



An Investment That Delivers: How Local Food Hubs Support Farmers and Families

Wednesdays can be a little chaotic at [WNC \(Western North Carolina\) From the Ground Up](#). The food hub's packing room is filled with long lines of metal shelves, which hold boxes, bags, and piles of vegetables. Volunteers and staff run up and down stairs in between cold storage rooms and delivery trucks. Many hands work along the line to pack those vegetables into individual orders. The orders are checked against a long list man-



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- LISA KELLY, WNC FROM THE GROUND UP

aged by an online system that tracks many food pantries, restaurants, and individuals who look to the food hub to source fresh food in their rural communities. Overseeing it all is Lisa Kelly, Executive Director of WNC From the Ground Up. She's the person behind the group's mission to connect farmers and ranchers to new markets, and to provide more locally grown and produced food to families who need it most.

Western North Carolina has a rich agricultural history, which includes tobacco farming and Christmas tree cultivation, alongside vegetable production and ranching.



Geographical challenges, rural isolation, and rising rates of food insecurity stretch the community's ability to both produce food and keep that food close to home. "Only about 60 percent of our population has internet access, and cell phone service can be spotty too," says Lisa. "People often struggle to access adequate nutritious food. At the same time, small farmers in our region want to expand their markets, but are left out of food policy

initiatives that would allow them to do so." Kelly explains that policy programs like the USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Program, a federal program that funded the purchase of local food to be distributed to food insecure families, were transformational for her organization and the farmers and families it supports.

CONNECTING SMALL FARMERS TO MARKETS AND FAMILIES TO FRESH FOOD

WNC From the Ground Up is a food hub and aggregator. They provide physical space for many farmers to bring their products, store these products, and repack and distribute products out to their customers. These customers include individuals doing their weekly grocery shopping, and food pantries aiming to increase the amount of fresh produce available to people in need. Another less visible, important function of the food hub is logistics coordination. WNC From the Ground Up makes it easy and efficient for farmers to update their inventories and set fair prices, and easy for customers to quickly select exactly what they want from a variety of local farmers all in one place.

Federal funding like LFPA was a key element to the operation's success, and similar programs that invest in American small farmers alongside the institutions, like schools and food pantries, that provide care to vulnerable people, should continue, according to Kelly. "Small farmers are not experiments, and neither are hungry





people," she says, "and these experimental funds have proven that permanent support will allow our local economy to grow while feeding people in need at the same time."

RURAL ECONOMIC GROWTH, DIGNITY, AND A PROVEN POLICY MODEL

Other successes that resulted from LFPA include multiple indicators of rural economic development. WNC From the Ground Up provided a new, stable market for over 40 farmers in the region. Instead of hauling their products to multiple farmers markets each week, where sales can be unpredictable and leftover vegetables can go to waste, farmers can now bring exactly what customers have ordered to one place, where it is distributed by employees at the food hub. The investment provided by the LFPA program, and the additional business it generated, also allowed Lisa to scale up her facility from 1,700 to 18,000 square feet and create four additional jobs in her rural community at the height of the growing season.

Perhaps most importantly, LFPA increased the amount of healthy, nutritious food available at food pantries in the area. Lisa says what's immeasurable is the impact of serving the same high-quality food that can be found at a high-end grocery store at a food pantry, and the dignity that gives to people in need.

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I am motivated to continue this work every time a farmer thanks me for helping to make farming a viable career path for them," Lisa says. "In this line of work, we get to connect with people from all walks of life, and to be able to say, 'We're here,' when someone is going through a hard time, and provide them with good food that might help them through their challenges, well, there's nothing like it."

This impactful work, supported by federal funds, has the ability and potential to transform lives across the country, and contributes to healthy, thriving local economies and communities.



Interview with Lisa Kelly, Founder and Executive Director of WNC From the Ground Up

BY THE NUMBERS

In June 2023, in partnership with the NC Farms-SHARE program and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, WNC From the Ground Up started sourcing and distributing local food for the LFPA program, generating the following impact:

\$212,800 in local food sales

18 community sites, including churches, health clinics, pantries and more received local, healthy food

Children and households received leafy greens, peaches, apples, onions, tomatoes, honey, beef and more

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