



*Raja Baptiste, City EBT Onsite Manager, distributes Link Match to a market customer*

## Link Up Illinois Building Statewide Infrastructure

When the 61st Street Farmers Market introduced ‘Link Match’ in 2009—which matches Illinois Link (SNAP) purchases to increase access to affordable fresh produce—Experimental Station had not envisioned that it would be replicated across Illinois. Experimental Station also did not envision that by 2022, our Link Up Illinois program would successfully expand across the state to over 100 farmers markets and food co-ops. The past year has marked a turning point in building statewide infrastructure for the program.

Low-income populations are at significantly greater risk of negative health outcomes, a disparity deepened by the pandemic. Federal, state, and city governments recognized this and invested in Link Up Illinois to improve food security among those living in poverty. With major increases in funding, the program has been able to expand its staff and create regional ‘hubs.’ These hubs provide outreach and

Link Match support to small, limited-capacity farmers markets operating in their region. The hubs are critical in bringing Link Match to all corners of the state.

Experimental Station has partnered with Food Works in Carbondale to create a hub in Southern Illinois and with The Land Connection in Champaign/Urbana to create a Central Hub. This year, Link Up Illinois has expanded Link Match to eight new low-capacity farmers markets, with more in the pipeline.

Libby Ervin of Food Works confirms, “The creation of the Southern IL Link Hub [...] is a benefit for customers, farmers, markets and the community. Many farmers markets are run by volunteers without the time or financial resources to handle the administrative, record keeping, and reporting requirements of a grant. We support them in whatever ways needed.”

*Link Up Illinois continued on page 2 ▶*



## Youth Perspective: BBW's Summer Program

On a warm Monday morning in July, eight Blackstone Bicycle Works (BBW) youth met their instructor Alex Lamers to learn about bicycles. This would be the first time youth were back in person at BBW since summer 2021.

*Youth Perspective continued on page 2 ▶*



## Hoop House Nourishes a Community

Every Saturday during the growing season, the residents of Jackson Park Terrace (JPT) gather in their hoop house to harvest. In the hoop house, the 61st Street Farmers Market Manager and the Head Gardener plant, harvest, and provide the JPT residents with food education programming.

*Hoop House continued on page 3 ▶*



## Link Up Illinois Building Statewide Infrastructure

With the added support of the Illinois Farmers Market Association, Link Up Illinois has also been able to offer training and outreach to markets across the state.

Thanks to increased funding and expanded outreach, Link Up Illinois has seen record numbers of SNAP/Link recipients shopping at Illinois farmers markets. Link Up Illinois will continue to build our statewide infrastructure to provide affordable access to healthy foods to Illinoisans in all parts of the state. The program will drive SNAP and Link Match dollars into the pockets of our local farmers, stimulate local economies, and increase local production of food. It is a tall order, but we are up to it!

# Youth Perspective: BBW's Summer Program

Max was one of those youths who joined the program. "What I like about bikes is how you can go places and have fun, and [...] you get a nice exercise," said Max.

Max is an avid biker himself, biking to school and with his friends in the neighborhood. "I wanted to join [the BBW Summer Program] because it would give me more knowledge about bikes and how to fix bikes," Max said.

While Max already knew something about fixing bikes before attending the program, the Summer Program taught him many new things. The instructor would disassemble certain parts of the youth's bike and ask them to reassemble it.

Max also expressed an increased sense of independence being able to fix his own bike. Now, he no longer has to bring his bike to the bicycle mechanic, since he can do it himself. A particularly fond memory for Max was when he was able to fix his friend's flat tire with the skills he learned in the Summer Program. "It was complicated at first,

[...] but I felt happy because normally, [...] we can't do anything about [our broken bikes]. And now, since I know how to fix a bike [...] my friends and I can keep riding together." It gave Max an increased sense of pride and motivation to keep learning about bikes.

"I would definitely come back [to BBW] after school working on bikes," Max said, and BBW is happy to have him!

**"It was complicated at first, [...] but I felt happy because normally, [...] we can't do anything about [our broken bikes]. And now, since I know how to fix a bike [...] my friends and I can keep riding together."**

**— Max  
a BBW's summer camp participant**



Blackstone Bicycle Work's Summer Camp



# Hoop House Nourishes a Community



Austin Keating



Students from Carnegie Elementary School visiting the Hoop House

**It's been a wonderful experience to share with and learn from the resident gardeners and members of the Jackson Park Terrace community as the garden has evolved over the years. Each year leaves me more excited to see what the next will bring and who else will get involved.**

**— Austin Keating  
Hoop House Head Gardener**

Young and old can enjoy the bounty of fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs the community collectively grew and cared for. The hoop house is a real source of pride and nourishment for the JPT residents.

For six weeks in the spring and two weeks in October, Emily Cross, the 61st Street Farmers Market Manager, leads a group of third graders from Carnegie Elementary School to the hoop house for their hands-on gardening classes. There, they learn about the seasons, crops, and nutrition. In the summer, the hoop house welcomes teens enrolled in the Blackstone Bicycle Works Summer Camp for a similar curriculum. The hoop house is at the heart of Experimental Station's food education efforts.

For the past nine years, Experimental Station has supported the JPT hoop house by providing a Head Gardener to help grow and harvest vegetables and lead gardening instruction. Austin Keating, our current Head Gardener, has been supporting the hoop house since 2016. Several residents contribute their time planting the crops in the spring, helping to

maintain the garden plots, and harvesting the crops for distribution to fellow residents.

"It's been a wonderful experience to share with and learn from the resident gardeners and members of the Jackson Park Terrace community as the garden has evolved over the years," shared Austin Keating. "Each year leaves me more excited to see what the next will bring and who else will get involved."

This year, Experimental Station also purchased raised beds to upgrade the JPT hoop house garden site, which is located across the street from the future Obama Presidential Center. The raised beds allow JPT adults and families to grow their own produce with Austin's guidance. Austin has brought life to the site, connecting with the residents and building community.

Experimental Station is delighted that the new owners of the JPT property—Preservation Of Affordable Housing (POAH) and Jonathan Rose Properties—are committed to and supportive of our work. Together, we aim for the hoop house and its food education activities to become a model for community engagement around food and wellness.



# Blackstone Bicycle Works Alumni Successes

Blackstone Bicycle Works alumni continue to make academic and professional advancements in the years after graduating from our program (and outgrowing their aprons!). For almost a decade, Blackstone Bicycle Works—with the support of a valued funder—has awarded scholarships to dedicated BBW alumni toward their postsecondary education. We are proud to join in celebrating their accomplishments:

Two college scholarship recipients received funding in 2021-2022 for their post secondary education, while two of our former scholarship recipients moved on to employment in the non-profit and health sectors.

Our current scholarship recipients are attending Whitman College and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, studying philosophy and film, and biology/forensics, respectively.

Other BBW alumni are working as mechanics in local bike businesses, as employees in bike share and bicycle component companies, and have transferred their skills from bikes to automotive repair.

# Market Community: Caring For Our Neighbors

Besides supporting our dedicated farmers and local food producers during these challenging times, our 61st Street Farmers Market customers have supported one another.

While Market attendance overall declined at the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, our vendors reported record sales. That we were cooking and eating more at home provides a partial explanation. Our October 2021 Market survey provides additional insight: more than 25% of 503 Market customers who responded to the survey stated that they shopped for people outside of their own household during the pandemic.

Thank you to all those who took good, neighborly care of one another, exemplifying the spirit of the Market!





# Link Up Illinois' Corner Store Initiative Gains Momentum

Link Up Illinois has continued to grow its corner store initiative since 2020, now including eight stores across Chicago's South and West Sides and East St. Louis.

The program is connecting store owners with food producers to add fresh local produce to their inventories, encouraging customers to purchase fresh foods and use those ingredients to make complete, healthy meals. Link Up Illinois' Link Match incentive program provides up to \$5 in vouchers, redeemable for purchases of fresh produce, when customers use their SNAP benefits to purchase healthy foods.

Link Match is an increasingly important resource as large grocery retail chains, such as Aldi and Whole Foods, continue to close on Chicago's South and West sides. "These closures [...] increase the urgency of our efforts to bring fresh produce into corner stores," said Lauren Stern, Link Up Illinois Senior Manager. In many cases, neighborhood grocers and corner stores are the only options available.

"We meet the community where they already shop, and where trust is established. That is why we are working with store owners who are committed to improving their community's health," added Meryl Davis, leading the initiative.

Two participating local stores, Morgan Mini Market in Englewood and Mi Mexico Grocery Store in Gage Park, who joined the program in 2020, have seen their produce sales significantly increase this year compared to last.

Go Green Community Fresh Market located in Englewood, a project by the Inner-City Muslim Action Network and the most recent addition to Link-Up Illinois' expansion, began



▲ *Green Community Fresh Market located in Englewood, a project by the Inner-City Muslim Action Network*

implementing Link Match. In a matter of months, they have seen \$25,000 in SNAP sales, demonstrating both their potential for a strong local impact, and the need for increased fresh food options in the community.

In East St. Louis, another community in Illinois with limited access to large grocery retailers and fresh produce, Neighbors' Marketplace began the program in March 2022. Thanks to the passionate advocacy of the owner, Sterling Moody, their program is off to a great start with almost \$5,000 of fresh produce purchased with Link Match vouchers this year.

With the aggregate effects of the pandemic, grocery store closures, and rising food prices, Link Up Illinois' neighborhood and corner store initiative is more crucial than ever as we continue to harness local food systems to address inequitable food access in our communities.

**These closures [Aldi and Whole Foods on Chicago's South and West sides] increase the urgency of our efforts to bring fresh produce into corner stores**

**— Lauren Stern, Link Up Illinois Senior Manager**



# Experimental Station Fills Gap For Seniors

Experimental Station has been working hard for the past 15 years to ensure that affordable, fresh food is available to those with limited access.

This Summer, Experimental Station stepped in when the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) was having difficulty finding a distributor for their Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program checks. The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program provides \$25 coupons to low-income seniors in Chicago that can be spent on fruits, vegetables, and other eligible foods at farmers markets, farm stands, and CSA programs.

Partnering with IDHS, Experimental Station filled the gap by coordinating and organizing farmers markets across Chicago to help accept applications and distribute the coupons to seniors. Experimental Station also provided an information hotline for seniors. Besides the benefit to seniors, local produce farmers appreciated the extra sales.

Our 61st Street Farmers Market is grateful to Carrie Strahan for generously volunteering her Saturdays in August and September to help us support seniors in our community.



*Carrie Strahan*

# Linking Chicagoans to City Farmers Markets

Experimental Station once again partnered with the City of Chicago to provide Link/SNAP services at the City's farmers markets. Since 2010, Experimental Station has hired seasonal staff to offer onsite Link services and to administer the program, enabling Link recipients to access the foods sold at the City's markets. This year, our experienced staff served seven City markets including Daley Plaza, Division Street, Austin Town Hall, Bronzeville, Pullman, West Humboldt Park, and the Mercado De Colores market (new this year).

With the help of CTA and CBS-TV advertising, as of September, 2022 has seen significant increases in Link sales, as well as an 25% increase in Link Match redemptions over last year—despite serving fewer markets. With Link Match, customers purchasing foods with Link benefits receive double the value of their Link purchase to buy fresh produce. That translates into almost \$40,000 worth of free locally grown carrots, spinach, potatoes, beets, collards, onions, peppers, tomatoes...



*Some of our City EBT Team members*



# Partnerships with Regional Grocers

Link Up Illinois' expansion across farmers markets and corner stores is an important milestone addressing food access across the state and city. Building on our success, this past year, we worked closely with the Midwest Independent Retailers Association to bring the program into full-scale grocery stores, including Cermak Fresh Market, Pete's Fresh Market, and One Stop Grocery.

This initiative has not come without its challenges: the Link Match incentive had to be integrated into the grocery store's POS (Point Of Sale) system. It meant converting the paper Link Match voucher into an electronically issued voucher. This challenge was further

complicated by the fact that grocery stores do not all use the same POS system. As a result, one POS integration is not a one size fits all solution.

It has taken the program years of work to get this effort off the ground and running smoothly at each store. Despite these challenges, Cermak Fresh Market was the first store to implement the electronic Link Match voucher.

Cermak Fresh Market reported that they have an average of \$2,500 of Link Match purchases per week. In collaboration with these and other regional grocers, Link Up Illinois looks forward to the further expansion of the program in 2023.

**Cermak Fresh Market reported that they have an average of \$2,500 of Link Match purchases per week.**

*One Stop Grocery getting ready to start Link Match program*





# Arts & Events

As a cultural organization, the arts have always played an important role in the Experimental Station ecosystem. Providing space for artists and cultural producers of all types to create and present their work is essential to fostering new ways of thinking, doing, and understanding our world.

This past year, in partnership with the French Consulate's Villa Albertine cultural exchange program, Experimental Station welcomed French hip hop choreographer Bintou Dembélé (Paris) for a three-month residency, as well as Les Abattoirs Museum director and curator Annabelle Ténèze (Toulouse), and architect and urban designer Jennifer Buyck (Grenoble).

Experimental Station opened its doors for the first public events in several years. These included community bread bakes, a skateboard extravaganza led by a group of young enthusiasts, a reading and discussion by Dr. Thomas Fisher of his new book *The Emergency: A Year of Healing and Heartbreak in a Chicago ER*, a 'Save The Point... again' community meeting, rehearsals and video-taped performances by local musicians and theater groups, and a variety of community gatherings.



Bintou Dembélé  
by Max Li





# Business Incubation Residents

Since 2006, Experimental Station has provided discounted long-term rental space and resources to mission-aligned local businesses and journalism institutions.

## Invisible Institute

The Invisible Institute is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism production company. They work to enhance the capacity of citizens to hold public institutions accountable.

Among the tactics they employ are investigative reporting, multimedia storytelling, human rights documentation, the curation of public information, and the orchestration of difficult public conversations. The work coheres around a central principle: we as citizens have co-responsibility with the government for maintaining respect for human rights and, when abuses occur, for demanding redress.

The Invisible Institute is a former program of Experimental Station.

## Build Coffee

Build Coffee is a coffee shop in the Experimental Station. Surrounded by community-driven nonprofits and civic journalism projects, Build is designed as a hub of great coffee and radical collaboration.

Build acts as a small venue for performances, workshops, gallery shows, book groups, game nights, and more. They also sell used books, local small press publications, journals, comics, art books, and zines.

## South Side Weekly

The South Side Weekly is a nonprofit newsprint magazine dedicated to supporting cultural and civic engagement on the South Side, and to providing educational opportunities for developing journalists, writers, and artists. They publish in-depth coverage of the arts and issues of public interest alongside oral histories, poetry, fiction, interviews, and artwork from local photographers and illustrators.

The paper is produced by an all-volunteer editorial staff and seeks contributions from across the city. In 2022, South Side Weekly merged with the Hyde Park Herald, who are now sharing our space.

## Civic Projects

Civic Projects, a woman and minority-owned firm, is a hybrid architecture practice in Chicago. Their work includes architecture as well as community and strategic planning, grant writing, and small-scale revitalization. They see their work as serving communities by expanding the role of design and architecture collectively. Their process of engagement, which interweaves closely with the process of design, prioritizes the involvement of those who the project will serve.





November 2021 - October 2022

# Grants, Individual Donors, and Foundation Support

## **\$500,000+**

City of Chicago  
Illinois Department of Human Services  
United States Department of  
Agriculture

## **\$50,000 - \$100,000**

The Chicago Community Trust  
Clifford and Lavonne Graese  
Foundation  
The Greer Foundation

## **\$20,000 - \$99,999**

Albert Pick Jr. Fund  
The Builder's Initiative  
The Chapin-May Foundation of Illinois  
Illinois Department of Agriculture  
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## **\$10,000 - \$19,999**

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## **\$500 - \$999**

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The Experimental Station builds independent cultural infrastructure on the South Side of Chicago by providing essential resources that respond to local needs.

## SUPPORT OUR WORK



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