fully aligned with the Coalition's needs. We began focusing on putting our resources into healthy food." Food Rescue soon partnered with Benzie Sunrise Rotary to create Healthy Harvest, a program to glean leftover and donated produce from local farms, and the Food Coalition began supplementing the canned and boxed goods on pantry shelves with fresh food.

With improvements to food distribution underway, in 2016 the Food Coalition sought the support of both Food Rescue and Groundwork Center to assess the operational side of the emergency

food system, which required a more formal survey of its members. "There wasn't a formal database listing all of the pantries and meal sites at the time," recalls Stone, noting the diversity of Coalition members. Some pantries and meal sites have abundant resources, regular operating hours, and capacity for both storing and purchasing food in addition to what they receive from Food Rescue. Many have limited resources, infrequent operating hours, and limited capacity for food purchases and/or storage. The survey found that the emergency food system needed to increase its overall capacity in order to both meet the growing demand for high-quality nutritious food—specifically local produce—and to offer nutrition and culinary education.

"As a community, we needed to move beyond the idea of simply filling bellies to really looking at what's best for the health of our neighbors."

— Kris Thomas, Author, 2014 Food Security Study

Phase 1 - Convene Stakeholders and Commit to a Shared Purpose



Convene diverse stakeholders to explore how they might work together to address the source of a complex problem and define a shared purpose for their collaboration.

A nascent network forms

Over the course of approximately four years, the Food Coalition, Food Rescue, and Groundwork Center garnered interest in the results of the two studies from other key stakeholders invested in the local emergency food system, including Michigan State University Extension, Great Lakes Culinary Institute, Munson Healthcare, and local Rotary Clubs, among others. Together they became a loose network with representation from all of the various food initiatives across the five-county region and were positioned to explore how to use their collective resources to better serve people experiencing food insecurity throughout their community.

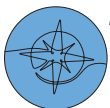
Committing to a shared purpose

By 2016, the community's understanding of the interconnection of food and health began to change, as a result of new perspectives joining the conversation and organizations like Rotary Charities publicly exploring the need for a systems approach. With the Food Coalition and Food Rescue providing infrastructure and operations for the local emergency food system, at this stage the network aligned around a desire to build a more robust, interconnected community asset. Stakeholders united behind the shared purpose of improving the emergency food system's capacity to provide the 70,000 individuals at risk of food insecurity with access to healthy food, along with nutrition and culinary education.

"There is a myth that we can 'food bank' and 'food rescue' our way out of hunger. It's unfortunate that it exists, because if we're truly going to have an impact on hunger in our community, it needs to be done collectively in an organized way."

— Taylor Moore, Director, Food Rescue

Phase 2 - Explore the Problem and Find Opportunities for Leverage



Explore the upstream causes of the complex problem to develop a shared understanding of the system and to identify promising opportunities for targeted intervention.

Mapping the system for shared understanding

Although the nascent network did not set out from the beginning with the intention of advancing deep systemic change, stakeholders saw the value of looking upstream to identify the sources of food insecurity—the “why” behind the issue.

In 2017, Rotary Charities supported a team of Food Coalition Operating Committee members

to participate in a free Systems Practice course offered through the Acumen Academy.⁶ The intention was to expand the group's shared understanding of the issue to include the “why,” not just the “what,” which was illuminated by the two assessments of the current state of food insecurity and of the emergency food system's operations in Northwest Lower Michigan. With leadership from Worden, the team co-created a systems map⁷ exploring the numerous influences on a person's ability to meet their nutritional needs while experiencing food insecurity. “There was a huge learning curve around systems change and its nomenclature, but the process was just as important as the outcome,” reflects Mary Clulo, who participated on the team and serves as the Food Coalition's Operating Committee's chairperson. “We had many lightbulb moments discovering just how interrelated the influences on food insecurity are.”

With a map portraying the perspective of individuals experiencing food insecurity in hand, the team turned to network partners for input on the places where targeted intervention would enable the stakeholders, if they worked in coordination, to meet the needs of those individuals. The map reaffirmed the need to provide greater access to healthy food: “Healthy food became the clear leverage point for affecting people's ability to improve their health and meet their nutritional needs,” asserts Clulo.

The team believed that the network was well positioned to act on the insights of the map, however, they needed full support of the Food Coalition's membership to make change. “The mapping process allowed us to return to the Coalition with a final product and share the story it told,” recounts Clulo. Again, despite earlier concerns about promoting the need to increase access to healthy food, pantries and meal sites were enthusiastic about the opportunity to scale up the amount of healthy food they provided to the community. “The 2014 Food Security Study and the systems map provided evidence that the community's health was at stake,” recalls

⁶ Available from: <https://acumenacademy.org/course/systems-practice>

⁷ Available from: <https://northwestmifoodcoalition.org/farm2neighbor>

Stone. Mindsets began to shift around the critical importance of healthy food and the role of the emergency food system in community health.

Opportunities for leverage

Through the systems mapping process, the team identified three opportunities for leverage that would have the greatest effect on decreasing local food insecurity at two levels of the emergency food system: structural and transformational.⁸

Structural change (policies, practices, and resource flows) – Leverage opportunities included:

- Increasing the amount of fresh healthy food available at local food pantries and meal sites by improving food storage, distribution, and purchasing power
- Providing nutrition and culinary education

Transformational change (mental models) – Leverage opportunities included:

- Raising public awareness of the needs of people experiencing food insecurity

Turning insight into immediate action

Viewing the issue through a systems lens highlighted the interdependence of all the actors—from the groups themselves to the individuals they served—in meeting their needs and advancing their independent and shared goals. The success of Food Rescue's programming, for example, depends on the ability of Food Coalition pantries and meal sites to give food to community members; meanwhile the quantity and quality of food pantries and meal sites are able to provide hinges on Food Rescue's distribution infrastructure. The relationships are interdependent and symbiotic at their best.

The timing of the systems mapping process and these insights could not have been better. Not long after identifying leverage opportunities, in 2018 Thomas lobbied several local Rotary Clubs for funding to start a local food purchasing initiative. Upon receiving a small grant, the Food Coalition launched the Farm2Neighbor Program⁹ to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers for distribution through pantries and community meal sites. Better still, Coalition members didn't need to expend any resources to participate. "There was no risk to them, just pure gain," says Clulo. Not to mention the "element of dignity," adds Moore. "The pantries wanted to give high-quality nutritious food to individuals and families and now they could."

Groundwork Center connected the Coalition to Providence Organic Farm, the first farm to participate in the program, and oversaw a part-time coordination role filled by Christina Barkel to facilitate food purchases, thanks to funding from the Michigan Health Endowment Fund. With distribution support from Food Rescue, the Farm2Neighbor Program purchased and distributed roughly 8,000 pounds of food from seven local farms to pantries and meal sites in its first year. The Farm2Neighbor program has since gone on to complement its local food purchases with nutrition and culinary education promotion in pantries and schools.

"We knew we needed to strengthen our local food system, and by prioritizing access to healthy food from local farms, we opened the door to so many new possibilities."

— Taylor Moore, Director, Food Rescue

⁸ Kania, John, et al. FSG, 2018, *The Water of Systems Change*, https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change.

⁹ Available from: <https://northwestmifoodcoalition.org/farm2neighbor>

Phase 3 - Design and Carry Out a Constellation of Actions



Design and carry out a systems-change strategy sequencing the actions necessary for creating out-sized impacts throughout the whole system.

Inspired by the outcomes of the systems mapping effort and the successful launch of the Farm2Neighbor Program, in 2018 Food Rescue, the Food Coalition, and Groundwork Center applied for a grant from Rotary Charities to act on the three leverage opportunities and scale the level of access to healthy food and nutrition and culinary education for families and individuals experiencing food insecurity across Northwest Lower Michigan.

The Rotary Charities grant was the first funding opportunity Food Rescue pursued in partnership with the Food Coalition, in part because the Coalition didn't have organizational status. Moore also knew from colleagues in other cities that food rescue organizations typically become the lead entities in emergency food systems. But that wasn't his vision for the system in Northwest Lower Michigan. "I was adamant about wanting Food Rescue and the Food Coalition to hitch our wagons together," recalls Moore. "It was clear to everyone involved that if we could find a way to collaborate at a higher level, we would achieve a tremendous amount together."

But hitching their wagons together proved to be easier said than done. "We were awarded the funding from Rotary Charities based on our concept, and we hit roadblocks right away with implementing it," says Clulo. Nearly six months into the grant period, the groups were still struggling to build consensus around a long-term vision and hadn't achieved any near-term goals, including establishing a Food Security Council to oversee the collaborative effort and develop an action plan. "People had their own stake in things, their own perspective, and it took time (and some hardship)

to understand competing priorities," Clulo adds. Moore acknowledges that the group also lacked the tools for facilitating collaborative decision-making, and as a result, the process of aligning around a clear goal was complex and messy.

When the groups brought their update to Freya Bradford, who advised the grant for Rotary Charities in her role as director of systems change and learning, she listened openly. "Thanks to the recent shifts Rotary Charities made within their grantmaking practices placing greater priority on trust and adaptability, Freya offered *more* support," explains McDermott, acknowledging that another funder may have responded instead by taking resources away. "This was our first year funding systems change initiatives," says Bradford. "We knew that this kind of multi-stakeholder work is challenging and that we needed to keep an open door and build trusting relationships with grantee partners to really understand how we could be most supportive." Bradford arranged for an external facilitator, Megan Motil,¹⁰ to support the groups in developing a partnership agreement outlining their roles and responsibilities.

"There were times when we all felt like it was just too much to learn new approaches and attend more meetings," admits McDermott. Yet she, Clulo, and Moore agree that it would be hard to overstate the importance of the risk Rotary Charities took in requiring grantee partners to work in different ways to be eligible for grant funding. They felt Rotary Charities' new orientation was critical in supporting their own shift, to use Clulo's phrase, "from opportunistic to strategic action," which required high-level collaboration.

"This work is all about relationships, and it's natural to experience tension points throughout a collaborative process. You don't grow without some tension."

— Meghan McDermott, Deputy Director, Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities

¹⁰ Available from: <https://www.rotarycharities.org/systems-change-coaching>

A constellation of mutually-reinforcing actions

While some initiatives arrive at this phase of systems change with a fully developed strategy, in the case of the Healthy Food Access Partnership, the process of establishing working agreements and adding other infrastructure supports—such as committees to guide and govern their collective efforts—ultimately became the set of mutually-reinforcing actions that created the conditions for transformation within Northwest Lower Michigan's emergency food system. What follows are some of the actions that show not just how the partnership among the Food Coalition, Food Rescue, and Groundwork Center deepened, but also how the group leverages their collective strengths to create change at a scale that no single entity would be able to achieve on their own.

Structural change (policies, practices, and resource flows)

Crafting a partnership agreement: With external facilitation support from a consultant, the Food Coalition, Food Rescue, and Groundwork Center crafted a partnership agreement that distributed power and responsibility, clarified roles, established methods for accountability, and supported their realignment around the shared goal of increasing access to healthy food and nutrition education for individuals experiencing food insecurity.

The success of their partnership agreement later influenced other local multi-stakeholder initiatives and became a learning opportunity for Rotary Charities as well. Bradford reflects, "In this first year of our systems change funding, we weren't requiring partnership agreements with collaborative grant applications, and the Healthy Food Access Partnership was not alone in their struggle post-award. Most initiatives in our first funding round spent several months negotiating working agreements. Since then, we've provided up-front support and learning opportunities to groups and now require agreements at the point of application for our larger grants."

Expanding food storage and distribution infrastructure: The Food Coalition's 2016 operational assessment identified food storage, distribution logistics, and purchasing power as the three primary factors limiting its members' ability to meet the community's demand for nutritious food. The opportunity to address two of those three factors came with the Rotary Charities grant resources. In 2019, allocations were made for purchasing equipment to move and stack pallets of food, as well as bag sealers for repackaging food in small quantities. Food Rescue also allocated space for Food Coalition members in its walk-in coolers, freezers, and dry storage and provided assistance with produce repackaging. Finally, additional funding from a generous donor and the Michigan Health Endowment Fund enabled Groundwork Center to launch its Building Resilient Communities program to support Coalition members with the purchase of freezers, fridges, and other produce storage for their own facilities.

With working agreements and added infrastructure support in place, the groups were "completely poised" to leverage their partnership, reflects Clulo—just in time for an event that would put their relationships to the test.

COVID-19 changes everything: In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a rapid change in context. Job losses resulted in rising unemployment. Panic buying led to food supply shortages. Pantries and meal sites struggled to keep their volunteers and neighbors safe. And executive orders from State of Michigan officials led to restaurant closures and farmer's market cancellations, causing local farmers to question whether or not they would have a market for their crops in 2020 at all.

The unprecedented level of uncertainty in food supply chains and the local food economy resulted in an immediate need for a coordinated response to ensure that all members of the community would have access to healthy, nutritious food.

"In March 2020, no one knew what was going to happen. With restaurants closed and farmer's markets canceled, farmers questioned whether they should even put plants in the ground."

— Meghan McDermott, Deputy Director, Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities

Launching the Local Food Relief Fund:

Under McDermott's leadership, in April 2020, Groundwork Center launched the Local Food Relief Fund,¹¹ a fundraiser designed to support pantries in purchasing food from local farmers for families hit hard economically by COVID-19. "I remember Meghan called to ask, 'If we reach out to Groundwork's donor base and raise maybe \$30,000, do you think the Food Coalition could move that amount?' I replied, 'Absolutely,'" recalls Clulo. Excitement grew around the fundraiser's goals:

To purchase available local crops and guarantee purchases throughout the growing season, creating financial stability for farmers;

- To keep pantry shelves stocked with nutrient-dense food for families in need; and
- To strengthen the regional economy and food supply chains by keeping purchases local.

Many community members at the time weren't aware of the extent to which the region struggles with food insecurity. The Local Food Relief Fund not only raised their awareness, but also motivated them to give—and give generously. The fundraiser swiftly surpassed the original \$30,000 goal within 24 hours and ultimately brought in over \$190,000 from more than 600 individual donors, demonstrating the power of the community in confronting the looming public health crisis. "The reception was wonderful to the goal of improving people's lives and health," recalls Stone. "The idea that we could raise money to buy local, healthy food was such a turning point."

One hundred percent of all donations were given to the Food Coalition, Food Rescue, and The Manna Food Project to purchase and distribute local food, including produce like parsnips, carrots, beets,

asparagus, green beans, pears, and more. "The Fund brought healthy food to pantry shelves in a way that we'd never seen before," says Moore.

"At a time when many farms had the last of their storage crops lined up for restaurant sales and were counting on cash flow to fund spring plantings, the ability to get paid for feeding low-income families in our community was a godsend during the COVID-19 crisis."

— Local farmer

Launching a representative Food Coalition

Purchasing Committee: As the pandemic surged, the Food Coalition struggled to match its operational capacity with the inflow of financial contributions from the Local Food Relief Fund and elsewhere. Food Rescue, deemed an essential service, continued distributing food and became a critical source of real-time information about the needs and capacity of food pantries and meal sites across the region. In April 2020, questions related to the efficiency and equity of food purchasing and distribution led Moore to call for a new version of the Food Coalition Purchasing Committee, which previously focused on leveraging members' collective purchasing power to buy products like canned chicken and peanut butter. Moore saw the need for the Purchasing Committee to better represent the communities served by Coalition members to strengthen both its connection to community needs and its ability to make more equitable purchasing decisions.

The Food Coalition and Food Rescue promptly requested assistance from Groundwork Center in developing a new Purchasing Committee, and in May 2020, McDermott stepped in to lead the effort of establishing new purchasing guidelines, governance structures, and working agreements. Given its purpose of purchasing food on behalf of all Coalition members, as Moore had pointed out, establishing a committee representative of the Coalition's diversity was a critical first step for equitable decision-making. The committee's

¹¹ Available from: <https://www.groundworkcenter.org/local-food-relief-fund>

makeup now reflects the counties and populations served by Coalition members, as well as the varying sizes and services of pantries and meal sites. Groundwork Center continues to provide facilitation to support the 12-person committee's Wednesday morning meetings. "Our meetings start with a review of our community agreements, which remind us how to be decent to each other. I love it. It's been good for my personal life, too," laughs Anneke Wegman, a longtime Food Coalition volunteer who now serves as the Purchasing Committee co-chair. A typical meeting involves reviewing available produce and voting on whether or not to make a purchase.

In addition to establishing strong internal operations, to fulfill its purpose, the Purchasing Committee also required someone to serve as a liaison between local farmers and the Food Coalition. Groundwork Center secured resources from the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation's Urgent Needs Fund to bring Barkel on full-time to play this role and serve as the organization's food equity specialist. "I love working with farmers," Barkel says enthusiastically, "I'm a former farmer myself." Along with forming and maintaining relationships with farmers on behalf of the Coalition, Barkel manages market research to discover which farms have available produce, how much it costs, and other details like the variety, color, and size of vegetables. Barkel suggests that local farmers have long been asked to give produce away and shares her excitement for shifting from a donation to purchasing model: "It's been so great to be able to bring resources to farmers and finally pay a fair price for what they've worked so hard for."

As more local food became available, Food Rescue scaled up its volunteer operations to help handle the logistics. Pre-pandemic, volunteers came to the Food Rescue warehouse a couple of times per month to repack 800-pound bins of bulk food into 30-pound pantry-sized banana boxes and family-sized bags that the pantries could more easily handle. Much of this food included excess fruits and vegetables gleaned by volunteers from local farm fields through Food Rescue's Healthy Harvest program. With the additional local food purchased

by the Coalition for distribution, Food Rescue scaled up its volunteer operations to two sessions per week. Volunteers packed local food purchased by the Coalition in special banana boxes marked with yellow tape to help the pantries identify the food purchased by the Coalition. Food Rescue was nimble in adapting logistics to the need, even during a time of great unknowns, shelter-in-place, and social distancing. It continued its weekly rescue and distribution services, as usual at no cost to the pantries and meal sites. Food Rescue also stretched its operations to distribute USDA Farmers to Families food boxes, including a run to an airport hangar serving Beaver Island. All of these things combined led to Food Rescue distributing more food than ever before during the pandemic years.

The swift action from Groundwork Center, Food Coalition, and Food Rescue—the Healthy Food Access Partnership—dramatically scaled up the amount of fresh, nutritious food on pantry shelves. During the first year of the pandemic alone, the Partnership successfully purchased over \$100,000 of locally grown produce—amounting to a staggering 70,000 pounds—worked with volunteers to repackage it into pantry- and family-sized containers, and distributed it to food pantries and community meal sites across the region. The impact of the program has been enormous, combined with other healthy food efforts. In 2014, 13% of Coalition members reported that they had fresh fruits and vegetables available on their shelves every time they opened their doors. By the end of 2020, that number grew to 64%.

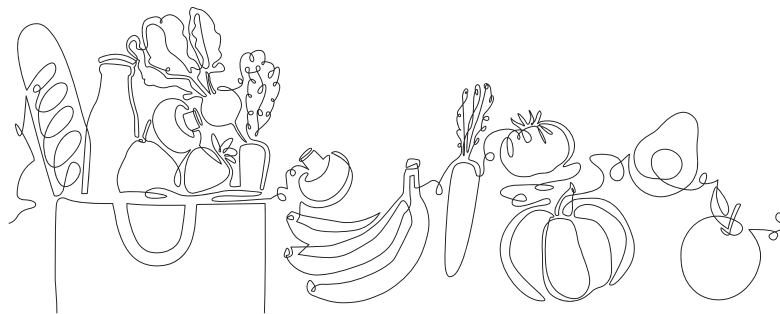
Since the pandemic, the Partnership has evolved its model to include handshake agreements for increased stability within the emergency food system and regional economy. "We've worked to put purchasing agreements in place before the season begins, so farmers know exactly what the Food Coalition wants to buy and for what price," explains Barkel. The strategy is a win-win. It gives farmers the opportunity to plan their input and labor costs with confidence, meanwhile Coalition members know when to expect produce in yellow-taped banana boxes, which supports their planning for educational materials and supplemental purchases (when extra resources are available).

Looking ahead, Barkel acknowledges that the challenge becomes securing sustainable funding for continued purchasing from local farmers. "There's a very understandable and real tension between the cost of local food and what feels like responsible resource stewardship by the Food Coalition," she says. "I've seen a gradual acceptance from Coalition members that it's worthwhile to spend more money on a local carrot versus less on one that comes from far away. If you're trying to feed a lot of people with limited resources, it can be hard to justify spending more money on local food. But the investment in the local food economy creates positive economic impacts for the region's farmers and gets higher-quality, more nutritious food to those who need it most."

Hosting a virtual Food Security Summit: For the Partnership, strengthening the regional emergency food system meant not just building more resilient pathways for people experiencing food insecurity to access nutritious local food, but also connecting those people to nutrition and food education and increasing the community's awareness about the issue of food insecurity in Northwest Lower Michigan.

In 2020 Michigan State University Extension supported the development of online nutrition and food education programming, which became available to the community on the Food Coalition's website.¹²

Later that year, the four organizations built on their work together to launch the Food Security Summit, a six-part virtual event running from December 2020 to March 2021 aimed at increasing public awareness around the issue of food insecurity through sharing data and stories. Roughly 120 people attended the sessions, including individuals experiencing food insecurity, pantry and meal site volunteers, staff from participating organizations, and community members at large. Sessions explored everything from the issue itself to the available food assistance opportunities to the values that drive local solutions and more.



"The Rotary Charities grant supported our partnership agreement and collective infrastructure. Then came the success of the Local Food Relief Fund and additional resources arriving from the Michigan Health Endowment Fund. All of it allowed us to take a great leap toward achieving our goals and to boost the local food economy in a way that we never thought possible."

— Meghan McDermott, Deputy Director, Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities

¹² Available from: <https://northwestmifoodcoalition.org/farm2neighbor/videos>

Shared Infrastructure

As the story suggests, the Healthy Food Access Partnership has not just endured, but flourished despite the challenges brought on by managing an inflow of resources beginning with the Rotary Charities grant and the changes that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps what makes its success even more remarkable is that the Partnership never defaulted to centralized leadership and instead learned to operate in mutually beneficial ways with a more distributed leadership model. "I've learned that you can still have leadership without a central leader," reflects Moore. "We each take the lead on different areas of our work." Clulo seems to agree, adding, "Some of our success can be attributed to people accepting their role in shared leadership and acknowledging other people's unique strengths."

Yet even in decentralized systems change initiatives like this one, some form of shared infrastructure is usually put in place to support mutually reinforcing action and continually strengthen the alignment of various participants toward a shared goal. Over time, the Healthy Food Access Partnership has established different supports to do exactly that.

Aligned resources – Building on the legacy of the Rotary Charities grant, the Partnership now regularly seeks joint funding opportunities to support mutually reinforcing action.

Partnership agreement – The process of creating the partnership agreement (or memorandum of understanding), as well as the agreement itself, served Food Rescue, the Food Coalition, and Groundwork Center by creating a strong foundation from which to operate.

Committees – The Healthy Food Access Partnership has formed a number of different collaborative committees to guide aspects of their collective work, from the Food Coalition Purchasing Committee to the Food Security Summit Advisory Committee (which existed for a short time to produce the event), as well as a loose Fundraising Committee.

Taken together, these supports, along with the muscle memory of successful collaboration in recent years, have succeeded in building a resilient partnership among the three groups, with Groundwork Center facilitating food purchasing, Food Rescue managing food rescue and distribution logistics, and the Food Coalition overseeing the operations at pantries and meal sites across the five-county region. "What we have now is a consummate intertwining of the three groups in a very effective partnership," says Clulo—a partnership that has already markedly increased the capacity of Northwest Lower Michigan's emergency food system to deliver healthy food to neighbors experiencing food insecurity.

Phase 4 - Learn and Adapt for Continuous Improvement



Foster a culture of learning to support ongoing adaptation and improvement, and adopt practices to regularly take stock of progress toward short- and long-term goals.

Fostering a culture of learning

When asked what role learning plays within the Healthy Food Access Partnership, without hesitation McDermott rhetorically asks, "What role hasn't it played?"

Moore credits the Partnership's commitment to transparent communication in fostering a culture of learning. "In the beginning, poor communication hindered our work. We just weren't hearing each

other, so we couldn't learn from one another," he says. After outlining how the groups would interact and communicate in their partnership agreement, they began "sharing information we had never shared before," Moore goes on, which enabled the rapid learning and adaptation they've demonstrated to date.

The Partnership also acknowledges their participation in Rotary Charities' Systems Change Community of Practice—a facilitated space where practitioners engage in peer learning around systems-based approaches—as another important source of learning. Clulo, Moore, and McDermott especially value ongoing reflection about the intersections of the local emergency food system with other systems, like healthcare and transportation.

Ongoing evaluation

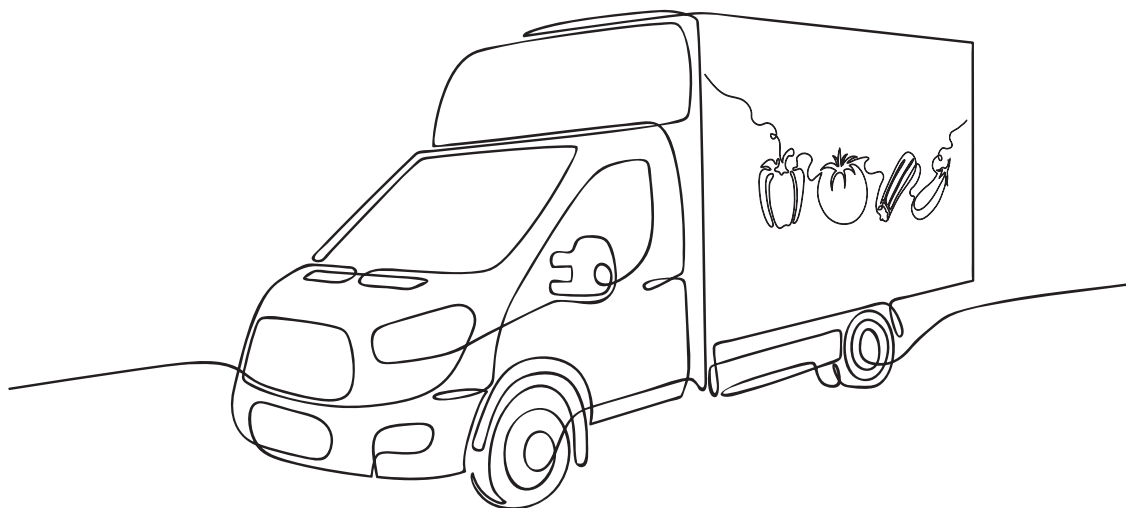
The Healthy Food Access Partnership relies on both traditional and non-traditional evaluation techniques to foster accountability and to take stock of their progress toward shared goals.

On the purchasing side, the Partnership has been tracking both the number of pounds of local produce purchased and the number of participating

farms since 2018. Data shows that, between 2018 and 2022, agreements have been made with 21 area farms for the purchase of 257,089 pounds of produce—roughly equivalent to a whopping 428,482 large potatoes at just over eight ounces each or 1,028,356 large carrots weighing four ounces each.

In terms of food distribution, tracking has notably improved with concerted effort from Food Rescue. In 2015, only 60% of food distributed by Food Rescue could be accounted for by county and the specific pantry or meal site served. By 2019, just four years later, that number grew to 98%. Insights gathered from this data paved the way for Food Rescue to implement equitable distribution measures. It now evaluates the number of pounds of food distributed per person living below the poverty threshold within each of the five counties. Using this data, Food Rescue adds and rearranges truck routes to deliver food to counties experiencing the greatest need, recently doubling, for example, the amount of food distributed to Kalkaska and Benzie counties.

On the operational side, evaluation proves to be more challenging. While the Food Coalition collects data on the overall number of pantry and meal site visits on a monthly basis, many acknowledge



the difficulty of tracking the number of unique versus repeat visitors. With a priority on respecting neighbors' dignity, many pantries, especially those that are faith-based, are reluctant to ask neighbors to quantify their need. In an effort to confront these challenges, the Food Coalition looked closely at pantry user data with additional consulting support from Motil during the height of the pandemic when other supports, such as stimulus checks, were available. What they found is that it's consistently very challenging, especially in a rural area, to assess what drives an individual's use of the emergency food system and the frequency of their pantry visits, let alone to determine need at a community level.

Even so, the Food Coalition has experimented with a relatively new participatory evaluation tool called ripple effects mapping¹³ to collect the untold stories that can ripple out from a program or activity. In 2020, Food Coalition members used the technique to evaluate the Farm2Neighbor program, discovering, among other positive "ripples," increased resiliency in the local food system.¹⁴ Thomas believes other promising evaluation practices exist: "We've learned of other hunger relief organizations that have found ways to track unique pantry visits, allowing them not only to better evaluate their impact on alleviating food insecurity, but also to make adjustments to their

work when appropriate." Thomas and others agree that there is work to be done to improve the way the Coalition tracks its impact on food insecurity.

Signals of change

Today, the Healthy Food Access Partnership's ongoing learning and evaluation practices support the groups in identifying the signals of change that reveal not just how the problem of food insecurity is improving across five counties in Northwest Lower Michigan, but also evidence suggesting that a less visible, though equally important transformation is underway.

By strengthening food purchasing, distribution, and operations within the emergency food system, the Healthy Food Access Partnership has achieved explicit change, dramatically increasing healthy food access for those who need it most. The change also signals a critical departure from the status quo. Barkel comments, "We've successfully moved away from the old food pantry model of providing only shelf-stable and calorically-dense, yet poor-quality processed food from the industrial food system to a new model of providing nutritionally rich, local foods." This shift is not only bolstering local farms and the regional food economy, but also creating the conditions for combating the negative health outcomes

During the first year of the pandemic alone, the Healthy Food Access Partnership facilitated over \$100,000 in purchases of 70,000 pounds of locally grown produce.

In 2014, 13% of Northwest Food Coalition members reported that they had fresh fruits and vegetables available on their shelves every time they opened their doors. By the end of 2020, that number grew to 64%.

Between 2018 and 2022, agreements were made with 21 area farms for the purchase of a staggering 257,089 pounds of locally grown produce.

¹³ Available from: <https://extension.umn.edu/community-development/ripple-effect-mapping>

¹⁴ Available from: <https://northwestmifoodcoalition.org/farm2neighbor>

associated with poor diets, which are often lacking in whole vegetables and fruits.

Beneath the system's surface, so to speak, there is evidence of a more implicit transformation underway. Just a handful of years ago, the Food Coalition, Food Rescue, and Groundwork Center operated independently and, at times, in competition with one another for power and limited resources. Not so today. "I'm starting to see these groups become more integrated. They aren't speaking on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of the work as a whole. The work is broadly owned, as opposed to the sole responsibility of a single grantee organization," reflects Jan Delatorre, a program officer at Michigan Health Endowment Fund who has supported the work. The groups agree. "We are stronger together," says Stone. "We don't concern ourselves with who gets credit for what. Instead, we each do our part. Our goal isn't to benefit our individual groups, but to support our neighbors."

Relational change to this extent also suggests a shift at the deepest level of the system—the realm of mindsets. The Healthy Food Access Partnership now seems to operate on the belief that their capacity for addressing regional food insecurity is contingent upon their ability to learn with and from one another, innovate collaboratively, trust each other, and set ego aside. They seem to have adopted a new mindset around how transformational change is made.

"I really appreciate the pantry and love all the people there. They're almost like family. I've been going there for a while with my sister, and they've been there during some hard times, like when I was out of work during the pandemic. Vegetables are out of reach at the store, so I loved seeing them on the pantry shelves."

— Sammy Stroh, neighbor and visitor, Buckley Food Pantry

Looking Ahead

When the Food Coalition, Food Rescue, and Groundwork Center came together to increase access to healthy, local food for community members experiencing food insecurity across Northwest Lower Michigan, the three groups likely would not have been able to anticipate how they would achieve it. As their story shows, tackling a complex community issue such as food insecurity requires time and space—and sometimes outside support—not just to understand the system in focus and identify opportunities for leverage, but also to form trusting relationships and build the capacity for different ways of working together.

Delatorre reflects that "Food security doesn't just happen to people. People have the agency to secure it for themselves and for each other. People own the system." The Healthy Food Access Partnership seems to embody this insight. Drawing on an astonishing level of commitment and passion, not to mention forward-thinking spirit in the midst of rapidly changing contexts, between 2018 and 2022, this diverse group of individuals put 257,089 pounds of locally grown produce onto pantry shelves and into the hands of neighbors. Today, they continue to harness their collective power to intentionally bring a more nutritious, resilient, and equitable emergency food system into being—thus improving the health of tens of thousands of community members across Northwest Lower Michigan.

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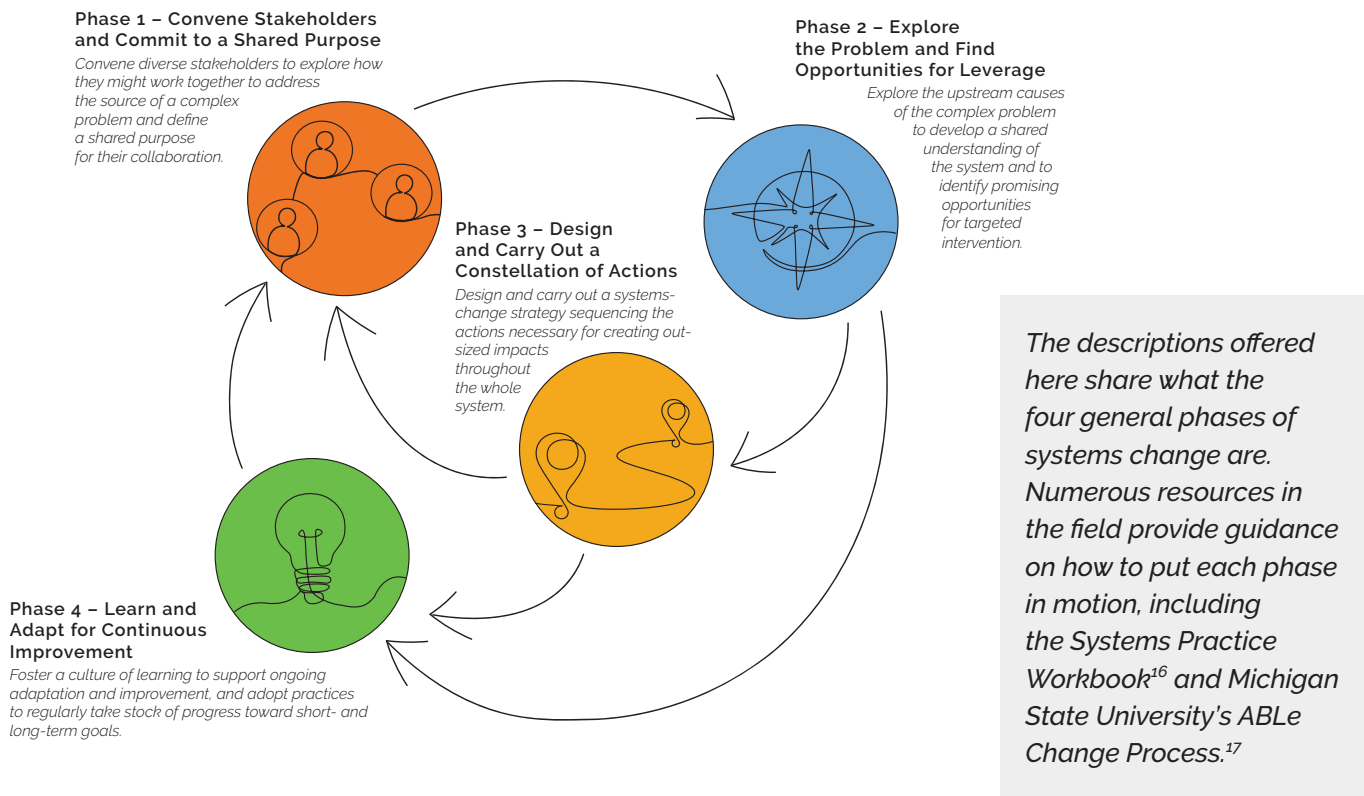
Appendix: Using a Systems Change Approach to Address Complex Community Issues

The work of solving problems like food insecurity, youth/young adult homelessness, and barriers to health and health equity is, inherently, a long game, and given the complexity of these challenges, no single organization will be capable of moving the needle on its own. It is essential to harness the collective power of a diverse group of individuals and organizations willing to commit themselves to *working together differently* and to *working on different things* to address the upstream sources of these challenges.

interdependent conditions that hold complex social and environmental problems¹⁵ in place. Taken together, the phases offer one (but certainly not the only) process that supports changemakers in making sense of the issues they seek to address and aligning their efforts to advance long-lasting change. Although they are presented as distinct and sequential, the phases of systems change weave together in practice to support an initiative's continuous improvement and adaptation in response to changing contexts.

Four phases of development commonly support multi-stakeholder initiatives in transforming the

Four Phases of Systems Change



¹⁵ *Complex problems* are defined by adaptive, interconnected, emergent, and non-linear qualities, which bring important implications for decision-making and strategy.

¹⁶ *Systems Practice Workbook*, 2017, <https://oecd-opsi.org/toolkits/systems-practice-workbook>

¹⁷ *ABLe Change Process: Tools and Resources for Community Systems Change*, Michigan State University,

http://systemexchange.org/application/files/4515/9111/1141/ABLe_Change_Process_for_Community_Systems_Change_Tools_and_Resources.pdf.

Phase 1 - Convene Stakeholders and Commit to a Shared Purpose



Building a foundation for systems change starts by connecting a diverse group of stakeholders to explore how they might work together to address the source of a complex problem. At their best, these groups include people with lived experience of the problem's consequences and people who bring institutional expertise with different approaches for addressing those consequences in different areas of the system at stake. Participants strengthen the foundation of their change effort when they tend to, and ultimately transform, the relationships between and among them to harness the group's collective power.

Defining a clear purpose is crucial for creating coherence across the group as the initiative takes shape; however it is held lightly and adapted with input from new participants in an ongoing process of co-creation, or "collective discovery."¹⁸ Equally important is the task of revisiting and revising the purpose over time as the context surrounding the issue changes.

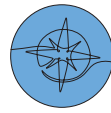
"Transforming a system is really about transforming the relationships between people who make up the system."

— David Ehrlichman, *Impact Networks*

"All of the activities that go into creating a 'we' ultimately build an 'action system' which becomes the foundation for broader social change."

— Cynthia Rayner and François Bonnici, *The Systems Work of Social Change*

Phase 2 - Explore the Problem and Find Opportunities for Leverage



Addressing complex problems requires moving beyond band-aid solutions to explore the upstream sources of the problem that are creating downstream consequences. To locate the sources, the group must first set boundaries for exploring the system at stake. Then they must collect two sets of data, drawing from various sources. The first set focuses on how the problem currently presents itself in their community, exploring questions like: How many people experience it? Who experiences it most severely? What trends might have contributed to it over time? The second set focuses on how the system produces the problem: What policies, practices, and resources are at play? What mindsets are influencing the problem? How are they all connected? The group prioritizes collecting perspectives from individuals with lived experience of the problem while engaging and honoring multiple ways of knowing.¹⁹

This process helps the group create a shared understanding of the terrain in which they're working, including how they may unintentionally contribute to the conditions that create the need for the proposed initiative. It also helps them identify leverage points or opportunities for targeted intervention that can produce outsized impacts throughout the whole system. Leverage opportunities are typically found within the six conditions of systems change and the interactions between them: policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models.²⁰ This phase also sets the stage for the group to agree on visionary goals for the future state they want to create that will drive their collaboration.

¹⁸ Ehrlichman, David. *Impact Networks: Creating Connection, Sparking Collaboration, and Catalyzing Systemic Change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021. p. 105-110.

¹⁹ Perry, Elissa Sloane, and Aja Couchois. "Multiple Ways of Knowing: Expanding How We Know." *Nonprofit Quarterly*, 27 April, 2017. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/multiple-ways-knowing-expanding-know>.

²⁰ Kania, John, et al. FSG, 2018, *The Water of Systems Change*, https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change.

Phase 3 - Design and Carry Out a Constellation of Actions



At this point, the challenge's breadth and depth become clearer. What's needed is a strategy sequencing the actions required to act on the leverage opportunities and advance the transformative change the group seeks to make. The group undertakes a collaborative planning process to design aligned and mutually reinforcing actions that facilitate learning and adaptation and that are, in some cases, carried out simultaneously.

In a more centralized initiative, actions are usually documented and carried out by smaller teams accountable to the group. In a more decentralized initiative, participants carry out actions in a more emergent way without a written plan or timeline. Initiatives often rely on other forms of shared infrastructure as needed—such as governance and participation agreements, communications platforms, and other resources—to support relationship building, enable information flow, unlock creativity, and strengthen alignment across the initiative toward shared goals.

"Meaningful collaboration both relies on and deepens relationship—the stronger the bond between the people or groups in collaboration, the more possibility you can hold."

— adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*

Phase 4 - Learn and Adapt for Continuous Improvement



Fostering a culture of learning within a systems change initiative is crucial. Through ritualized activities, participants learn from each other's practices, amplifying what enables the desired change while stopping what inhibits it.

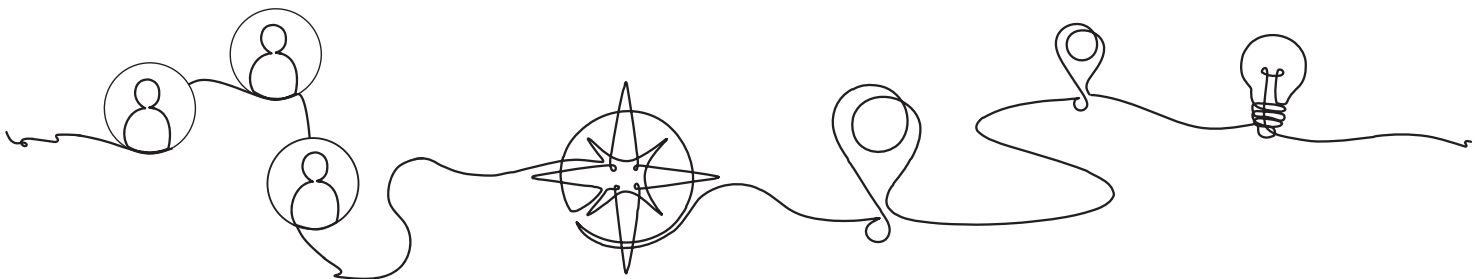
Many initiatives rely on a combination of practices to regularly take stock of progress toward their short- and long-term goals: using inquiry questions for ongoing sensemaking, embedding hypotheses within planned actions to create indicators of change at multiple levels, and capturing signals of change through the use of more traditional evaluation techniques and/or newer principles-based approaches designed to accommodate the characteristics of complex challenges.

"Strategic learning is even more important once you realize that it is possibly the only outcome in systems change we can control."

— Mark Cabaj, *Tamarack Institute*

"The key lever in a complex system is learning; the key methods are conversation, discovery, and experimentation."

— Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston, *Simple Habits for Complex Times*





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