

# FINDINGS FROM HEALTHY FOOD FOR DENVER'S KIDS 2020-2023 EVALUATION



**SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS EVALUATION WORK**  
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# BACKGROUND

The 2018 Denver Ballot Measure 302, the Healthy Food for Denver's Kids (HFDK) initiative established a fund for healthy food and food-based education for Denver youth by increasing sales and use tax by 0.08% in the City and County of Denver. The ballot measure was approved in November 2018, and went into effect in January 2019. This fund is expected to generate \$11 million annually and will be collected from Jan. 1, 2019, through Dec. 31, 2028, and distributed by Dec. 31, 2029.

The Denver Department of Public Health and Environment (DDPHE) distributes these funds through competitive grants to non-profits, local government agencies, and public schools throughout the city of Denver. DDPHE contracted with an external evaluator, Change Matrix, for the first four years of the initiative. CAI has since been contracted to continue the HFDK evaluation from 2023-2027. CAI is a non-profit organization that works at the local, state, national, and international levels to help organizations improve health care and social services for marginalized communities. With nearly 15 years of experience working with nutrition programs for children and caregivers, CAI is eager to continue working in the evaluation of healthy food and food-based education to improve and respond to both persistent and emerging disparities that particularly impact low-income and minority children and families in Denver.



## REPORT PURPOSE

This report presents a **synthesis of key takeaways, major gaps, and future funding opportunities** from data collected between August 2020-July 2023 by the previous evaluator. CAI will use this information to inform the updated evaluation system and ensure continuity between evaluation partners. Core activities for CAI's evaluation includes: engaging in strategic planning with the HFDK Commission and staff; leading the evaluation of the HFDK grantee programs to understand their successes, challenges, and the impact of the HFDK funding portfolio on healthy food access and nutrition education for children, youth, and their families living in Denver; and providing training and technical assistance (T/TA) on evaluation approaches to support grantee data collection and community engagement approaches to promote programmatic impact and assess meaningful multi-level outcomes for Denver, the HFDK initiative, grantees, and the communities they serve.



## DATA SOURCES

This report summarizes data from:

- HFDK Year 1, 2, and 3 Final Evaluation Reports
- Key Informant Interview Preliminary Findings (2023)
- Community Listening Session Summaries (2022-2023)



# KEY FINDINGS: HFDK GRANTEE ACTIVITIES

## HFDK supported extensive growth in meal distribution.

HFDK has made a significant impact on the Denver community by distributing \$66.5 million in grants to 95 organizations serving low-income and under-served youth. These grants have supported local government agencies, public schools, and nonprofits in their efforts to improve the lives of young people and their families.

The number of funded grantees each year includes:

- Year 1 (August 2020-July 2021): 25
- Year 2 (August 2021-July 2022): 39
- Year 3 (August 2022-July 2023): 49

The below table showcases the HFDK funded grantees activities and accomplishments during the first three years of this program. Notably, of all the HFDK activities, meals served to children, youth, and families increased the most. There was a 25,451% increase in meals distributed between August 2020 through July 2023.

**Table 1: Grantee Activities and Accomplishments**

HFDK Grantee Activities	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total	% Increase from Y1 to Y3
Meals served to children, youth, and families	52,524	13,289,779*	13,420,632	26,762,935	25,451%
Snacks served to children, youth, and families	66,400	3,959,493	4,275,496	8,301,389	6,339%
Pounds of food distributed to partners	2,971,645	2,608,410	4,016,895	9,596,950	35%
Children & youth who participated in education	13,047	13,047	47,050**	73,144	261%
Total instruction hours of nutrition education	5,106	10,895	9,090	25,091	78%
New youth job & Internships created	76	169	220	465	189%
Pounds of food harvested from local gardens/farms	21,502	95,602	86,522	203,626	302%

*Data Source: Years 1-3 HFDK Annual Reports*

\*The number of meals/snacks served increased significantly in Year 2 due to three grantees: Denver Public Schools Food and Nutrition Services (DPS FNS), Food for Thought Denver, and new grantee Kaizen Food Rescue. DPS FNS provided 80% of all meals served in Year 2 and Kaizen Food Rescue provided more than 50% of all distributed snacks.

\*\*The number of children and youth who participated in education increased significantly in Year 3 because informal learning opportunities were included, such as those by Bright by Text, who sent out text messages to youth about food education or food access opportunities.



# KEY FINDINGS: HFDK GRANTEE ACTIVITIES

## Children Enrolled in WIC Increased 116% and Children Enrolled in SNAP increased 2,389%

Investing in community organizations and institutions that provide outreach and enrollment for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, Children (WIC) programs is fundamental to HFDK’s grantmaking strategy. Through this support, HFDK has helped families access crucial nutrition assistance. Children enrolled in WIC increased 116% and children enrolled in SNAP increased 2,839% from August 2021 through July 2023.

The number of HFDK grantees enrolling participants in federal nutrition assistance programs during the past 2 years is listed below:

- Year 2 (August 2021-July 2022): 9
- Year 3 (August 2022-July 2023): 13

The table below shows the numbers of individuals enrolled in WIC, SNAP, Child Tax Credit (CTC), and Free/Reduced-Price Meal programs in Year 2 and Year 3 of the HFDK initiative.

**Table 2: Individuals Enrolled in Food & Nutrition Assistance Programs**

Enrollment Activities	Year 2	Year 3	Total	% Increase from Y2 to Y3
WIC Enrollment – Adult Women	305	834	1,139	173%
WIC Enrollment – Children/youth	861	1,863	2,724	116%
SNAP Enrollment – Adult women	230	10,587	10,817	4,503%
SNAP Enrollment – Children/youth	354	10,403	10,757	2,839%
p-EBT or free/reduced-price meals	51,252	50,901	102,153	-1%
Child tax credit	204	15	219	-93%

*Data Source: Years 2-3 HFDK Annual Reports*

Many grantees not only facilitate direct enrollment of individuals in federal nutrition assistance programs but also engage in proactive outreach endeavors to promote enrollment. These initiatives encompass disseminating informative materials and resources among program participants. For instance, in Year 2, 33 grantees, and in Year 3, 26 grantees, reported disseminating information about programs such as WIC, SNAP, the Child Tax Credit, and Free and Reduced-Price School Meals. Through these actions, each grantee assumes an educational role within their community, raising awareness among residents about the array of federal, state, and local nutrition assistance programs available.



# KEY FINDINGS: FOOD SYSTEMS GAPS

The previous evaluation team reported on several gaps in the Denver food system throughout their Years 1-3 reports. These gaps were primarily identified through Key-Informant Interviews (KII) and were divided into key themes using The Water of Systems Change framework.

The primary gaps identified through the Years 1-3 reports focused on four system change conditions: resource flows, relationships/connections, mental models, and policies (definitions provided at bottom of page 4). While the first three conditions can be addressed by HFDK, the gaps related to policies fall primarily outside of the narrow scope of the HFDK charge. More specific detail about the food system gaps within each theme are listed below:

<b>Resource Flow Gaps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low enrollment in food and nutrition programs due to lack of awareness, accessibility barriers, negative perceptions such as stigma or fear, and limited resources to support outreach/enrollment.</li> <li>• Variability in the quality of meals served, especially in schools that lack the infrastructure to prepare scratch meals.</li> </ul>
<b>Relationships &amp; Connections Gaps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Failure to incorporate culturally responsive foods into meals, snacks, and groceries provided</li> </ul>
<b>Mental Model Gaps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of nutrition knowledge among children and families resulting in poor healthy eating habits and/or cooking skills.</li> </ul>
<b>Policy Gaps (Primarily Outside of HFDK Role)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systemic barriers (i.e., poverty, housing, transportation) that impact and coexist with food insecurity.</li> <li>• Federal child nutrition program requirements, exclusive eligibility requirements, and program guidelines can be limiting and can serve as a barrier to food access.</li> <li>• Ending the pandemic program waivers and SNAP emergency allotments enacted during the pandemic.</li> <li>• Lack of coordination/collaboration across food system actors, such as the separation of charitable and retail food systems.</li> <li>• Limited resources, including insufficient funding, staff, kitchen infrastructure, and delivery infrastructure.</li> <li>• Lack of culturally responsive foods in the WIC package.</li> <li>• Enrollment barriers for sites:</li> <li>• Barriers to CACFP enrollment and participation for interested daycare homes and childcare centers</li> <li>• Barriers for smaller grocers, particularly local culturally specific stores interested in participating in WIC and SNAP.</li> </ul>

## System Change Conditions - Definitions

- 1. Policies:** Government, institutional, and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide the entity's own and others' actions.
- 2. Practices:** Espoused activities of institutions, coalitions, networks, and other entities targeted to improving social and environmental progress. Also, within the entity, the procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise their work.
- 3. Resource Flows:** How money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed.
- 4. Relationships & Connections:** Quality of connections and communication occurring among actors in the system, especially among those with differing histories and viewpoints.
- 5. Power Dynamics:** The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among individuals and organizations.
- 6. Mental Models:** Habits of thought; deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk.



# RECOMMENDATIONS FROM YEARS 1-3 FOR MAXIMIZING HFDK FUNDING

The CM Years 1-3 Evaluation Reports also highlights several opportunities to improve ways to maximize HFDK funding. HFDK staff and Commission can use these recommendations to help prioritize how future funds are allocated. These opportunities were primarily identified through key informant interviews and community listening sessions and align with the four key grantmaking strategies included in the HFDK Theory of Change:

1. Invest in Equitable Food Education
2. Invest in Equitable Healthy Food Access
3. Invest in Federal Nutrition Assistance Program Outreach and Enrollment
4. Invest in Food Sovereignty and Policy, Systems, and Environmental Changes

The future funding opportunities are included below by HFDK strategy:



## Invest in Equitable Food Education

1. Expand educational opportunities using culturally responsive models, especially ones designed to engage the entire family.
2. Support grantees distributing food to also prioritize food education (e.g., introduce new foods to families), especially those working with refugee and immigrant populations.
3. Expand opportunities for children and youth to participate in experiential learning (e.g., cooking demonstrations, gardening workshops, art interventions).
4. Fund purchase of books and curricula on food, nutrition, and gardening and other educational materials for early childhood and school environments



## Invest in Healthy Food Access

1. Explore infrastructure interventions in neighborhoods impacted by food apartheid and lower food access.
2. Continue to fund grantees that are distributing food via delivery and mobile strategies that address stigma and transportation barriers.
3. Use data on HFDK grantee reach to identify areas of focus for future funding. While grantees served Denver youth living in priority neighborhoods, there were a few priority neighborhoods that were less represented (East Colfax, Washington Virginia Vale, Windsor, Goldsmith, Hampden, and Kennedy). HFDK should consider prioritizing these neighborhoods in future rounds of funding.
4. Fund strategies that bring healthier foods into schools, including infrastructure projects and sourcing of local produce.



## Invest in Federal Nutrition Assistance Program Outreach and Enrollment

1. Promote CACFP by funding organizations to help sign up providers to become CACFP sites.
2. Use community-based models (e.g., promotoras or community health workers) to support enrollment.
3. Fund organizations that are well-connected to FFN (friend, family, and neighborhood) providers. FFN providers are ineligible to participate in CACFP and struggle to provide healthy food for youth clients. FFN providers could benefit from being connected to farmers markets, community gardens, and mobile food pantries.



## Invest in Food Sovereignty and Policy, Systems, and Environmental Changes

1. Develop multi-pronged equity strategy by taking a ‘curb cut’ approach
2. Center collaboration with communities and other funders by promoting mutual aid among nonprofits, explore participatory grantmaking, refer unfunded applicants and grantees to other funders, and pursue collaborative grantmaking with other local funders.
3. Fund grantees to support long-term food sovereignty work and contribute to the long-term sustainability and resiliency of local food systems.
4. Improve grantmaking process by engaging in focused outreach/relationship building with grassroots organizations, clarifying eligibility criteria, having direct conversations with applications about the extent to which their programs reflect equitable, culturally responsive, and community-based practices and providing unfunded applicants with substantial feedback.

# CONCLUSIONS

Over the last three years, HFDK has made significant strides towards improving healthy food access and food-based education to Denver youth. Meals served to children, youth, and families increased by 25,451%, snacks increased by 6,339%, and participation in educational programs increased by 261% over the course of the three years. Furthermore, child/youth enrollment in SNAP increased by 116% and 2,839% for WIC enrollment during the last two years of the initiative.

At the same time, food-system gaps, and recommendations on how to maximize HFDK funds were identified by key-informants and through community listening sessions. The gaps in the food system primarily focused on lack of resources, quality of connections and communication, mental models such as deeply held beliefs and assumptions, and systemic challenges and policy barriers. The opportunities for future funding that were identified were categorized by the four key grantmaking strategies included in the HFDK Theory of Change: 1) Invest in equitable healthy food access; 2) Invest in equitable food education; 3) Invest in federal nutrition assistance program outreach and enrollment; and 4) Invest in food sovereignty and policy, systems, and environmental changes. These reflections and recommendations are helpful in identifying future areas for HFDK to prioritize funding as well as for CAI to identify areas to strengthen the evaluation system to more specifically measure outcomes that assess impact.





# NEXT STEPS

CAI plans to use the background and grantee-level data from the past three years to inform an updated HFDK evaluation plan. The plan will include continuation of several previous measures to ensure continuity between evaluators, while also adding new measures to better assess outcomes. Key steps are outlined below:



## STRATEGIC PLANNING CONVENING

CAI convened grantees, commissioners, and DDPHE staff to reflect on HFDK's original vision and aims; review and identify strategic measures to be used in evaluating grantee activities and assessing overall impact; and develop strategies for improving ways to measure HFDK progress and outcomes.



## UPDATE TO HFDK MEASURES

Using the HFDK Theory of Change, CAI reviewed the previous evaluator's measures and mapped their relevance to the identified HFDK outcomes and impacts and identified areas for improvement to further demonstrate impact. CAI identified three key categories to stratify reporting: 1) Food Access & Distribution; 2) Food & Nutrition Education; 3) Food and Nutrition Assistance. Each grantee will be required to complete the relevant survey questions for their agency within at least one of these categories. CAI plans to present the updated and final measures at an upcoming all-grantee convening in April 2024.



## GATHER EVALUATION COMMITTEE AND GRANTEE FEEDBACK

CAI presented draft proposed measures to the HFDK Evaluation Committee to gather feedback on proposed output and outcome measures and identify any missing metrics. CAI THEN hosted cluster TA/listening sessions with 29 grantees to share proposed metrics and gain a better understanding regarding data collection feasibility.



## ALL GRANTEE CONVENING

CAI will host an all-grantee convening in April 2024 to review final measures with grantees and commissioners. CAI will review how these measures are connected to the HFDK Theory of Change.



## PILOT PERIOD

The new HFDK grantee-level measures will be piloted beginning in May 2024. CAI will work with grantees throughout the reporting period to ensure that they are able to collect the measures and refine any measures as needed based on feedback from the pilot. We propose to pilot the grantee-level measures with grantees in June 2024, asking them to report on Quarter 3 data. This will give grantees about 6 weeks to implement any changes to their data collection systems. Measures and the reporting tool will be refined as needed based on feedback and data review from the pilot.



## IMPLEMENTATION TA AND WEBINAR

CAI will provide training, technical assistance, and ongoing support to grantees for data collection and reporting.



## MACRO EVALUATION

In addition to having grantees collect and report on key performance measures over the upcoming four years, CAI will simultaneously seek to answer questions regarding the broader Denver food system to understand HFDK's impact on a macro-level. This includes identifying if HFDK is primarily reaching individuals in high-need neighborhoods, reducing food insecurity, increasing the number of youth receiving healthy and culturally relevant food, and improving food literacy and skills in Denver. CAI will work with HFDK to use a combination of grantee-reported data, client-reported data, and community-based participatory approaches to assess key questions that will inform progress achieved throughout the city.