

Operationalizing Equity

How State Entities are Targeting Socially Disadvantaged Producers in USDA's Local Food for Schools and Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Programs



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Executive Summary

In 2021, the United States Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) established the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) and the Local Food for Schools (LFS) cooperative agreement programs to mitigate supply chain disruptions that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both programs sought to serve food insecure communities most impacted by the pandemic, while taking historic steps to target support for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers within local and regional supply chains.

This study explores how state governments are using LFPA and LFS funding to develop or advance local food purchasing programs that target socially disadvantaged producers. Tribal governments were also eligible to apply for these programs, however none were engaged for this project, therefore further research is needed to understand program design by Tribal cooperators. Based on findings from a survey and interviews with state agencies, we share examples of how these programs are operationalizing equity in program design, measurement, outreach, and implementation. We discuss how learnings and outcomes can advance equity in state and federal programs.

A goal of this research project is to make our findings accessible to those who seek to “operationalize equity.” We present what we heard in a non-academic style with direct quotes to enable our target audience—cooperators, in particular state agencies—to hear firsthand how others are approaching implementation. While each state differs in its approach, interviewees expressed a common desire to learn from one another to adapt approaches to their own state's context.

Why States Applied

In total, 40 states signed cooperative agreements for LFS and 48 for LFPA.^{1,2} Among the 31 states that participated in our research, reasons why states decided to take advantage of these funding opportunities from the USDA included:

- State employees had the frame of mind that it was the right thing to do,
- External pressure from local partners, and
- Pre-existing work at the state level to build upon programs to reach socially disadvantaged producers and to support local food systems.

LFS and LFPA Program Design

Each state's program design is unique based on its local food landscape, existing programs and infrastructure, and current needs and challenges. Nonetheless, there are common models for how states are using their LFPA and LFS funds. Of the states we surveyed:

- Thirty out of 31 states chose to solely subaward their LFS and/or LFPA funds to other entities, rather than directly purchasing and distributing food.
- For LFS, most states are establishing subawards with school districts. Some are establishing subawards with food hubs or distributors.
- For LFPA, many states are sub-awarding funds to food banks, food hubs, or other partner organizations. In some instances, these partners have been identified through a competitive grant process.

Strategies for Success

States are at various stages of implementing and evaluating their LFS and LFPA programs, but key strategies for success have begun to emerge:

- Early public engagement, such as listening sessions, to build trust with partners and producers and to identify priorities for program design;
- Outreach and engagement approaches that meet producers where they are, remove barriers to participation, and foster long-term market connections; and
- Efforts to maintain flexibility and reduce administrative burden in state contracting systems and processes.

Positive Outcomes

The overarching sentiment of states who participated in our research was a shared sense of opportunity for LFS and LFPA, and many states expressed that they are already seeing that opportunity transform into tangible positive outcomes, such as:

- New relationships between buyers and producers that can extend beyond the LFS and LFPA funding periods;
- Productive collaboration among state agencies to develop a holistic approach to local and regional food systems work that encompasses public health, food security, farm economic viability, and equity; and
- New demographic data collection from socially disadvantaged producers reached through programming.

Sustainability Plans

Given that LFS and LFPA are one-time funds, sustainability is top of mind for states. Several emphasized that, despite the fast turnaround for applications, they have been intentional in their design and implementation to maximize long-term planning and shifts in programming and services by:

- Sustaining and strengthening new relationships with and among producers, buyers, and partner organizations;
- Planning for LFPA and LFS takeaways to inform other programs and areas of work at the state level; and
- Making the case for sustained investment in local and regional food systems and targeting socially disadvantaged producers through storytelling, data collection, and advocacy.

The experiences, strategies, and emerging outcomes captured in this report demonstrate the optimism that states conveyed for LFS and LFPA to create long-term impact, along with the realities and difficulties of operationalizing equity within food systems.

Recommendations

We provide recommendations for states and for the USDA that reflect the learnings that emerged as best practices and greatest needs for LFS and LFPA, as well as broader efforts to build more equitable, resilient food systems. These recommendations include:

- Pursue **collaboration** within and among states agencies, Tribal Nations, and USDA offices to reduce silos and more effectively serve stakeholders;
- Continue to **target socially disadvantaged producers** in USDA programs, and **build capacity for targeted outreach** to socially disadvantaged producers at state and federal levels;
- **Engage socially disadvantaged producers** in the planning and decision-making processes to learn about their needs and priorities;
- Support producers and stakeholders in accessing funding opportunities by **eliminating programmatic barriers** and developing systems of support;
- **Prioritize program evaluation** to understand and communicate program impact, and make the case for long-term investment in local food systems; and
- Support the **sharing of ideas and strategies** across states and regions, including in-person and/or virtual gatherings for states and Tribes to convene about LFPA and LFS program implementation.

We also present recommendations for further research. Our study specifically looks at state design and implementation of LFS and LFPA in relation to the programs' objectives for targeting socially disadvantaged producers. Other areas where we see opportunity and need for further research include impact evaluation of LFS and LFPA on socially disadvantaged producers, LFPA program evaluation in Tribal Nations, and how LFS connects to existing farm to school efforts.

Note on Terminology

This report uses the USDA's term "socially disadvantaged producers" to refer to historically underserved farmers, ranchers, and producers who have faced social and racial prejudice and who are the target populations for the LFS and LFPA programs. The USDA's definition of socially disadvantaged producers in the LFS and LFPA requests for application is:

Socially Disadvantaged Producers. *Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher is a farmer or rancher who is 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.*³

Some states also have their own terminology and definitions for historically underserved and underrepresented populations of farmers, ranchers, and producers. For further exploration of this topic, including definitions and a brief history of federal programs and policies for socially disadvantaged producers, see the Congressional Research Service's Report on "Defining a Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher (SDFR): In Brief."ⁱ

ⁱ See Congressional Research Service, Report on Defining a Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher (SDFR): In Brief at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46727/6>

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we view the security of our food system. Supply chain disruptions, which impacted many consumers for the first time this generation, are now a fading memory as grocery stores and institutions resume normal operations. But those who work directly within this system—food bank staffers, school nutrition operators, meatpacking workers, processors, and distributors—understand its fragility and consolidation firsthand. For the state agencies interviewed for this project, the shock of the pandemic still looms in their day-to-day work with farmers and underserved communities.

“During COVID, when we had [slaughter and processing] plants go down, there was nowhere to take those animals. These animals need to be processed. It was terrifying that we were going to have to depopulate pigs. There was nowhere for us to go.” - Anonymous State Agency Interviewee

Developed over decades of agricultural policy making, our food system is streamlined and efficient, providing a dizzying array of shelf stable food products that line the aisles of our retail food outlets. Even among this abundance, however, 34 million Americans are food insecure, including 9 million children—one out of every eight kids.⁴ Furthermore, there are significant racial disparities in the food system resulting in communities of color facing higher rates of hunger than white communities.⁵ The pandemic’s impacts were manifold for Native communities due to lack of basic water infrastructure, multigenerational housing which created challenges for social distancing, and delayed funding relief due to bureaucratic systems.⁶ Overall, the greatest impacts of the pandemic, felt by those who are the most food insecure, were people of color and socially disadvantaged communities.⁷

On the supply side, small and mid-scale farmers have dwindled over the past several decades as farm businesses have become fewer and larger.⁸ Socially disadvantaged producers have struggled to grow their businesses, and this is especially true for farmers of color who face the most challenges with access to land and capital.⁹ As a result of decades of disinvestment and discriminatory policymaking, 95% percent of farmers polled through the 2017 Census of Agriculture identify as white.¹⁰ Black farmers have declined from 13% of total farms in 1900 to just 1.4% in 2017.¹¹

For a farm or ranch business, obtaining financing is necessary to invest in infrastructure and expand operations, which in turn enables broader access to markets and creates farm economic viability. But there is a long and well-documented history of discrimination against farmers of color, in particular Black farmers, when it comes to

lending and access to government benefits.^{12,13} For example, as recently as 2020, 99% of COVID-19 debt relief was distributed to white farmers, leaving 1% for socially disadvantaged farmers, including just 0.1% for Black farmers.¹⁴ Historically, producers of color have been denied loans from both the federal government and the broader system of banks associated with the farm credit system.¹⁵ All of this culminates in the need for dedicated investment in socially disadvantaged producers—something that the USDA, under the current Biden-Harris administration, is actively working to rectify.

Small-scale producers serving local and regional markets—who are more likely to be producers of color—suffered an estimated \$688 million in lost sales during just the first three months of the pandemic.^{16,17} Despite this setback, smaller-scale agricultural producers pivoted quickly to serve supply chain gaps due to their inherent nimbleness, diversity, and locally-held relationships.¹⁸ Many local and regional producers expanded their markets during the pandemic to meet the surge in demand for direct to consumer, online, and home delivery food services.¹⁹

The federal government responded to the dual public needs of acute hunger and supply chain disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2020, the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) established the Farmers to Families Food Box Program to serve as a one-year emergency hunger relief effort that distributed \$5 billion of American agricultural food products to those in need.²⁰ This program was a novel approach to connect food insecurity and federal procurement of fresh product with built-in cost coverage for transportation.²¹ In particular, the early rounds of funding demonstrated it was possible for the USDA to provide appropriately scaled contracts with smaller distributors to enable food purchases from small and mid-scale producers to combat American hunger.²² Congress passed the American Rescue Plan in 2021, which gave the USDA the authority and funding to form two new programs (among many) to continue to alleviate hunger and find markets for farmers whose regular sales channels were no longer viable. The learnings from Farmers to Families were adapted and LFS and LFPA were formed.

Creation of LFPA and LFS

In 2021, the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) established the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) and the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program (LFS) to mitigate supply chain disruptions and advance equity through targeting socially disadvantaged producers within local and regional food systems. The purpose of the two programs was to address acute hunger brought on by the pandemic and to begin to rectify the consolidation of food distribution networks by incorporating more diversity and thus resilience to supply chains that had faltered and failed to get food to consumers.

Both programs were designed to reach food insecure communities most impacted by the pandemic. And as we'll discuss in more detail, both programs took historic steps to target support for socially disadvantaged producers in local and regional supply chains.

Background

Equity at the USDA

In recent years, the USDA has taken steps to address historic inequities in access to federal programs for producers of color.²³ In January 2021, the Biden administration announced an executive order on advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities through the federal government. This included “allocating federal resources to advance fairness and opportunity” and “engagement with members of underserved communities.”²⁴

In December 2021, the USDA announced the launch of the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) and the Local Food for Schools (LFS) cooperative agreement programs, which reflect the USDA’s priorities to advance racial equity and support underserved communities through investment in local and regional food systems. Specifically, both programs provide funds to purchase and distribute local food, with a focus on buying food from socially disadvantaged producers.

The USDA’s Equity Commission

In February 2022, the USDA created the Equity Commission through a mandate of the American Rescue Plan Act. It is comprised of external stakeholders whose charge is to provide an overarching equity assessment of USDA programs and policies, and to make recommendations to the Secretary of Agriculture. To support their work, the USDA provided a list of resourcesⁱⁱ that cataloged the Department’s activities, research, and plans regarding advancing equity within the USDA. The Commission’s 2023 Interim report recommends procurement as a mechanism for advancing equity within the government’s supplier and contracting programs:

*“Systemic racism and historical discrimination have excluded Native, BIPOC, and women owned agricultural businesses from accessing and qualifying for USDA programs. By focusing on procurement and supplier diversity, USDA can rectify the generational exclusionary practices that have effectively precluded disadvantaged businesses. Procurement systems and culture need to change simultaneously to ensure there is greater opportunity for funding organizations who are not historically funded each year.”*²⁵

ⁱⁱ See USDA Equity Commission Resources at <https://www.usda.gov/equity-commission/resources>

States interviewed for this project revealed that LFPA and LFS have advanced the conversation and effort to diversify local and regional food supply chains through procurement systems. However, more work is needed to maintain this momentum and to address cultural change at the state level to prioritize equity.

Existing USDA programs for socially disadvantaged producers

One of the recurring themes from our research included the difficulty states had with identifying socially disadvantaged producers to engage in LFPA and LFS. This challenge is also experienced in other federal programs, and our interviewees revealed several reasons why, including: distrust in government due to a history of discrimination, cultural differences in how government and small farm businesses operate, and lack of infrastructure and capacity to navigate bureaucratic government systems.

Through the work of the Equity Commission and ensuing projects, the USDA, under the current Biden-Harris administration, recognizes that socially disadvantaged producers require targeted support due to historic underinvestment and the difficulty of reaching and engaging these customers with its services.²⁶ The Department offers many programs to support “historically underserved” farmers and producers, a term which includes four categories: beginning, socially disadvantaged, veteran, and limited resource.²⁷ In July 2022, the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area released a reportⁱⁱⁱ of comprehensive USDA resources available to these producers from three different agencies: Farm Service Agency, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Risk Management Agency. These agencies cover services related to financing, land management, and crop insurance, respectively. Through the USDA’s Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement, the Outreach and Assistance to Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program (also known as the 2501 Program) focuses primarily on training, engagement, and connection to USDA programs.²⁸

What is missing from this list of programs—and what therefore demands more attention—is procurement and market access for these producers to create long term resilience for their businesses and local food systems at large. Furthermore, while these programs provide value to historically underserved farmers and producers, there is still an overarching need to resolve longstanding distrust between these producers and government agencies and to develop support and targeted technical assistance at the state and federal levels. Doing so would make opportunities like LFPA and LFS, and

ⁱⁱⁱ See USDA Farm Production and Conservation, “Get Started: A Guide to USDA Resources for Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers” at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2022-10/farmersgov-historically-underserved-factsheet-07-20-2022_0.pdf

future government procurement programs, more accessible to socially disadvantaged producers.

Existing USDA programs for local and regional food systems

The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is responsible for marketing and promotion of American agricultural products. It administers several programs focused on market development for local and regional foods, such as the Farmers Market Promotion Program and the Local Food Promotion Program, collectively known as FMLFPP. The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service also administers the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program to help child nutrition program operators, such as schools, incorporate local food into federal meal programs and support market development for producers.^{29,30} However, none of these programs fund the actual purchase of local food like LFS and LFPA; rather, they focus on market development and capacity-building strategies. And none have an explicit focus on socially disadvantaged producers.

To our knowledge, LFPA and LFS are the first procurement cooperative agreement programs at the USDA to target socially disadvantaged producers within local and regional food systems.^{iv}

The magnitude of LFPA and LFS investment in local food systems and socially disadvantaged producers cannot be overstated (see *Figure 1*). FMLFPP distributed \$215 million between 2006 and 2020 and the Farm to School Grant Program has invested roughly \$75 million since 2013.^{31,32} Meanwhile, LFPA and LFS investment totals over \$1 billion—nearly five times the funding—in just 18 months for LFS and 24 months for LFPA, distributed on a rolling basis as cooperative agreements are signed. This funding represents a staggering leap of direct investment in local and regional procurement to target socially disadvantaged producers.

^{iv} While the USDA purchases foods through commodity procurement for nutrition programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and USDA Foods, these programs are not focused on local and regional distribution. For these programs, USDA AMS assists small businesses through solicitation “set asides” in the categories of Small Business and Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business, but targeting socially disadvantaged producers is not a primary goal of the programs as it is for LFPA and LFS. For more information, see the [USDA AMS Small Business Opportunities](#).

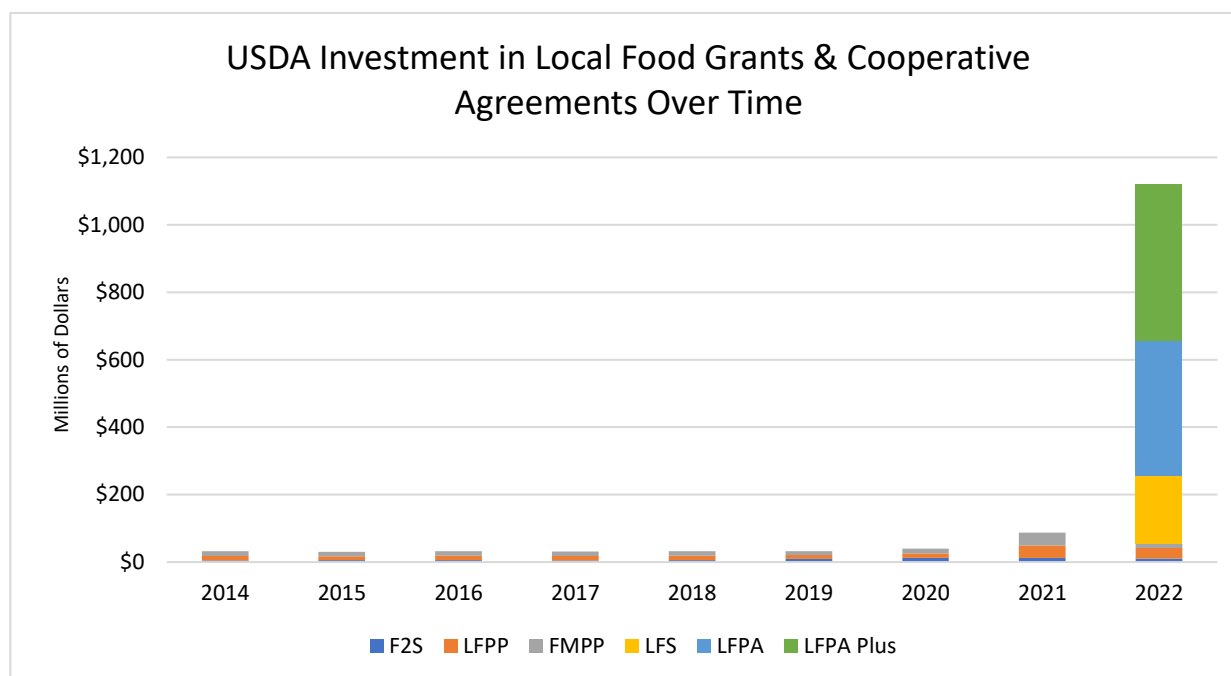


Figure 1. USDA investment in local and regional food systems since 2014 through grants and cooperative agreements: Farm to School (F2S) Grant Program, Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP), Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP), Local Food for Schools (LFS), Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA) and LFPA Plus. Data sources: USDA^{33,34,35,36,37}

LFPA and LFS have created the opportunity for cooperators - states, Tribes, and territories that received funding - to learn how to “operationalize equity” within programs, with the explicit purpose of benefiting socially disadvantaged producers. As we’ll explore in this report, many cooperators had to develop new ways to identify and reach out to these producers, learn and respond to their needs and interests, and adjust LFPA and LFS program design accordingly. For example, some state agencies prioritized listening and public engagement to ensure the program would meet these producers where they were. They also worked to reduce administrative burden wherever possible and find flexibilities to make LFPA and LFS more appealing for these producers to apply.

In many cases, this was the first time these producers engaged with a government program. Because the LFPA and LFS requests for application (RFAs) clearly stated that one of the purposes of these programs was to create economic opportunity for socially disadvantaged producers, the USDA incentivized state agencies to take small, intentional shifts toward inclusivity in their program design for LFS and LFPA, as well as future programs.

Local Food Purchase Assistance Program

The Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA) is a noncompetitive cooperative agreement program authorized through the American Rescue Plan to support purchases of local food for emergency food assistance. Initially, up to \$400 million was made available to state and federally recognized Tribal governments to distribute food to underserved communities “for the purpose of supporting local producers and socially disadvantaged farmers/producers.”³⁸ An additional \$464 million of funding was made available through the Commodity Credit Corporation,^v expanding LFPA’s total investment to \$864 million.³⁹

LFPA Background and Purpose

The USDA announced the LFPA program in December 2021 as part of a suite of investments targeted to help the country recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“These purchases will help to transform the food system and build back a better food system—one that is fair, competitive, distributed, and resilient because the purchases will expand local and regional markets and place an emphasis on purchasing from historically underserved farmers and ranchers.”⁴⁰

“In addition to increasing local food consumption, funds are expected to help build and expand economic opportunity for local and socially disadvantaged farmers/producers.”⁴¹

The purpose of this program is to maintain and improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency. The program achieves this purpose in three overarching goals outlined in the RFA:

1. Provide an opportunity for States and Tribal governments to strengthen their local and regional food system.
2. Help to support local and socially disadvantaged farmers/producers through building and expanding economic opportunities.
3. Establish and broaden partnerships with farmers/producers and the food distribution community, and local food networks, including non-profits to ensure distribution of fresh and nutritious foods in rural, remote, or underserved communities.⁴²

^v The Commodity Credit Corporation is a Federal corporation within the USDA that has financing authority up to \$100 million and borrowing authority of up to \$30 billion. It is managed through bylaws and by a Board of Directors, chaired by the Secretary of Agriculture. For more information see: <https://www.usda.gov/ccc>

LFPFA Program Description

Entities eligible to apply for LFPFA included Tribal governments and state agencies, commissions, or departments responsible for agriculture, procurement, food distribution, and emergency response within the state.⁴³ Only one agency per state and territory was eligible to receive funds; therefore, when these activities spanned multiple agencies within one state, the agencies were required to self-organize and coordinate.

“States and Tribal governments are required to target purchases from beneficiaries that meet the definition of socially disadvantaged.”⁴⁴ The majority of funds are to be spent on the purchase of fresh and processed foods in addition to needs for program development, administration, food storage, and food distribution during the two-year cooperative agreement period.⁴⁵ A recipient can subaward or subcontract project activities to expand the potential reach to socially disadvantaged producers on the supply side as well as community-based organizations, nonprofits, food banks, and food pantries to meet the needs of underserved communities on the demand side.

LFPFA Allocation of Funds

State entities received funds based on The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) funding formula to ensure an equitable distribution of funds across the country, based on nutrition assistance needs demonstrated through poverty rates and unemployment levels.⁴⁶ States with Federally recognized Tribes could initially apply for up to 60% of their total allotted funding for their state to ensure sufficient time and opportunity for Tribal governments to respond to the RFA and access 40% of funds.

The USDA signed cooperative agreements with 48 states, 28 Tribes, and 3 territories for LFPFA funding.^{vi} States and Tribal governments had to apply for LFPFA funds by May 20, 2022. Applications were reviewed and accepted on a rolling basis, and the LFPFA performance period is 24 months.⁴⁷ At the time of this research, each state and Tribal government was at a different point in their 24-month LFPFA performance period and their LFPFA funds will expire in 2024 or 2025.

LFPFA Reporting: Socially Disadvantaged Producers

Cooperators (states, Tribes, and territories) are required to submit regular financial and progress performance reports to the USDA. Data to be collected include 1) the number of socially disadvantaged farmers/producers awarded contracts, 2) the dollar value of purchases from these producers, and 3) the type of product. The USDA is also

^{vi} See USDA AMS, List of Signed Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreements at <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/lfpacap/exec-summaries>

collecting qualitative information regarding programmatic changes, challenges, and successes as well as future plans for sustainability. At program completion, cooperators submit a final report to the USDA that summarizes all the data collected over the program and measures the percentage of new marketing opportunities established for local producers and socially disadvantaged producers, including how many are likely to sustain beyond the project period. Reporting will also compare the number of partnerships before and after the program and food deliveries that expanded beyond the reach of current distribution programs.⁴⁸

LFPA Plus

In November 2022, the USDA announced a second round of LFPA funding of \$464 million dollars called LFPA Plus. The funding can be used by states, territories and Tribal governments who did not enter into cooperative agreements for the first round of funding, as well as those who did and would like to continue the work they began through LFPA.⁴⁹ In our interviews, many states mentioned this extension will provide important runway funds to build on progress, develop impact metrics to engage state legislatures, and have a slightly longer-term focus.

Local Food for Schools Program

The Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program (LFS) was established by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Services (AMS) to provide up to \$200 million in funding to states to purchase local foods for distribution to schools. As described by the USDA, the LFS program seeks to “strengthen the food system for schools by helping to build a fair, competitive, and resilient local food chain, and expand local and regional markets with an emphasis on purchasing from historically underserved producers and processors.”⁵⁰

LFS Background and Purpose

The LFS program was announced in December 2021 as part of a package of several investments, totaling \$1.5 billion, to strengthen the school meal program with funding from the Commodity Credit Corporation.⁵¹ Also included in the package announcement was \$1 billion in Supply Chain Assistance funds for schools to purchase food and \$300 million of domestic food purchases, known as USDA Foods, for distribution to schools. While all of these programs were developed by the USDA to support states and schools in navigating the challenges of supply chain disruptions brought on by the pandemic, LFS was unique in its specific emphasis on supporting local food systems and socially

disadvantaged producers.

The LFS program has three main goals:

1. Provide an opportunity for states to strengthen their local and regional food system.
2. Help to support local, small, and socially disadvantaged farmers/producers through building and expanding economic opportunities.
3. Establish and broaden partnerships with farmers/producers and schools to ensure distribution of fresh and nutritious foods.⁵²

LFS Program Description

Similar to LFPA, the USDA awarded LFS funds to state governments through a noncompetitive, cooperative agreement process. Eligible entities to apply included the state agencies, commissions, or departments that are responsible for agriculture, procurement, food distribution, emergency response, and administration of the National School Lunch Program, or similar activities within the state. Like LFPA, only one agency per state and territory was eligible to receive funds so state agencies needed to self-organize and coordinate when these activities spanned multiple agencies.

LFS cooperative agreements are 18 months in length. Funds are exclusively intended for local food purchases, and states are directed to target purchases from socially disadvantaged farmers/producers and small businesses. Food purchases must be unprocessed or minimally processed and meet the USDA AMS definition of local, which requires food be raised, produced, aggregated, stored, processed, and distributed within 400 miles of point-of-sale to consumers.⁵³ Funds can also be used to cover associated costs for the storage and distribution of foods. But unlike LFPA, funds cannot be used for any administrative costs.

LFS Allocation of Funds

Each state's funding allocation was based on a formula derived from enrollment and earnings of schools participating in the National School Lunch Program. States were encouraged to apply for an amount that met their needs considering the guideline amount for their state. States were required to submit an application with their request for funding and a plan for how the funding would be used to meet the goals of the program while ensuring equitable distribution of funds in their state.⁵⁴

The USDA signed cooperative agreements with 40 states.^{vii} States had to apply for LFS funds by August 31, 2022. Applications were reviewed and accepted on a rolling basis and the LFS performance period is 18 months.⁵⁵ At the time of this research, each state was at a different point in their LFS performance period and their LFPA funds will expire in 2024 or 2025.

LFS Reporting: Socially Disadvantaged Producers and Small Businesses

The USDA requires states to target socially disadvantaged producers and small businesses with LFS funding. States must submit quarterly financial and progress reports with 1) the number of producers and businesses purchased from—including number of socially disadvantaged producers and small businesses—and 2) the corresponding dollar value of food purchases for those groups. At the end of the program, states must submit a final report that summarizes all the data collected over the 18-month program and measures the percentage of new marketing opportunities established for 1) local producers, 2) socially disadvantaged producers, and 3) small businesses, along with how many are likely to sustain beyond the project period.⁵⁶

^{vii} See USDA AMS, List of Signed Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreements at <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/lfs/exec-summaries>

Methodology

This research collected information and insights from states on their experience implementing their LFS and LFPA cooperative agreements. The research process included two components for data collection: a survey sent to all 50 states and interviews conducted with participants from a subset of states. In total, 31 states participated in the research, representing all seven regions outlined in the programs' Requests for Application. Some states participated in this project for LFS or LFPA only; other states participated for both programs.

Survey

Survey questions were developed to understand the context of implementation for LFPA and LFS programs, with particular focus on outreach, recruitment, and benefits to socially disadvantaged producers. The survey was distributed via email to publicly available contacts at state entities who were awarded LFPA and LFS cooperative agreement funds. States that completed the survey were asked if they were willing to participate in an interview. In total 31 states completed the survey. Twelve states for LFS only, eight states for LFPA only, and eleven states completed for both LFS and LFPA. States participated in the survey anonymously; data and quotes from survey respondents have remained anonymous in this report.

Supplemental information about how states designed their programs was collected from the LFS and LFPA executive summaries, provided by states, on the USDA AMS website.

Interviews

Interviewees were recruited from participation in the survey and personal outreach. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes. The Zoom teleconference platform was utilized to record and transcribe the interviews. Participants were primarily employees of state departments of agriculture, health and human services, and education. Interviewees included individuals who were newly hired to run the LFS or LFPA program as well as long-time government employees. In total, 17 interviews were completed with representatives from 14 states. Direct quotes throughout this report have been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

The study was reviewed by the Arizona State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and granted exemption on May 4, 2023 (Study #00017969).

Research Limitations

This research presents findings that are only representative of the 31 states that voluntarily completed the survey and/or participated in interviews. Eligible entities for the LFPA included both state and Tribal governments and U.S. territories. LFPA funds were awarded to 28 Tribal Nations and 3 territories.⁵⁷ However, due to the limitations of IRB approval, no Tribal governments were interviewed or surveyed for this study. More research is needed to understand the impact of LFPA and LFS within Tribal Nations.

In addition, this research was conducted while states were at various stages of program implementation. Results and themes discussed are not exhaustive or fully representative of states' experiences implementing LFPA and LFS. Furthermore, programmatic impact was not assessed.

The targeted group interviewed for this study is state entities implementing LFPA and LFS. Therefore, no interviews were conducted with socially disadvantaged producers who are a primary intended beneficiary of these programs. Furthermore, the definition of socially disadvantaged producers is broad, encompassing many identities. While some interviewees spoke about their perception of the experience of these producers, further research is needed to understand firsthand how people who identify as one or more of these characteristics engaged with and experienced these programs.

Research Findings

Why States Applied

In total 40 states signed cooperative agreements for LFS, and 48 did so for LFPA. For the states that decided to take advantage of this funding from the USDA, our research revealed several reasons why, including:

- State employees had the frame of mind that it was the right thing to do;
- External pressure from local partners; and
- Pre-existing work at the state level to build upon programs to reach socially disadvantaged producers and support local food systems.

Frame of Mind

LFPA and LFS were created as non-competitive cooperative agreement programs with funding allotments for each state, but not every state decided to apply. In some instances, a state's participation came down to individual staff who felt that the funding was too important to pass up. We heard from many states cooperators that staff capacity was a prominent concern for whether they could effectively implement the program, particularly for LFS. Ultimately, some states may have chosen not to apply for this reason.

An important distinction between the two programs is that LFPA allows for the use of funds toward “outreach, program development, and program administration,” enabling states to hire staff and add the necessary capacity to design and run a new statewide program and award process.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, LFS was funded by the Commodity Credit Corporation, which restricts the use of funds to the purchase of food, food storage, and distribution.⁵⁹ In a few instances, it was the determination of a single, willing state employee to lead the way when motivation or capacity was otherwise lacking. As one state interviewee shared, *“No other agency wanted to do the program... so while I've never worked with farmers before, I jumped in.”*

In some cases, the programs' requirement to target socially disadvantaged producers was a hurdle to access this funding to support local food systems programs. For others, the unique focus on socially disadvantaged producers further solidified the state's decision to apply.

“Honestly, this is pretty simple. We think that it’s the right thing to do. We see federal and state resources every day for years, going to row crop farmers and farmers who have generational wealth, who have not had to make purchases such as land and equipment and had the generational knowledge passed on to them.” – Anonymous State Agency Interviewee

Pressure and Collaboration from Partners

Several states applied for LFPA after being approached by partners about the funding. For **Kansas**, it was local food banks that encouraged them to apply for LFPA. Some states like **Louisiana** hesitated to apply because of the lack of capacity to implement the program, but partners offered to support them. In some cases, grassroots advocates both pressured and partnered with states to think creatively about how LFPA and LFS could bring more focus to the needs of socially disadvantaged farmers and diversify supply chains. Many states credited the innovative nature of their program design to the listening sessions they held to encourage public input and direct feedback from their communities.

“A grassroots advocacy effort put some upward pressure on the state agencies to really think creatively about the LFPA and what it could do for food systems development and value chain work as opposed to just funneling all the money towards the [traditional] distribution network. We had to fight really hard to diversify that approach.” - Naima Gardner-Rice, Indiana Department of Health

Pre-existing work to support socially disadvantaged producers

Multiple states mentioned that their LFS and LFPA programs were built upon pre-existing efforts at their state agency to support socially disadvantaged producers. These pre-existing efforts played a critical role in narrowing the focus and catalyzing impact and reach for their LFS and LFPA programs. But more importantly, LFS and LFPA presented an opportunity to operationalize these ongoing efforts to support socially disadvantaged producers. States were able to deepen stakeholder and producer relationships, apply previous learnings and priorities to program design, and put agency commitments into practice—often in ways that they hadn’t been able to do before.

Connecticut Case Study: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Working Group

In 2021, the Connecticut Department of Agriculture established a DEI working group “to engage and support current and future farmers in Connecticut’s agricultural industry who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).”⁶⁰ Funded by a USDA AMS Specialty Crop Block grant, it was originally conceived as an agency project to change

how the state engages and communicates with these producers. The state held a series of focus groups which snowballed into a larger, longer-term working group with three primary goals: improving and building new relationships between the agency and BIPOC producers, embedding equity into departmental policies and programs, and developing recommendations for the Commissioner of Agriculture.

“Yes, [the working group] was to absolutely get feedback and recommendations on how we can improve, but also to build relationships, because we just needed to be in communication and talk to these producers more often.” - Cyrena Thibodeau, Connecticut Department of Agriculture

The state put out a call for producers to join the working group and received over 70 nominations, which led to 35 BIPOC farmers participating in four subgroups: market access, secure land tenure, education and training, and resource access and capital. So far, the group’s work has culminated into a report^{viii} that includes policy and program recommendations as well as timelines for implementation. The group was also able to leverage the pre-existing network of the Southern New England Farmers of Color which furthered the connections and ability of BIPOC farmers to interact with the agency and build relationships. The agency was able to leverage the BIPOC farmer networks to share the opportunity of LFPA and LFS and target those producers across the state. The pre-existing strong ties through each of these networks allowed the state to bring a few key producers on board for LFPA, who in turn became champions of the program and spread the word further than the state agency could do alone. This enabled many more BIPOC-identifying producers to participate in LFPA and connect to new markets.

“The timing of [the DEI working group] with this program with the focus of socially disadvantaged producers was pretty crucial...We definitely see that communication coming from us only goes so far and only reaches so many people.” - Cyrena Thibodeau, Connecticut Department of Agriculture

Minnesota Case Study: Emerging Farmers Working Group

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture developed an Emerging Farmers Working Group, born from the state legislature, in 2020. Like Connecticut, the process began with a series of focus groups in 2019 for the state to better understand the barriers faced by producers of historically underserved communities and determine support to enhance their success. These focus groups led to the creation of a working group,

^{viii} See Connecticut Department of Agriculture, DEI in Agriculture Working Group Report to the Commissioner of Agriculture at https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DOAG/Boards_Commissions_Councils/Diversity-Working-Group/DoAG-DEI-Report-English-Final-print.pdf

which has since evolved into a permanent Office of Emerging Farmers that facilitates the ongoing working group. Annually, farmers can apply to participate and serve two-year terms. The working group makes recommendations to the Commissioner and advises the state agency. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture brought the opportunity of LFPA and LFS to the Emerging Farmers Working Group to assist with the design and outreach of the program, and to build connections between the two programs and ongoing, long-term agency work to support emerging farmers.

Minnesota's definition of emerging farmer "encompasses a number of historically underserved communities including women, veterans, persons with disabilities, Native American/Alaska Native, communities of color, young and beginning farmers, LGBTQ+ farmers and more. The term reflects the diversity and intersectionality of farmers, and the way that barriers affect multiple communities at the same time."⁶¹

Pre-existing work to support local food systems

States also indicated how they saw LFPA and LFS funds as an opportunity to build on pre-existing programs focused on local market development and local food access, though not necessarily focused on socially disadvantaged producers. For instance, multiple states sought LFS funding to expand or work in tandem with state-funded farm to school grant programs. Meanwhile, several states are using LFPA funds to support programs modeled off pandemic-era farm share box programs. In these situations, LFS and LFPA have the potential to move the needle in these established state programs to reach and engage more socially disadvantaged producers, some of which already have long-term funding.

For example, **Colorado's** LFS program will end as the state's new Local Food Program (LFP)^{ix} will transition from a three-year pilot to a fully funded program that provides reimbursement for local food purchases to school districts. While LFP doesn't target socially disadvantaged producers, the state has been promoting LFS as a way to prepare for LFP and anticipates that the relationships built between schools and socially disadvantaged producers during LFS will carry forward.

"They're already setting those pieces in place to focus their dollars on socially disadvantaged producers and so although that won't be a requirement moving into the permanent LFP, because it's part of this and they're establishing some of those relationships, I think those dollars are going to continue to go to those growers." - Krista Garand, Colorado Department of Education and Nutrition

^{ix} See Colorado Department of Education, Local Food Program at <https://www.cde.state.co.us/nutrition/source-local-food#localfoodprogram>

In **New Mexico**, the New Mexico Farmers' Marketing Association (NMFMA) manages the New Mexico Grown Approved Supplier Program, which enables small- and mid-sized producers to easily access institutional markets after meeting food safety certification training requirements.⁶² While the program is not specific to socially disadvantaged producers, participation in the program is required for producers who wish to sell into LFPA. Administrators of New Mexico's LFPA found that producers who are on the Approved Supplier list were more likely to respond to the LFPA RFP, signaling their readiness to reach more institutional markets like the state's food banks. Furthermore, getting connected to the Approved Supplier Program opens the door for even further institutional sales opportunities for these producers above and beyond LFPA—which, in turn, creates economic resilience for those producers. NMFMA employs Spanish-speaking and Tribal staff members who are doing targeted outreach to socially disadvantaged producers. Producers who participate in the Approved Supplier Program get added to the state's Approved Supplier List, which is used by many other institutions, such as schools and senior centers, beyond LFPA.⁶³

LFPA and LFS Program Design

The USDA gave states the ability to determine how best to leverage LFS and LFPA funding. Therefore, each state's design is unique based on the local food landscape, existing programs and infrastructure, and current needs and challenges. Nonetheless, survey results and interviews showed common models for how states are using their LFPA and LFS funds, as well as common partners who are involved in the programs.

- Thirty out of 31 states chose to solely subaward their LFS and/or LFPA funds to other entities, rather than directly purchasing and distributing food.
- For LFS, most states are establishing subawards with schools. Some are establishing subawards with food hubs or distributors.
- For LFPA, many states are sub-awarding funds to food banks, food hubs, or other partner organizations. In some instances, these partners have been identified through a competitive grant process.

Local Food for Schools

Survey results showed that the majority of states chose to subaward LFS funds to schools to purchase their own local foods. (See *Figure 2*.) There are also several states that sub-awarded funds to distributors or food hubs, who are in turn distributing local foods to schools.

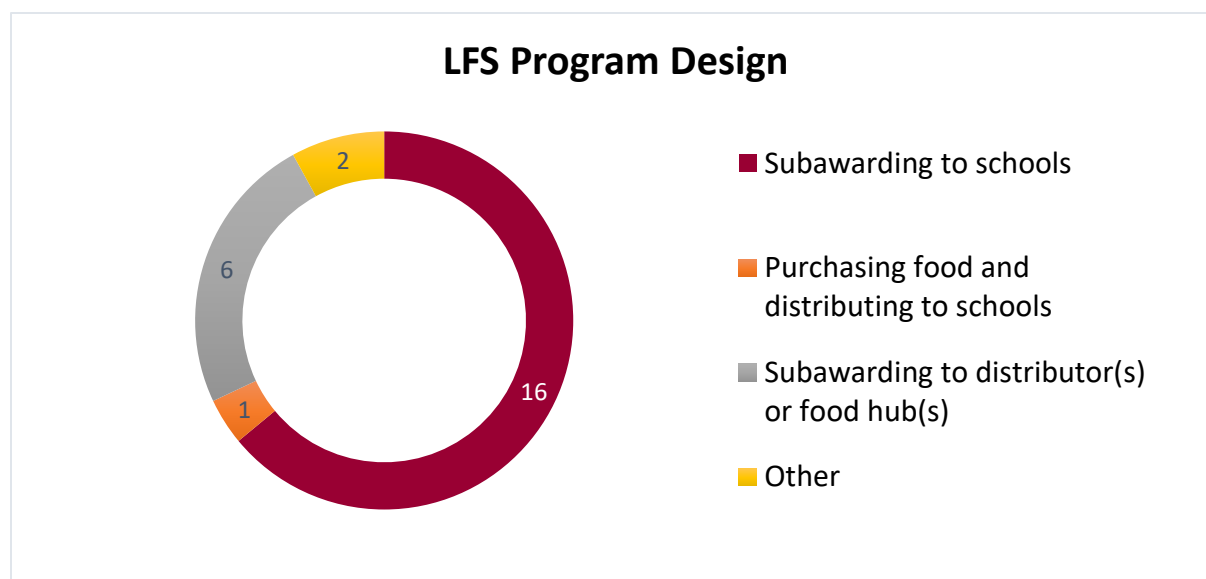


Figure 2. How states are using LFS funds to purchase and distribute local foods to schools.

Subawards to Schools

Among states that are sub-awarding LFS funds to schools, some are making funds available to *all* school districts based on formulas derived to ensure equitable access to funds, whereas other states are administering their LFS funds as a competitive grant program to which schools apply.

- **Louisiana** allocated their LFS funding to all schools based on each school's USDA entitlement allotment, which is calculated by total reimbursable meals served multiplied by the federal rate established by the USDA.
- **Oregon** has a state-funded Farm to Child Nutrition Grant Reimbursement program that is similar in nature to LFS, so the state is using LFS funds to provide additional funding for local foods that their state grant doesn't cover, such as milk and foods grown within 400 miles but outside the state of Oregon.^{64,65}
- **Minnesota** added LFS funds to existing state funds to quadruple the amount of competitive Farm to School grant funds awarded to school districts.^{66,67}

Subawards to Distributors & Food Hubs

Other states are sub-awarding LFS funds to distributors or food hubs, who are then distributing local food to schools. Interestingly, one survey respondent noted that, when their state gave school districts the option to receive a direct subaward or access funds via an established partnership with a local food hub, all schools chose the food hub partnership.

- In **Vermont**, all school districts received LFS funds based on their school enrollment in the form of credit at their assigned food hub. Food hub staff “work with each School Food Authority to help them navigate the procurement process, ensuring each school can easily utilize their allotted funds and can readily identify those products produced by socially disadvantaged farmers.”⁶⁸

Other LFS Strategies

Outside of subawards to schools or distributors and food hubs, a few states have taken more unique approaches to their LFS funding:

- **Washington** is using its USDA Foods distribution system to organize centralized purchasing of local foods to distribute to schools. The state will procure “dry and frozen foods predetermined to be desirable by schools and available locally, including frozen fruits, vegetables, beef, and fish, as well as whole grain flours, dried pulses, and legumes.”⁶⁹
- **Utah** designed an alternative strategy in which the state is partially involved in food procurement. The state is finding producers and establishing contracts or cooperative agreements, and then schools order directly from those producers and are reimbursed by the state.

Local Food Purchase Assistance

Like LFS, most states are sub-awarding their LFPA funds to other entities including food banks and food shelves, community-based organizations, food hubs, and farms (see *Figure 3*).

In some cases, these are direct subawards to pre-determined partners, like food banks, and in other instances states are offering competitive grants that organizations can apply to receive.

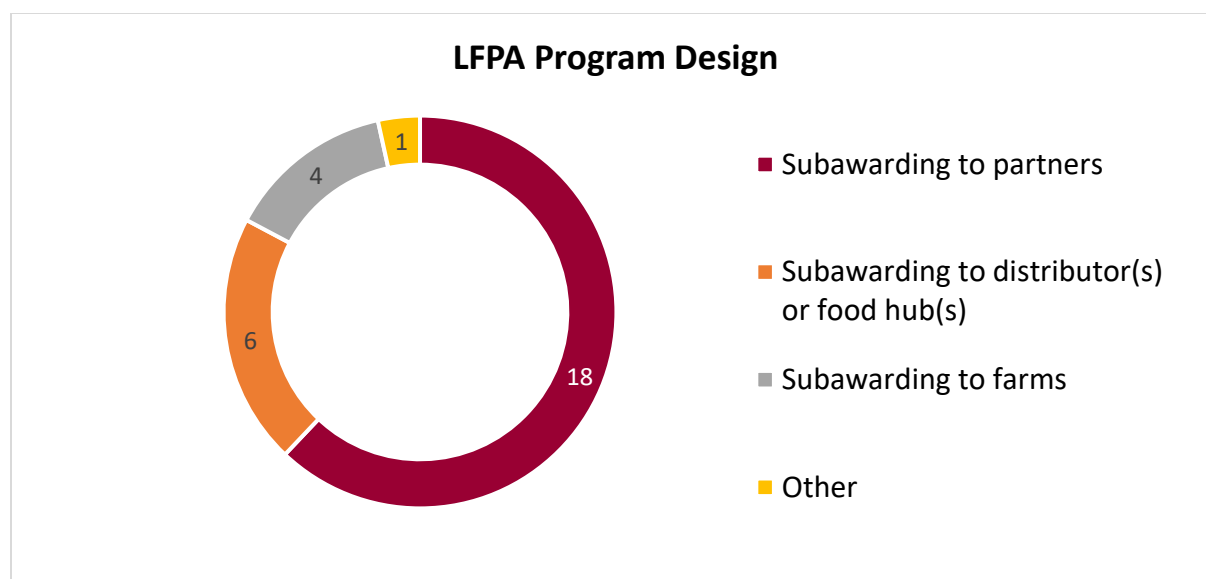


Figure 3. How states are using LFPA funds to buy and distribute local foods.

Subawards to Food Banks

Several states, such as **Louisiana**, sub-awarded their LFPA funds directly to their states' food banks, which have existing infrastructure and partnerships to distribute food to communities. According to one state who used this approach, the simplicity of this design helped the state to begin purchasing food quickly.

“Working with Feeding [State Name] gave us statewide access, extensive local partnership connections, and built in storage/transportation capacity. This reduced the administrative overhead that would have been necessary if we had to build all aspects of the program from scratch.” - Survey Respondent

Subawards to Food Hubs and Local Producer Organizations

Other states chose to subaward their LFS and LFPA funds to partners who have close, existing relationships with producers, such as food hubs and nonprofit organizations.

North Carolina's LFPA-funded FarmsSHARE program “will build on the success of the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association efforts started in 2020 as a response to COVID-19” and partner with 15 food hubs to procure local foods for distribution to underserved communities.⁷⁰

Competitive Grants

States such as **Connecticut** and **Minnesota** chose to establish competitive grants using their LFPA funds in which applicants can propose how they will purchase and distribute local food to communities.

As one state explained, their competitive grant process was based on public input that *“people wanted to be able to define for themselves how this money should be spent and also wanted to prioritize keeping food in the communities where it was produced.”*

Multiple Strategies

New York and **Indiana** have divided their funding to reach and support different types of projects.

New York used their LFPA funds to offer two different funding opportunities. The first was a non-competitive application for \$10,000–\$50,000 to build capacity and provide technical assistance to help producers participate in LFPA and address food distribution barriers in underserved communities. The second was a competitive application for \$200,000–\$2 million focused on purchasing and distributing local food. These two funding opportunities were based on messaging received during public outreach which underscored the need to *“make it as easy as possible for organizations to apply for this money and that there was some capacity building that really had to happen in a lot of organizations that felt that they could serve social and economically disadvantaged growers.”*⁷¹

Indiana also divided their LFPA funds into two tracks. Track One provided funding to Fresh Connect Central, which serves the state’s food banks. For Track Two, the state issued a competitive Request for Proposals but only accepted one application from each of the state’s five regions—which required regional collaboration to develop proposals for how to best use the funding in their area.

Tactics for Targeting Socially Disadvantaged Producers

States are using different, and sometimes multiple, strategies to target socially disadvantaged producers for LFS and LFPA. Some states took a narrowed approach by targeting subgroups within the broad USDA definition of socially disadvantaged producer. In other cases, states left it up to producers to self-identify as socially disadvantaged for the purposes of data collection.

Figures 4 and 5 show the number of states using each strategy in each of the programs to target socially disadvantaged producers. States could select more than one strategy.

For both LFS and LFPA, the most common way states are targeting socially disadvantaged producers is by encouraging subawardees to buy from them. Some states that are offering LFS or LFPA funds as competitive grants also prioritized subawardees with previous experience or clearly defined plans for buying from socially

disadvantaged producers. For example, one state's Notice of Funding Opportunity for LFPA asked about pre-existing relationships with socially disadvantaged producers and plans for building upon them and awarded points accordingly. Many states are also providing targeted outreach as well as training and technical assistance to socially disadvantaged producers to support participation in the programs.

Some states are going a step further and requiring subawardees to purchase certain amounts of food from socially disadvantaged producers. Interestingly, this is more common for LFPA programs than LFS. Thirteen states that participated in the survey indicated that they are requiring LFPA subawardees to buy certain amounts of food from socially disadvantaged producers, whereas only three states indicated doing so for LFS programs. Two examples of how states are requiring certain amounts of food to be purchased from socially disadvantaged producers are:

Kansas established a tiered purchasing structure for LFPA. Tier 1 producers are socially disadvantaged, Tier 2 focuses on beginning producers, and Tier 3 includes all producers. Subawardees (food banks) must purchase at least 25% of food from Tier 1 producers.

Minnesota is requiring LFPA subawardees to purchase at least 70% of food from socially disadvantaged producers.⁷²

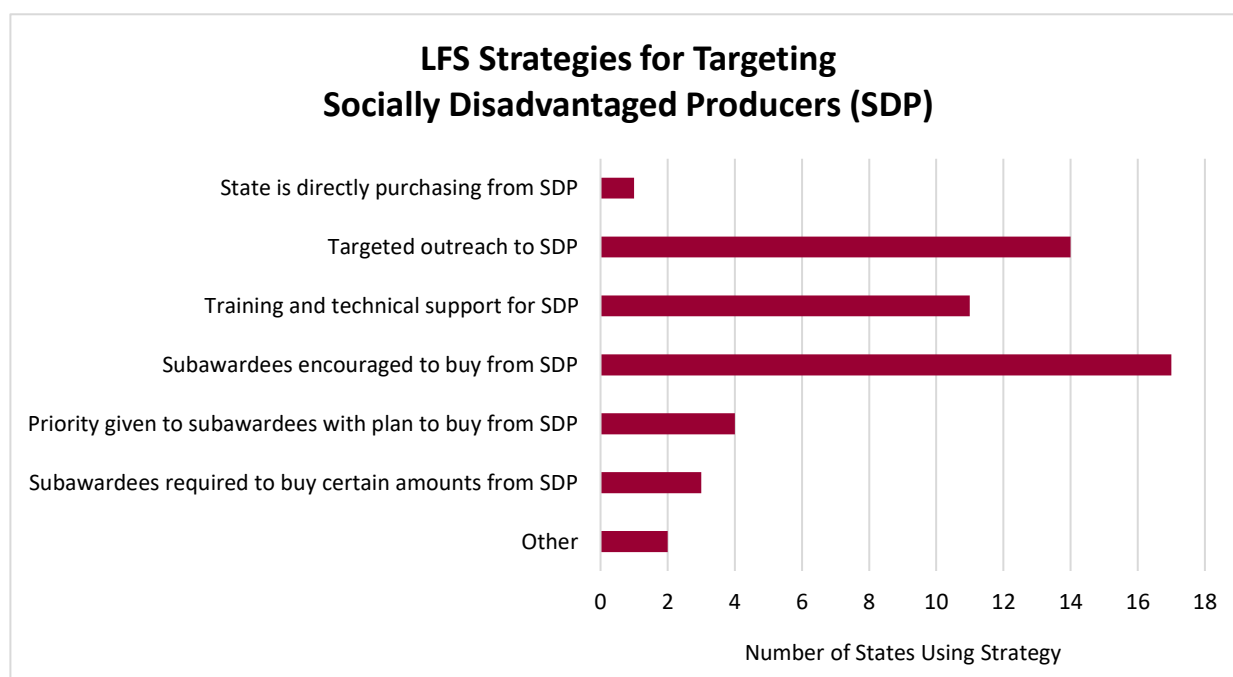


Figure 4. Strategies that states are using to target socially disadvantaged producers in LFS programs.

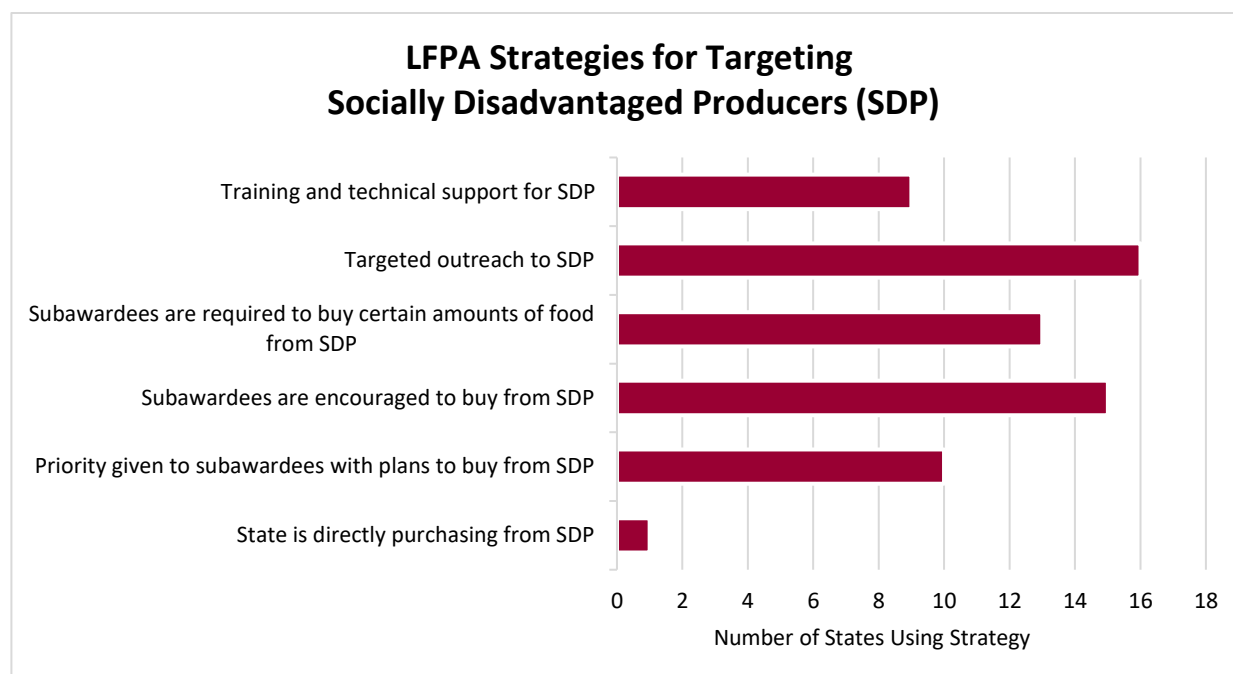


Figure 5. Strategies that states are using to target socially disadvantaged producers in LFPA programs.

Expected Impact on Socially Disadvantaged Producers: LFPA versus LFS

Both LFS and LFPA programs are intended to provide targeted support for socially disadvantaged producers. When applying for funds, states were required to provide plans for how they would target and conduct outreach to socially disadvantaged producers as well as establish target outcomes for the number of socially disadvantaged producers engaged and dollars spent on food from these producers. LFS also required states to set target outcomes for small businesses.

Survey Results: Target Outcomes for LFPA and LFS

Of states surveyed, the average target outcomes for funds to be spent on food from socially disadvantaged producers was 45% for LFPA (with a range of 2%–100%) and 48% for LFS (with a range of 15%–100%). For LFS, the average target outcome for the funds that will go towards small businesses was higher at 57% (range of 0%–100%). See *Table 1*.

When asked about their confidence in reaching their target outcomes for socially disadvantaged producers, states reported an average confidence score of 7.9 out of 10

for LFPA versus 5.7 out of 10 for LFS. Meanwhile, states implementing LFS reported an average confidence score of 7.5 out of 10 for reaching their target outcome for small businesses. For both programs, reported confidence scores from states ranged from 1 to 10.

Table 1: Average target outcomes for purchases from socially disadvantaged producers, and confidence in reaching target outcomes.

LFPA	LFS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States set an average target outcome of 45% of LFPA funds to go towards food from socially disadvantaged producers <p>Confidence: 7.9/10</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States set an average target outcome of 48% of LFS funds to go towards food from socially disadvantaged producers <p>Confidence: 5.7/10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> States set an average target outcome of 57% of LFS funds to go towards food from small businesses <p>Confidence: 7.5/10</p>

These scores suggest a considerable range in confidence among states in reaching their target outcomes, which one state admitted felt like a “crap shoot” to set. But more importantly, the results speak to the larger uncertainty that many states are feeling regarding the number of socially disadvantaged producers that they’ll successfully engage through LFS and LFPA, and the difficulty that some are having in identifying and conducting outreach. In explaining their confidence scores, states reported uncertainty about the number of socially disadvantaged producers in their state, limited capacity of state staff or subawardees to do outreach, and a lack of resource infrastructure such as supplier lists to identify producers.

But why do states expect to spend a lower percentage of LFS funds than LFPA funds on socially disadvantaged producers? There are likely many reasons, some beyond the scope of this research, but there are key distinctions between LFS and LFPA.

First, unlike LFPA, LFS targets socially disadvantaged producers *and* small businesses. With this broader focus, some states may be choosing to take a more relaxed approach to targeting socially disadvantaged producers for LFS if they know that they’ll be

reaching small businesses—which is a much broader definition.^x In fact, one survey respondent noted that *“almost all of the food producers in [the state] qualify as small businesses.”*

Another state mentioned that they didn’t set any goals for socially disadvantaged producers for LFS because they didn’t want to pull socially disadvantaged producers and their supply from LFPA. So instead, they are just focusing on small producers and businesses for LFS. This example raises the question of supply and demand: how much can a state’s socially disadvantaged producers supply, and is it enough to meet demand of LFS and LFPA? A few other states expressed similar uncertainty, especially when considering other factors such as infrastructure, food safety standards and certifications, and general capital that farms may need to be prepared to work with schools. However, the cause of such uncertainty may be due to states’ lack of experience and relationships with socially disadvantaged producers and lack of previous market opportunities for socially disadvantaged producers to scale up supply. As one survey respondent noted:

“At the time of application, there was no data available to know how many socially disadvantaged farmers/producers and small businesses there were and we are unsure of how many are interested in selling to schools.” – Survey Respondent

Second, LFPA and LFS are not starting on the same footing. LFPA is a new type of program for many states to administer and for many subawardees, such as food banks, to implement. But LFS is building on decades of Farm to School work, at both state and national levels, to support schools in purchasing local foods. When asked about the types of farms that schools are buying food from with their LFS funding, one interviewee noted that *“the majority are farms that [schools] already had established relationships with. But every quarter we see a few new relationships.”* Perhaps it feels easier to establish preference for socially disadvantaged producers in a new program like LFPA than LFS where many subawardees may have pre-existing relationships with producers and established processes for how they buy local.

Third, and perhaps most notably, since LFS does not support administrative funding, state capacity for outreach to socially disadvantaged producers may be limited. Most states who completed the survey reported that they are using a portion of their LFPA funds to support personnel costs, either at the state level and/or for their subawardees,

^x The USDA provides the following definition of small business for LFS: “A small business is generally defined by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) as a business that is: a for profit-business of any legal structure; independently owned and operated, not nationally dominant in its field, and physically located and operated in the U.S. or its territories.” For more information, see the LFS RFA: <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/LFSRequestForApplicationsVersion3.pdf>

and our interviews highlighted the impact that those administrative dollars are having on outreach efforts to socially disadvantaged producers. Meanwhile, lack of administrative funding was one of the top challenges that states listed for LFS implementation. A state employee in Indiana, where they are requiring their regional LFPA subawardees to hire a part-time or full-time value chain coordinator, noted “*you really are underestimating and minimizing the time and effort that it should take to invest in relationship building*” if staff time is not dedicated to outreach.

The combination of these three factors is reflected in one state’s LFS experience:

“Many of the farms that schools have been working with are small farms. This has been relatively easy due to the restrictive scope of the grant and reporting (unprocessed, minimally processed and traced back to the local farm). Engaging socially disadvantaged producers has been a challenge in our state. [The state] has reached out through various entities to try to obtain information and resources for schools. However, to date there are very few farms that schools have purchased from that meet this qualification. In addition, farms that are socially disadvantaged may not have the capital and investment to be able to sell to a school immediately and with assurances of certifications/insurance. Time is needed to build up the farmers; the funding was given in advance of allowing for this time.” - Survey Respondent

Strategies for Success

While states are at various stages of implementing and evaluating their LFS and LFPA programs, several themes and best practices emerged through our research that reflect shared perspectives, lessons learned to date, and areas where states have found success. Some of these key strategies for success include:

- Early **public engagement**, such as listening sessions, helped states build trust with partners and producers and identify priorities for program design;
- **Outreach and engagement** approaches that meet producers where they are, remove barriers to participation, and foster long-term supply chain connections; and
- Efforts to maintain **flexibility** and reduce administrative burden in state contracting systems and processes.

Public Engagement

Several states highlighted the critical role that public engagement played in developing programs that address community needs and priorities. It also enabled states to hear and respond to the challenges producers face in applying for state programs. Strategies for collecting public input into program development included listening sessions, surveys, and direct outreach to socially disadvantaged producers and organizations.

New York did considerable outreach to organizations that serve socially and economically disadvantaged producers, as well as producers themselves, about LFPA program design. Through this outreach, state employees heard the importance of making it as easy as possible for organizations to apply for money and realized that capacity-building is necessary to support producers in selling into LFPA. This community input directly shaped the state's two LFPA funding opportunities—one of which was specifically focused on technical support to producers and both of which sought to simplify the application process and reduce barriers to the funding.

Utah hosted a town hall with school districts to hear what schools needed and what they wanted the state to do with the LFS funding. The feedback they received—that schools wanted to have choice in how they spent their funds, but also didn't have capacity to do it all on their own, particularly outreach to socially disadvantaged producers—led to Utah's LFS program structure in which they managed procurement at the state level and established contracts with local producers for schools to purchase under.

States also underscored how initial public engagement helped them to build critical trust and relationships with partners, producers, and communities at the onset of their programs, which they hope will benefit the work ahead.

“Historically, agriculture in [our state] has been focused on commodity export crops. There’s a long-standing culture around how we do our work and who we support and represent. So that’s been a challenge in building trust within these farmer communities new to us... the ways that we’ve tried to push back on those things is to really center the work in public engagement.” - Anonymous State Agency Interviewee

Outreach to Socially Disadvantaged Producers

Overcoming Challenges

Identification and outreach to socially disadvantaged producers was one of the top areas where states indicated that additional support would help them in reaching their program goals for both LFS and LFPA. Many states described the challenge in connecting socially disadvantaged and smaller producers with this opportunity which included distrust in government due to a history of discrimination, cultural differences in the way state agencies and rural farming communities do business, and lack of infrastructure and capacity to navigate bureaucratic government systems.

States also identified the interest or need for more time (particularly among LFS participants) and additional or complementary funding to support infrastructure, outreach and engagement, and training and technical assistance. Ultimately, all of these areas connect back to the overarching needs and challenges associated with building connections with socially disadvantaged producers and providing them with support to build capacity and navigate program requirements.

In **Washington** state, lack of broadband accessibility has been one of their biggest hurdles in promoting LFPA and enabling producers to apply. Because this infrastructure is lacking in rural communities, a government employee drove all across the state to advertise LFPA, support farmers in applying, and encourage word of mouth promotion. While this effort paid off and the opportunity spread among the farming communities, it took considerable time, especially for an agency with no added capacity for this function.

One state described how getting producers to sign agreements and abide by USDA regulations and reporting requirements was a hurdle because many producers did not want to create a paper trail or be identified by the government.

“A lot of socially disadvantaged producers, especially from the Latino community, don't want to be in any government system. We have a producer agreement, and producers have to sign that to acknowledge that they'll only be growing the food at the location they specify to ensure compliance by all USDA regulations, etc., and just the wording of that freaks them out, and they're like, ‘Oh, my gosh! The state is going to come investigate me on my property.’ So we face challenges of lack of trust in both federal and state institutions.” – Anonymous State Agency Interviewee

To help with this challenge, the state hired translators to introduce the producers to the program and work with them to ensure the paperwork was standard with government agreements. While this is a start, more work is needed to build trusted relationships between state agencies and socially disadvantaged producers.

In **Kansas**, the state mentioned how daunting it is to apply for USDA grants, even for established producers. For example, many Kansas meat processors are not applying for the USDA Local Meat Capacity grant because they are intimidated by the application process. The state is considering doing recordings that demonstrate each step in the grant writing process, such as how to apply for a Unique Entity ID (UEI) and locate the required attachments. This type of technical assistance is needed for producers to take advantage of these programs, but it is not currently widely offered by the federal or state governments.

Utah also spoke to the state procurement process as a challenge. They had trouble getting responses to their LFS Request for Proposal even with the relationships they had built. One rancher, who was in a promising position to supply a large volume of beef to the schools through a strong distribution network, turned in his proposal just hours late, thus disqualifying him. Another producer submitted a photo of their cost sheet instead of an excel spreadsheet, so only one of the products they intended to sell was captured in the application, cutting their award in half. These types of detail-oriented, clerical hurdles prevented Utah from meeting their initial goals for LFS and ultimately, they had to do another round of proposals to capture more producers in the program.

“A lot of our socially disadvantaged farmers are small and don't have a lot of resources and trying to do a contract like this is really difficult. We know they're already working so hard and they're so busy. And paperwork is not usually their forte. Needing to submit all this stuff through this state procurement portal and get it right...that was really tricky. In a perfect world, we would have a counterpart for me at the Department of Agriculture who could be working more closely with folks and helping train them up to do this...There's this expectation that you're going to turn in this really polished government document and that's not the world they live in or work in. It was eye opening for me, even though I knew it was going to be a barrier, just talking to people and they were like 'That was so hard. That was so difficult.' And we made it as easy as we could. I don't know that as a state we can make it any easier and still follow all our many pieces of procurement code.” - Kate Wheeler, Utah State Board of Education

Value Chain Coordination

In some states, staff are taking a hands-on approach to value chain coordination, conducting outreach to producers and then helping to pair buyers and farmers. In doing so, they can specifically target and support socially disadvantaged producers in connecting with subawards of LFS and LFPA funding.

In **Utah**, where the state is leading the competitive purchasing process for schools, staff are finding producers and then matching them with schools based on location and product volume. The schools then order food directly from the producers.

Indiana required their five regional LFPA subawardees to have at least one part-time or full-time value chain coordinator to support producer outreach and relationship-building, in addition to broader network development to support creation of a long-term strategy for economic development in the state.

A notable challenge for states to take on value chain development and coordination is sufficient food systems infrastructure, which is something that LFS and LFPA funds cannot support. This challenge came up repeatedly among states—how to make a long-term impact with this one-time funding that came with limited time to plan. Unlike larger operations with dedicated staff and trucking, small and socially disadvantaged producers have a limited range they can drive to get their products to market. This issue is exacerbated with longer distance food transportation to rural or remote areas, which creates additional costs. In addition, many smaller food banks or community organizations have limited cold storage capacity, requiring more frequent food deliveries.

Perhaps one of the more extreme examples of states grappling with this issue is **Alaska**, where lack of infrastructure requires considerable effort and innovation on the part of producers and buyers to make local purchasing across the state possible.

“We don’t have great infrastructure here yet. A lot of our districts and schools are off the road system, so physically getting things to some of these more remote districts or communities is difficult. It could go from a truck to an airplane to an airplane to some guy’s snow machine or dog sled in the winter. And then in the summer it might be like the 4 wheeler or a truck. So if you were a small producer and you’re trying to figure out how to get carrots to another region, that is going to be pretty taxing.” - Waverli Stowe, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development

Utah also noted how meat processing capacity in particular has been a hurdle for their state's LFS program. Part of the reason the state chose to focus their LFS funding on local protein was because a new processing plant in Northern Utah expressed enthusiasm in supplying schools and being a key supplier for the program. However, when communication from this new plant suddenly halted, the state was left in a difficult position. Since then, the state has struggled to find enough producers and processors in the region to meet demand from schools.

Supplier Lists and Databases

Several states developed producer lists to support subawardees in outreach, particularly to socially disadvantaged producers. Other states, like **Washington**, are using and adding to existing producer lists. Some states are offering these lists as resources for subawards to find producers, whereas other states like **Kansas** are requiring subawardees to purchase off the supplier list. For **Arkansas**, creating this type of list and limiting the types of producers to only socially disadvantaged and small farms is a central part of their strategy for steering LFPA and LFS subawardees towards socially disadvantaged producers.

"Since we're targeting socially disadvantaged farmers... my plan is a hundred percent goes to them. By choosing who gets in the catalog sets our goal of who's going to be eventually getting the funds." - James Ponzini, Arkansas Department of Human Services

Other states like **New York** have existing producer lists that predate LFS or LFPA, but they don't specifically identify socially disadvantaged producers. They are nonetheless a starting point and resource for outreach to producers. But for states that started their LFS and LFPA programs without any existing lists, outreach has been more challenging.

"We've had to ask [school] districts to do a little bit of leg work to ask some questions and identify whether those farms are socially disadvantaged or not... We didn't have a way to help them identify that, and the Colorado Department of Agriculture didn't have that either. So we were at a bit of a loss as to how to provide that in the beginning." - Krista Garand, Colorado Department of Education and Nutrition

Another interviewee expressed how some food pantries that have received LFPA funds don't know where or how to find socially disadvantaged producers. Their state has tried to help by directing them to food hubs and sharing contact information among subawardees so they can connect with those in the same geographic area.

“The main feedback that I've gotten is that we need a database of socially disadvantaged producers. But because they are socially disadvantaged, they're the ones least likely to be in a directory. It's kind of a chicken or the egg situation.” – Anonymous State Agency Interviewee

While supplier lists can be an effective tool and starting point for identifying producers, especially among those who have limited experience working with farmers and buying local food, the resounding message was the need among states and subawardees to dedicate time and resources for doing direct outreach and building trust and relationships with socially disadvantaged producers.

Flexibility and Reducing Administrative Burden

Many states discussed challenges implementing LFPA and LFS within their state policies, procedures, and systems. The programs' specific focus on local and regional foods, and furthermore the targeting of socially disadvantaged producers, is requiring some states to conduct grants, business, and purchasing in new ways and get creative along the way to ensure the programs are reaching the audiences they're intended to support.

“We need to adjust statute and policy to be flexible enough to localize. Currently, it's not—not in any sense of the fashion. My team ends up spending a lot of time navigating requirements in order to localize, to build that resilience that we say that we want. And that's the biggest lesson we learned during pandemic recovery, because during the pandemic and the massive fallout, a lot of those restrictions were removed or set aside. It didn't go exactly easy, but it went easier on the administrative route... Now we, as a state agency, just need to push that forward and push hard on it.” - Melinda Bratsch-Horsager, Washington State Department of Agriculture

When asked about successes they've achieved so far in implementation, several states highlighted steps they've taken to integrate flexibility into their programs and reduce administrative burden for target audiences, including socially disadvantaged producers, to participate in their programs.

In **New Mexico**, The Food Depot (LFPA subawardee) has worked hard to build a request for proposal (RFP) that targets and is accessible to socially disadvantaged producers but is also in compliance with state procurement rules. This included developing a scoring system for the RFP that targets socially disadvantaged producers so they aren't just beholden to award to the lowest priced bidder. In addition, they have

worked to demystify and normalize the process of responding to bids, which is new and intimidating to smaller, socially disadvantaged producers in the state.

“I am really proud of, from the beginning, folding in values-based procurement. The way that we structured the RFP process, we are building something that is innovative, and really trying to figure out how to work within the confines that we have, being innovative to prioritize small to mid size socially disadvantaged producers. It is the daily fight of this program.” – Meredith Lorencz, The Food Depot New Mexico

Arkansas set up a pro-forma invoice process, outside of their traditional procurement and payment procedures, for subawardees (food banks) to get reimbursed for food purchases prior to delivery from producers. This was critical for successfully engaging and capturing the target producer audience.

“Small farmers can’t wait 30-60 days for payment, so we found a solution where [food banks] could pay them relatively quickly.” - James Ponzini, Arkansas Department of Human Services

One state that chose to make small amounts of LFS funding available to all schools, rather than administering a competitive award process where fewer schools could receive larger awards, did so to reduce the administrative burden for schools to participate.

“There is no need to apply, so the paperwork burden for the schools should be low. They just need to call their local food hub and place an order. I think this is one of the more equitable ways to distribute resources across the state.” – Survey Respondent

Positive Outcomes

The overarching sentiment of states who participated in the survey and interviews was a shared sense of opportunity for LFS and LFPA, and many states shared how they are already seeing that opportunity transform into positive outcomes. Some that were commonly discussed included:

- **New relationships** between buyers and farmers that can extend beyond the LFS and LFPA funding periods;
- **Productive collaboration among state agencies** to develop a holistic approach to local and regional food systems work that encompasses public health, food security, farm economic viability, and equity; and

- **New demographic data collection** from socially disadvantaged producers reached through programming.

New Relationships Between Buyers and Farmers

The most common positive outcome reported by states was the initiation and development of new relationships between buyers and farmers. In many places, LFPA and LFS galvanized the community of socially disadvantaged producers to sell to schools and the emergency feeding system for the first time. Many states reported they were optimistic that these new partnerships—and the transactions that create and sustain a resilient food system—would continue after the program to some degree.

“I would say 99% are new [sales] avenues for socially disadvantaged producers. And we’ve gotten some great responses that the food is of higher quality than what food banks get through [other distribution channels]. They’re surprised how good it is and it’s local. And they’re all about supporting local farmers. So, that seems like a big success. And I’d see it continuing into the future. For sure.” – James Ponzini, Arkansas Department of Human Services

In **New Mexico**, the sole contractor for their state’s LFPA program was cautious about being the intermediary preventing relationships from growing. To avoid this, they are helping the food banks build relationships directly with the producers.

“We are providing a link where there has historically never been one. Building that makes sense for sustainability... This is not a traditional partnership, but they took to it and figured out how to build it together. I think the collaborative aspect of it is what makes it great.” – Meredith Lorencz, The Food Depot, New Mexico

In **Kansas**, the state’s Department of Agriculture is encouraging meat producers to reach out to nearby schools to build more connections. Between their work in regulation and marketing, the Department of Agriculture will provide wraparound support to build trust with these producers and better serve them in the future through policy development, bolstering local food infrastructure, and identifying region-specific needs.

“A lot of the [producers] that I work with aren’t wholesaling yet. This is their first venture into wholesale so I hope the success of this program is that they have the confidence to go out and make connections with other businesses - whether that’s a grocery store, restaurant, the hospital system. Maybe they participate in local food for schools, helping them scale up.” - Brittney Grother, Kansas Department of Agriculture

In **Utah**, “so many ranchers were not selling to schools and now they are.”⁷³ They estimate that two-thirds of the state’s schools are now buying local beef because of LFS. Adding new vendors is an extremely challenging process but the schools are a reliable customer base for local ranchers to get paid. It’s been a struggle to include Tribal populations in farm to school, so a particular point of success from Utah’s LFS is the sale of local, Tribal-raised bison to schools. These transactions strengthen the new local food incentive program the state has launched, which can help sustain the purchases beyond the program.

New Collaborations Across State Agencies

The pandemic created circumstances where cross-agency, statewide communication was needed to look at the whole system of services instead of programs siloed by agency. Doing so created efficiencies and strengthened the connections between programs and the state employees who run them. It also helped them develop a shared understanding of their constituency and greater capacity for food systems work. However, such pandemic-era collaboration has not always continued. As one state employee noted in an interview, *“We had weekly calls for emergency response during COVID. There was all of this communication and collaboration, and it was really beneficial. Some of it has continued, but not to the same extent.”* In many cases though, states are seeing LFS and LFPA as opportunities to begin or revive cross-agency collaboration to extend beyond LFS or LFPA programming.

Many states reported working with their sister agencies for the first time through LFPA and LFS. In some states, this collaboration came about out of necessity to execute the programs. State agencies that didn’t have enough staff to design and implement LFS or LFPA have had to rely on other institutional partners and agencies to share the load to apply for these federal funds and run the programs.

In one state, planning for the state’s LFPA application brought about monthly calls between the Department of Agriculture and Department of Health. These meetings have continued as a space where the two agencies can think about how food systems work in a holistic way, from healthy food access to production and distribution. It allows them to explore ways to strengthen collaboration between each agency’s areas of work and see how these programs and complementary funding sources contribute to thriving communities across the state.

The need for more collaboration across state agencies was echoed by another interviewee:

“I feel like a lot of times food insecurity and emergency food is what's equated as food systems work. But it's more holistically looking at the system needs...some of these programs are helping to move that along...it's not just food, but also health care, transportation, and childcare. I think that conversation is starting to develop more about helping with this ecosystem of services.” - Cyrena Thibodeau, Connecticut Department of Agriculture

Demographic Data Collection

Data collection is critical to showing impact, establishing accountability, and building the case for future programs and funding. For many states, LFPA and LFS were the first time their agency collected demographic data on socially disadvantaged producers in their state. Through the design of these programs, states are presenting an opportunity for these producers to self-identify to track purchases for reporting requirements and in some cases build contact lists for the producers to be reached and connect to new markets. In a sense, LFPA and LFS forced some states to account for equity-focused data in this new way.

Responses from our survey indicate that of the 31 state agencies administering LFS and/or LFPA, only four reported that their agency previously collected demographic data on the producers benefiting from their programs to evaluate equity. An additional four reported they had had somewhat collected such data. Meanwhile, 21 states reported that this was new data they were collecting, seven were uncertain, and one chose not to disclose.

Even with the incentive to collect demographic data, many states grappled with questions regarding the feasibility, accuracy, and how to go about collecting the data. One state reported they would have liked *“tools for highlighting socially disadvantaged producers in a respectful, thoughtful, and effective manner.”*

Sustainability Plans

Given that LFS and LFPA funding are one-time funds, sustainability is top of mind for states. Several emphasized that, despite the fast turnaround for applications, they have been intentional in their design and implementation to maximize sustainability and convert one-time funding into long-term shifts in programming and services. States think that LFPA and LFS programs will have long-term impact on:

- **Sustaining and strengthening new relationships** with and among producers, buyers, and partner organizations;
- Planning for **LFPFA and LFS to inform other programs** and areas of work at the state level; and
- **Making the case** for sustained investment in local and regional food systems and targeting socially disadvantaged producers through storytelling, data collection, and advocacy.

Sustaining and Strengthening New Relationships

For many state agencies, LFS and LFPFA have created opportunities to build new or stronger relationships with other state agencies, partner organizations, subawardees—such as schools and food banks and pantries—and most notably, socially disadvantaged producers. The programs have encouraged states to rethink how they conduct outreach to producers and created precedent for targeting socially disadvantaged producers in grant funding and programming. States are hopeful that the relationships and trust that are built through LFPFA and LFS will extend beyond the cooperative agreements. Furthermore, they are thinking about how to sustain the strategies for relationship and trust building that they’ve developed through LFS and LFPFA to improve the quality and impact of their work more broadly.

For example, **New York** has a new grant program for beginning farmers and the state set aside \$4 million this year specifically for socially and economically disadvantaged producers. They are hopeful that the outreach and relationship building that they are doing for LFPFA can serve as a foundation for this new grant program and other such programs that seek to reach and more equitably serve their constituents.

“I think LFPFA will really help us get to know that population better than we have and build some bridges with organizations that maybe haven’t felt served by the Department of Agriculture in the past. And through LFPFA, hopefully that’ll open the door to them being more comfortable accessing more of our programs.” -

Emily Cook, New York Department of Agriculture and Markets

States are also hopeful that the new relationships that are formed between producers and buyers continue beyond LFS and LFPFA, and they are thinking about how they can play a role in ensuring that new relationships continue to be developed.

States like **Louisiana** see the producer lists and databases that they’ve developed for LFS and LFPFA as important strategies for sustaining the impact and the bridges that these programs are forming between producers and buyers.

“Nourish LA list has been a success and we see this is a key tool for sustaining work with helping socially disadvantaged producers and small producers access new markets after LFPA funding is done.” - Douglas McKean, Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry

“The database is also a good space to continue after the grant. Now that we have these contacts we’re hoping as future grants and outreach come, the database will grow and that it will increase awareness.” – Anonymous State Agency Interviewee

Informing Other State Programs & Areas of Work

When asked about the long-term impact and sustainability of LFS and LFPA, many states shared specific examples of how they intend to apply the outcomes of LFS and LFPA to other state programs they coordinate. Many leveraged LFS and LFPA as an opportunity to “do things differently” such as shifting a cultural mindset from high volume/low cost to more equity-focused purchasing, pushing the agency to try something innovative, or consolidating disparate efforts across the state to support socially disadvantaged producers. LFPA and LFS created the incentive and provided the startup capital to experiment.

Washington State Department of Agriculture shared how they see the opportunity for LFPA to impact future work in their department that they hope will expand to their other state agencies. They have developed a robust evaluation plan for LFPA that includes both qualitative and quantitative data collection, including direct phone calls to producers to talk about their experience. They are sharing their LFPA reports publicly to ensure that lessons and results of LFPA continue to inform state programs, processes, and policies—particularly regarding equity and accessibility.

Indiana is in the early stages of developing a state food charter, which they see as a natural avenue for amplifying and implementing learnings from LFPA. *“We want to identify some shared metrics within equity and food justice for the food charter and I think LFPA is going to be really important foundational knowledge for us as we go into that process.”* In addition, they are hoping to create an LFPA community of practice at the state level to share learning across the existing networks and the evolving value chain coordination network built during LFPA.

Several states also mentioned how they plan to apply learnings from LFS and LFPA to inform their state’s design and implementation of their Resilient Food Systems

Infrastructure Program (RFSI). This is a \$420 million cooperative agreement program offered to state departments of agriculture and territories where funds can be used toward “expanded capacity for the aggregation, processing, manufacturing, storing, transporting, wholesaling, and distribution of locally and regionally produced food products.”⁷⁴ While LFS and LFPA funds cannot be used to support any infrastructure development, RFSI provides a unique opportunity to respond to the infrastructure needs and gaps that LFS and LFPA have exposed or magnified in states.

Making the Case for Future Investment

Another common theme heard among states was their hope to use LFS and LFPA as opportunities to build a case for future state investment in similar programs, both in local food systems more broadly and for socially disadvantaged producers. Given that LFS and LFPA presented many states with the opportunity to do things differently, there is strong focus on how to demonstrate that continued investment in local food systems and socially disadvantaged producers is valuable and necessary. As one interviewee put it, *“the state needs to fund it...if agriculture is one of our cornerstone economies, we need to do better than what we’re doing.”*

Connecticut is using LFS funds to pilot a local food incentive program for schools and build support for a state-funded program. They hope to build a proof of concept and gather data to show the outcomes and impact of the program to support future legislation for a state program.

“I feel like that is a huge missing piece of why there’s hesitancy to pass and put [legislation] forward, because it’s pretty untested.” - Cyrena Thibodeau, Connecticut Department of Agriculture

Similarly in **Utah**, LFS enabled the state to launch its statewide procurement pilot for local food for schools:

“It’s difficult to make changes and start new things at a government agency. And there was a lot of ‘If you can’t prove that it will work, we’re not gonna do it.’ I have been pushing for us to do statewide contracts for a few local products that schools regularly purchase (like apples) for years. LFS funding let us justify the experiment. I’m hoping that we learn how to do this efficiently and apply this technique in the future.” - Kate Wheeler, Utah State Board of Education

Another state expressed hope that the quantitative and qualitative data they’re collecting from awardees will help build a narrative around why it’s important to invest in

these farmers as well as shorter supply chains and local and regional markets. They are optimistic that this storytelling can garner financial and statewide support for future investment.

Louisiana is similarly thinking about how to show the need for public and private funding to support the continuation of LFPA.

“The overall goal is sustainability, to see if this can be where the normal funds that come in—through private donation to the food banks and also legislative grants to Louisiana—can be utilized for these socially disadvantaged local farmers.” - Douglas McKean, Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry

There was also a strong desire expressed among states to use LFS and LFPA to make the case for long-term federal investment. As previously discussed, LFS and LFPA are the first time that many states are collecting demographic data on socially disadvantaged producers in their state, including reporting such data to the USDA. So just as LFS and LFPA are historic in their targeted focus on socially disadvantaged producers, the demographic data that states are collecting and reporting present a historic opportunity to make the case for dedicated long-term investment in local supply chains and socially disadvantaged producers at state and federal levels.

Recommendations

This research captured experiences and insights of many state agencies as they navigated their implementation of LFS and LFPA. The following recommendations reflect the learnings that emerged as best practices and greatest needs for LFS and LFPA, as well as broader efforts to build more equitable, resilient food systems.

For States

- **Collaborate among agencies at the state level and with Tribal Nations** to build a holistic picture of what programs and services already exist, and what needs more support and funding. As much as possible, reduce silos at the state level to provide better service to constituents across the food system. For example, state departments of agriculture, health, and education are all engaged in food systems work to varying degrees through farmer outreach and support, administering food access programs, and farm to school and child nutrition programs. Coordination across these programs can better support socially disadvantaged communities.
- **Build capacity for targeted outreach to socially disadvantaged producers** to garner feedback, promote state programs, engage in future program design, and provide technical assistance. Invest in staff time, resources, and partnerships to integrate outreach into all programs and services. Consider hiring outreach staff who have the cultural and linguistic competency to reach a diverse range of producers and work closely with organizations who have trusted relationships within these communities.
- **Engage socially disadvantaged producers in the planning and decision-making processes.** Some states have begun this through hosting listening sessions or discovering and engaging pre-existing networks. Listening and responding to the needs and priorities of these producers is vital for building resilient food systems and successfully addressing historic inequities.
- **Support producers and stakeholders in accessing state funding opportunities:**
 - **Eliminate programmatic barriers** that may prevent participation from historically underserved communities, such as match requirements or slow reimbursement.
 - **Create simple trainings and resources** for producers and stakeholders that explain how to apply. For example, create short videos and one-

paggers on how to obtain a Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) or register for SAM.gov. Wherever possible, provide hands-on technical assistance for producers to navigate complex administrative challenges associated with state procurement.

- **Host communities of practice** for subawardees/grantees and program recipients to build connections, share stories of success and best practices, and foster collaboration. Many interviewees spoke to the importance of dedicated space for peer-to-peer connection to nurture networks of support to further program impacts.
- **Incorporate demographic data collection** to build the picture of available supply from socially disadvantaged producers within the state. Prioritize program evaluation with an equity lens to understand and communicate impact and make the case for long-term investment in these producers. Consider a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data to capture the numbers, as well as the power of individual stories. If this is a newer strategy for the state, proceed slowly, allowing time for building understanding and relationships between the often-disparate cultures of rural, socially disadvantaged communities and state government.
- **Share ideas and implementation strategies across states and regions.** A common sentiment heard throughout our research was a desire from state employees to learn from one another. We encourage states to self-organize where practical and possible, knowing this takes extra time and capacity to do. States should consider reaching out to others with similar political contexts, not just those within the same region. In addition, the National Association of the State Departments of Agriculture could play a role in creating opportunity and facilitating cross state connection.

For USDA

- **Advance procurement-related recommendations from the USDA Equity Commission's 2023 Report**, which included: creating set aside programs for socially disadvantaged producers; establishing incentives for major contractors to partner with socially disadvantaged producers; creating a pilot project within FNS to purchase at least 50% of foods from small and socially disadvantaged producers for school meals and emergency food assistance programs; providing reimbursement flexibility and enhanced funding to cover additional costs associated with working with socially disadvantaged producers.⁷⁵ This research highlights the immense value and impact that LFS and LFPA programs are

generating as just one-time funding opportunities. Continued investment in these programs, or similarly-focused procurement programs, are needed to achieve greater equity and resiliency in our food system.

- **Continue to target socially disadvantaged producers in USDA programs.** LFS and LFPA are the first of their kind to leverage the USDA's purchasing power to provide targeted support to socially disadvantaged producers. Therefore, it is imperative that the USDA apply learnings from LFS and LFPA to inform strategies and processes for continuing to target socially disadvantaged producers in other USDA programs including but not limited to procurement. Apply the data collected through progress reporting that outlines producers reached, dollar values of purchases, and new relationships between producers and buyers that are expected to continue beyond LFS and LFPA to inform future programs. The data and experiences resulting from these programs are invaluable to understanding how to create long-term transformation in our food system.
- **Allow and build in administrative costs specifically for targeting outreach to socially disadvantaged producers in funding opportunities.** Staff capacity to conduct such outreach was one of the most commonly discussed challenges among states, particularly those participating in LFS which does not allow administrative costs. However, among states that have been able to expand their capacity to do outreach, many lifted up their outreach and new connections with producers as a success of their programs, showing the impact that dedicated time and resources for outreach can provide.
- **Fund or organize in-person and/or virtual gatherings for states and Tribes** to convene about LFPA and LFS program implementation. States expressed significant interest in attending gatherings to learn from each other and build stronger connections. Ideas shared included public virtual forums with breakouts according to program model an annual national or regional gathering for cooperators to share their implementation approaches, successes, and challenges, including representation from producers and subawardees. USDA FNS regional offices, USDA Climate Hubs, and/or USDA Regional Food Business Centers could serve as regional partners for these gatherings.
- **Develop systems and resources for states and Tribes to better understand what federal programs exist** that can address funding gaps or support complementary programming such as capacity building, business planning, investments in infrastructure, outreach and engagement, supporting market

access, and lending. Through the “Build Back Better” Food Systems Transformation Initiative, the USDA is rapidly rolling out new programs that aim to “strengthen the food system across the supply chain, from how our food is produced to how it is purchased, and all the steps in between.”⁷⁶ More coordinated outreach efforts from the USDA about these programs would help states leverage these opportunities to support their communities through holistic, wraparound services that address the full scope of the food system from conservation, production, and distribution to marketing and consumption.

- **Collaborate across agencies and mission areas to reduce silos and more effectively serve stakeholders.** For example, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers child nutrition programs and the Farm to School grant program, while Agricultural Market Service (AMS) administers the Local Food for Schools cooperative agreement program. We recommend FNS and AMS work together to identify technical assistance needs raised through LFS implementation and develop resources and support to meet that need.
- **Target technical assistance and support to the cooperators of LFPA and LFS** – in this case state entities, Tribal governments, and territories – rather than stakeholders broadly across the food system. The cooperators were responsible for designing programs to best serve the unique needs of their communities, which enabled more control at a local level. Moving forward, cooperators would benefit from organized spaces for peer learning, networking, and targeted topical support such as how to target socially disadvantaged producers through program design.

For further research

Our research specifically looked at state design and implementation of LFS and LFPA in relation to the programs’ objectives for targeting socially disadvantaged producers.

Other areas where we see opportunity and need for further research include:

- **Impact evaluation of LFS and LFPA on socially disadvantaged producers,** specifically farmers of color, to determine if and how they benefited as targets of the program. The USDA definition of socially disadvantaged producers provided through the RFA is broad, encompassing many identities including race, color, age, national origin, and disability. Dedicated research is needed to understand the unique experiences of producers who identify with one or more of these characteristics, and how they perceived, engaged with, and ultimately benefited (or not) from LFPA and LFS. Understanding these perspectives will inform how

the USDA and future cooperators can adjust program design and engagement strategies to better serve them. Research in this area should leverage the data collected by state cooperators for the USDA that outlines producers reached, dollar values of purchases, and new relationships between producers and buyers that are expected to continue beyond LFS and LFPA.

- **Impact evaluation of LFPA in Tribal Nations.** Dedicated research is needed to understand how Tribal governments implemented LFPA, how Tribal communities experienced the programming, and how these producers and communities were ultimately impacted.
- **Further exploration of how cooperators and states structured their RFA, contracting, and/or procurement process for LFS and LFPA** to effectively engage and support socially disadvantaged producers in program participation. These components of program design are foundational to how accessible or inaccessible LFPA and LFS are to socially disadvantaged producers. Further research is needed to identify successful models, state procurement challenges, and what technical assistance is needed to overcome them.
- **Research at the state or regional levels to understand supply and demand dynamics within local food systems,** including current capacity of socially disadvantaged producers. Some states brought up uncertainty around the ability for these producers to meet the institutional demand that was built through LFPA and LFS and acknowledged that they had limited data available when planning and implementing these programs. In particular, because LFPA and LFS flooded the institutional market with funds, some states were concerned that there was not enough supply and they would pull product from existing market channels. Or they expressed concern about the negative impact for these producers to invest in quickly scaling for these programs, to then lose these markets after the funding was gone. Research on supply availability and wholesale readiness of socially disadvantaged producers can reveal what these producers need to access long term, stable markets.
- **Additional research on LFS** and how this program connects to existing farm to school efforts. Decades of work has laid the foundation for schools to purchase local foods, building momentum for state and federal policy to incentivize local purchasing. Multiple states discussed how they are leveraging LFS to kickstart or expand their state farm to school procurement. Research is needed to explore the impact of LFS on widespread and large-scale local procurement, including from socially disadvantaged producers, within schools.

Conclusion

“Supply chain issues hit everything. Every sector, every industry. You know, you felt that. And so sometimes when disasters occur you have to rely on your local people to get through it. And this is what's coming up with these two grants. Getting back to basics.” - James Ponzini, Arkansas Department of Human Services

The state employees we interviewed and surveyed for this project had many insightful things to share about their work through these programs, their hopes for carrying forward learnings from the pandemic, and the prospects of LFPA and LFS to prioritize and operationalize equity. We asked what they had learned during pandemic recovery that they keep in mind in their current work:

“There's no shortcut to building trust with people. It just takes time. And that's exactly what it took me. That was earned through really hard and honest conversations, but also with me following through and being consistent. And I had to develop some thick skin. And it took a lot of time and I had to do some traveling and some after hours conversation where my kids were screaming in the background. But I just took the time. I have a lot of really wise mentors in this space who have been working in the value chain world for a lot longer than I have. The counsel that I received very consistently was: It's about relationships. And it's about trust building. And you can't rush that, you know. That's the phrase: the work happens at the speed of trust. That's been kind of my mantra throughout this LFPA process.” – State Agency Interviewee

“We can see, now that we've had to endure it, exactly where the problems lie. And I would like to continue in the spirit of equity and the spirit of getting our small American farmers back...I'm just wondering how many farms have to disappear? How many kids have to see their parents, and the family farm struggle so hard that they don't want any part of it anymore? And then the land is sold off and made into subdivisions...” – State Agency Interviewee

LFS and LFPA created historic opportunities to demonstrate the impact of investment in our local supply chains, as well as to highlight the contributions of socially disadvantaged producers that make our food system more diverse, stronger, and more resilient.

Through the course of our research, it became apparent that while each state is building LFS and LFPA programs that reflect their states' unique needs, circumstances, and policies, there are common threads stitching together a patchwork of LFS and LFPA programs across the country. States we interviewed and surveyed are navigating and

grappling with many of the same circumstances, discovering success in similar strategies and approaches, and thinking with intention and care about how to create long-lasting impact that operationalizes equity.

One of the most common pieces of feedback from this process was that states held a strong desire to learn from one another so that they don't need to start from scratch to operationalize equity into their agency's culture and systems. Simultaneously, they felt challenged to find the time and capacity needed to do this peer-to-peer learning without the USDA or other partner organizing a national fly-in for LFPA and LFS implementers. Short of that, it is our hope that by showing how states are implementing LFPA and LFS, this report can help carry the work and lessons learned across geographic boundaries and encourage cooperators and state employees to reach out to their peer agencies across the country to continue the critical work of targeting socially disadvantaged producers in state programs and policies.

The experiences, strategies, and emerging outcomes captured in this report speak to the optimism that states conveyed for LFS and LFPA to create long-term impact, along with the realities and difficulties of operationalizing equity within our food system. Looking ahead to the remainder of LFS and LFPA projects and beyond, we offer a few themes that emerged from our research that we hope can guide and ground the work to come:

1. As we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, **there is desire—and need—to do things differently.** States spoke to the need to pursue flexibility wherever possible in program design and to reduce barriers and burdens for historically underserved communities and individuals to engage with government programs. Such efforts can be supported by pursuing deeper collaboration across state agencies, Tribal governments, and partner organizations, and by centering the voices and needs of socially disadvantaged producers.
2. **Targeting socially disadvantaged producers and operationalizing equity in our food system requires the investment of time and resources.** Many states had stories to share of how they are rethinking their outreach strategies, in many cases trading in email for more personal approaches like traveling to different farmers markets, making phone calls, and attending producer meetings. Meanwhile, other states spoke to the challenges of conducting such outreach without proper staffing and resources. Together, these experiences underscore the need for investment in outreach strategies that meet producers where they are, build trust, and lay the foundation for authentic relationship-building.

3. The **collection and sharing of data is critical** to transforming the one-time investments of LFS and LFPA into long-term change in our local food systems that builds resiliency and equity. The demographic data collection required of cooperators by USDA has pushed the states we interviewed to expand their data collection to support equity work. States are also thinking strategically about how to leverage quantitative and qualitative data, as well as stories, to capture the impact of LFS and LFPA and make the case for future investments in local food systems that target and serve socially disadvantaged producers.

In their 2023 interim report, the USDA Equity Commission states “Procurement systems and culture need to change simultaneously to ensure there is greater opportunity for funding organizations who are not historically funded each year.”⁷⁷ The LFPA and LFS programs incentivized state procurement systems to prioritize equity which, as we’ve learned through our research, is in itself a monumental challenge. What’s still to come, and what some states are just scratching the surface on, is a change in culture to bring about a vibrant, diverse, and resilient food system that serves all Americans.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interviewee List

- Alaska Department of Education and Early Development - Waverli Stowe, Farm to School Coordinator
- Arkansas Department of Human Services - James Ponzini, Commodity Distribution Program Administrator
- Colorado Department of Education and Nutrition - Krista Garand, Supervisor of Grants and Strategy
- Connecticut Department of Agriculture - Cyrena Thibodeau, Agricultural Marketing and Inspection Representative
- Indiana Department of Health - Naima Gardner-Rice, SNAP-Ed and Nutrition Programs Director
- Kansas Department of Agriculture - Brittney Grother, Grants Coordinator
- Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry - Douglas McKean, Food Distribution Program Manager
- New Mexico Department of Agriculture - Gretchen Gilbert, Program Specialist and Alyssa Pearson, Agricultural Marketing Specialist
- New Mexico Farmers Market Association - Bryan Crawford-Garrett, Director of Food Systems Initiatives
- The Food Depot New Mexico - Meredith Lorencz, Local Food Procurement Specialist and Bonnie Murphy, Local Food Procurement Specialist
- New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets - Emily Cook, Team Lead, Division of Agricultural Economic Development
- Utah State Board of Education - Kate Wheeler, Farm to Fork Specialist
- Washington State Department of Agriculture - Melinda Bratsch-Horsager, Commerce Specialist
- Four anonymous interviewees

Appendix B: State Agency Interview Questions

1. Which USDA program did your state receive funding for? LFPA, LFS, or both?
2. What were factors that led to your decision to participate or not?
3. Give us an overview of your state's program. How are you prioritizing and reaching socially disadvantaged producers? (For example: new partnerships, logistics, distribution, data collection, staffing, etc. needed to make this happen)
4. One of the purposes of the LFPA/LFS is to "help to support local, small, and socially disadvantaged farmers/producers through building and expanding economic opportunities."
5. What goals and activities did you set for purchasing from socially disadvantaged producers and how did you decide on those goals?
6. Do you anticipate meeting this aim in your state?
7. Who are the farmers that you are currently reaching and did you have existing relationships with them? Who are the socially disadvantaged producers that you have reached or are trying to reach?
8. In what ways has the funding to support socially disadvantaged producers?
9. What challenges have you faced in implementation with regard to reaching socially disadvantaged producers? What have you done to overcome them?
10. What successes have you achieved with regard to reaching socially disadvantaged producers, that you hope to sustain or build upon?
11. Since the programs are not currently slated to be permanent, what are your plans for sustaining the work you've done to reach and support SDA producers?
12. How do you see LFS and/or LFPA impacting other state programs in the future? What do you hope to learn or figure out?
13. How are you measuring impact? What metrics are you using and what is your process for tracking?
14. What have we learned during pandemic recovery that we want to apply to future food systems policy and federal programs?
15. What ideas do you have about how to make the learnings from LFS and/or LFPA accessible to others? What would make it more accessible to you?

Appendix C: State Agency Survey questions

1. Title
2. State Entity/Agency
3. Does your state agency manage LFS, LFPA or both?
 - Our agency manages both LFS and LFPA
 - Our agency manages LFS
 - Our agency manages LFPA
 - Our state opted out of LFS and/or LFPA funding
4. Are you filling out this survey for LFS, LFPA or both?
 - LFS
 - LFPA
 - Both

Local Food for Schools (LFS)

5. Does your state have LFS funding?
 - Yes
 - No

If answer to #1 is no:

Why did your state choose not apply for LFS cooperative agreement funding?

6. How are you using your LFS funds?
 - Purchasing food and distributing to schools
 - Subawarding to schools
 - Subawarding to distributor(s) or food hub(s)
 - Subawarding farms
 - Other:

Anything else you want to share about how you're using your LFS funds?

7. Please describe your state's LFS budget (in dollars):
 - Total award:
 - Food:
 - Food storage:
 - Food distribution:

Comments:

8. What were the outcome indicators that you established in your LFS application for the amount of funds expected to be spent on food from socially disadvantaged producers and small businesses?
 - Total dollars expected to be spent on food from socially disadvantaged producers
 - Total dollars expected to be spent on food from small businesses

9. How confident are you that you'll achieve your estimated outcomes for LFS purchasing goals? (Scale: 0 = not confident at all, 10 = very confident) Socially disadvantaged producers (scale of 1-10)
- Socially disadvantaged producers
 - Small businesses

Please explain your levels of confidence in reaching your goals.

10. What would help you reach your LFS goals? What support and resources can USDA or others provide to assist you?

11. How are you prioritizing and reaching socially disadvantaged farmers? (*check all that apply*)

- State is making direct purchases from socially disadvantaged farms
- Priority given to sub awardees with plans to buy from socially disadvantaged producers
- Subawardees are encouraged to buy from socially disadvantaged farms
- Subawardees are required to buy certain amounts of food from socially disadvantaged producers
- Targeted outreach to socially disadvantaged producers
- Training and technical support for socially disadvantaged producers
- Other:

12. Who are your LFS partners and collaborators helping you to reach socially disadvantaged producers?

13. What is innovative about your state's implementation of LFS?

Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA)

14. Does your state have LFPA funding?

- Yes
- No

If answer to #13 is no:

Why did your state choose not apply for LFPA cooperative agreement funding?

15. How are you using your LFPA funds?

- Purchasing food and distributing to partners (e.g. food banks, community-based organizations, schools, etc.)
- Subawarding to partners (e.g. food banks, community-based organizations, schools, etc.)
- Subawarding to distributor(s) or food hub(s)
- Subawarding to farms

- Other:

Is there anything else you want to share about how you're using your LFPA funds?

16. Please describe your state's LFPA budget (in dollars):

- Total award:
- Food:
- Food storage:
- Food distribution:
- Personnel (including fringe):
- Other:
- Comments:

17. What were the outcome indicators that you established in your LFPA application for the amount of funds expected to be spent on food from socially disadvantaged producers and small businesses?

- Total dollars expected to be spent on food from socially disadvantaged producers:

18. How confident are you that you'll achieve your estimated outcome for purchases from socially disadvantaged producers?

(Scale: 0 = not confident at all, 10 = very confident)

Please explain your level of confidence in reaching your LFPA purchasing goal for socially disadvantaged producers.

19. What would help you reach your LFPA goal for purchasing from socially disadvantaged producers? What support and resources can USDA or others provide to assist you?

20. How are you prioritizing and reaching socially disadvantaged farmers? (*check all that apply*)

- State is making direct purchases from socially disadvantaged farms
- Priority given to sub awardees with plans to buy from socially disadvantaged producers
- Subawardees are encouraged to buy from socially disadvantaged farms
- Subawardees are required to buy certain amounts of food from socially disadvantaged producers
- Targeted outreach to socially disadvantaged producers
- Training and technical support for socially disadvantaged producers
- Other:

21. Who are your LFPA partners and collaborators helping you to reach socially disadvantaged producers?

22. What is innovative about your state's implementation of LFPA?

For Both LFS and LFPA

23. Has your state previously collected demographic data on the producers benefiting from your programs, such as what is being required for LFPA and/or LFS, to evaluate equity?

- Yes
- No
- Somewhat
- Uncertain

Please explain:

24. How do you see LFS and/or LFPA impacting future state programs? What do you hope to learn/figure out?

25. We are also conducting virtual 30-60 minute interviews for this study. Would you be willing to be interviewed?

- Yes
 - No
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