

Readiness, outcomes, and capacity for future sustainability of food policy councils created through SNAP-Ed: A case study

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Abstract

Communities have formed food policy councils (FPCs) to address inequities in the food system by advancing policy, system, and environmental change (PSE) strategies, including through the SNAP-Ed program, but this approach has not

been studied. To address this gap, we employed a case study approach with the aim of exploring (1) components of readiness for groups to start an FPC; (2) sector and priority population engagement in FPCs; (3) PSE strategies adopted as a result of FPC efforts; and (4) capacity for the future sustainability of FPCs receiving funding and ongoing training and technical assistance as a part of SNAP-Ed programming. Seven South Carolina groups interested in starting FPCs in partnership with SNAP-Ed participated in the study. They

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Author Notes

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were interviewed to explore their readiness, submitted ongoing tracking documents on engagement and PSE strategies, and completed sustainability assessment surveys and interviews. Groups demonstrated motivation and capacity to start or expand FPCs, though capacity-building needs were also identified. Engagement increased over a two-year period where ‘government or elected officials,’ ‘education,’ and ‘business/economic development’ became the most engaged sectors, while priority populations were most commonly engaged through a ‘consult’ or ‘inform’ approach. Forty-nine PSE strategies were adopted, with ‘initiation, improvement, expansion, reinvigoration, or maintenance of edible gardens’ being the most common strategy implemented and ‘community organization’ the most common setting. Capacity for future sustainability of FPC scores increased over time for ‘funding stability,’ ‘organizational capacity,’ and ‘adaptation’ domains, while other domains decreased. Results demonstrate evidence to justify the continuation of funding for FPCs through SNAP-Ed to advance PSE strategies. Further exploration is needed on how to ensure sustainability and that people eligible for SNAP-Ed are the ones leading FPCs.

Keywords

food policy council, SNAP-Ed, multisector, readiness, sustainability, participant engagement

Introduction

The food system in its current form presents challenges for some individuals and the communities to which they belong, contributing to health inequities. Insufficient access to healthy, culturally appropriate foods (House et al., 2024; Rabbitt et al., 2023; Ziso et al., 2022), inadequate transportation infrastructure (Dumas et al., 2021; Wainer et al., 2023), and a lack of farmers markets that accept SNAP benefits (Kelleghrew et al., 2018) are a few examples. To address these and other related issues, many communities have formed food policy councils (FPCs). FPCs bring together diverse partners to examine and offer recommendations for changing policies, systems, and environments (PSE) to strengthen the food system at the local or state level. Since the first documented FPC was

created in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1982, FPCs have grown in popularity, with more than 300 active councils in the U.S., according to the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future’s FPC Dashboard (Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, 2023). Structurally speaking, most FPCs fall under one of four categories: (1) grassroots coalition; (2) housed within government; (3) nonprofit; or (4) housed within a nonprofit (Bassarab, Santo & Palmer, 2019; Burgan et al., 2022; Santo et al., 2021).

Common activities for FPCs include engaging in research (e.g., community food assessments), suggesting and crafting policies, and supporting food system–related programming (Burgan et al., 2022; Scherb et al., 2012). While no two FPCs are identical, most direct their efforts toward issues such as making food systems more equitable and accessible (especially for low-income populations), strengthening connections between local agriculture and institutional food buyers (e.g., school districts, hospitals), improving food system sustainability (e.g., decreasing food waste, farmland preservation), and increasing access to healthy, culturally appropriate food (Harper et al., 2009; Scherb et al., 2012). According to a 2014 national survey, municipalities with local or regional FPCs were more likely to have supports available to help residents access healthy food than those without FPCs (Lange et al., 2021). Fostering and maintaining robust partnerships with individuals and organizations representing a variety of sectors both within and outside of the food system are found to be vital, as these partnerships play an important role in promoting and advancing FPC policy priorities (Clayton et al., 2015; Schiff, 2008). Multisector partnerships are useful as FPCs work to determine policy priorities, increase the visibility of FPCs in policy work, connect with lawmakers, and gain stakeholder buy-in (Clayton et al., 2015). FPC participants also recognize the importance of engaging community members, with 81% of FPC representatives indicating in a survey that these relationships are necessary to achieve council goals (Bassarab, Santo & Palmer, 2019). While some FPCs are successful in assuring the representation of priority populations in both the work of the council and in determining its policy priorities, many continue to

struggle to engage these community members (Packer, 2014; Porter & Ashcroft, 2020).

In a 2018 survey of 234 FPCs across North America conducted by the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, 34% listed funding (e.g., sustaining funding or inability to compensate staff) as their greatest challenge (Bassarab, Santo & Palmer 2019). This trend continued in its 2020 survey (Santo et al., 2021). The survey also found that new FPCs were more likely to have small annual budgets or no funding at all when compared to all FPCs. Yet, the early stages of FPC development are arguably when funding, especially to attract and retain staff, is most needed. FPCs with paid staff reported being able to address a wider range of policy topics and were more likely to utilize a racial or social equity decision-making framework than those without paid staff (Santo, et al., 2021).

Alignment between Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed) requirements and FPC purposes demonstrates the potential of this program to serve as a funding source to start, expand, and sustain these multisector groups working in diverse settings to improve healthy food access through PSE changes; however, literature is currently lacking on the process and outcomes of this approach. SNAP-Ed aims to ensure that people eligible for SNAP or other public assistance programs meet national dietary and physical activity guidelines while living on a budget. SNAP-Ed is administered at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service, and funding is allocated to state SNAP administrative agencies who contract with State Implementing Agencies (SIAs) to implement and evaluate multilevel intervention programming. The social-ecological model for food and physical activity decisions serves as the theoretical underpinning for SNAP-Ed, conceptualizing how social and cultural norms and values, sectors, settings, and individual factors collectively influence food and beverage intake and physical activity, which contributes to an individual's health outcomes (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2024). A case study approach was employed with the aim of exploring (1) components of readiness for groups to start or expand an FPC; (2) sector and

priority population engagement in FPCs; (3) adopted PSE strategies as a result of FPC efforts; and (4) capacity for the future sustainability of FPCs that received funding and ongoing training and technical assistance as a part of SNAP-Ed programming.

Methods

Setting

In the study location of South Carolina, a state FPC was established in 2005 to address policy, local food systems, and statewide food access challenges with leadership from two state agencies and a volunteer board of directors. The FPC served primarily as a convenor, bringing different sectors together and developing a report focused on specific food system topics annually (e.g., advancing farm-to-school programming, expanding Healthy Food Financing Initiative opportunities). Over the years, state level momentum ebbed and flowed based on leadership capacity. At a visioning retreat in 2016, the existing board of directors recognized that for the state FPC to grow and maintain momentum, there needed to be a focus on building up FPCs at a local level, and that people who were a part of those groups would then serve in leadership roles and inform priorities at a state level. At the time, three local FPCs existed in the state, which was in stark contrast to the flourishing local FPC network that was expanding in neighboring North Carolina.

Based on the state FPC identifying the need to build a network of local FPCs as a priority, the University of South Carolina SNAP-Ed SIA started a project to provide training and technical assistance to interested groups in program year 2019. Eight groups were identified for partnership, however, limited funding for staff capacity was articulated as the primary barrier to advancing their work in establishing FPCs at the end of the year. To address this barrier and promote program equity by providing SNAP-Ed funding directly to local communities as an alternative to keeping all allocated funding at a state agency level, the SNAP-Ed Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant Program (Grant Program) was established.

SNAP-Ed Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant Program Overview

The University of South Carolina SNAP-Ed SIA began recruitment for the Grant Program in February 2021. A request-for-applicants document was disseminated to newly established members of the state's FPC ($n = 43$) who were encouraged to share it within their networks. Groups interested in developing an FPC or any currently developing or established FPC in the state were eligible to apply, although in order to receive funding, the group needed to be a part of a federally recognized non-profit organization or government agency. Grass-roots groups of community members not affiliated with an organization were still encouraged to apply and were then provided with assistance in identifying a fiduciary partner from the Grant Program team. Interested applicants were asked to complete an interest form seeking the following information: applicant group or organization name; contact person's name, email address, and phone number; community and county names; brief explanation of interest in the funding opportunity; and the stage of their FPC development. Each person who submitted an interest form was invited to participate in an in-depth interview, which completed the application process.

Groups invited into the Grant Program received US\$14,000 in year 1 and US\$20,000 in both years 2 and 3 to fund staff to carry out the activities listed in Table 1.

In addition to funding, participating Grant Program groups received training and technical assistance on starting and sustaining FPCs from

University of South Carolina SNAP-Ed program coordinators (authors 2 and 3) for the duration of the study, including both group and one-on-one sessions. Group sessions consisted of monthly virtual learning collaboratives, each lasting approximately 90 minutes, with a focus on a different topic or promising practice related to FPC development. All FPCs were invited to attend a total of 30 learning collaboratives over the two-and-a-half-year program. Topics included a general program overview, community food assessments, multisector engagement, engaging priority populations, FPC structure and governance, identifying and using data in community food assessments, best practices for conducting surveys and interviews, state and local advocacy, transportation and food systems, asset mapping, and PSE strategies. Each learning collaborative began with a 5- to 10-minute reflection during which participants shared major successes and challenges that they had encountered during the past month. Reflections were followed by a formal presentation focused on the monthly topic provided by the program coordinators or principal investigator (author 1) or invited experts in the field. Learning collaboratives served as both a vehicle to deliver training to the cohort and a setting for participants to interact and collaborate with one another. As such, a minimum of 20 minutes at the end of each session were reserved for participants to share experiences, troubleshoot, and problem-solve with their peers.

FPCs were also expected to attend monthly one-on-one check-in sessions with the program coordinators. These virtual sessions lasted 30

Table 1. Funded Activities for SNAP-Ed Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant Program

Engage different sectors in the work of the food policy council

Engage people most impacted by food insecurity and inequities (i.e., priority populations) in the work of the food policy council

Conduct a community food assessment

Work with food policy council members to identify and facilitate the adoption of policy, systems, and environmental change strategies to make healthy eating more accessible and equitable; strategies must occur in locations where at least 50% of people live at or below 185% of the federal poverty level

Participate in monthly learning collaborative meetings virtually with all funded groups and in periodic individual calls with the SNAP-Ed program coordinators, and complete data tracking documentation

minutes to 1 hour and consisted of individualized technical assistance. Topics were primarily determined by the FPCs and commonly included questions about FPC structure and meeting planning, identifying additional funding opportunities, and engaging priority populations.

Data Collection, Instruments, and Analysis

Below we describe data collection procedures, instruments, and analysis organized by each aim of the study.

Aim 1. Readiness Assessment

With approval from the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board, key informants from groups interested in starting or expanding an FPC in partnership with SNAP-Ed were recruited to participate in the study. Recruitment was done in conjunction with the Grant Program call for applicants. A letter of invitation explaining the purpose of the study and usage of the data collected was provided via email to groups who completed the brief initial interest form and were invited to participate in the in-depth interview ($n = 9$). All interviews were conducted by authors 1, 2, and 3 during February 2021 using a teleconferencing platform and lasted 45–75 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were reviewed by those who conducted the interviews to check for completeness and accuracy.

A semi-structured interview guide was created based on the readiness framework $R(\text{readiness}) = M(\text{motivation}) C^2(\text{general capacities, innovation-specific capacities})$ (Scaccia et al., 2015), focusing on motivations and innovation-specific capacities to start or expand an FPC. The guide was drafted by the principal investigator, who has published previously on the application of the framework (Draper & Younginer, 2021; Draper, Morrissey, & Younginer, 2021) and then reviewed by the program coordinators knowledgeable about FPCs and a SNAP-Ed evaluator familiar with the framework; minor changes were made through this review. Further minor revisions to simplify and combine some questions were made after the first interview was conducted. (See Table 3 in the results section for the components of influences on motivation

and innovation-specific capacities explored.)

Only groups that completed all data collection processes were included in the analysis ($n = 7$). Two additional groups participated in only the readiness assessment interview due to either (1) not being selected to receive an FPC grant directly because two applicants applied from the same county and agreed to collaborate, or (2) declining the funding once offered due to staff transitions occurring soon after the readiness assessment; no systematic differences existed between these two groups and those that participated in the Grant Program. Two team members trained in qualitative methods (authors 1 and 2) analyzed the readiness assessment interview transcripts using the qualitative analysis software NVivo version 14.23.3 (Lumivero, 2024). An initial codebook was developed based on interview questions, and subcodes were developed throughout the coding process. The coders performed peer debriefing throughout the process to ensure that consensus was reached on the emergent themes identified across the sample. Saturation of themes was reached due to the complete coding of transcripts for each FPC ($n = 7$).

Aim 2. Sector and Priority Population Engagement

FPCs documented engagement by sector and priority population—community members meeting SNAP-Ed income eligibility criteria and directly impacted by food inequities—throughout the study. Templates were created based on the SNAP-Ed sectors of influence included in the SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework (USDA SNAP-Ed Connection, n.d.-a) and the Continuum of Community Engagement (N. Russell et al., 2008) to help FPCs track and plan for engagement. For each sector (a total of 19) and level of engagement (Table 2) included, FPCs were asked to report if they were already engaging, had started planning for engagement, or had not started planning for engagement.

The FPC representative(s) funded through the Grant Program completed the templates, with the exception of one group in which the executive director of the FPC fiduciary organization completed them. The templates might have been reviewed by additional FPC members, although the

Table 2. Priority Population Levels of Engagement and Definitions

Level of Engagement	Definition
Community Driven/Led	To support the actions of processes initiated, driven, or led by the priority population
Delegate	To place the decision-making in the hands of priority populations
Collaborate	To partner with priority populations in each aspect of the decision-making, including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solution
Involve	To work directly with priority populations throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered
Consult	To obtain priority population feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or solutions
Inform	To provide priority populations with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions

extent to which this occurred is unknown. Data from the templates were tabulated across groups for each month and compared at 2 time points: April 2021 (the beginning of the study) and March 2023 (2 years later).

Aim 3. Adopted PSE Strategies

FPCs submitted documentation on SNAP-Ed focused PSE strategies as each group began planning for and moved through the adoption and maintenance phases of implementation. FPCs identified their PSE strategies of focus based on community food assessments completed at the beginning of the Grant Program. FPCs were not encouraged to focus on any specific strategy(ies) by the study team; however, the strategies were required to align with a list of 106 PSE strategies established through a peer-review process of SNAP-Ed practitioners and evaluators at a national level. Templates were created based on the SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework (USDA SNAP-Ed Connection, n.d.-a) and included the following components: name of PSE strategy, setting, description of how the PSE strategy was determined to be reaching SNAP-Ed eligible populations, when and how the PSE strategy was identified as a community priority, short description of the PSE strategy, and the current stage of PSE planning or implementation. Data from the templates were inputted into the Program Evaluation and Reporting System (PEARS) that streamlines data collection, evaluation, and reporting of SNAP-Ed programs and interventions. Support from an experienced SNAP-Ed evaluator was provided to

the FPCs to determine the estimated number of people eligible for SNAP-Ed reached by each strategy at the conclusion of program fiscal years and this data was added into PSE entries. PEARS PSE data was then aggregated across FPCs and study years.

Aim 4. Capacity for Future Sustainability

At two different time points (January to February and September to October 2023), FPC representatives completed the capacity for future sustainability of their FPC assessments and a follow-up interview. An assessment tool was created using the online survey software Qualtrics based on the Program Sustainability Assessment Tool (PSAT) (Washington University in St. Louis, n.d.), a tool SNAP-Ed implementers are encouraged to use with program partners in sustainability planning. On both surveys, the complete PSAT was included, asking participants to rate five statements per eight domains ('environmental support,' 'funding stability,' 'partnerships,' 'organizational capacity,' 'program evaluation,' 'program adaptation,' 'communications,' and 'strategic planning') on a scale from 1 ('to little or no extent') to 7 ('to a very great extent'); a 'not able to answer' response option was also included for each statement. The baseline survey also included the following questions: name of FPC, respondent name, respondent email address, names and roles of others who worked to complete the survey, length of time the FPC had existed, and a place to provide comments or explanation of the scored responses for each domain. On the follow-up survey, the length of

time the FPC had existed question was omitted and two questions were added: how much training and technical assistance support the respondent would like to receive for their FPC on a scale from 1 (being 'a lot') to 5 (being 'none'); and an open-ended question to provide any comments on the kind of training and technical assistance that would be helpful for each domain. Follow-up interviews were conducted by the study coordinators with each FPC based on the information they provided in the survey. A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the principal investigator that included prompts around what led to each domain being a strength or an area for growth (including specific examples) and providing an opportunity to add any additional information or context that was not already provided in the survey responses for each domain. In addition, during follow-up interviews for the second time point, participants were provided with side-by-side comparisons of their scores from both time points. For scores that had changed substantially, participants were asked if there was any reason they could think of to account for that change. Interviews were conducted using a teleconferencing platform and lasted 45–75 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were reviewed by those who conducted the interviews to check for completeness and accuracy.

PSAT scores were averaged for each FPC individually and then across FPCs by domain. Interview transcripts were analyzed in accordance with a content analysis approach (White & Marsh, 2006) (author 1) using NVivo. An initial codebook was developed to capture challenges, strengths, opportunities, sources (e.g., current or potential sources for FPC funding), strategies (e.g., those used for identifying partners), methods (e.g., those used for evaluating FPC activities), and examples (e.g., how FPCs have adapted) as relevant for each domain and subcodes were developed throughout the coding process. The second interviews were coded to determine what remained the same versus changed overtime within each domain. The results were reviewed by those who conducted the interviews and member checked (C. K. Russell & Gregory, 2003) by the FPCs through a presentation and feedback session.

Results

Below we present the results for each aim of the study.

Aim 1. Readiness Assessment Interviews

Below we describe our sample followed by the themes identified for motivations, current capacities, and capacity building needs to start an FPC.

Sample Description

Between 1 and 4 individuals ($n = 15$) participated in each readiness assessment interview. Interviewees varied in background and included community members interested in starting an FPC (i.e., community champions), cooperative extension employees, and those employed by a nonprofit organization willing to serve as a fiscal sponsor of the FPC. Nonprofit employees held various roles within their organizations, from program coordinator to executive director. The organizations themselves ranged from those having a specific focus on food systems, to those having a broader focus on public health or philanthropy. Two groups reported that their FPC had yet to start, and five groups were in the preliminary stage of development. Six FPCs were geographically situated at the county level, and one within a tricounty region. Regarding organizational structure, five FPCs were housed in a nonprofit, one was a grassroots coalition, and one began as a grassroots coalition and became a stand-alone 501(c)(3) after approximately two years. Only one group had representation from a SNAP-Ed SIA (one of three other SIAs in the state outside of the one conducting this study), and no group had received SNAP-Ed funding previously.

Motivations and Innovation-Specific Capacities

Respondents were especially interested in receiving SNAP-Ed funding to start an FPC to improve food security and healthy food access through policy versus programming. Often relatedly, some respondents articulated how starting an FPC built upon or complemented existing organizational work, commonly food-based programming, such as was explained by the executive director of a nonprofit organization working predominantly in an urban location:

We already have a footprint in terms of food programs with summer feeding, and, like I said, with after school and the senior program we try to incorporate healthy eating and food here at the [name of organization]. And we're interested in even expanding that. We've been in talks with local farmers. We have a football field as well ... and one of the things that we've been talking to the farmers about is having a farmers market once a month. We have a community garden that we've partnered with [name of church]. We have a lot of partners ... just to be able to develop a council and be able to connect with those partners. And we could bring others in as well. But there's definitely an interest here, and we feel that we already have somewhat of a good footprint here, and we can expand upon that.

Similar themes—improving food security or healthy eating being a stated organizational priority or mission and having experience implementing food related programming—also surfaced when asked about the current alignment between the mission, values, and current work of the organizations applying for the funding and the general purpose and work of an FPC.

Respondents also sought out the funding in order to engage the broader community in an FPC, including to shift ownership of a newly forming FPC housed in a nonprofit organization working at a county level, as described by a program director:

We work really hard to be resident-informed but we really want to get to that space where it's resident-driven and really led, in that we are just helping to support them in any way that they might need. But right now it's organizationally led and we want to move to that space where it is much more equitable and that those that are experiencing the problem are really helping to drive the solutions.

Overwhelmingly, respondents spoke of a lack of geographic access to healthy foods as a main challenge in the food system at the time of the interview, especially due to the absence or closure of grocery stores. Other nongeographic factors limiting healthy food access were also mentioned,

including the existing farmers market in a largely rural county being “elitist,” the absence of nutrition education opportunities, and community members not having enough income to purchase healthy foods when otherwise available. The latter related to another predominant theme that surfaced, which was underlying causes of food insecurity, including high poverty rates or other social drivers of health (e.g., housing, transportation). Notably, only one grassroots group working in a primarily rural county spoke about a lack of awareness of the importance of a localized food system as a key challenge, as explained by the main organizer of the group:

I would say education around locally produced food and the importance of having food that is produced locally. Many farmers feel that people don't understand why their products cost more than they do at the grocery store, and they don't see the value in paying more for food that is produced locally. And we have a difficult time with that and feeling that people really understand the importance of investing in the economy that way, the local economy, and just our local farmers and producers.

When asked about current food system assets and strengths, most respondents spoke about having committed people and partners ready to be involved in an FPC, including the organizer of a county level healthy eating, active living coalition:

We have also a new market manager employed with the [name of city]. I met with him last week and I'm going to have him included in our Eat Smart meeting on the 1st of March, so it's exciting. ... We're going to add him into the partnership. ... We have a lot of fingers like a spider, you know, like everywhere, trying to help with all of this.

When asked to provide a general description of an FPC, most respondents said it is a group of people coming together to talk about food. Commonly, this included a particular focus on bringing community members, especially those most impacted by food insecurity, together with organizational representatives. Some respondents took the explanation a step further to explain that the reason for

coming together to talk about food was to then take action steps to inform policy change, as articulated by the paid organizer of a county coalition focused on overall health:

I understand it for myself is it's a group that comes together to help inform policies throughout whatever their area is and make sure that those people at the table are community but also stakeholders so you want people who can make it work sitting at the table. And then you're going to need the people who do the work at the table and then those affected by the work at the table. So, I think it's just a group of people who get together that can form the policies and inform the policies of their target community.

Relatedly, most respondents explained working on PSE strategies instead of or in addition to delivering programming as a way to lead to systemic, equitable, or sustained change since, as stated by a network manager at a nonprofit health entity focused on a tricounty region, "We could do programs all day long, but if we don't affect the system, make a change, get to the powers that be and speak to them and let them know what needs to change concerning food in our area, then our food system is always going to be lacking." Another common way respondents talked about a PSE approach was through providing strategy examples such as strengthening public transportation options for accessing healthy foods, agriculture rezoning, and menu labeling.

Respondents spoke about current buy-in secured both internally and externally to their organizations to start an FPC. Other than nonprofit organizations, there were no sectors or organization types that were mentioned commonly across groups. Examples, each mentioned in only one or two interviews, included colleges and universities, donors, elected officials, faith-based organizations, health care entities, hospice, libraries, school district, local government, produce distribution companies, farmers, restaurants, and grocery stores. There were also no common responses for buy-in that was still needed externally to start an FPC, with examples mentioned each one or two times, including community members,

state department of health, food truck owners, grocery store chain, health care, neighboring county, an FPC in a neighboring location, and a local university. Many respondents were leaders of their organizations with decision-making power, meaning they were the main internal buy-in needed for starting an FPC; however, other existing internal buy-in mentions were boards of directors, coalition partners, and hospital administration, which were contextual responses based on where the FPC would be housed. No groups noted additional buy-in still needed internally.

Overwhelmingly respondents spoke of established partners and volunteers as current or known resources they had available to leverage for their FPC. Another predominant theme was additional funding already secured or sharing examples of how they had been successful in securing funding in the past, including for the executive director of a nonprofit organization working in a predominantly urban setting:

And in terms of funding, we've been really good in terms of grant funding and other donations. [We are a] part of [name of a nonprofit fundraising event organized by a regional community foundation]. So, we're in a good fiscal standing at the moment. Last year was probably one of the best years for the [name of organization] in terms of funding. It was a really strong year for us, financially. So, I would say that we're really in a good position.

Less spoken about as both a current and needed resource was technical assistance opportunities. This included knowing that they would receive technical assistance through the Grant Program and needing guidance especially around how to structure an FPC.

Anticipating potential resistance or lack of interest was an overarching, most-reported theme that surfaced when respondents were asked about foreseen challenges they might encounter in starting an FPC. This included potential partners having limited time to be involved, people in positions of power resisting positive change and the empowerment of other people, and coalition members being hesitant to focus in on specific communities that are experiencing food inequities instead of tak-

ing a “let’s help everybody” approach.

The comprehensive list of themes that surfaced for influences on motivations and innova-

tion-specific capacities among grant awardees for starting an FPC in partnership with SNAP-Ed are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes for Influences on Motivation and Innovation-Specific Capacities to Start a Local Food Policy Council Among Interested Groups (n = 7)

Influences on Motivation	Themes
Interest in receiving funding to start or expand an FPC	Expand upon existing work
	Improve food security and healthy food access through policy
	Engage community
	Hire staff
Perspective on challenges within the current food system	Lack of grocery stores and other healthy food options, geographically
	Lack of healthy food options, other factors
	Underlying causes of food insecurity or associated social determinants of health
	Lack of awareness or understanding of the importance of a local food system
Perspective on assets within the current food system	Committed people and partners
	Emergency/charitable food system
	Food access strategies in place
FPC description	A group of people, including those working in the food system and those most impacted, coming together to talk about food
	Informing and advocating for policy change within the food system
Perceptions of changing policies, systems, and environments in comparison to programming	Leads to systemic, equitable, and/or sustained changes
	Specific example provided
	Complements programming already happening
	A way to leverage partnerships
Alignment between the purpose and work of FPCs and organizational mission, values, and current work	Experience implementing food related programming
	Improving food security or healthy eating a stated priority or part of mission or strategic plan
	Mission to empower people or improve overall wellbeing
Misalignment between the purpose and work of FPCs and organizational mission, values, and current work	Expands upon providing direct services or programming
	Nothing noted
Innovation-Specific Capacities	
Current buy-in	Within the organization
	Outside the organization
Needed buy-in	Impacted community members (e.g., communities of color, people living in zip codes experiencing higher rates of poverty)
	Specific sectors
Current or known resources	Established partners and volunteers
	Additional funding already secured and demonstrating success leveraging funding in the past
	Space
Needed resources	Technical assistance, including examples of successful FPCs
	Additional funding
	Staff
Foreseen challenges to be overcome	Technical assistance
	Messaging and communication
	COVID-19 pandemic
	Resistance or lack of interest

Aim 2. Sector and Priority Population Engagement

Below we present the results for sector and priority population engagement.

Sector Engagement

For each of the 19 sectors tracked, the overall number of FPCs reporting active engagement rose from April 2021 to March 2023 (Figures 1 and 2, next page). ‘Government/elected officials,’ ‘education,’ and ‘business/economic development’ became the most engaged sectors, while the sectors

of ‘planning’ and ‘immigrants/refugees’ were the least engaged after two years. FPC engagement with the sectors of ‘institutional food purchasers,’ ‘racial/ cultural/social justice,’ and ‘business/economic development’ increased the most over time, while the ‘philanthropy,’ ‘immigrants/refugees,’ and ‘anti-hunger advocates/emergency food provider’ sectors increased the least.

Priority Population Engagement

Engagement of priority populations increased from April 2021 to March 2023 for each of the six levels

Figure 3. Priority Population Engagement among Food Policy Councils at the Beginning of the SNAP-Ed Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant Program, April 2021 (n = 7)

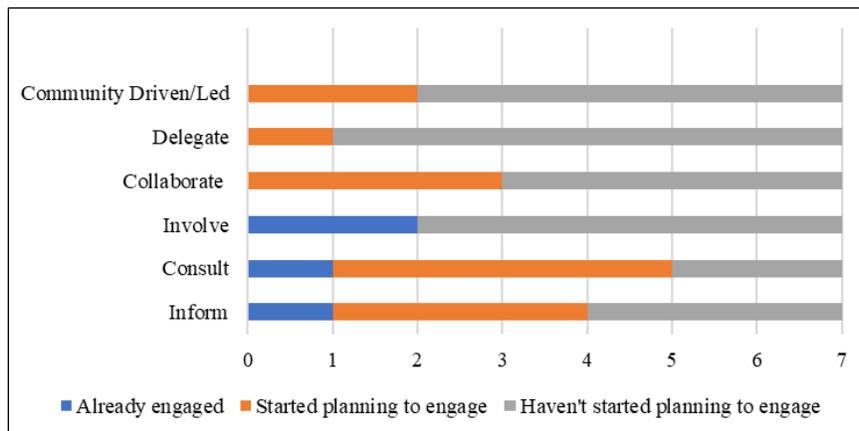
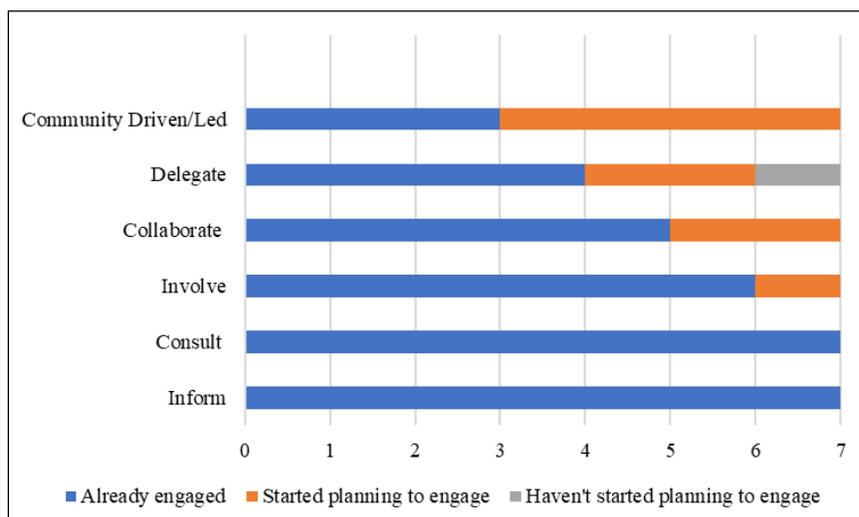


Figure 4. Priority Population Engagement Among Food Policy Councils Two Years After the Beginning of the SNAP-Ed Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant Program, March 2023 (n = 7)



of engagement (Figures 3 and 4). Priority population engagement via the ‘consult’ and ‘inform’ levels were reported as the highest, while ‘community driven/led’ and ‘delegate’ were reported as the lowest, with more FPCs still in the stage of planning for engaging priority populations versus actively engaging at these levels after two years. ‘Community driven/led,’ ‘delegate,’ and ‘involve’ saw the most increase over time, while ‘consult’ and ‘inform’ saw the least.

Aim 3. Adopted PSE Strategies

FPCs reported adopting 49 PSE strategies in multiple settings (i.e., the PSE strategy location), with ‘initiation, improvement, expansion, reinvigoration, or maintenance of edible gardens’ being the most common strategy implemented and ‘community organization’ the most common setting (Table 4).

Figure 1. Sector Engagement Among Food Policy Councils at the Beginning of the SNAP-Ed Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant Program, April 2021 (n = 7)

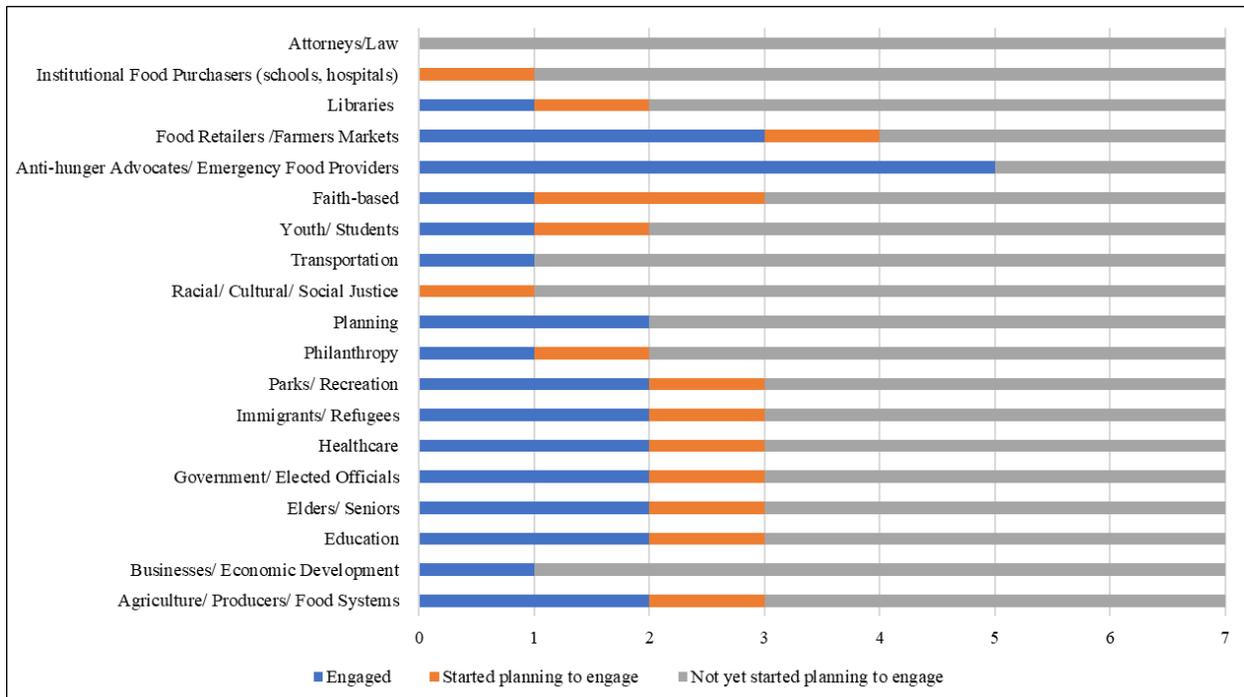


Figure 2. Sector Engagement Among Food Policy Councils Two Years After the Beginning of the SNAP-Ed Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant Program, March 2023 (n = 7)

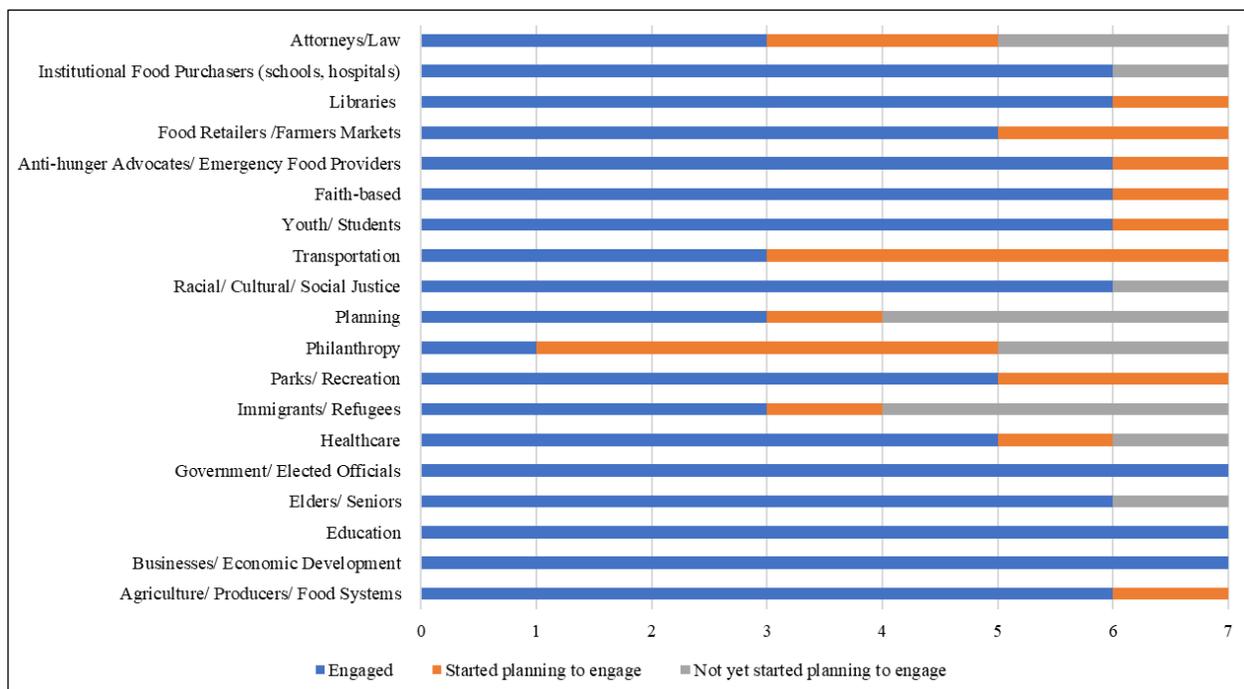


Table 4. Adopted Policy, System, or Environmental Change Strategies Reported by Food Policy Councils Funded by the SNAP-Ed Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant (n = 7)

Policy, System, or Environmental Change Strategy	# of Strategies	Settings	Aggregated Estimated SNAP-Ed Eligible Reach
Food programs including improvements in referral and enrollment procedures	1	Community organizations	231
Food system/policy council	7	Community organizations	Not calculated ^a
Increased space/amount/variety of healthy options (includes shelf space, number of booths, options on menus)	1	Small food stores	561
Initiation, improvement, expansion, reinvigoration, or maintenance of edible gardens	16	Before- and after-school programs, Community organizations, Faith-based centers/places of worship, Food assistance sites, Gardens, Health care clinics and hospitals, Libraries, Residential treatment centers	1,287
Kitchen/food preparation facilities that allow for healthier or more appealing options or nutrition education (e.g., refrigeration, appliances that allow for scratch cooking or cooking classes, etc.)	1	Community and recreation centers	Planning stage
Mechanism for distributing produce to families or communities (e.g., gardens, or farmers markets)	3	Community organizations	750
New food bank, food pantry, or emergency food distribution site	5	Community organizations, Food assistance sites	10,792
New healthy retail outlet	6	Places people go to “shop” for or otherwise access food to prepare and eat at home	5,879
Novel distribution systems to reach high-risk populations, such as home delivery for the elderly, backpack programs, etc.	3	Food assistance sites, Places people go to “shop” for or otherwise access food to prepare and eat at home, Schools (K-12, elementary, middle, and high)	644
Opportunities for parents/students/community to access fruits and vegetables from the garden	1	Gardens	386
Opportunities for parents/students/community to work in the garden	1	Gardens	386
Policy that encourages the establishment of new healthy retail outlets	1	Community organizations	Not calculated ^b
Storage for fresh produce and other perishable foods	1	Food assistance sites	Planning stage
Use of a clinical screening tool for food insecurity and/or a referral system to nutrition or healthy food access resources (e.g., direct education, food bag, resource list, produce prescription, etc.)	2	Community organizations, Health care clinics and hospitals	606

^a Not calculated due to a lack of methodology to calculate reach for a newly established FPC

^b Not calculated due to no new retail outlet being established as a result of the adopted policy at the time of reach calculation

Aim 4. Capacity for Future Sustainability

Tables 5 and 6 show PSAT and interest in receiving technical assistance scores and content analysis results describing sameness (i.e., the same themes surfaced at both time points) or changes over time (i.e., different themes surfaced between time points) for each sustainability domain. ‘Funding stability,’ ‘organizational capacity,’ and ‘adaptation’ domain scores increased while the remaining domain scores decreased (‘environmental support,’ ‘partnerships,’ ‘program evaluation,’ ‘communications,’ and ‘strategic planning’). FPCs shared differing experiences with several domains over time; some FPCs provided examples of more engagement from inside and outside of their FPCs and having identified additional funding, while others were still struggling with active involvement, shared leadership, and diversifying funding. Communication channels used and evaluation activities remained largely limited across FPCs. FPCs were most interested in receiving technical assistance related to the ‘strategic planning’ domain. A desire to learn of promising practices and receive examples from other FPCs were cross-cutting interest areas for desired technical assistance across domains.

Discussion

This is the first paper to explore readiness, associated outcomes, and capacity for future sustainability of FPCs created with funding, training, and technical assistance from SNAP-Ed. For the seven

groups included in the study, readiness was driven by internal and external factors related to motivation and capacity to innovate. This is reflected in existing toolkits and literature that highlight the importance of considering factors such as motivation to organize to improve the local food system (Scott et al., 2011), availability of resources (e.g., space, time, people, etc.), and opinions within the community regarding food insecurity (Achilich, 2015; Ruhf et al., 2017). In addition, the overall number of FPCs reporting active engagement with the 19 sectors tracked rose over two years, as did priority population engagement. Conversations with FPCs throughout the study, as well as the increases themselves, support prior literature indicating the importance of active sector and priority population engagement (Bassarab, Clark et al., 2019; Calancie et al., 2017; Calancie et al., 2018; Clayton et al., 2015; Schiff, 2008). Increased engagement was expected in the study since it was a stated objective, an allowable activity, and a training and technical assistance focus of the Grant Program. Increased engagement might also be attributed to changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic over the course of the study; at the beginning, opportunities for engagement were largely limited to those that could happen virtually due to restrictions on face-to-face convenings, which became progressively less of a barrier over time. Finally, the consistent patterns of engagement across FPCs could have been influenced by the cohort and learning collaborative approach

Table 5. Capacity for Future Sustainability Reported by Food Policy Councils Funded by the SNAP-Ed Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant Scores (n = 7)

Domain	Baseline Score ^a	Follow-Up Score ^a	Technical Assistance Score ^b
Environmental Support	5.29	5.01	2.57
Funding Stability	3.07	3.41	2.0
Partnerships	5.03	5.00	2.43
Organizational Capacity	5.06	5.31	2.71
Program Evaluation	5.10	4.78	2.67
Program Adaptation	5.21	5.34	2.86
Communications	4.70	4.29	2.57
Strategic Planning	3.94	3.81	1.71

^a Program Sustainability Assessment Tool Scoring Scale – 1 (to little extent) to 7 (to a very great extent)

^b Interest in Receiving Technical Assistance Scoring Scale – 1 (a lot), 2 (some), 3 (neutral), 4 (a little), 5 (none)

Table 6. Capacity for Future Sustainability Reported by Food Policy Councils Funded by the SNAP-Ed Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant Content Analysis for Follow-Up Interviews (n = 7)

Domain	Follow-Up Categories	Follow-Up Themes	Technical Assistance Themes
Environmental Support	Same over time	Limited engagement among general public	How to sustain leadership momentum
	Changes over time	Increased participation in meetings Engagement with FPC members and partners increased after CFA was completed Steering committee/council member leadership becoming more engaged; members carrying out action items Resident advisory board more established Able to help others through understanding PSE strategies or PSE strategies progressing Strategies in place to increase engagement among the general public Working to establish stronger connections between FPC and government leaders Broader coalition members helping make connections	
Funding Stability	Same over time	Grants predominant funding source (time-limited)	Having one place to find out about funding opportunities
		Challenges finding certain types of funding (e.g., to support PSE strategy implementation)	How to stand out in a grant application
	Changes over time	Development director for FPC fiscal agent organization hired	Identifying and security donors and sponsorships
		New council members/board members have financial planning/management expertise/experience or starting to plan for fundraising FPC now has their own 501(c)(3) organization	Strategies for ensuring funding stability Guidance on working under a FA
	Received additional funding to support FPC activities/have applied for additional funding	General not-for-profit financial management	
Partnerships	Changes over time	Shifting power to a community advisory board	Types of partnerships to engage
		Teamed up with a broader county health coalition	How to form connections and partnerships both within local communities and county-wide
		Building partnership with grocery stores, restaurants, farmers markets, and schools around specific PSE strategies	Different levels of partnerships and when and how to best engage different sectors
		Elected leaders being more aware and involved	
	New challenges	Fostering engagement now that CFA is completed Getting elected officials involved Getting general public aware and involved Getting partners to guide FPC goals Matching community members with specific areas of the FPC work	

continued

Domain	Follow-Up Categories	Follow-Up Themes	Technical Assistance Themes
		Heavily reliant on volunteers	How to collaborate versus compete without organizations
	Changes over time	Increased staff and funding capacity	Identifying funding for engagement activities
		Working on volunteer and staff position descriptions	
		Working toward recruiting individuals with specific supportive skills	
		Looking toward identifying interns	
Program Evaluation	Same over time	Partnering with an external entity	How to effectively communicate evaluation data
		Could still tell their story better	How to translate evaluation data into relatable information for the general public
		Does not have evaluation capacity	How to create new surveys to ensure data collected is useful in measuring change and informing actions
		Has not been a focus yet	
	Changes over time	Sometimes a disconnect with external evaluation team	
		An evaluation has been conducted that helped guide PSE strategies of focus	
		CFA provided evaluation data	
		Leveraged Community Health Needs Assessment process	
		Would like members to be more involved in evaluation activities	
Program Adaptation	Same over time	Have not gotten to the level of needing to adapt	How to be more proactive in adapting
		Food desert framing still limiting	
		Changing strategies of focus based on community feedback	
	New Examples	FPC members more empowered to make decisions	
		Action circle model for reviewing what is working or not	
		Taking a step back before proceeding with a specific PSE strategy	
Communications	Same over time	Still using social media, websites, and churches as main communications strategies	How to develop a communications plan
	Changes over time	Volunteers or students with communications skills engaged	Examples for marketing the FPC to the general public
		FPC members now using consistent language and messaging about the FPC	
		Communications subcommittee in development	
	New challenges	Changing the narrative from individual problems to community, systemic problems	
		Could be communicating story better to general public and lawmakers	
		Need to figure out ways to more effectively communicate to generate excitement about the FPC	
		Need an elevator speech for FPC members	

continued

Domain	Follow-Up Categories	Follow-Up Themes	Technical Assistance Themes
Strategic Planning	Same over time	No written plans in place	How to development a strategic plan
		Need to find the time	How to align to align government led plans with FPC plans
More shared ownership needed			
	Changes over time	Completing the first sustainability assessment got them thinking about it more	
		Have received more funding	
		Have people with financial and strategic planning expertise now involved in the FPC	
		Plan actively in development	

FPC = food policy council

PSE = policy, system, and environmental change

CFA = community food assessment

FA = fiscal agent

employed through the Grant Program, where one FPC finding success with engagement could have influenced other FPCs to take the same approach.

Despite overall increased engagement, FPCs that reported having priority populations lead or drive activities remained limited at the study conclusion, with most still in the planning stages of executing this approach. This could be due to SNAP-Ed federal guidance that makes paying people eligible for SNAP-Ed to participate in community food assessments or FPCs difficult, requiring pre-approval and paperwork to be completed, including providing notifications that receiving compensation could impact the receipt of public benefits such as SNAP (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2024). When the Grant Program began, federal guidance was even more unclear on how to make these kinds of payments and was, therefore, not included as an allowable expense, which could have contributed to a lack of this level of engagement. Additionally, the requirement of groups to be a 501(c)(3) organization, government agency, or secure a fiscal agent could have deterred some grassroots groups made up of community members from applying, which also could have contributed to a lack of leadership from people most impacted by food inequities. Ensuring that people eligible for SNAP-Ed are leading FPCs is critical for shifting power dynamics and advancing equity, which could be achieved through more flexibilities in SNAP-Ed funding allowability, diversified funding, and requiring that future Grant Program applicants have representation from impacted people during the application phase.

Many of the most common PSE strategies FPCs from this study chose to focus on (e.g., edible gardens, new food bank or pantry, new healthy retail outlet) were related to common priorities that FPCs throughout the U.S. identified in surveys (e.g., healthy food access, anti-hunger and anti-poverty, economic development) (Bassarab et al., 2019; Santo et al., 2021). Certain priorities were common in SNAP-Ed programming as well; for example, edible gardens were found to be the most predominant PSE strategy implemented across the southeastern region of the U.S. in program year 2020, which is also the most common strategy reported in this study (Public Health Institute, 2021). The PSE strategies selected also relate to the sectors engaged, including ‘emergency food providers’ and ‘food retailers/farmers markets,’ which were the most engaged sectors at the beginning of the study and remained high throughout. These findings also align with the readiness assessment results that identified a lack of food retail as a primary food system challenge and emergency and charitable food systems as key assets.

A common theme of FPC sustainability assessments was that SNAP-Ed funding alone was not adequate to support FPCs. This finding supports earlier research indicating the need for additional funding, specifically for staff time to start and sustain FPCs (Bassarab, Santo & Palmer 2019; Santo et al., 2021) and underscores the importance of SNAP-Ed as a funding stream to support FPCs while also demonstrating the need for diversified funding. Relatedly, engagement from the philanthropy sector remained low throughout the study.

Also, at the end of the study, FPCs reported continued challenges in evaluating and communicating their work as limitations for ensuring sustainability, which are typically critical components of securing funding. Building FPC capacity in these areas could, in turn, help address funding challenges.

Strengths and Limitations

The study has limitations that should be considered when drawing conclusions, including that the small sample limits the generalizability of the findings, although the sample size is appropriate for the case study approach employed (Boddy, 2016). Further limiting generalizability is that the FPCs in the study were required to work within SNAP-Ed funding parameters, which included using the funding for specific allowable activities, focusing on a prescribed list of PSE strategies, and focusing PSE strategies in locations meeting income eligibility; therefore, FPCs developed without these restrictions might have produced different results.

For the readiness assessments, the sample included those who expressed an interest in starting or expanding FPCs, and therefore the results likely reflect increased readiness when compared to other similar types of groups. Sector and priority population engagement were self-reported by FPCs, who might have had a different interpretation of the categories or levels of interest than members of these populations. In some cases, the sustainability assessments were taken by different people within the FPC who might have had different perspectives, limiting the ability to make comparisons between the two time points. Further, the authors (i.e., those collecting the study data) were also the ones funding and providing training and technical assistance to the FPCs, which might have created a situation where participants felt pressure to respond favorably about the state and work of their FPC throughout the study.

Despite these limitations, the study provides important insights to inform future research, policy, and practice, as discussed below. The longitudinal study approach that includes multicomponent areas of exploration and applies the use of established frameworks and tools also fills a notable gap in the current FPC literature. In

addition, this is the first study to explore FPCs in the context of SNAP-Ed—the nation’s largest nutrition education and obesity prevention program.

Recommendations

FPCs created through SNAP-Ed demonstrated readiness and were successful in facilitating the adoption of PSE changes and engaging diverse sectors, providing evidence for this approach to be included as a SNAP-Ed intervention. SNAP-Ed Connection includes a database of Evidence-Based SNAP-Ed Interventions (USDA SNAP-Ed Connection, n.d.-b) that are encouraged to be used within programming. New interventions are accepted after undergoing a review process that occurs on an irregular basis, with the next time expected to occur in the spring of 2025. Currently, 30 interventions have a focus on sectors of influence outcomes and 68 on environmental settings outcomes (i.e., PSE adoption), while 107 focus on individual-level outcomes. The inclusion of FPCs as an intervention could increase the adoption of this approach among SIAs, leading to additional funding for scalability and sustainability.

The findings also have implications for programs outside of SNAP-Ed. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have begun including FPCs as an encouraged approach within their State Physical Activity and Nutrition (SPAN) program. For example, potential activities for expanding nutrition incentive and produce prescription programs includes to “strengthen or launch regional, state, or local food policy councils of diverse, cross-sector food system partners” (CDC, 2023, p. 1). Lessons learned from this study can help inform strategies for ensuring these groups are ready to form and have the capacity for future sustainability. Tailored readiness and sustainability tools specific to FPCs should be created through a future, larger-scale research study. Additionally, a database of promising practices and examples from FPCs related to sector and priority population engagement, as well as each sustainability domain included in the PSAT, should be created, presenting an opportunity for cross-agency collaboration between the USDA and CDC. 

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