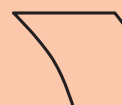




2020 Increasing Food Access Report



experimental station
building independent cultural infrastructure

From the Executive Director

Dear friend,

2020 has been described as “The Worst Year Ever.” It was, indeed, a terrible year. A year of conflict and loss, 2020 laid bare for all to see the deep divisions and inequities that have long plagued our nation, but that we, as a people, had long striven to ignore or deny. We were forced, as witnesses to the unjust and disproportionate deaths among our poor and minority population, to recognize the fundamental unfairness of the status quo.

2020 revealed to us the deep insecurity inherent in our local food system. Food insecurity (the inability to gain regular access to healthy food) has been a longstanding problem for those living in our poor and minority communities. We saw this past year how the effects of food insecurity—which manifest as a host of diet-related diseases and co-morbidities—became a primary underlying cause of those disproportionate death tolls among minorities.

2020 also brought to light Illinois’ larger problem of food insecurity. In 2020, shoppers at even the country’s upscale grocery stores came upon shockingly empty shelves. Here in Illinois, despite living in one of the nation’s top agricultural states, we experienced the risk of importing 95% of the foods we consume from distant states and countries. When the supply chain fails, there is not enough food to go around.

2020 was equally a year of renewed purpose, as you will see in the following pages. The work Experimental Station has undertaken to address the problem of food insecurity since 2008 found new sources of support and opportunities for programming. In addition to partnering with farmers markets, mobile markets, and food cooperatives, our Link Up Illinois program piloted Link Match at two corner stores in one of Chicago’s most challenged neighborhoods. Our 61st Street Farmers Market adapted its layout and procedures to create a safe source of locally grown foods for approximately 1,100 customers each week. The Market also met our SNAP customers where they live (literally), collaborating with partner organizations to aggregate, prepare, and deliver locally grown produce, eggs, and bread to families in need on Chicago’s south side. Working with the City of Chicago, Experimental Station enabled SNAP recipients to spend their benefits on the healthy foods sold at the City’s farmers markets. And partnering with the Illinois Department of Human Services, we created an opportunity for farmers of color to receive grant funding to invest in infrastructural improvements, leading to increased food production and distribution.

Although we have moved on to 2021, we cannot simply put 2020 behind us. 2020’s hard lessons must not be lost. Broad recognition of inequity and insecurity in our society and our food system has given rise to the possibility for systemic change. Experimental Station is excited to be part of making that change happen. We hope that you will join us in that effort.



Photo courtesy of Marc Monaghan

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Connie Spreen".

Connie Spreen, PhD
Executive Director
Experimental Station

Contents



pg. 4

Link Up Illinois provides Illinois farmers markets, co-ops, and corner stores with Link Match funding, training, and assistance.



pg. 10

The **61st Street Farmers Market** brings local, sustainable foods and food education to Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood.



pg. 12

City Farmers Markets Link Access brings Link services and up to \$25 in Link Match to 10 City of Chicago Farmers Markets.



pg. 13

The **Fresh Food from Farmers of Color Grant** funded \$673,000 of infrasturctural improvements for 24 farmers of color.

Link Up Illinois



Link Up Illinois is a program of Experimental Station, undertaken in 2011 in partnership with Wholesome Wave and the Illinois Farmers Market Association.

Experimental Station and its partners seek to increase the affordability and accessibility of fresh and nutritious foods sold at Illinois farmers markets and other venues selling locally produced foods. Link Up Illinois was created to combat urban and rural food deserts, support local small and mid-size farms, offer lasting health benefits to vulnerable Illinoisans, and advocate for policy change on the state and federal level.

Link Up Illinois achieves these aims by providing farmers markets, other direct-to-consumer venues, food co-operatives, and small grocers across the state with funding to implement Link Match programs for recipients of Illinois Link (federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefits). In addition, Link Up Illinois provides free EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) consulting, training, and technical assistance to ensure successful implementation of these programs. With support from our generous funding partners, Link Up Illinois also provides statewide marketing and promotion.

Program partners provide outreach and advocacy at the state level (Illinois Farmers Market Association) and fundraising support, technical support, outreach, and advocacy at the national level (Wholesome Wave). Link Up Illinois also works closely with the Illinois Department of Human Services, which administers the SNAP program in Illinois, as well as the GusNIP Nutrition Incentive Hub, which provides additional technical support and a nationwide community of practice.



Link Match earned at one farmers market can be spent at any other participating farmers market in the state.

From the Program Manager

In 2020, we were all faced with unforeseen challenges. However, with these challenges came greater awareness of food insecurity in the United States and a call to action for programs like Link Up Illinois. Due to COVID-19, fewer farmers markets opened their doors to the communities of Illinois. For those that did, many operated for a shorter season and fewer hours. Even so, the need was clear and shoppers came out in force to access locally-grown, fresh fruits and vegetables. Link Up Illinois partner markets saw their Link and Link Match sales grow by 20%, with individual Link purchases in Chicago growing by 60%. To meet the demand for fresh fruits and vegetables and address the fewer number of farmers markets, Link Up Illinois expanded its programs to two corner stores in Englewood, a produce delivery service in Austin and a mobile market serving southern Chicago.

We prepare for 2021 with great excitement. Our funders and partners have been extremely generous and supportive. With this generosity, Link Up Illinois plans to introduce Link Match to three independent grocery stores in Chicago's communities of need, expand to more corner stores, launch Link Match for CSA's (Community Supported Agriculture) and increase our reach with more farmers markets throughout Illinois. To do all this work, Link Up Illinois is also growing its team. We can't wait to introduce our new team members to you and our partner markets this season as we continue to increase access to fresh, local fruits and vegetables for our communities and support our local farmers and food producers.



Dennis Ryan

Dennis Ryan
Senior Program Manager
Link Up Illinois



Experimental Station's Link Up Illinois program has been the primary force in bringing SNAP nutrition incentives to more Illinois farmers markets each year.

Link Match Across Illinois

Link Up Illinois aims to support both the health of Illinois' SNAP recipients and that of our state's local farming economies. Healthy food environments with strong ties to the communities they serve and providing the most direct benefit to our local farmers, farmers markets are central to our vision. At the same time, the seasonal nature of farmers markets in the upper Midwest, the inability of every community to offer a farmers market, and the potential for new opportunities for our local farmers to sell their products have led to the expansion of Link Match to year-round, brick-and-mortar venues.

With financial support from the United States Department of Agriculture, City of Chicago, The Builders Initiative, Chicago Region Food Systems Fund, The Chicago Community Trust, Square One Foundation, Humana, Fair Food Network, individual donors and others, Link Up Illinois was able to provide funding training and technical assistance to 78 farmers markets, food cooperatives, mobile markets, and corner stores to implement Link Match programs in 2020.

61st Street Farmers Market, Chicago
Alton Farmers and Artisans Market, Alton
Andersonville Farmers Market, Chicago
Aurora Farmers Market, Aurora
Austin Town Hall Farmers Market, Chicago
Batavia Farmers Market, Batavia
Bronzeville Farmers Market, Chicago
Community Farmers Market in Carbondale, Carbondale
CPS - Roseland Farmers Market, Chicago
DeKalb Farmers Market, DeKalb
Dill Pickle Food Co-op, Chicago
Division Street Farmers Market, Chicago
Downtown Bloomington Farmers Market,
 Bloomington
Downtown Elgin Farmers Market, Elgin
Downtown Evanston Farmers Market, Evanston
Edens Place Farmers Market, Chicago
Englewood City Farmers Market, Chicago
Farmers Market of Carbondale, Carbondale
Farm on Ogden - Windy City Harvest, Chicago
Federal Plaza Farmers Market, Chicago
Forty Acres Fresh Market, Chicago
Fresh Moves Mobile Market (14 sites), Chicago
Garfield Park Community Council Farmers Market,
 Chicago
Gary Comer Youth Center Farmers Market,
 Chicago
Glenview Farmers Market, Glenview
Glenwood Sunday Market, Chicago
Green Top Grocery Co-op, Bloomington
**Green Youth Farm of Lake County - Windy City
 Harvest**, Waukegan
Healthy Food Hub Mobile Market (5 sites),
 Chicago
Illinois Products Farmers Market, Springfield

Kankakee Farmers Market, Kankakee
La Follette Park Farmers Market, Chicago
**Lawndale Youth Farm Stand - Windy City
 Harvest**, Chicago
Logan Square Farmers Market, Chicago
Mi Mexico Grocery Store, Chicago
Morgan Mini Mart, Chicago
Neighborhood Co-op Grocery, Carbondale
North End City Market, Rockford
Old Capitol Farmers Market (2 markets), Springfield
Park Forest Farmers Market, Park Forest
Park Ridge Farmers Market, Park Ridge
PCC Austin Farm Stand - Windy City Harvest,
 Chicago
Peoria Riverfront Farmers Market, Peoria
Plant Chicago Farmers Market, Chicago
Printers Row City Farmers Market, Chicago
Pullman City Farmers Market, Chicago
Rockford City Farmers Market, Rockford
Roseland City Farmers Market, Chicago
Skokie Farmers Market, Skokie
Sugar Beet Co-op, Oak Park
**The Land Connection Champaign-Urbana Winter
 Farmers Market**, Urbana
Town Square Market, Carbondale
Ujamaa Co-op Farmers Market (9 markets),
 Chicago
Urban Canopy, Chicago
Urbana's Market at the Square, Urbana
**Washington Park Farm Stand - Windy City
 Harvest**, Chicago
West Humboldt Park City Farmers Market,
 Chicago
Woodstock Farmers Market (2 markets), Woodstock

Corner Store Success!

In partnership with the Innercity Muslim Action Network (IMAN), Link Up Illinois offered Link Match at two corner stores in Chicago's struggling Englewood and Gage Park neighborhoods—Morgan Mini Mart and Mi Mexico Grocery Store. The owners of the stores worked closely with Link Up Illinois staff to source produce from local farmers, feature the locally grown produce in their stores, and promote Link Match to their customers. The impact of the program was immediate.

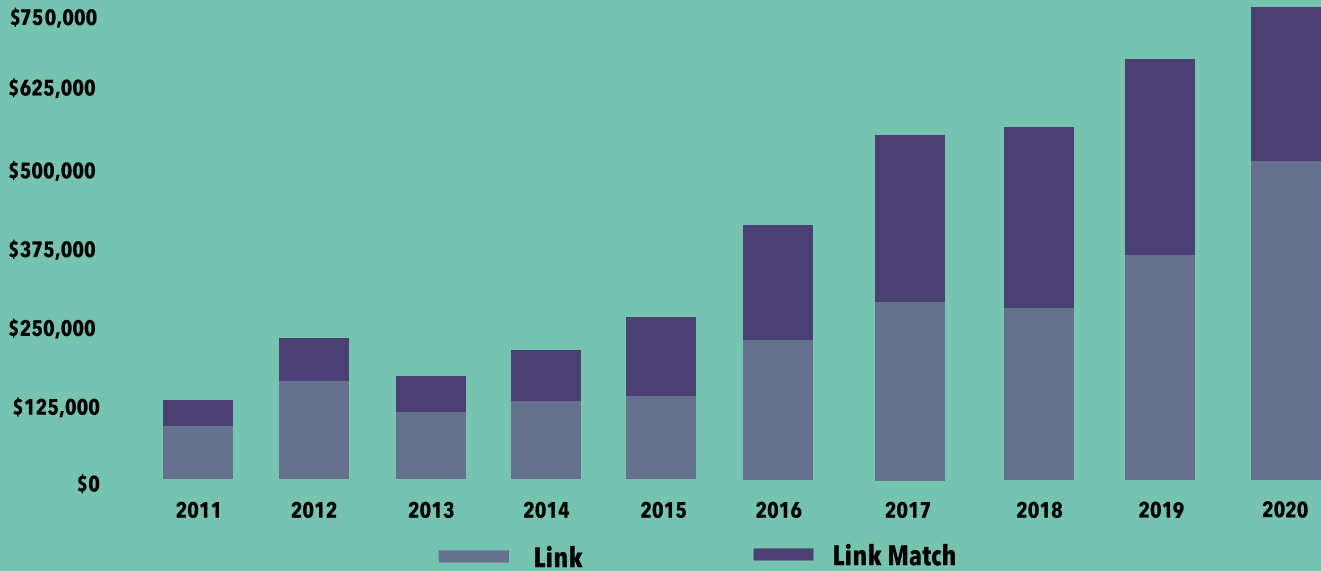


"I love this program not only for the reason of sales going up but the fact it helped the people in need the most. Seeing the customers' faces excited was priceless. Within the first month of being in this program, we have sold more fruits and vegetables than we would have in four months."

Ahmad,
Mi Mexico Grocery Store owner

78 markets, co-ops, and corner stores supported

Link, WIC, and Link Match Sales at Link Up Illinois Markets



“The Link Match program was such a blessing, being given the opportunity to have more fruits and vegetables from local farms is a win-win for everyone involved. I particularly enjoyed the local mushrooms and micro greens, as well as peppers and winter squash. The program let me use my Link dollars on other food staples and allowed for more fresh vegetables and fruit.”

Link Match shopper, Andersonville Farmers Market, Chicago

“With the Link Match universal currency, I am able to get fresh food for my family without having to worry about the price point. It means even more to me as someone who uses SNAP to be in a position to afford healthy options thanks to this program. The farmers market has not only been a constant affordable source of fresh produce, but also a way to connect me with my neighborhood and be able to support the community. From the bottom of my heart, I want to say thank you!”

Link Match shopper, Andersonville Farmers Market, Chicago

600+ family farms and small-scale food producers supported

\$1,374,458 Total economic impact from Link, WIC, and Link Match sales in 2020 (\$763,588 x USDA multiplier of 1.8)

“The SNAP program has really helped with sales, almost half of all my sales are from the fruits and veggie Link Match coupons.”

Farmer, Illinois Products Farmers Market, Springfield

“The Link Match program for SNAP is a considerable portion of our weekly sales at the market. We love seeing customers get excited to use the extra purchasing power to enhance a meal plan or take home extra veggies!”

Marty Gray, Gray Farms, Watseka

Looking Ahead

The COVID-19 pandemic has been clarifying. It has become clear to policymakers and agencies at every level that the health and wellbeing of our low-income citizens must be taken into account. That is, we must put financial and other resources where they are needed to improve the health and wellbeing of our most vulnerable citizens. After 10 years of undertaking and sustaining this work in Illinois, Experimental Station is pleased to see the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, and the federal government working actively to bring substantial resources to the effort.

— In 2021, in addition to supporting farmers markets, CSAs, mobile markets, food cooperatives, and corner stores, with current federal funding, Link Up Illinois will pilot Link Match at three independent grocery stores on Chicago’s food insecure south and west sides.

— The Governor’s office has included in the state budget the \$500,000 appropriation called for in the Healthy Local Food Incentives Fund legislation passed in 2018. A coalition of health and hunger organizations and agencies are working hard to ensure that those funds will remain in the 2022 budget passed in May!

— Included in the recent COVID-19 stimulus bill is an additional \$75,000,000 for SNAP nutrition incentives. When the opportunity is released, Link Up Illinois will seek additional federal funds to further support our work to bring Link Match to current and additional farmers markets, CSAs, mobile markets, and corner and grocery stores across the state. This is an exciting opportunity both to aid our food-insecure fellow citizens and, by supporting local food-producing farms, to help transform the food system in our state.

61st Street Farmers Market



The 61st Street Farmers Market was founded in 2008 to bring locally and sustainably produced foods and food education to Chicago's under-resourced Woodlawn neighborhood. In a typical year, the Market supports over 30 local farmers, bakers, cheese makers, and prepared food vendors and welcomes an average of 1,400-1,600 customers each Saturday during the outdoor season, May-October. The indoor market, operating inside Experimental Station, occurs from November-April and attracts as many as 650 customers.

Due to the pandemic, the 2020 Market season opened six weeks later than planned and, with ongoing safety concerns, the indoor market was canceled entirely, while the Market's outdoor season was extended by an additional three weeks.

Although 2020 altered best laid plans, the Market proved to be a critical community resource as we collectively faced the pandemic and sought to ensure one another's wellbeing. As always, the Market accepted SNAP/Link and matched Link purchases, providing up to \$25 per week of free fresh fruits and vegetables for SNAP/Link recipients. Customers shopped for friends and neighbors, while farmers accepted online orders and brought pre-packaged product to enable contact-free transactions. Despite masks, lines, and social distancing, all found joy in encountering one another in a safe and friendly environment.

25

market days

23

farmers and prepared food vendors

1,110 avg. weekly customers

\$24,970
Link and Link Match sales



20% reported increase in sales by farmers over 2019



50

free gardening kits and educational materials distributed to neighborhood families homeschooling their children

10

free garden plots and gardening support provided to residents of Jackson Park Terrace apartments

360

grocery bags of fresh, organically grown vegetables distributed to residents of the Jackson Park Terrace low-income residence June-November

Market Box

The inability of farmers markets to open in the spring—coupled with the closure of grocery stores following the racial protests and general lack of access to healthy food among low-income residents—gave rise to the Market Box initiative, a collaboration between the Market, other organizations located at Experimental Station, and Star Farm. Market Box was initially conceived as a one-month project, with 100 boxes of locally grown foods delivered for free to families in need in our community. Thanks to a great outpouring of donor support and the hard work of the organizations involved in the project, Market Box was extended through October. Over five months, the initiative provided almost 5,000 boxes of fresh fruits and vegetables, bread, and eggs to 800 South Side families, with 200 families receiving a Market Box every other week. In the end, 20 local farms sold their products through the Market Box initiative, with \$219,000 going into their pockets!



Photo courtesy of Davon Clark

“I was grateful to work on a project that was deeply collaborative, locally rooted, and replicable—this is a model that will outlast the pandemic.”

Hannah Nyhart, Market Box

City Farmers Markets Link Access

Since 2010, Experimental Station has partnered with the City of Chicago to provide SNAP/Link service at the City's farmers markets, a number of them located in food-insecure neighborhoods on Chicago's south and west sides. From 5 markets in 2010, the service has expanded to as many as 22 markets in 2015.

In 2020, despite the cancellation of all public events, the City deemed farmers markets essential services, providing critical access to healthy foods for thousands of Chicago residents. To support the City's efforts to ensure affordable access to healthy foods, Experimental Station provided SNAP/Link service and a \$25 Link Match per market day at 10 City markets. A majority of these markets were located on Chicago's food-insecure south and west sides.

Due to the need to create and implement new COVID-19 safety precautions, the City's farmers markets started later and, in the case of the Daley Plaza farmers market, were not able to operate in 2020. Despite the reduced number of days, the City markets provided essential sources of food for many Chicagoans and critical venues for farmers to sell their products.

99% Link Match redemption rate

\$45,602
Link and Link Match sales

\$11.62
avg. Link transaction, highest since program inception

Austin Town Hall (West)
Bronzeville (South)
CPS Roseland (Far South)
Printers Row (Central)
Division Street (Near North/Central)*
Federal Plaza (Central)*
Englewood/Anchor House (South/West)
La Follette Park (West)
West Humboldt Park (West)
Pullman (Far South)*

*Experimental Station also provided market security and event management.

"Experimental Station is a wonderful partner to help City Markets accomplish our mission of improving food access throughout the city. Their efforts have a tremendous impact on both the economic success of farmers and the health of the people of Chicago."

Alisa Baum,
Department of Cultural Affairs
and Special Events,
City of Chicago

Fresh Food from Farmers of Color

2020 saw a new partnership between the Illinois Department of Human Services and Experimental Station to bring greater equity in access to resources for local farmers of color. Together, we created the Fresh Food from Farmers of Color (FFFC) initiative, which aimed to support farmers of color while increasing access to healthy foods in some of Chicago's most food insecure neighborhoods.

With the additional support of Catholic Charities, the University of Illinois Extension, Advocates for Urban Agriculture, Illinois Stewardship Alliance, and Grow Greater Englewood, Experimental Station carried out a granting process to provide funding to farmers of color growing within 200 miles of Chicago. Funds were to be used to improve the farm's infrastructure, enabling increased future production and/or distribution and sales of the farm's products. Recipients of grant funds also committed to providing product to Chicago's south and west sides as of 2021, either by selling at a farmers market or by selling product to one or more WIC Nutrition Centers located in those areas.

The FFFC initiative funded 24 proposals from both urban and rural farmers, individual farmers and farm collectives, supporting a host of infrastructural improvements including irrigation systems, refrigeration units, storage sheds, greenhouses, fencing, bee hives, and more. As farmers carry out and develop their projects, we aim to continue to provide additional forms of support to ensure their future success.

\$673,000

Total funds granted

Recipients of FFFC grants

Belly of the Block
Black Oaks Center
Broadview Farm and Gardens
Bronzeville Neighborhood Farm
Catatumbo Cooperative Farm
Chicago Patchwork Farms-R. Phillips
Chicago Patchwork Farms-A. Pate
Closed Loop Farms
Dusable City Ancestral Winery & Vineyards, LLC
Edna White Community Garden
Fresher Together
Global Garden Refugee Training Farm
Greasy Gardens
Green Pastures Eco Community Urban Farm
Iyabo Farms
Mother Carr's Farm
New Magnolia Garden Center
Rehoboth Blueberry Farm
Run-A-Way Buckers Club, Inc. and B.S.R.R. Youth Center & Academy/ Farm
Smooth & Social Roots
Sower's Grove
Star Farm
Urban Growers Collective
Westside Bee Boyz

FFFC Grant Spotlights

Global Garden Refugee Training Farm (GGRTF)

In 2012, 42 refugee families from Burma and Bhutan transformed a vacant lot in Albany Park and began growing fresh, organic vegetables. On the half-acre of planting beds built at that time, they produced nearly 5,000 pounds of vegetables for home consumption and another 1,500 pounds of farm produce was sold within the community. Today, GGRTF provides 100 refugee families with plots where they collectively cultivate an estimated 25,000 pounds of vegetables each year. GGRTF also supports 5 incubator farmers by providing them with planting beds, training, and logistical support for commercial vegetable production and sales.

The often multi-generational refugee families grow a mix of their traditional and standard vegetable varieties. Traditional Burmese and Bhutanese specialties grown at GGRTF include bitter melon, water spinach, amaranth, goosefoot, roselle, and daikon. Farmers harvest fresh ingredients for traditional recipes, learn about vegetable production in a cold climate, and earn supplemental income through sale of produce to local businesses.

GGRTF responded to the Fresh Food from Farmers of Color (FFFC) grant seeking support for the purchase of a produce cooler to expand the farmers' ability to service local businesses and two local community-based non-profit organizations, Common Pantry and Apna Ghar.

GGRTF anticipates the new produce cooler will increase post-harvest production by at least 25% because they will no longer have to leave excess harvestable produce in the field, where it spoils. The produce cooler will also allow greens and other vegetables to be thoroughly cooled before farmers markets so that the produce maintains freshness, nutritional value, appearance, and marketability. Increased produce production will also allow GGRTF to establish a formal relationship with a WIC Center program, further providing fresh food access to local community residents.

GGRTF builds on the traditional strengths of refugees from rural backgrounds to create food security and economic opportunity in their new Chicago home, doing what they do best: growing food and cultivating community.



Greasy Gardens

For the past 7 years, master urban gardener Marlene Fisher has been growing food and flowers to give away to her neighbors in the Grand Crossing community on the South Side. Greasy Gardens' presence started to alleviate fly dumping and abandoned cars parked in the empty lots. Today, the two city plots fondly known as Greasy Gardens is a modest farm that grows pesticide-free organic produce including heirloom tomatoes, hot peppers, tomatillos, pumpkins, kale, sweet potatoes, turnips, onions and beets. Marlene also grows edible flowers such as hibiscus and lavender.

Greasy Gardens has become a community gathering space allowing Marlene to host an annual event called "Greasy Free," where she engages aspiring growers in the community. The annual vegetable and plant giveaway and educational event inspires and teaches other residents how to start their own community gardens and "Grow Together".

Marlene describes the FFFC grant as a "godsend," as it financially supplements her commitment which she self-funded for the past 6 years. Marlene is also excited about increasing her food production capacity with the expansion of 4 new garden beds. Greasy Gardens will now have a total of 25 beds, doubling the Greasy Gardens harvest for the 2021 season and allowing Marlene to participate in local farmers markets on the South Side.

Lastly, the FFFC grant is supporting the purchase of a new Greasy Gardens shed and small greenhouse. The shed will provide storage for all of the garden tools and equipment, while the greenhouse will enable her to extend her growing season.

DuSable City Ancestral Winery & Vineyards LLC

It's a family affair! Meet Julian and Kenya Sample, husband and wife team stewarding all of the urban farming activities at DuSable City Ancestral Winery & Vineyards, a ¼-acre farm that borders the Englewood Nature Trail. These two urban farmers have been growing fruits, medicinal herbs, and vegetables on the South Side of Chicago since 2008.

As with many small businesses, the onset of COVID-19 forced them to pivot. For Julian and Kenya this meant increasing their focus on harvesting Elderberry, Ashwaghandha, and Moringa to expand production of their medicinal tinctures sold at retail locations, farmers markets and CSA's on the South Side in the Englewood and Greater Grand Crossing communities.

As recipients of a Fresh Food from Farmers of Color (FFFC) grant, they were able to achieve several goals including, adding a new tincture product offering, increase the purchase of raw herbs, purchase additional production supplies and secured needed production equipment to scale up their manufacturing processes. With this added capacity, in the Spring they will be able to supply 2-3 additional retail locations by the end of the season.

The Sample's teenage sons are also hands-on at the farm and remind Julian and Kenya of the importance of social media and how it can assist in getting the word out into the community about the expanded product-line. The FFFC grant enabled them to broaden the capacity of their team to include a Social Media Marketing Specialist to assist with expanding their social media reach.

Currently, there are no other medicinal tincture products available utilizing their mixture of medicinal herbs available in local markets on the South and West Sides of Chicago. The expanded availability of their products will provide an option for those who are interested in alternative health.

Thank you to all of those who provided financial support for this work in 2020.



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Humana



And other generous donors!

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