



Supporting the Local Food System with ARPA

The most recent federal coronavirus relief package, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), cites food insecurity as one of the reasons these funds are being distributed, and states that funds may be spent “to respond to the public health emergency or its negative economic impacts.” This funding is an important opportunity for cities and towns to make investments in the food supply chain to help ensure food security and a thriving food and agricultural economy.

The local food system proved to be a critical resource when national and global food supply chains were disrupted, and its long-term resilience is equally vital to the state’s recovery and ongoing food security needs. All aspects of the food supply chain have been affected by the crisis, from farms and fisheries, to distributors and restaurants, to consumers and community-based organizations. Food insecurity remains high as many people continue to struggle to afford food. Investments are needed in infrastructure, planning, and capacity building to ensure that food system businesses remain sustainable and households have access to nutritious food.

The ARPA funding that is going to municipalities presents an opportunity to further food system work in your own community. A good summary of the basics about this funding, if you aren’t already familiar, is [provided by the Vermont League of Cities and Towns](#). Food systems expenditures could include **directly supporting individuals, households, and populations facing food insecurity; directly supporting food system workers; and directly supporting food system businesses**. This funding is also an unprecedented opportunity to *think big* – to catalyze projects that create long-lasting change well after the ARPA funding has been spent. These types of projects might work towards:

- **Reducing the Health Impacts of Food Insecurity:** Food security is an essential part of public health, and there are many programs and models that can be implemented in partnership with healthcare organizations, such as subsidized CSA shares, workplace interventions, Healthy Retailer initiatives, and food and nutrition education.
- **Creating the Infrastructure Needed for Food Security:** Food security requires not just individual assistance to those facing hunger, but also an investment in community infrastructure and the local economy. Infrastructure projects such as public transportation or sidewalk improvements and regional

processing, storage, and distribution infrastructure can increase community food access as well as strengthen the local economy.

- **Supporting Kids and Families with Farm-to-School Initiatives:** Farm to School and Early Childhood provides equitable access to healthy, local food while also promoting food and agriculture literacy. Supporting this work with ARPA will require coordination between the municipal government and the School Board, but could include projects such as school gardens or composting, food preparation and storage infrastructure, or planning or administering a new meal or food distribution program.
- **Supporting Community Development with the Local Food Economy:** The local food system is an essential part of Vermont's economy. Community development projects could include supporting independent retailers, grocers, and direct-to-consumer farm sales, supporting agricultural and culinary workforce training programs, addressing housing for farmworkers and other food system employees, and collaborating on regional processing, storage, and distribution infrastructure.
- **Improving Environmental Sustainability and Climate Resilience:** Good agricultural stewardship can build environmental resilience, generating clean water, clean air, healthy soils, and ecological diversity. ARPA funding can be used to support many agricultural best management practices such as streambank stabilization or purchase of specific equipment, as well as the development of partnerships between municipalities and property owners to address nonpoint sources of pollution.

Identifying Effective and Sustainable Projects

You may already know exactly what is needed to support food access and the local food economy in your community. Many Vermont communities have been working on these issues for a long time – it's possible your municipal plan already includes action items -- and the COVID-19 pandemic has in many cases clearly illustrated the changes that are needed.

If you know you would like to support food system work but are not yet sure about specific projects– that's also great! ARPA funding does not need to be spent until December 31, 2024 (obligated) / December 31, 2026 (spent). Communities can use this time to undergo a thoughtful research and stakeholder engagement process to figure out what investments will make a positive impact, and be sustainable after the ARPA funding is spent, and to develop partnerships with neighboring towns and regional organizations.

Understanding the Food System

There are many organizations and resources that can help you understand our local food system and how to support it. A few places to start:

- **Learn about Vermont's food system, including barriers and opportunities:** [The Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan 2021-2030](#) was created collaboratively by dozens of subject matter experts and food system businesses and lays out strategic goals and priority strategies for the state. In addition, 54 concise topic briefs can be [accessed individually](#) and lay out the current conditions, barriers, opportunities, and recommendations for a wide array of products, markets, and issues in our food system. These briefs were also co-authored by a team of experts and can point you

towards organizations who can provide even more information.

- **Hear from communities across the state about what they are already doing:** The [Local Food Resiliency in Vermont](#) website shares stories of community food system work that emerged from or have been key to addressing COVID-19.
- **Understand what can be done within municipal government to support our food system:** [Sustaining Agriculture: Agriculture and Food System Planning](#) is a series of resources that provide an overview of the food system from a municipal perspective. They are focused on town plans and land use, but also include non-regulatory ideas as well as background information.



One model for conceptualizing the food system.

Understanding Your Community's Unique Needs and Opportunities

While the above resources are a good starting place, it's essential to talk with both organizations in your area and residents of your community to learn what is needed and what is already happening. Your regional planning commission can help you with a public engagement process around the use of ARPA funds. Here's a preliminary list of the types of food system stakeholders you should bring into the conversation:

In your community:

- People facing food insecurity
- Farmers, both farm owners and farm workers
- Other food system business owners such as grocers, specialty food producers, restaurant owners, food distributors, etc
- Other members of the local business community such as your local Chamber of Commerce
- Educators, child care providers and school food service personnel, and Farm to School committees
- Community garden coordinators or managers
- Farmers market managers or vendors
- Food shelves and organizations who run community meal programs
- Health care providers
- Conservation commissions and land trusts
- Food system advocates and champions
- Youth groups, services for older adults such as your regional Area Agency on Aging, and other service providers
- Local churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith communities
- Make sure to include stakeholders who are diverse in race/ethnicity, gender, age, ability, and socioeconomic status

Regionally:

It's important to know what neighboring communities are working on and what regional initiatives or nonprofits already exist, to avoid duplicating efforts or reinventing the wheel. Plus, many food system projects require regional or multi-town collaboration – an individual town's population likely can't support a workforce training program all by itself, for example. Some regional stakeholders to talk to include:

- Your area's Hunger Council ([find it here](#))
- Hospitals, federally qualified health centers, and other health care providers for your area
- Your Regional Planning Commission ([find it here](#))
- Your regional Department of Health office ([find it here](#))
- Your Regional Economic Development Commission ([find it here](#))
- Any food system organizations in your area (you can use the [VT Food System Atlas](#) to search by area or topic)

Statewide:

These statewide organizations may have helpful resources or staff who can be contacted for advice:

- [Vermont Farm to Plate Network](#)
- [Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets](#)
- [Vermont Department of Health](#)
- [Hunger Free Vermont](#)
- [Vermont Farm to School Network](#)
- [Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont](#)
- [Vermont Council on Rural Development](#)

Thank you for taking part in this work!

Building a local food system that is sustainable, equitable, and ensures food security for all will take more than a one-time municipal expenditure; it will require ongoing investment as well as changes in policy, infrastructure, culture, and economy. That said, this ARPA money is an unprecedented opportunity to strategically support projects that can have long-term impact.



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