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New York State Community Food Collaborative

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The only thing stronger than a coalition is a coalition of coalitions.

If this is not a hard-and-fast rule, it's at least a theory that the New York State Community Food Collaborative (NYSCFC) is testing out.

New York State has no shortage of entities working on food policy. However, as is often the case, there were redundancies in their collective work, and thus opportunities to create new efficiencies. But it requires lots of conversations to fully explore those opportunities.

Funding from the New York State Health Foundation has helped ignite those conversations over the last three years. The foundation was already funding many of these entities separately. The next step was to get them to talk to each other, build trust, and create a sense of community while recognizing the value that could come from their collective effort.

"That [funding] really forced us to get together more frequently — not that we needed a lot of force — but just needed a little bit of nudging," said Josh Stephani, director of the Adirondack Food System Network.

Stephani described how, over the past two years, "it turned from all these different entities orbiting one another, being relatively unaware of what was happening, and also individually advocating for some of the same things — increases in SNAP, funding for food emergency programs, funding for farmers — and then with this recent funding we were able to learn best practices from one another."

By the time it held its kickoff event in December 2025, the NYSCFC had grown to 16 food policy entities, 12 of which are place-based, along with four others that do statewide policy work.

"We're not trying to create a new organization. We're trying to steward a network of relationships," Stephani said. "This is more like a collective that we're trying to build,



which I think is different than other models."

As a veteran of what he called — with some wry humor — the "nonprofit industrial complex," Stephani acknowledged that the quest for funding tends to create competition among nonprofits in any region or sector, and he believes "that leads to such a deficit in communication and deficit in collaboration."

This new network is trying to create a departure from that phenomenon, as Stephani described:

"It's very rare to approach this as, 'Hey, we are not here to do programs. We're not here to step on toes; to create a policy that would lead the charge.' We're here to say, 'Hey, let's go deeper rather than wider. Let's build stronger relationships and not worry about trying to do too much.'"

Stephani wants to help all the partners in the coalition do the work "better and more efficiently and more holistically and collaboratively, and that's such a weird way to think about it."

Siedra Loeffler, program coordinator for the New York State Community Food Collaborative, is co-steering the food policy network with Stephani. She also sees unique qualities in the group.

"I feel super grateful to be working with everybody," Loeffler said. "It's been truly inspiring work, and people have been so supportive of each other and transparent about a lot of things that I don't think people generally are, and I find that to be so refreshing.

"It kind of breaks down a little bit of the 'nonprofit industrial complex' that Josh mentioned. Truly supporting people is an anti-capitalist feat, and I think the folks we're working with are on board with that. So that helps hinder the barriers."

Stephani echoed those remarks and added:

"I think this work would be happening regardless of funding and regardless of our limited time. There's such a value in having and maintaining our relationships. I think back to our main convening. A lot of our grants had already ended, but we're still showing up. Our organizations see this as a value add — a more connected state. And I think the transparency piece is unheard of."

Some of the group's focus in the next year to year and a half, Stephani said, will be on creating a map that captures the policy priorities of these various food policy entities. It will help the network get the lay of the land, regarding policy work already happening, and help them play the long game in streamlining that work.

"Part of the challenge with all food policy councils is that we're very much the 10-year, 20-year game, as opposed to putting food directly on tables tomorrow," Stephani said.

He pointed out another persistent problem with the nonprofit model. "It's this idea that we need to produce a tangible outcome, and we often lose the person's connection/collaboration as an outcome itself," he said. "For me, the most beneficial part of this network over the last two years has been being able to pick up the phone and say, 'I'm having a problem defining our membership,' or, 'I need to write a new charter,' or, 'Do you have a connection here with this funder?' Or 'How do you explain upstream, long-

term thinking to a funder who has only ever done program-based pieces? ‘

“If we realistically want to make social change happen with resiliency, I need to learn from those other people [in the network], and they’re such an amazing force to tap into.”

Both Stephani and Loeffler couldn’t say enough about the value of the New York State Health Foundation as a partner that understands all this big-picture thinking.

Stephani said, “They’re helping to change the thinking with other funders. They’re really serving as advocates within that philanthropic world for long-term, systems thinking. Not just about supporting the emergency needs but also looking 10 steps beyond that.”

As Loeffler pointed out, the work of food policy councils “can fall flat, potentially, unless you have someone explaining the importance of long-term thinking. It’s not about pounds of food going to the pantry. It’s about supporting the ecosystem and the food system in our regions. That’s invaluable to have a funder that really understands the importance of that and is alongside you advocating for that work to be happening in the state.”