



Public food dollars can reshape local food systems

Insights from Southwest Colorado's Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) Program 2022-2025

March 31, 2026

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Paul picking up produce to deliver to Pine River Shares

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Food Assistance Provider Partners:

Amazing Grace Food Pantry
Animas Valley Grange
Dove Creek ROCK
Espero Housing Solutions
Good Samaritan Food Pantry
Grub Hub
La Plata Family Center Coalition

Mancos Food Share
Manna Soup Kitchen
Montezuma WIC
Our Community Eats
Pine River Shares
St. Patrick's Episcopal Church
TARA Food Pantry

We are equally grateful to the local farmers, ranchers, and food producers who supplied the food that nourished our communities through this program.

Participating Producers:

Adobe House Farm	KMF Shields
Adobe Milling	Lancaster Farm
Beesezi	MISABEL
Beet Street Farm	Navajo Agricultural Products Industries (NAPI)
Bellows Farm	Old Fort Farm
Berto Farm & Ranch	Phoenix Foods
Bidii Baby Foods	Podunk Ranch
Bow & Arrow	Pueblo Seed & Food
Breen Mesa Creamery	Rancho Durazno
Carhart Customs	Red Cliff Ranch
Community Food Farm	Sean O'Kane
Farm to Summit	Fireweed Field
Fields to Plate	Sunnyside Meats, Inc.
Fruit for Good	Terra Sana Farm
Goodrich Farms	Terra Walk Farm
Grasshopper Collective	Two Sisters & a Farm
Grassroots Meats	Wild Heart Farm
Homegrown Farm	
Jakes Farm	

Together, these partners demonstrated the power of collaboration in strengthening local agriculture, expanding food access, and building a more resilient regional food system.

Executive Summary

Between October 2022 and August 2025, the Good Food Collective (GFC) coordinated a regional, community-led implementation of the United States Department of Agriculture’s Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) program across Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners region. The GFC facilitated a purchasing network between 14 food assistance providers and 36 local producers that ultimately invested \$564,642 of public dollars on local food, distributing it to community members seeking emergency food. This effort strengthened farm viability and expanded access to nutritious and culturally relevant food for underserved, rural communities. This report analyzes program implementation, impacts, and lessons learned to inform future food system investments and advocate for permanent LFPA funding. Here are the six key insights gleaned from our experience:

RELATIONSHIP-BASED PROCUREMENT CONNECTED FARMERS AND FOOD ACCESS PROVIDERS

Providing food assistance providers with autonomy over purchasing revealed shared values in local food supply chains and the power of producer-pantry relationships. This work aligned farmers with community food access to connect two systems – local agriculture and hunger relief – that have historically operated in parallel and often in tension. For many emergency food providers, LFPA funding created their first meaningful opportunity to engage and buy directly from local producers. As trust and experience grew, food access sites increasingly sought to procure directly from hyper-local, socially disadvantaged producers, emphasizing that LFPA helped “[us] meet and partner with additional farmers in the area and expanded our supply chain, giving [us] access to new local products.”

VALUES-BASED FOOD PURCHASING EXPANDED EQUITABLE MARKET ACCESS

Public food dollars that promote values-based procurement can successfully scale and sustain equitable market access for local producers, providing fair market and economic opportunity. Between October 2022 and August 2025, 77.62% of total LFPA food dollars were directed to socially disadvantaged producers, with 24 of the 36 participating producers identifying as SD. The share of funding going to SD producers steadily increased over time, likely due to intentional improvements in program design and the reality that strong, trusting partnerships take time to develop. The sustained high ratio of SD producers in 2024 and 2025 demonstrates that once the groundwork is laid, it can be maintained.

STABLE, FAIR, AND FLEXIBLE MARKETS STRENGTHENED PRODUCERS AND THE REGIONAL ECONOMY

Creating fair, stable, and flexible markets expanded business opportunities and kept public food dollars circulating within regional economies, thus reinforcing local economic

development. In contrast to conventional wholesale markets, where producers often absorb price pressure from large buyers, we ensured that 100% of participating producers set their own prices. This gave farmers greater control over their income to ensure they were paid fairly. One farmer said, **“having guaranteed peach sales at peak harvest helps us reduce food waste and get the highest dollar value for our fruit.”** A cattle ranch and diversified vegetable farmer described this opportunity as something that **“could make or break our farm operation.”** Ten of the 11 producers surveyed said participation made a moderate or significant difference in their ability to make a living, and all indicated they would participate again. Producers were also afforded flexibility with product, harvest schedules, and deliveries; when unforeseen circumstances like crop failure, labor shortages, or early ditch shut-offs occurred, they had flexibility to pivot without losing sales.

A LIFELINE DURING A CRISIS.

When conventional supply chains were disrupted during COVID-19, these locally rooted purchasing channels stabilized farms and ensured communities could access food. For many producers, keeping their businesses open was one of the biggest concerns, with one describing LFPA as **“an answer to our prayers”**. For emergency food assistance providers, LFPA purchasing power made it possible to respond to rapidly escalating community needs (across the country, an unprecedented 60% average increase in demand, with some high-need areas reporting increases of up to 300%) at a time when donated food streams and national distributors were unreliable or insufficient (Feeding America estimates retail donations to food banks plummeted by nearly 50% in many communities¹). By aligning public investment with local production and community distribution, we helped stabilize both sides of the food system during disruption.

IMPROVING FOOD ACCESS THROUGH DIGNIFIED, NUTRITIOUS FOOD

LFPA significantly improved access to nutritious, culturally relevant food in rural and underserved communities—strengthening food security while reducing stigma through dignified food access. In SW Colorado, distance, limited retail options, and constrained emergency food infrastructure create persistent barriers to access to healthy food. Working through a collaborative network of 14 food pantries, LFPA-supported food purchases reached more than 10 communities and represented a major infusion of resources into places where fresh, nutritious, and culturally relevant food is often the hardest to access. Across the program period, 39.1% of total LFPA dollars (\$220,878) were spent on produce, 34.9% (\$197,332) were spent on meat and poultry, and 9.2% (\$51,941) were spent on Native and Indigenous foods. This work strengthened dignity in emergency food access spaces for an estimated 6,800 households each month.

¹Feeding America, *The Impact of the Coronavirus on Local Food Insecurity in 2020 & 2021*
<https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/coronavirus-hunger-research>.

LOCAL INTERMEDIARIES MADE THE PROGRAM POSSIBLE.

Success in our rural community depended on having a dedicated partner to handle the 'heavy lifting'-- managing the complex and high administrative and operational burden inherent in this federal program. Through its Farms to Food Access Food Hub, the Good Food Collective provided the flexible food procurement and coordination, administration and compliance support, and shared infrastructure that allowed small farms and small food pantries to participate in LFPA without compromising their core work. Many food assistance providers requested support coordinating orders across multiple producers, arranging delivery logistics, managing invoices and payments, completing grant reporting and compliance requirements, ensuring proper cold storage and food-safe handling, and meeting wholesale minimum purchase thresholds that would have been impossible to reach individually. The Good Food Collective's Farms to Food Access Food Hub filled these gaps, allowing small farms and small food pantries to participate in LFPA without diverting time and energy away from their core work. Over time, as relationships strengthened, several food access providers chose to purchase directly from local producers.

While LFPA delivered meaningful impact to our regional food system, several structural challenges limited its full potential and ability to achieve its core goals; challenges including a lack of program continuity and federal funding, uncertainty, certain parameters imposed by the grant program design, and limited coordination among Colorado LFPA recipients. Our experience demonstrates that public food dollars can be a powerful tool for strengthening local food systems. Here are our recommendations to continue this work in the future:

- Design for equity from the outset.
- Invest in local intermediaries and infrastructure.
- Build an evaluation framework.
- Strengthen statewide coordination and shared learning.
- Provide multi-year funding cycles.
- Codify and institutionalize federal investment.

Reflecting on our experience, we believe that future programs should prioritize equitable procurement strategies to expand fair market access for small, beginning, and socially disadvantaged producers; invest in local intermediaries that coordinate procurement, logistics, and provide critical backbone functions; provide long-term funding cycles; build an evaluation framework into program design; and strengthen statewide coordination and shared learning.



Top: photo courtesy of Gwen Camermon. Bottom: Photo courtesy of Laura Austin

Introduction

The Good Food Collective is a Southwest Colorado–based nonprofit working to make sure everyone in our region can access affordable, healthy, and culturally relevant food—and that the people who grow and provide that food can make a living doing so.

We believe food is about more than eating. It’s about health, dignity, culture, community, and economic opportunity. When our food system works well, families are healthier, farmers and ranchers thrive, and our whole region is stronger.

Mission

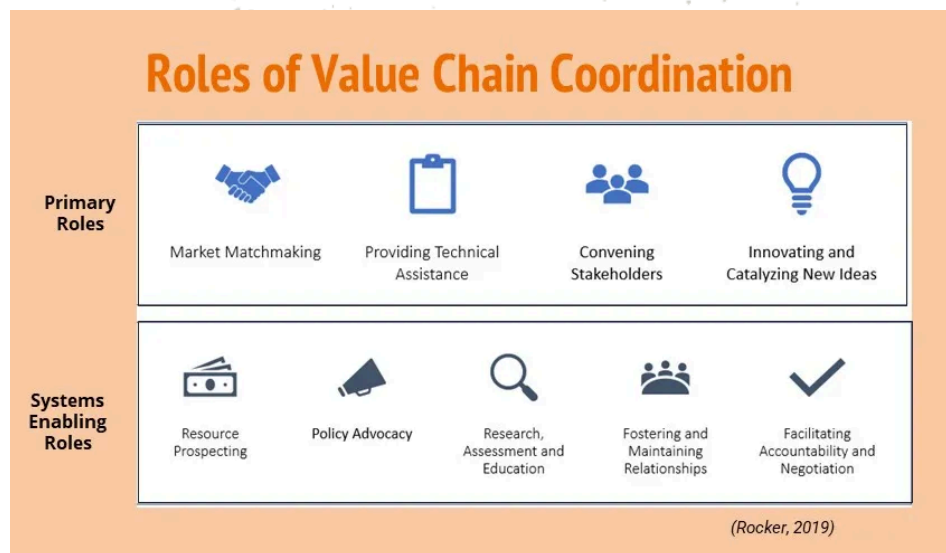
We work together to build a just and thriving food system in Southwest Colorado.

Vision

A vibrant regional food system centered around community leadership, collaboration, economic prosperity, and equity—where all people have agency over their food, health, and environment.

The Good Food Collective supports a regional Farms to Food Access Initiative, which for the past eight years has mobilized a five-county and 2-tribe network of Food Assistance Providers to collectively seek funding that, in turn, allows us to purchase local foods from farmers and distribute that food out to our region’s most underserved communities. We operate a Food Hub to facilitate group purchases, streamline ordering and delivery, and offer a centralized drop point with cold and dry storage. We also provide match-making services between local producers and buyers, technical assistance, convening, and administrative support. We consider this work

value chain coordination, which is “the deliberate, collaborative process of aligning activities, information, and relationships among diverse actors in a supply chain to improve efficiency, increase value, and achieve shared goals.”²



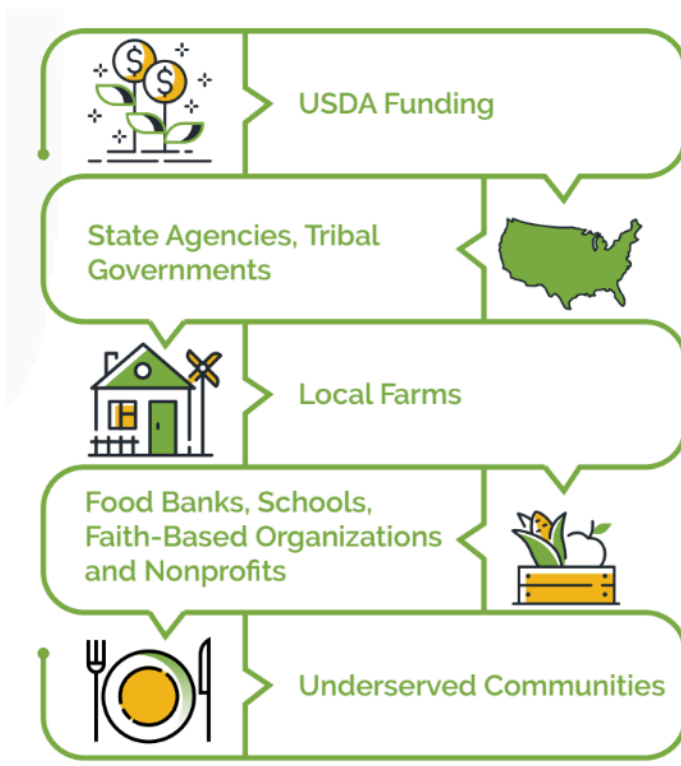
² Rocker, S. (2019). *Value Chain Coordination*. Food System Leadership Network.

This report evaluates the collaborative Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) program that the Good Food Collective operated through its Farms to Food Access Initiative in Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners Region from October 2022 - August 2025. The results of the analysis uplift program successes and lessons learned to carry forward into new and similar projects. This effort included a collaboration between 14 food pantries and 36 local producers across Archuleta, La Plata, Montezuma, Dolores, Ute Mountain Ute Reservation, and Navajo Nation. In total, our group was awarded four LFPA grants totaling \$696,600.

Background

What is the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Program?

The Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Cooperative Agreement Program was created by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 2022. The Local Food Purchase Assistance program maintains and improves food and agricultural supply chain resiliency through non-competitive cooperative agreements with State and Federally Recognized Tribal Governments. In 2022, the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) entered into a non-competitive cooperative agreement with USDA to pilot the LFPA program in Colorado. Together, CDHS and partners across the state coordinated the implementation of efforts to purchase local domestic food, with a special focus on supporting socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and distribution to underserved communities. Over a four-year period, CDHS released four Requests for Applications for organizations, businesses, and Tribes across Colorado to participate in this effort: LFPA 1 and 2, and LFPA Plus 1 and 2.



The overarching goals of the LFPA used in all states that implemented this program are:

E. Atwell, E. Bomstein, M. Edwards, S. Schempf, and G. Templeton, *USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Program: Initial Impacts, Opportunities and Recommendations* (Wallace Center at Winrock International, 2023).


- To support local food producers and socially disadvantaged farmers and food producers
- To establish, strengthen, and broaden partnerships with producers and the food distribution community, local food networks, and nonprofits distributing fresh and nutritious foods in rural, remote, and underserved communities
- To provide an opportunity for States and Federally Recognized Tribal Governments to strengthen their local and regional food system
- To build and strengthen relationships and purchase and distribution channels that continue beyond the conclusion of the LFPA program

CDHS included additional goals for the State of Colorado, which include:


- To provide opportunities to purchase food from farmers and producers in as many regions of Colorado as possible
- To provide opportunities for food distribution in as many regions of Colorado as possible

Definitions

Throughout the report, the following definitions will be used. We recognize that these definitions are imperfect, oversimplified, and subjective. We also recognize that defining a community by its (dis)advantage is harmful, perpetuates inequity, and incorrectly homogenizes the group's tethering and its various needs, hopes, and desires. We use these definitions throughout this report to maintain continuity because they were standardized by the USDA for the LFPA grant program.

 **Values Based Procurement** is a strategic approach to sourcing food where buying decisions are guided by social, environmental, or local economic values and goals rather than just the bottom-line price.

 **Value Chain Coordination** is the development of soft infrastructure, like relationships, networks and information sharing channels, that creates thriving and sustainable regional food economies.³

 **Local or regional producers** are farmers, ranchers, producers, processors, distributors, and other businesses involved in food production or distribution that are located in the state or federally recognized tribal region or within 400 miles of the delivery destination. Located means that the headquarters of the businesses involved in food production or distribution must also meet these geographic criteria of being in the same state as the distribution site or within 400 miles of the distribution destination.

³ "Value Chain Coordination," Food Systems Leadership Network, accessed March 24, 2026, <https://foodsystemsleadershipnetwork.org/resource-library/topic-areas/value-chain-coordination/>.

Local or regional food. Locally and Regionally Produced Food means food that is raised, produced, aggregated, stored, processed, and distributed in the locality or region where the final product is marketed to consumers, so that the total distance that the product travels between the farm or ranch where the product originates and the point of sale to the end consumer is at most 400 miles, or both the final market and the origin of the product are within the same State, territory, or federally recognized tribal land.

Socially Disadvantaged producers. According to the USDA, a Socially Disadvantaged (SD) Farmer or Rancher is a farmer or rancher who is defined as a member of a Socially Disadvantaged Group. A Socially Disadvantaged Group is a group whose members have been subject to discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and, where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or a part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program.

Underserved Communities. Underserved communities are defined in Federal Executive Order 13985, Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities. Through the Federal Government, Jan 20, 2021. Sec. 2. Definitions:

1. The term "equity" means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.



Photos courtesy of Beet Street Farm

2. The term “underserved communities” refers to populations sharing a particular characteristic, as Colorado Department of Human Services Solicitation Number: RFA IHGA 2023000368, as well as geographic communities that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life, as exemplified by the list in the preceding definition of “equity.”


 **Minimally Processed Foods.** Foods which may have been slightly altered for the main purpose of preservation, but which do not substantially change the nutritional content of the food. Examples include cleaning and removing inedible or unwanted parts, grinding, refrigeration, pasteurization, fermentation, freezing, and vacuum-packaging. Other examples include dried mushrooms, frozen strawberries (but not strawberry jam).



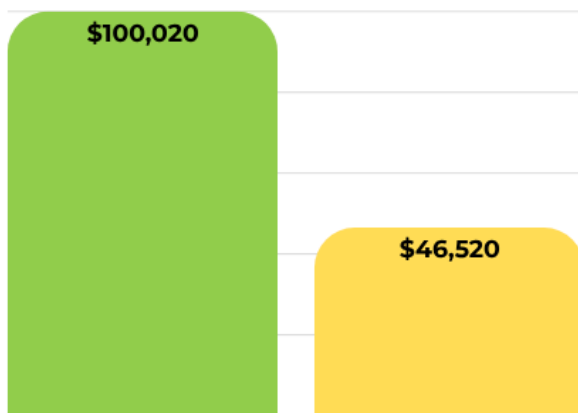
Photo courtesy of Homegrown Farm

Problem Identification that catalyzed our Farms to Food Access Initiative

Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners Region— defined here as La Plata, Montezuma, Dolores, Archuleta, and San Juan Counties in Colorado; and the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute in Colorado, and Navajo Nation in New Mexico – is characterized by its residents’ deep sense of place, stunning natural beauty, geographical isolation, and strong agricultural ties.

Regional Wage Comparison (Averages)

- Living Wage
- Annual Wage - Agricultural Industry



At the same time, the region is plagued by several insidious challenges— a strong rural-urban divide, high degrees of social inequity, and a striking (and growing) gap between earning potential and cost of living. A 2024 report from the Region 9 Economic Development Center defines a living wage as the annual income required for a family to meet basic needs— including housing, food, and healthcare— without outside assistance. The threshold for self-sufficiency has risen dramatically: *a family of four in Archuleta County now requires \$105,919 annually, while those in La Plata and Montezuma Counties need \$102,621 and \$91,519, respectively (regional average of \$100,020).* In contrast, the average annual wage in the regional agriculture industry is just *\$46,520*. This leaves a staggering gap, as farmers and ranchers in Southwest Colorado currently require a 50% to 56% increase in earnings

just to afford the most basic necessities for their families. In Montezuma County, this economic pressure is most acute, with the vast majority of producers remaining below the federal poverty line if forced to rely solely on farm income.⁴ Our region of the state is home to generational family farms who are desperately trying to stay in business, as well as beginning and young farmers who are priced out of farm land. While farming is a beloved way of life in our communities, our region’s producers are struggling.

Farm business viability became even more challenging due to COVID-19; 67% of farmers surveyed in Southwest Colorado reported loss of their most lucrative wholesale accounts.

⁴ Donna Graves and Zac Robinson, *Livable Wages in Southwest Colorado – 2024 Update* (Durango, CO: Region 9 Economic Development District of Southwest Colorado, 2024) https://www.region9edd.org/uploads/Final_Report_Livable_Wages_Upd_.pdf.

Unfortunately, local procurement still has not rebounded. In our 2022 Southwest Colorado Food & Agriculture Summit, producers cited lack of stable markets, drought, labor issues, land and input costs, and the artificially low cost of food driven by the conventional food market as the largest constraints on their business's success. One year later, a farmer-owned cooperative and our region's only food hub— Southwest Farm Fresh— permanently closed its doors. High costs of living and low wages also contribute to high levels of food insecurity in Southwest Colorado, as residents often have to elect to pay for fixed costs rather than healthy foods. According to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap data, food insecurity rates saw a significant upward trend between 2021 and 2023, with rates consistently higher in our Rural counties compared to the state average. Food insecurity rates rose from 12.0% to 13.0% in La Plata County and from 12.8% to 15.0% in Archuleta County. The disparity was even more acute in Dolores and Montezuma Counties, where food insecurity reached 15.0% and 17.0% respectively in 2023.⁵ At our local university, Fort Lewis College, 49% of students surveyed in 2023 were found to be food insecure.⁶ On top of that, food insecurity disproportionately affects Indigenous, Latine, and older adults in our communities. A 2022 study conducted by the Montezuma Food Coalition reported shocking numbers: in Montezuma County, 96% of Native Americans, 60% of Latine, 79% of Youth, and 59% of Seniors are currently limited in their ability to reliably access or source nutritionally adequate and safe foods⁷. It is ironic, then, that we live in a rich agricultural region hosting over 2500 farms, many of which produce food crops, proteins, and important cultural foods. The barriers to a thriving local agriculture industry and food security have one thing in common: deeply connected, underlying conditions make both issues especially difficult to solve. On the other hand, many of these root causes are well-documented, and there is already incredible work being done in our communities to solve these problems holistically and equitably to create long-lasting change.



Left: Photo courtesy of Maggie Shields. Middle: Photo courtesy of Laura Austin. Right: Photo courtesy of Rachel Landis

⁵ Feeding America, "Map the Meal Gap 2024 & 2025," Local Food Insecurity Estimates for Colorado (2022-2023).

⁶ Fort Lewis College, *GRUCKUS Basic Needs Survey Brief: Spring 2023* (Durango, CO: Fort Lewis College, 2023)

⁷ Hall, L. (2022). *Four Corners Community Food Assessment*. Colorado Health Foundation. Page 8.

LFPA Program Design and Implementation

The Good Food Collective partnered with 14 food pantries and 36 local producers to apply for LFPA 1, LFPA 2, and LFPA Plus to support our regional Farms to Food Access Initiative. The GFC publicly advertised and recruited food pantries across our region to collaborate on our LFPA applications. Similarly, with each LFPA grant application, we released a public bid process to select producers. Over time, this evolved and included specific producers that food pantries recruited themselves. In total, we were awarded \$696,600. We spent \$692,509– \$564,642 (81%) of which was spent on local food and \$127,867 (19%) to support backend administrative and operating costs for both the GFC and our pantry partners. About 55% of food procured went through the GFC’s Food Hub, and about 45% was passed through to food pantries that purchased directly from producers.

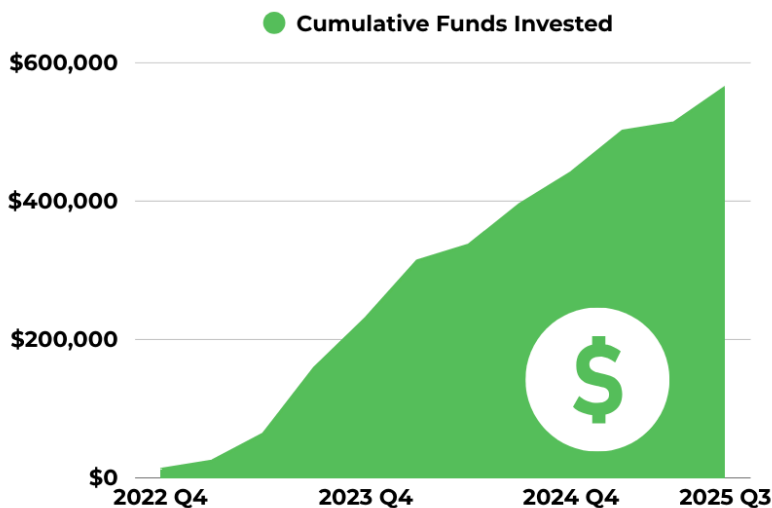


Each Fall/Winter (typically aligned with each of the three major LFPA RFPs/applications), the Good Food Collective issued a call for bids to producers in Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners Region, with an emphasis on socially disadvantaged producers and new/beginning producers. Producers interested in participating in LFPA Plus completed a detailed application along with an accompanying bid sheet. Producers identified the Food Assistance Providers (FAPs) they wished to work with and sell food to, including the GFC’s Food Hub. Producers and FAPs then worked collaboratively to determine the types of food to be sold and received, expected pricing per unit, product specifications, and estimated availability. In total, producers

identified 22 Food Assistance Providers for food distribution, including three local hubs that provided wholesale procurement, aggregation, and distribution to smaller FAP organizations.

When the Good Food Collective started LFPA program design conversations with stakeholders in our region, local producers and food assistance providers made several conditions to successful implementation really clear. Some of the requests small

Cumulative LFPA Funds Invested



farms made included: streamlined communication and delivery options (preference for drop sites so that they don't have to deliver to several locations), consistent orders, and wholesale minimums. Food pantries requested help: coordinating orders and delivery logistics, reporting and grant compliance, storing food at food-safe temperatures, and meeting wholesale minimums.

The Good Food Collective's Farms to Food Access Food Hub filled these gaps so that small farms and small food pantries could participate in our regional LFPA program. Our Food Hub created 'a la carte' menu of services for producers and food pantries:

- Product Aggregation
- Facilitating group purchases to meet wholesale minimums
- Coordinating logistics
- Managing deliveries and pick-ups
- Managing grant reporting, data tracking, and compliance
- Providing local purchasing support for food assistance providers that are too small to have in-house local food procurement specialists

Approximately 55% (\$310,553) of LFPA food moved through the Good Food Collective's Food Hub, reflecting the central role of shared infrastructure in making this work possible.

Over time, as food assistance providers were able to build their understanding of local purchasing, develop relationships with local producers, and hone procurement logistics, more and more food assistance providers requested to purchase directly from local producers. In those instances, the Good Food Collective handled the backend, administrative work: paying invoices, managing budgets, reporting and data tracking, and other grant compliance requirements.



Photo courtesy of Bert Street Farm

Methods

This report analyzes the implementation and impacts of the Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) program in Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners region between October 2022 and August 2025. The analysis draws on several sources of quantitative and qualitative data collected by the Good Food Collective (GFC) and its partners during program implementation.

Producer bid data: The Good Food Collective and its Food Assistance Provider partners invited producers to participate through a public bid process. Producers submitted applications describing the foods they planned to sell, expected quantities, prices, and seasonal availability. This information was used to develop LFPA grant applications submitted to the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) and to plan food purchases. For example, during the LFPA Plus application process, GFC received applications from 30 producers totaling more than \$1.8 million in bids. After review, 29 producers representing \$1,176,819 in bids met program requirements and aligned with partner purchasing needs.

Procurement & distribution data: The Good Food Collective tracked all LFPA purchases and distributions using a custom Salesforce system. Each invoice recorded the product purchased, vendor, price, quantity, date, and the food assistance provider receiving the food.

Surveys: GFC administered intake and end-of-year surveys to participating producers and food assistance providers. These surveys collected feedback about program participation, operational challenges, and perceived impacts on farms and food access.

Quarterly reporting: As part of LFPA grant requirements, GFC submitted quarterly narrative and purchasing reports to CDHS. Food Assistance Providers also reported the number of households served and progress toward program goals.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from procurement records, producer bids, surveys, and expenses were summarized using descriptive statistics in Google Sheets. Qualitative responses from surveys and program reports were reviewed by the GFC team to identify common themes and participant experiences. While the analysis was guided by the goals of the LFPA program, additional insights were included when they reflected important on-the-ground impacts.

Community Engagement and Ethics

The LFPA program was developed and implemented through collaboration with local producers and food assistance providers. Partners helped shape program design, identify food purchasing priorities, and share feedback throughout the program.

Survey participation was voluntary. This report primarily presents aggregated data and selected quotations to protect participant privacy while accurately reflecting community experiences.

Key Insights

Key Insight #1

Relationship-Based Procurement Connected Local Producers and Food Access

Providing food assistance providers with autonomy over purchasing revealed shared values in local food supply chains and the power of producer-pantry relationships.

Trust-based partnerships between local producers and emergency food assistance providers were the linchpin to the successful implementation of LFPA in Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners region. This work aligned farmers with community food access to connect two systems – local agriculture and hunger relief – that have historically operated in parallel and often in tension. Generally, farmers seek the highest price possible to make their margins work, while food assistance programs “prioritize maximizing the quantity of food per dollar in order to meet the overwhelming demand of their clientele, often regardless of the origin, quality, or cultural appropriateness of the food.”⁸ Our experience and data showed how intentional, relationship-based procurement can bridge that gap.

From the outset, the formation of new farmer–pantry relationships emerged as one of the most significant outcomes. For many emergency food providers, LFPA funding created their first meaningful opportunity to engage and buy directly from local producers. These connections expanded the assistance agencies’ ability to offer clients nutritious, fresh, culturally relevant, and dignified food choices. Wendy McAllister of St. Patrick’s Church Food Pantry explained:

We are able to provide our food pantry guests with a much more robust and nutritionally dense offering each week. These items include fresh and locally grown produce (fruits and vegetables), milk and eggs, and a variety of frozen meats. Also from time to time we are able to access culturally meaningful food for our guests including but not limited to tortillas, beans, rice, corn and peppers.

⁸ E. Atwell, E. Bomstein, M. Edwards, S. Schempf, and G. Templeton, *USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Program: Initial Impacts, Opportunities and Recommendations* (Wallace Center at Winrock International, 2023).

These producer-pantry relationships also reduced their reliance on distant or volatile supply chains across the regional emergency food network– which particularly impacted fresh produce and meat.

As trust and experience grew, food access sites increasingly sought to procure directly from hyper-local, socially disadvantaged producers rather than relying exclusively on centralized aggregation. This shift reflected growing administrative capacity and confidence across the



\$438,268
spent on locally produced food

network. Of the \$564,642 in local food purchased through this work, \$438,268 supported socially disadvantaged producers, demonstrating both the scale of investment and the program’s intentional focus on deepening direct producer relationships.

Emergency food providers consistently emphasized the value of these new connections. In 2023, Manna Soup Kitchen shared that LFPA

helped them **“meet and partner with additional farmers in the area and expanded our supply chain, giving Manna access to new local products.”** These partnerships proved durable: Manna later sought and secured additional funding to collaborate with the Durango Farmers Market to recover and purchase unsold produce – an initiative that has continued each summer since 2024.

Other organizations experienced similar long-term impacts. Good Samaritan’s Food Pantry established new partnerships with producers such as Bidii Baby Foods (specializes in dehydrated Navajo baby food) and BeeSezi (grows and processes cornmeal) – relationships that have since become central to its culturally relevant food sourcing practice. Our Community Eats, a food pantry in Pagosa Springs, developed a new partnership with Beet Street Farm and is now working toward a forward contract for the 2026 growing season, formally integrating local food purchasing into its strategic plan and operating budget.

Producer feedback confirmed that these partnerships were not solely transactional. Alix Midgley of Fireweed Farm noted that **“it hurts many of us [farmers] to have to rely on sales to more privileged members of our community to keep our farms running. Most of us do this work**



Shawn Haight with Manna Soup Kitchen picking up a fruit delivery from Rancho Durazno

because we believe in all people having access to good, nutritious food, and LFPA was a significant means for us to guarantee that our food was going to people in our communities who may not otherwise have access to it.” After the 2024 growing season, nine of eleven farmers highlighted the importance of being able to directly support neighbors experiencing food insecurity and described the work as a “win-win” that supported farm viability while increasing access to high-quality local food. Farmers also reported that having food assistance providers reach out to initiate the partnership reduced a significant marketing burden that they often carry when trying to navigate wholesale markets.

This wide-scale adoption and investment in local food production by food assistance providers show that our LFPA work did more than move food. It built trust, strengthened relationships across sectors, and reinforced local supply chains rooted in shared values – positioning producers as active partners in feeding their communities.

Key Insight #2

Values-Based Food Purchasing Expanded Market Access for Socially Disadvantaged Producers

Public food dollars that promote values-based procurement can successfully scale and sustain equitable market access for local producers.

In the Southwest Colorado and Four Corners region, our community-led Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) program demonstrated that values-based procurement is successful at scale and can effectively expand market access for socially disadvantaged (SD) producers.

LFPA helped reshape who participates in the regional food system. Between October 2022 and August 2025, 77.62% of total LFPA food dollars were directed to socially disadvantaged producers, with 24 of the 36 participating producers identifying as SD. Average sales for SD and non-SD producers were \$3,246 and \$2,478, respectively, demonstrating a successful prioritization of SD producers per the grant objectives.

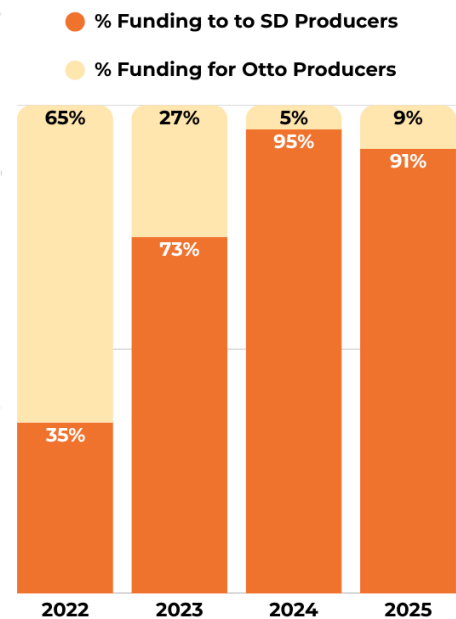


Misabel, a women-owned startup that uses ingredients grown in-house at the Pond Farm

Between 2022 and 2025, the share of funding going to SD producers steadily increased. In 2022, 35% of food dollars went to SD producers. That rose to 73% in 2023, peaked at 95% in 2024, and remained high at 91% in 2025. This shift was likely attributed to intentional improvement through program design and the reality that strong, trusting partnerships take time to develop. Importantly, while initial relationship-building takes time, the sustained high ratio of SD producers in 2024 and 2025 demonstrates that once the groundwork is laid, it can be maintained. Part of this success can also be attributed to the Good Samaritan Food Pantry, a food assistance provider that we began working with in early 2024 who brought in several new producers. The Good Samaritan is an excellent example of a food assistance provider who prioritized purchasing cultural foods from Native and Indigenous producers using LFPA funds.

This effort set an important precedent for integrating values-based purchasing into the emergency food sector in Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners region. Some food assistance providers were already working toward or experimenting with values-based purchasing before LFPA. Yet, they often lacked the funding, capacity, and producer relationships to do it consistently or at scale. LFPA provided the dedicated resources to turn those intentions into sustained action. It demonstrated that federal food assistance dollars can support equity, fair markets, and local economic opportunity at the same time. Since the program was terminated in 2025, there is a lost opportunity to monitor the sustainability and continuity of values-based, vendor-buyer relationships that took effort and energy to set up.

Share of funding for Socially Disadvantaged Producers by year



Key Insight #3

Stable, fair, & flexible markets strengthened farmers and the regional economy

Creating fair, stable, and flexible markets expanded business opportunities and kept public food dollars circulating within regional economies, thus reinforcing local economic development.

In Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners region, we leveraged LFPA resources to build fair, predictable, and flexible markets for local producers – especially small, beginning, and socially disadvantaged (SD) farmers. While the Good Food Collective coordinated this work, the program’s success was made possible by the farmers, food access providers, and partner organizations who shaped the approach and carried it forward. In contrast to conventional wholesale markets, where producers often absorb price pressure from large buyers, our program design ensured that 100% of participating producers set their own prices. This gave farmers greater control over their income to ensure they were paid fairly.

Our approach to the administration of these public dollars intentionally distributed opportunity across farms. No single producer accounted for more than 11% of total sales, which helped prevent market concentration and spread benefits broadly. Several elements that we chose to leverage supported stability, including forward purchase agreements (where farmers knew in advance what would be purchased and at what price), annual bid processes (where farmers listed what they had available and food access sites listed what they needed), and consistent wholesale purchasing when possible. Because purchases were backed by federal and state funding, producers could rely on guaranteed sales during the grant period, reducing uncertainty and enabling stronger production and financial planning. At the same time, the federal government’s lack of communication during rollout – and the change in administration in 2025 that ultimately led to the cancellation of future LFPA funding – created severe



Susan Halkin, former TARA Food Pantry Manager, and Danielle Grantham, Owner of Two Sisters and a Farm.

disruptions that undermined farmer trust and limited our ability to fully deliver long-term stability. We discuss this further in the “[Challenges](#)” section.

For many SD producers, this was their first opportunity to sell into a federal food assistance program. The result was not only short-term income stability, but greater confidence to plan, invest, and grow. Producer experiences illustrate this impact. Gwen Cameron of Rancho Durazno shared:

This funding with the Good Food Collective would provide critical financial support for our farm in several ways. Knowing we have these guaranteed sales will allow us to increase melon production and extend the length of the season. Having guaranteed peach sales at peak harvest helps us reduce food waste and get the highest dollar value for our fruit.

In recent years, Rancho Durazno had lost approximately \$20,000 (a significant hit for small, specialty crop producers) due to oversupply and low prices— losses that guaranteed markets and forward purchasing helped prevent. Reliable, consistent markets support small farm businesses and ensure they can keep their doors open.

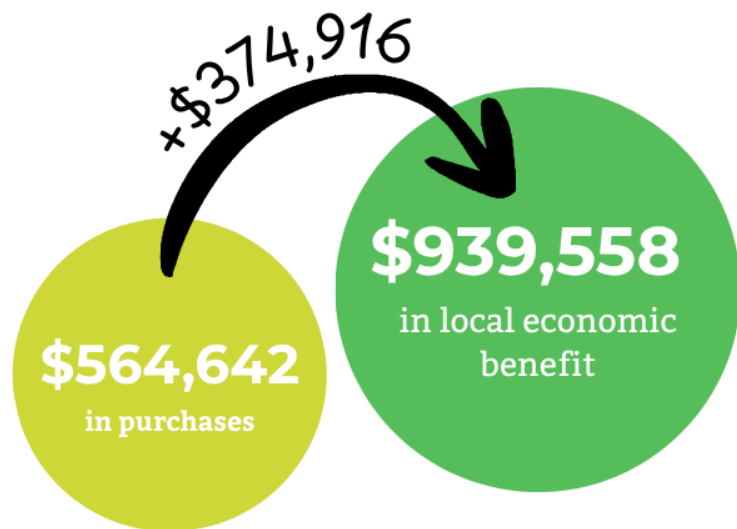
For some farms, the stability we built together was critical to staying in operation. Lancaster Family Farm, a start-up cattle ranch and diversified vegetable farmer, described this opportunity as something that **“could make or break our farm operation.”** Without a guaranteed buyer, there was no assurance their products would sell. Our purchasing reduced that risk at a pivotal stage by providing dependable income when marketing capacity and visibility were still limited. Similarly, Goodrich Farm, a beginning fruit and vegetable farmer, described this as a critical opportunity to generate early-stage income for irrigation and infrastructure investments— expenses that often pose major barriers to farm viability in the first years of operation.



Max Fields with Fields to Plate Farm

Our regional LFPA implementation also balanced stable, predictable markets with flexibility. Unlike most traditional wholesale market channels, we allowed producers flexibility in product, harvest timelines, and delivery. For example, if a producer experienced a crop failure, they worked with us to substitute for a similar crop. One time, a bulk, group purchase was several months delayed due to unforeseen challenges outside of the farmer's control— primarily due to "REZ-onomics," a term that Zachariah Ben of Bidii Baby Foods coined to describe the specific and acute challenges that farmers who operate a business on tribal lands experience. We maintained consistent communication and adapted plans in recognition that procuring food from small, local, and SD producers requires flexibility.

Survey data from the 2024 growing season further underscore the economic significance of this work. All 11 responding producers reported financial benefits, including increased revenue, access to new markets, expanded customer bases, and, in some cases, the ability to hire staff. Ten of the 11 said participation made a moderate or significant difference in their ability to make a living, and all indicated they would participate again.



Beyond individual farms, our work also functioned as a regional economic driver. Using the [USDA Local Food Economic Impact Calculator](#), our purchases totaling \$564,642 generated an estimated \$939,558.31 in local economic benefit. Research shows that dollars spent on local food are more likely to recirculate within the community as producers purchase supplies and services locally (Shideler and Watson, 2019). By sourcing from regional farms, we strengthened both individual farm businesses and the broader rural economy.

Overall, our community-led LFPA implementation served as a practical economic development strategy for the region. By using public investment to develop fair, reliable, and flexible markets, we helped producers stabilize, grow, and reinvest while supporting our regional economy at large.

Key Insight #4

A lifeline during crisis.

When conventional supply chains failed → community-led LFPA program stepped in → local systems worked

Liquid purchasing dollars provided through our community-led LFPA became a critical stabilizing force during a period of crisis, when conventional food supply chains were severely disrupted and community need surged. When COVID-19 hit the region, many local producers lost primary markets overnight as restaurants, institutions, and processors shut down. At the same time, emergency food assistance providers experienced unprecedented increases in demand, yet lacked both the funding and reliable supply channels needed to respond. This disconnect exposed a fundamental system failure: local producers had food but nowhere to sell it, while food pantries and meal programs urgently needed food but had no money – nor the suppliers – to purchase it. In other words, the conventional supply chain failed.

The USDA created the LFPA program to help communities respond to this crisis. The Good Food Collective worked closely with local producers, food access sites, and regional partners to pursue and use LFPA funding to directly address this gap. Together, we leveraged public resources to create a locally rooted purchasing channel that moved food from farms and ranches to community food access sites when other systems could not.

For many producers, keeping their businesses open was one of the biggest concerns.

Grassroots Meats in Pagosa Springs described LFPA as **“an answer to our prayers,”** noting that the loss of their local processor and customer base during COVID had deeply affected both revenue and reputation. With guaranteed sales through LFPA, the business was able to prevent closure and begin rebuilding.

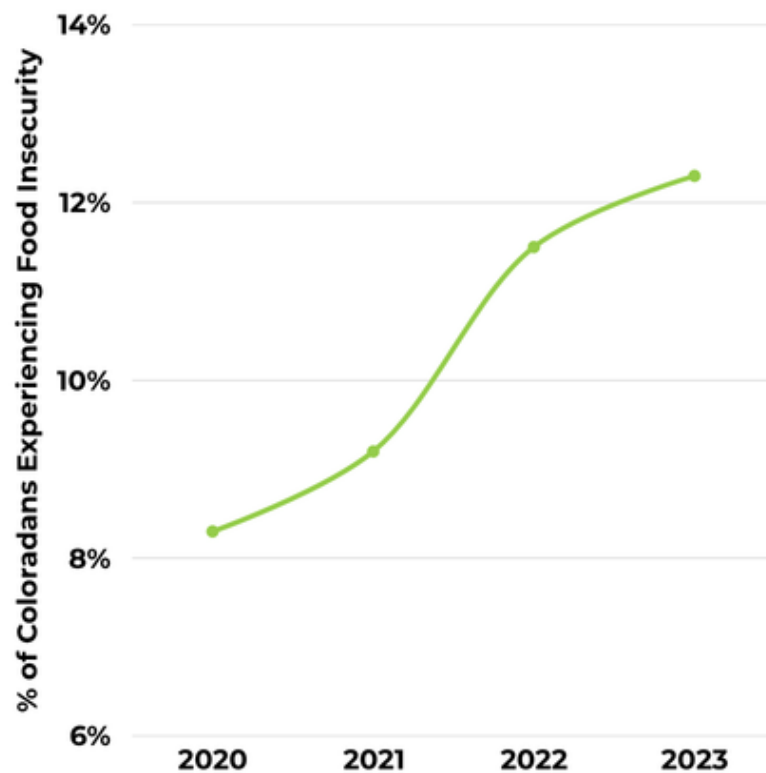
For emergency food assistance providers, LFPA purchasing power made it possible to respond to rapidly escalating community need at a time



Volunteer picking up produce for Pine River Shares

when donated food streams and national distributors were unreliable or insufficient. Prior to COVID-19, food insecurity was just below 10% in Colorado, but steadily rose during the pandemic years to almost 13% in 2023, according to Feeding America⁹. This trend was more pronounced in Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners region, which regularly averaged higher food insecurity rates compared to the state's average. Food pantries struggled to keep food on their shelves, much less fresh produce and meat. Delivery trucks were delayed, and shifting regulations continually changed how organizations could operate. By sourcing locally, food assistance providers were able to access fresh, regionally produced food even as national systems stalled—reinforcing the importance of localized procurement during crisis response.

Post-COVID Rise in Food Insecurity in Colorado



Taken together, these experiences show that our LFPA work was not simply a food access program, but a resilience strategy. By aligning public investment with local production and community distribution, we helped stabilize both sides of the food system during disruption—preserving farms and ensuring communities could continue accessing food with dignity during a period of profound uncertainty.

⁹ Feeding America, *Map the Meal Gap: Food Insecurity & Poverty in Colorado (Overall, 2023)*, interactive map, Feeding America, 2025, <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2023/overall/colorado>

Key Insight #5

Improving Food Access through Dignified, Nutritious Food

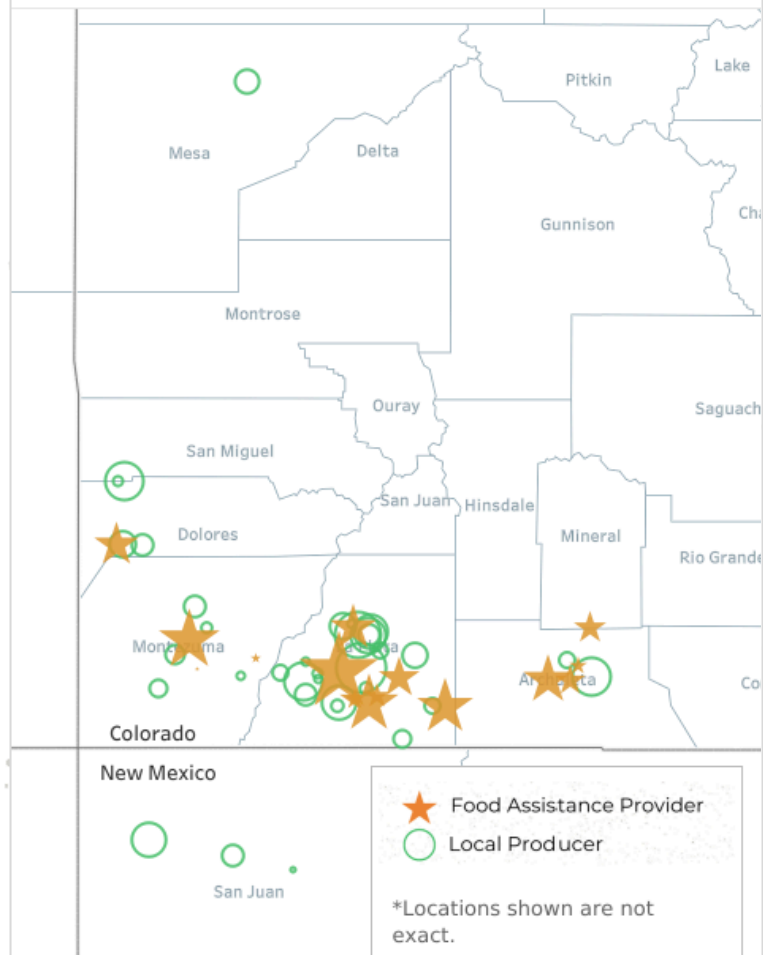
LFPA significantly improved access to nutritious, culturally relevant food in rural and underserved communities—strengthening food security while reducing stigma through dignified food access.

Our community-led LFPA implementation in Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners region played a critical role in addressing food and nutrition insecurity across a geographically vast, rural area. In our region, distance, limited retail options, and constrained emergency food infrastructure create persistent barriers to access to healthy food. Working through a collaborative network of 14 food pantries, LFPA-supported food purchases reached more than 10 communities and represented a major infusion of resources into places where fresh, nutritious, and culturally relevant food is often the hardest to access.

LFPA funding enabled our food access partners to purchase foods that were otherwise financially or logistically out of reach— especially fresh produce, high-quality protein, and culturally specific foods like cornmeal and Navajo baby food. Across the program period, 39.1% of total LFPA dollars (\$220,878)

Map of all producers and food assistance providers that participated in LFPA in Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners Region.

Size indicates the monetary value of the product purchased from the producer or distributed to the provider.



were spent on produce, 34.9% (\$197,332) were spent on meat and poultry, and 9.2% (\$51,941) were spent on Native and Indigenous foods. These categories consistently emerged as the most difficult for food pantries to source through traditional donation streams, yet among the most requested by community members. In rural Colorado, where grocery options are limited or prohibitively expensive, LFPA food purchases helped fill critical nutritional gaps for households experiencing food insecurity.

Just as importantly, this work strengthened dignity in emergency food access spaces for an estimated 6,800 households each month. Many organizations reported that sourcing local, high-quality, and culturally significant food helped reduce stigma and strengthen trust with community members. Manna Soup Kitchen and other regional providers reported increases in participation and reinforced the role of food pantries as trusted community anchors rather than last-resort services. These experiences let food assistance providers live out their values, and reinforced that local procurement is a core component of dignified food assistance services.

Taken together, these outcomes show that our LFPA initiative functioned as a targeted investment in rural food security— one that addressed immediate nutritional needs while supporting longer-term shifts toward dignity-centered, community-responsive food access. In a region where structural barriers to healthy food are persistent, LFPA provided both the resources and flexibility needed to meet people where they are with food that supports health, culture, and overall well-being.

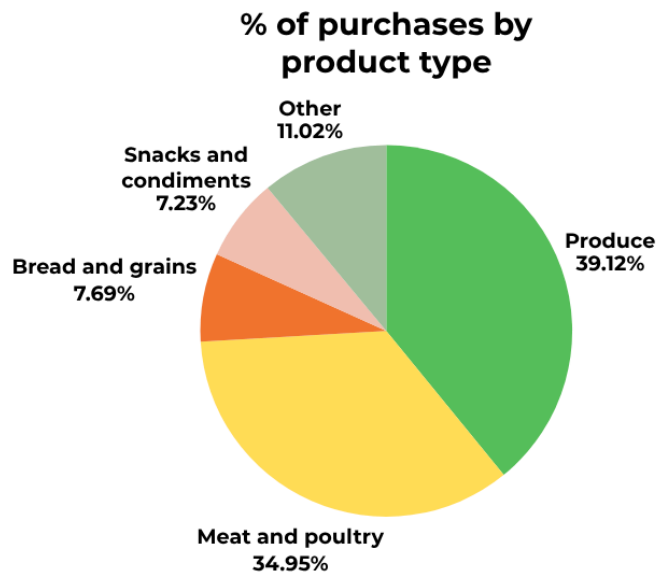


Photo courtesy of Bidii Baby Foods

Key Insight #6

Demonstrated importance of local intermediaries

Through its Farms to Food Access Food Hub, the Good Food Collective secured funding and provided the flexible food procurement and coordination, administration and compliance support, and shared infrastructure that allowed small farms and small food pantries to participate in LFPA without compromising their core work.

Beyond daily operations, the presence of a regional "backbone" entity was a prerequisite for access to these funds. The preparation for a federal and state contract of this magnitude required a massive investment of time and expertise long before a contract was signed. The GFC conducted an intensive pre-bid market analysis to identify producer and pantry interest, as well as establish sustainable pricing structures. Furthermore, the technical requirements for federal awards— including specific and costly insurance policies— are often prohibitive for smaller organizations. Had the GFC not been positioned to absorb these front-end costs and administrative burdens, it is likely that this community-informed and led funding opportunity would have bypassed the region entirely. This highlights a critical lesson: the complexity of the federal application process remains a significant barrier to equitable access for rural communities, necessitating a dedicated partner to bridge the gap.

During the program design phase of our regional LFPA implementation, local producers and food assistance providers were clear about what successful participation would require. Small farms requested streamlined communication, consistent and predictable orders, and consolidated delivery options— preferably shared drop sites so they did not have to drive to multiple pantries across a geographically large region. They also emphasized the importance of meeting wholesale minimums without having to overextend production.

Food pantries identified a different but equally significant set of needs. Many requested support coordinating orders across multiple producers, arranging delivery logistics, managing invoices and payments, completing grant reporting and compliance requirements, ensuring proper cold storage and food-safe handling, and meeting wholesale minimum purchase thresholds that would have been impossible to reach individually. For smaller, volunteer-led pantries in particular, the administrative and logistical burden of participating in a federal grant program would have been prohibitive without support.

The Good Food Collective's Farms to Food Access Food Hub filled these gaps, allowing small farms and small food pantries to participate in LFPA without diverting time and energy away

from their core work. *In total, approximately 55% (\$290,067) of LFPA food purchases and distributions were facilitated through the Food Hub.* Rather than requiring a single model of participation, the Food Hub offered flexible, “à la carte” services tailored to each partner’s needs.

For producers, this included product aggregation, coordinated group sales to meet wholesale minimums, consolidated drop sites, and streamlined communication—reducing transportation time and administrative burden. For food assistance providers, the Food Hub coordinated purchasing across multiple farms, managed delivery schedules and pickups, handled invoicing and payments, tracked budgets, and ensured grant reporting and compliance requirements were met. In effect, farmers were able to focus on growing food, and food pantries were able to focus on feeding their communities.

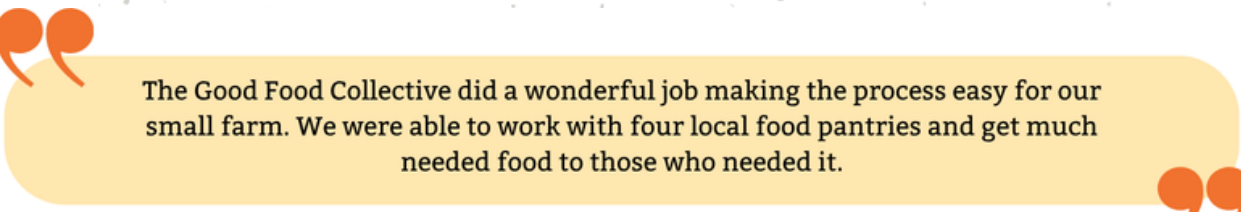
Over time, as relationships strengthened, several food access providers chose to purchase directly from local producers. Even in those cases, the Good Food Collective continued to manage the backend administrative work—processing payments, tracking expenditures, maintaining compliance documentation, and submitting required reports—ensuring that flexibility did not compromise accountability.

Producers consistently emphasized the value of this streamlined process. As Jakes Farm shared,



55%

**Food Hub
purchases and
distributions**



The Good Food Collective did a wonderful job making the process easy for our small farm. We were able to work with four local food pantries and get much needed food to those who needed it.

Similarly, Homegrown Farm noted, **“I could not ask for a simpler transaction.”** These perspectives reflect a broader pattern: reducing friction made participation feasible for farms that would otherwise have been excluded or opted out from selling to these institutional markets.

Our experience demonstrates that community-based food hubs are not optional add-ons to local procurement efforts at this scale— they are essential infrastructure. By providing flexible coordination, absorbing administrative complexity, and sharing financial risk, the Food Hub made it possible for small farms and small food pantries to benefit from public investment without compromising their primary missions. In doing so, it translated federal funding into functional, equitable, and community-rooted food system outcomes.

Discussion

Challenges

While LFPA delivered meaningful impact to our regional food system, several structural challenges limited its full potential.

Program continuity and federal funding uncertainty.

Many producers made production and investment decisions based on expectations that LFPA funding would continue into 2025. In March 2025, USDA canceled \$5.5 million allocated to Colorado, leaving farms with product, labor commitments, and informal agreements, but no guaranteed buyer. This abrupt shift undermined trust and created financial strain for producers who had scaled up in good faith.



Photo courtesy of Maggie Shields

Short grant timelines.

Limited funding periods made it difficult to build consistent purchasing patterns and long-term supply chain relationships. Stability is essential for both farm viability and effective food access planning.

Food purchasing restrictions.

The transition from LFPA to LFPA Plus and its “minimally processed” rules excluded certain locally produced foods and reduced flexibility, limiting participation for some producers and narrowing food access options for communities.

Lag time in state reimbursement.

Delays in reimbursement required the Good Food Collective to carry a significant financial burden to keep purchasing food. Many smaller organizations would not have the cash flow or reserves to sustain this level of risk, creating a structural barrier to participation.

Limited coordination among Colorado LFPA recipients.

Despite shared goals, there was minimal peer-to-peer coordination or state-level facilitation among Colorado grantees. Greater collaboration could have reduced duplication, strengthened shared learning, and improved overall program effectiveness.

Recommendations

Our experience demonstrates that public food dollars can be a powerful tool for strengthening local food systems. Here are our recommendations to continue this work in the future:

Design for equity from the outset.

Our success showed that equity should be built into program design in the future. Public food dollars can expand fair market access for local, small, beginning, rural, and socially disadvantaged producers when equity principles are built into program design.

Invest in local intermediaries and infrastructure.

Community-based food hubs and coordinating organizations make participation possible for small farms and small food access sites. Sustained funding for these intermediaries, like including funds to cover administrative costs, is essential to scale local procurement while maintaining quality, accountability, and relationship-based partnerships.

Build an evaluation framework.

Develop standardized metrics to track and assess the financial impacts on local producers. From the outset, programs should measure how market opportunities impact farm viability, stability, and growth. Ideally, these metrics align with state or federal best practices, providing consistent data that can be compared across similar programs and communities.

Strengthen statewide coordination and shared learning.

A statewide debrief among Colorado LFPA recipients would help identify lessons learned, improve program design, and explore opportunities to continue this work in a coordinated way. Continued participation in networks such as the Food System Leadership Network's Farms to Food Assistance Community of Practice can also support cross-state learning.

Provide multi-year funding cycles.

To be effective, grant cycles must align with agricultural realities. Short, unpredictable grant cycles prevent producers from making the long-term investments in seed, livestock, and infrastructure necessary to sell into new markets. We recommend a shift to multi-year

commitments (3–5 years) that allow farmers to plan crops and infrastructure in advance, moving the regional food system from a reactive, crisis-management cycle to one of durable growth.

Codify and institutionalize federal investment.

Temporary pilots are not enough to build resilient local food systems. We recommend the permanent institutionalization of LFPA-style programs through federal legislation. Supporting acts like the *Local Farmers Feeding our Communities Act* (H.R. 4782) and the *Strengthening Local Food Security Act of 2025* (S. 2338) ensures that local food procurement for food assistance providers becomes a permanent pillar of the U.S. Farm Bill, rather than a series of one-off awards.

Conclusion

Our community-led LFPA implementation in Southwest Colorado and the Four Corners region demonstrated that public food dollars can do far more than buy food– they can reshape local food systems.

By prioritizing socially disadvantaged producers, we expanded fair market access without diminishing opportunity for others. By centering relationship-based procurement, we connected farmers and food access providers in ways that strengthened local supply chains and reduced reliance on distant, volatile markets. By guaranteeing fair prices and stable demand, we supported farm viability and generated measurable regional economic impact. During a period when conventional supply chains faltered, LFPA functioned as a resilience strategy– stabilizing producers and ensuring communities could access healthy food with dignity. In rural and underserved areas, the program significantly improved access to nutritious and culturally relevant foods that are often hardest to obtain. Finally, through the Farms to Food Access Food Hub, we demonstrated that local intermediaries are essential infrastructure and allowed farmers to focus on growing food, and food pantries to focus on feeding their neighbors. Taken together, this work shows that when public investment is locally led, equity-driven, and supported by trusted intermediaries, it can simultaneously strengthen farm viability, rural economies, and community food security.



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