



KING COUNTY

Food & Fitness Initiative

A COMMUNITY WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE THE HEALTHY CHOICE THE EASY CHOICE





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OUR *story*

Imagine you were given an opportunity to address food, health and well-being issues — in a holistic way, with collaborative, community-based solutions — focusing on local neighborhoods where the needs are great among the most vulnerable families and children. This was the opportunity afforded a group of us in Seattle and surrounding King County beginning in 2007, when we received a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to create the King County Food & Fitness Initiative (KCFFI).

Five years later, our project has come to a close, but the relationships we forged live on, and much of our good work carries forward. And yet more remains to be done, here in our city and county and in communities like ours across the country. It's because of these ongoing needs that we want to tell our story. We hope to celebrate all we accomplished and to inspire those who continue community-building efforts of all kinds, especially the young people who were an integral part of our project and in whose capable hands the future lies.

What We Set Out To Do

The Pacific Northwest is known for its livable communities, active lifestyles, rich agriculture, and technological innovation. Despite a generally robust economy, economic disparities present a major challenge in King County. Nearly a quarter of our population lives in households with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Food insecurity affects 10 percent of households. Disparities in health are also a significant concern. While half of our residents are overweight or obese, low-income residents are 1.3 times more likely to be obese than wealthier residents, and African American residents are 1.6 times more likely to be obese than white residents.

It is against this backdrop that more than 40 community partners came together to form KCFFI. Among the government agencies, academic programs, and community organizations represented were Washington State University (WSU) Extension, Public Health – Seattle & King County (PHSKC), Good Food Strategies, City of Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, Solid Ground, Feet First, Cascade Bicycle Club, and University of Washington, Center for Public Health Nutrition, and Department of Urban Design and Planning. We brought to the table intense passion, strong leadership, a wealth of expertise, and a long history of cross-sectoral and cross-cultural collaborations, community building, and participatory planning.

We recognized that food systems activists, physical activity proponents, and community health promotion advocates had largely operated in separate arenas, and we realized that integrating our efforts and making connections between food, physical activity, and community health represented the next logical step for expanding the effectiveness of our work. KCFFI was precisely what we needed to fill the gaps in our collective work, create systems change, and address health disparities in our region.

Our coalition was honored to be one of roughly 16 locations invited to submit a proposal to the Kellogg Foundation, and pleased and humbled to be selected as one of nine Food & Fitness sites nationwide to receive a \$500,000 grant for a two-year planning phase followed by a \$1.2 million grant for three years of implementation. WSU Extension, with its experience in food systems, and PHSKC, with its experience in built environment issues and community health, would serve as co-conveners. We were ready to learn and grow through our interactions with the Kellogg Foundation and equally eager to reciprocate by sharing our experience and knowledge. We were especially grateful that in making a substantial, multi-year investment, the foundation was taking the long view, affording us an extraordinary opportunity for sustained impact.

A Plan For Community Action

We were fortunate to have ample time and resources to build relationships in the community and work with a diverse group of community members to co-create an action plan that would serve as our roadmap going forward. We can't overemphasize how important the Community Action Plan was for maintaining the focus and direction of our initiative as new people joined the effort. Having a detailed, written plan helped shape the KCFFI "brand" identity and enabled us to expand, adapt and grow without losing our unique character and essence.

Recognizing we couldn't cover the entire county, we sought to concentrate our efforts in areas with the greatest health disparities.

Recognizing we couldn't cover the entire county, we sought to concentrate our efforts in areas with the greatest health disparities. We gave presentations in a number of communities to explain the opportunity KCFFI represented, and spoke with local public officials, agencies, organizations, and community members. Working with a third-party facilitator, we selected two neighborhoods: Delridge and White Center, in large measure because both demonstrated readiness for systems change.

We established a Leadership Council to govern KCFFI, with seats for the co-conveners, community members from Delridge and White Center, and community-based organizations. We wanted true community representation and made sure a diverse cross-section of people who lived in Delridge and White Center had seats on the council. And we gave youth leaders a seat at the table as well. It was a long, slow, but fruitful process, resulting in a multi-stakeholder coalition with fair and equitable representation.

We then embarked on months of data collection and analysis, involving on-the-ground walking audits of neighborhoods and assessments of community food systems and regional agriculture. In partnership with the Delridge Neighborhoods Development Association (DNDA) and the White Center Community Development Association (WCCDA), we convened a series of community meetings to listen to residents about what they felt were the problems and barriers contributing to health disparities where they lived. The meetings combined open, honest, and sometimes difficult dialogue with community-building activities like salsa dancing and shared meals.



Youth come together at a FEEST dinner. At weekly, youth-led meals, students in FEEST (Food Empowerment Education and Sustainability Team) cook a healthy meal, discuss community food issues and develop as young leaders.

To strengthen our youth engagement, we partnered with the Youngstown Cultural Arts Center, which is located in Delridge, and focused on youth development through media literacy and environmental programs. The partnership with Youngstown Cultural Arts Center marked the beginning of what would become one of the most successful aspects of KCFFI, the youth program called Food Education Empowerment and Sustainability Team, or FEEST.

Through our collaborative efforts to understand the food and health challenges facing Delridge and White Center, we identified three priority areas for our work: healthy community food environments, school food systems, and opportunities for active living in the natural and built environment.

What We Built Together

With an understanding of the health and physical activity issues facing our two focus communities, Delridge and White Center, and with our community-generated action plan in hand, we began in late 2009 to undertake the work itself.

Although the road ahead of us was long and the way not always clear, we never waivered from our mission or lost sight of our guiding vision.

Our mission: “To foster collaborative leadership among diverse community partners to co-create long-term, innovative strategies to realize our vision of equitable access to resources and choices that promote health.”

Our vision: “To create vibrant communities that support access to locally grown, healthy, affordable food, and safe and inviting places for physical activity and play — for everyone.”

Our approach was to work through local action and to promote policy and systems change at the municipal, county, regional, and state levels. To achieve our goals, we created Strategy Action Teams to actively engage with communities and youth in planning, decision-making, and fun activities. Sometimes we launched programs, the bricks of our work; more often we served as mortar, bringing people and organizations together, forming coalitions, or leveraging our work across government agencies, school districts, and public institutions.

Schools are community hubs that connect every family in the community. With so much of our work revolving around schools, we hired a Schools Food and Fitness Coordinator focused on coordinating our safe routes to school initiatives, physical activity, school garden, and nutrition efforts. We partnered with WCCDA and DNDA on our healthy retail initiative. When we needed local expertise, we contracted individuals and organizations for assistance. And we relied on the Youngstown Cultural Arts Center to direct the FEEST youth program.

With patience and great care, we constructed a substantial framework for our collective efforts, and to this framework we added many successful projects, all aligned with our shared mission and vision.

The work was not without challenges. Our implementation phase coincided with the economic downturn, straining resources in our region at all levels. For reasons beyond our control, DNDA closed its doors. WCCDA went through internal changes of its own. WSU became the sole grantee maintaining a close partnership with PHSKC. And, as ever, the Delridge and White Center communities themselves continued to evolve.

Although from the start we developed guidelines to help us collaborate in a culturally competent manner, we came to see that many of us held unconscious biases and preconceived notions that hindered understanding and relationship building. We acknowledged that some of us held inherent power based on invisible privileges that could perpetuate the very systems we sought to change. Honestly confronting racial and cultural tensions became one of our greatest challenges, and one of our greatest accomplishments.

To address these issues, we engaged the Leadership Council and community members in trainings that helped us honor and listen to each other and enabled neighborhood residents and people of color to provide real leadership for the initiative. Our focus on food was an advantage. Because food means something to everyone, it's a great topic around which to consider more challenging topics, such as poverty, race, and class.

The Kellogg Foundation helped us develop strong relationships with the other eight Food & Fitness initiatives across the country, sharing knowledge, learning from each other, and coming together several times for summits to deepen our work, including our work on racial healing and equity.

In a few short years, we accomplished a lot, moved past roadblocks, learned many lessons, and had a positive and lasting impact in two very motivated local communities.

lessons learned

- Be a true partner with the community.
- You can't rush the process.
- Building relationships takes time but the outcomes are deep.
- It's important to involve youth in a meaningful way from the beginning.
- Engage the school district early, often, and on its own terms.
- Expect roadblocks.
- Everyone has knowledge.
- There is power in mutually beneficial relationships.
- Make constant adjustments.
- Be optimistic, be positive, and celebrate successes.
- Plan for sustainability.
- Never give up.



COMMUNITY AND YOUTH *engagement*

Engaging youth was a goal of KCFFI from the start. Young community members were part of our Leadership Council and our decision-making process. We also collaborated on several initiatives to address the food, health and well-being of young people, as well as the need to develop promising youth who would become future community leaders. Here are two examples of successful efforts toward community building and youth engagement.

If you want young people to open up and talk, you have to be willing to listen.

White Center Community Development

Association Family Connections Program engages parents as champions for wellness. Before partnering with KCFFI, the program's holistic family approach did not include access to opportunities to make healthy lifestyle choices. After years of fruitful collaboration in KCFFI, the WCCDA has made healthy living a core component of its community development work.

Food Empowerment Education and Sustainability Team (FEEST)

Team (FEEST) is a youth empowerment and leadership program that provides improvisational cooking classes where young people can learn about food and where it comes from, and learn to prepare and enjoy healthy meals. FEEST is a bold concept in that it is led by teens themselves. At FEEST gatherings, youth participants prepare and eat family-style meals together, discuss food and community issues, and sometimes hear from an expert invited from the community.

The program has proved to be a success and continues to expand and empower youth to advocate for food systems change. An integral component of the program are paid internships that enable enterprising youth to engage in FEEST activities more deeply and to serve as mentors of other participants. FEEST engages and inspires youth to become leaders in their chosen field and community, no matter where the future takes them.

Over four years, FEEST dinners engaged more than 1,100 youth and adults. As the program has matured, the young participants have reached out to adults, as well as other youth, facilitating workshops at a national W.K. Kellogg Foundation conference and creating the FEEST replication manual to assist others in developing their own FEEST programs. FEEST youth have engaged local, regional, and state policymakers in school nutrition and community food advocacy efforts. And FEEST has earned a seat on the Puget Sound Regional Food Policy Council to ensure youth voices are represented in regional food discussions.

FEEST has a bright future, although it's worth noting that it requires adults who will take the time to get trained and to facilitate the program. It requires a place to meet and food for the meals. It takes the commitment of a sponsor, funders, and trained adults who really want to encourage an authentic youth voice. If you want young people to open up and talk, you have to be willing to listen.



COMMUNITY VOICE: *lena guevara* FEEST intern

"When I was told that as an intern, I could be paid to spend my time cooking, I decided to join FEEST. I was raised in a single parent household and pretty much took care of my younger siblings. My FEEST journalism internship was a job I could bring them to.

I come from a Samoan background, so my connection to food is cultural. But I hadn't thought a lot about where my food comes from. Through FEEST I gained an understanding of how big the issues around food systems really are. One day I showed my younger siblings pictures of what actually goes into chicken nuggets. It made them think.

As a FEEST journalism intern, I began with photography and editing classes and then I took photos and wrote stories for the FEEST blog, a new story every two weeks.

I also got to attend conferences and even researched and discussed bills at the State Capitol in Olympia, bills that affected our community.

Most importantly, I learned that I have the power to be heard and to affect change. If you acknowledge this power, you can work with adults to address the issues you care about and that affect you and your family. Through connecting with the food I ate, I became more aware. I understood the issues.

I'm away at college now, but I continue to help out at FEEST when I can, and the FEEST participants recently helped me edit a video I produced on school food. I don't know what I will do after school is over, but I may concentrate my studies on food and youth."

Lena is currently a student at Western Washington University. She started interning at FEEST at the end of her high school sophomore year.



healthy community

FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

At the heart of a healthy community is healthy food, a simple but profound truism behind KCFFI's efforts to improve the quality, availability, and affordability of food in Delridge and White Center. Our work to create healthy community food environments was focused in three areas: expanding access to healthy food, increasing demand for healthy food, and strengthening community connections to local food.

KCFFI experienced both successes and challenges in our community food work. Expanding access to good food — food that is healthy, sustainably grown, fairly produced, and affordable — is hard because market forces favor cheaper, conventionally sourced foods. We found that many corner stores and small grocers needed assistance with sourcing, merchandising, and promotion to help them take on the extra effort and cost of stocking fresh, wholesome food, especially if it represented a change to their business model. This raised a question: When direct assistance runs out, how do you support these businesses?

The simple answer is to generate enough demand in the community to represent a stable customer base for local businesses. But that's a chicken-and-egg situation: the stores need steady customer demand to justify stocking healthy foods; the community needs a dependable supply of healthy food to make an effort to seek it out. Spurring demand requires changing behavior, driven to a considerable extent on affordability, and good food generally costs more. We came to see that changing a community food system is a slow, incremental process that requires both persistence and patience.

Expanding Access to Healthy Foods

Our capacity to expand the availability of healthy foods was given a significant boost from Healthy Foods Here (HFH), a healthy food retail initiative funded by a Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) grant to PHSKC and modeled after the healthy corner store program developed by KCFFI. A total of 12 stores were recruited to the HFH program in Delridge and White Center. HFH amplified the work begun by KCFFI by supplying resources and technical assistance on a much larger scale, including general business support, improvements to infrastructure for stocking fresh foods, marketing, and connections with distributors and local producers.



A flash mob promotes healthy foods. This energetic group of Delridge youth made sure they were seen and heard at rush hour in front of a neighborhood store selling fresh, healthy produce.

Increasing Demand for Healthy Foods

We recognized that helping neighborhood grocers and retailers stock healthy food made sense only if we also worked to increase the demand for healthy food among community members. During KCFFI's last year, we partnered with WCCDA to reach more than 36,200 people through an aggressive marketing campaign to promote all stores in White Center and Delridge selling healthy food. This CPPW-funded campaign included branding, street banners, mailings, merchant profiles, food labels, work parties, print and web resources, and coupons.

As part of this effort, the Buy Fresh campaign increased consumer awareness of fresh, local produce available in Delridge and White Center. Buy Fresh displays and mailings were printed in six languages. A companion website listed all retail stores and produce markets in the program and included merchant profiles and a map of store locations.

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Going beyond conventional marketing, WCCDA and HFH partnered on a “food walk” showcasing nine markets in White Center selling healthy foods. Several hundred community residents attended the market tour, which featured popular healthy food chef demonstrations and recipe hand-outs. In Delridge, youth staged a healthy foods flash mob performed during rush hour in front of one of the new stores in Delridge selling healthy foods to raise awareness.

Strengthening the Connections to Local Foods

Our region continues to struggle to figure out how local food can compete with non-local food in limited-income communities. Despite our work to build relationships between farmers and retailers, we learned that relationships may not be enough to overcome this price differential. Our pilot project to connect several local farms with produce markets in White Center met with limited success. A major challenge to this effort was that stores did not want to disrupt the established relationships they had with suppliers to take a risk with new, untested suppliers. But the greatest challenge was the gap between how we, and our funder, defined the concept of “local” (as healthy foods

sustainably grown or processed in our region) and how the communities thought of local. It was a matter of priorities for the community — strong, locally-based food retailers over locally-sourced food.

Recognizing that a demand for locally-produced food benefits a broader regional economy, WCCDA continues a partnership with the White Center Food Bank to provide food bank clients with \$5 vouchers to purchase fresh produce of their choice at several of the stores participating in the healthy retail program. As more retailers show interest in the program, the WCCDA is exploring the possibility of expanding the voucher program to even more produce markets and convenience stores in White Center.



COMMUNITY VOICE: *jamie yin* neighborhood grocer

"My family has to eat healthy, because we have a long history of diabetes and heart disease. And we like to eat fresh. Our store, Samway Market, lets us promote fresh food for everyone. We try to keep our produce prices reasonable. For instance, if a certain vegetable comes in at a high market price, we try to lower the price of another vegetable to balance things out.

Our collaboration with Healthy Foods Here resulted in signs being placed around the community, an online profile of our store, and local media attention. My brother was in

the *Seattle Times*, and customers would come in and mention the article. We continue to participate in a program through the White Center Community Development Association that enables the White Center Food Bank to provide people with \$5 vouchers they can redeem at Samway and other stores for fresh fruits and vegetables.

Programs like Healthy Foods Here and the vouchers from the food bank help us build relationships with customers. When the programs started, we saw many new customers, but now it's mostly the

same ones. Buying fresh produce has become part of their routine, with or without vouchers.

To be honest, the \$5 vouchers only benefit our bottom line a little. For us, it's more about helping people. That's what we want to do, help people in White Center. We grew up here. It's our home too. Providing healthy food is our way of giving back."

Jamie Yin works at Samway Market, the grocery store owned and operated by his family, who moved from Cambodia to White Center.



school

FOOD AND FITNESS

KCFFI was successful in laying the foundation for lasting changes to meals served at schools in Delridge and White Center, fostering a connection between students and school food, and increasing opportunities for physical activity available to students at school and in the community. Our success was the result of strong relationships built on the ground by KCFFI staff based at a school site, working side-by-side with school staff, teachers, and especially parents, who served formally and informally as wellness ambassadors for the schools.

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We worked with parents through the WCCDA Family Connections program, training them to advocate and take action around an issue about which they were passionate. For instance, we covered the cost of one enthusiastic parent to become a certified Zumba dance-fitness instructor. Offering Zumba classes at the school encouraged parents to engage more with the school, increasing the number of parents attending school events, bringing joy to school and neighborhood celebrations, and creating demand for low-cost community-based fitness opportunities.

Below are just a few highlights from KCFFI's robust school food and fitness efforts:

Coordinated Approach to School Wellness

KCFFI coordinated the establishment of federally-mandated wellness committees for Seattle Public Schools (SPS) (serving Delridge) and Highline School District (serving White Center). As a result of this KCFFI leadership, wellness committees in the two districts are working together on a coordinated school wellness approach that incorporates youth engagement and community voice, and focuses on areas where KCFFI has already built momentum: farm-to-school, school meals, nutrition education, physical activity, and safe routes to school.



Bicycles play a star role in active living. Through a partnership with the Cascade Bicycle Club, young community members learned bike safety and maintenance, essential for making bicycling a part of everyday life.

Transformation of Recess Culture

In partnership with Treeswing, a local non-profit, four high-poverty schools implemented changes to recess based on the Playworks Recess 360° Comprehensive Recess and Youth Leadership Program. The results were so positive that participating schools requested training for additional staff and for other schools to receive the training. To sustain and expand the transformation process, the Boys & Girls Club and White Center Heights Elementary have continued to fund a Recess Coach position originally created and supported by KCFFI.

Safe Routes to School

As a result of KCFFI work, SPS passed a new transportation policy officially making Safe Routes to School a key part of its transportation strategy. After significant capacity building efforts led by KCFFI, such as “walking school buses” (adult-supervised groups of kids walking to school together), SPS also developed a Walking School Bus Subcommittee to develop resources and procedures to embrace the new policy.

Farm-to-Childcare

Extending the farm-to-school concept to childcare has been a big win for KCFFI. In partnership with the Northwest Agriculture Business Center and the City of Seattle Human Services Department (HSD) Youth and Family Empowerment Division, we launched farm-to-childcare efforts at two childcare sites in Delridge and White Center, serving more than 120 families.

We coupled locally-sourced food with promotional activities, such as farmer visits to the childcare sites. As a result of our partnership, HSD successfully advocated for farm-to-childcare to be a priority in the Seattle Food Action Plan. HSD also committed funding to enable the food and fitness activities funded through KCFFI in Delridge and White Center to be replicated in other areas of Seattle.



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COMMUNITY VOICE: **chato carver** family ambassador

"I had time to volunteer after moving to White Center, so I began contributing to KCFFI programs and events, chopping vegetables, and helping with meal preparation. Eventually I was hired by the White Center Community Development Association as a Family Ambassador. In this role, I helped families get the resources they needed. They can sometimes be shy and don't know where to turn. We helped parents connect with their children and help them form good study habits.

One of the activities I helped with was the Walking School Bus. It started right next door to my house. I called the kids and woke them up in the morning. We'd meet at 8:30 a.m. at the park and walk together to school. We had a little raffle and incentives for the kids who walked. You know, a lot of kids were driven to school, even though they lived just a few blocks from school. The kids who walked with us got to school at the same time as the ones who were driven there, due to

traffic and waiting time at the school driveway! This realization actually initiated a traffic flow study and has changed the way the school has organized traffic flow."

Originally from the Philippines, Chato Carver moved to White Center in 2010 to afford her child more space than they had in their former Seattle neighborhood.



CONTINUING THE *good work*

Real and lasting change is neither quick nor easy to achieve. Change at the policy, systems, and environmental levels is harder still. Change that grows from the ground up, by and from the community itself, is hardest of all.

Reflecting on five years of the King County Food & Fitness Initiative, we would like to share some parting thoughts and offer hope and encouragement to those who continue the good work.

We were privileged to have such a long planning process, and it enabled us to select, in a democratic way, two communities on which to focus and to engage both adults and youth in these communities.

We confronted issues of race, class, and culture in our Leadership Council, and by facing these issues head on, we set the table for equity and justice in community work on food and physical activity.

It takes time to activate a community to think about underlying issues, to identify the root cause, and do more than apply band aid solutions. It takes time to engage a community to make changes at the systems level; it's not, for instance, just about starting this or that farmers market but about getting individuals to change the way they eat, the way they see food, and their relationship to it.

In the end, it's about community members making the changes themselves.

The Kellogg Foundation wanted the work to be community based, and we took this charge to heart, making sure that community was the driver at every stage of our work. What if the community you're hoping to work alongside defines both problems and solutions differently from you? How do you balance the desires of your funder with the needs of your community? These were some of the underlying questions we wrestled with even as we developed KCFFI with the most community-minded of intentions.



Young people will carry the work forward. Communal meals through FEEST (Food Empowerment Education and Sustainability Team) are only the beginning. FEEST youth will grow into the community leaders of tomorrow.

You have to understand the problems in a deep way and base your solutions on community assets, not deficits. You must believe in what is possible and then reach beyond that. There's always more to it than a fix to a problem. If there's one key to success in this work, it's that it really needs to involve the people most impacted by the issues you're trying to solve.

We are honored to have discovered this key and to have put it into practice as best we possibly could. We wish the same for all who follow in our footsteps and all who go beyond them.

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Acknowledgements

The King County Food & Fitness Initiative has been, by design, an inclusive effort over a sustained period of time. Thousands of community members have participated in events or activities and contributed in ways large and small; it would be impossible to name them all.

We want to extend our sincere thanks to everyone in Seattle, King County, and the Pacific Northwest region whose lives and work intertwined with KCFFI, whether they know it or not. We owe a special debt of gratitude to each and every person, young and old, who calls Delridge and White Center home.

Over the years, there have been many people closely associated with KCFFI who put their hearts and minds and hands into the work.

To all our co-creators, colleagues, and collaborators, we cannot thank you enough. The KCFFI experience, everything we created together, and the promise of a healthier, more resilient, more equitable future stands as testament to your good work.

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