



PLANTING THE SEEDS: A FARM TO IN-HOME EARLY CARE PILOT CASE STUDY

Increasing access to healthy, culturally appropriate produce and resources for Hmong in-home early care providers and sustaining the financial viability of Hmong American Farmers Association farmers.

INTRODUCTION

Building on a long-standing partnership and a bedrock vision of a truly community-based food system, in 2020 the Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA) and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) launched a new Farm to in-home Early Care initiative on the east side of St. Paul. Though impacted by the sudden upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, the initial phase of this project connected a cohort of Hmong early care providers and the children they care for with fresh healthy vegetables from HAFA's farm, provided resources to support their long-term ability to maintain their Farm to Early Care activities and laid the groundwork of a scalable model that continues to grow.

WHY IN-HOME EARLY CARE?

Early care settings offer a critical intervention point to provide good nutrition and encourage healthy eating, as children often consume up to two-thirds of their daily nutritional intake while in early care. However, early care environments are diverse and one-size-fits-all resources will not work for all providers. In addition to center-based care, such as Head Start Centers, preschools and childcare centers, many children are cared for in home-based settings, including licensed and family, friend and neighbor care (no more than 14 children) and usually in the provider's home. In Minnesota in 2019, there were over 1,700 child

What is Farm to Early Care?

Farm to Early Care initiatives connect young children with healthy, locally-grown foods and support farmers in their communities.

Farm to Early Care's three core components:

- Serving locally grown foods in early care meals and snacks
- Offering food and farming-related educational activities for children
- Organizing food and farming-related family engagement activities.

Farm to Early Care initiatives deliver foods from local farmers into early care meals while teaching children where that food comes from.

care centers and more than 7,600 licensed family child care programs¹, with many more unlicensed in-home daycares as well. A 2020 report from The Center for Law and Social Policy documents the systemic barriers that child care providers faced even before the COVID-19 pandemic's upheaval of the system, noting that "virtually all child care workers are women, disproportionately women of color and immigrant women who do not have adequate wages



or benefits.”² In-home early care providers are often solely responsible for all meal preparation, cleaning, paperwork, business management and communication with families in addition to caring for the children and cultivating educational opportunities for them. Despite these challenges, in-home early care settings also offer unique opportunities for deep engagement with smaller groups of children and greater ability to do more involved educational activities.

Most Farm to Early Care resources — including the model and educational resources we created previously — focus on center-based early care environments. Through calls from partners and experience in our work, we recognized a severe lack of resources for in-home daycare settings and in particular, for women of color in-home daycare providers, and hope materials we create from our pilot can help meet the huge need for support of in-home providers to participate in Farm to Early Care going forward.

Farm to Early Care is good for kids!

Children who participate in Farm to Early Care initiatives encounter a wide variety of locally grown and raised foods, show increased willingness to try new foods, and eat more servings and more diverse kinds of fruits and vegetables compared to children who do not participate in Farm to Early Care. These healthy habits are developed during a key window of childhood when taste preferences are being set that will carry forward for the rest of their lives, making it an effective prevention strategy for obesity and diet-related disease. Through hands-on classroom activities, children also develop a sense of “food literacy” and deepen their understanding of agriculture, healthy eating, local foods and seasonality. Additionally, introducing local foods to very young children lays the groundwork for Farm to School activities in K-12 settings. Through Farm to Early Care activities, children can act as agents of change for families and teachers, inspiring healthier eating habits outside the classroom.

Farm to Early Care is good for farmers!

Farm to Early Care initiatives open up new markets for farmers to sell their products. Institutions like early care settings can provide a stable and predictable source of income for local food producers, and farmers who sell to early care settings can potentially plan ahead and sell larger amounts at once than they can at a farmers market. Experience selling to early care settings builds skills that support selling to additional wholesale markets, helping to diversify farmers’ businesses and grow their bottom line.

Farm to Early Care is good for communities!

In addition to farmers, other sectors of the local food economy, such as processors and caterers, also can increase their businesses. Investing dollars locally creates a multiplier effect — in fact, a study from Oregon found that every dollar spent on Farm to School and Early Care generates an additional \$2.16 in local economic activity.

Farm to Early Care initiatives are taking off across the spectrum of child care settings, from family child care providers, to Head Start Programs, to center-based care. They naturally align with child development best practices by engaging children in experiential learning and are a complementary strategy to meet already existing requirements from licensing, child nutrition programs and quality improvement standards. These initiatives are flexible, and early care providers can choose unique activities based on the goals and needs of their community. Ultimately, Farm to Early Care activities can transform systems to be more resilient by engaging families and community members, strengthening local economies by investing in local growers and other food-related businesses and supporting farmers by facilitating access to new markets.



Janssen Hang delivers a HAFA CSA box to an in-home early care provider in June 2022.

BUILDING CULTURAL FOOD AND AGRICULTURE CONNECTIONS

In addition to a lack of resources focused on in-home settings, providers have also told us they would like more culturally responsive curricula and educational materials to support them in meeting the unique needs of their communities. We see a large opportunity for accessible bicultural/bilingual Farm to Early Care materials to engage children in learning diverse cultural food traditions and foodways that connect them to their community and identity. With increased barriers to access to fresh, healthy, culturally appropriate foods, communities of color in particular are disproportionately affected by diet-related disease and preventable premature death, making resources focused on these communities even more vital. We could not identify any Farm to Early Care materials developed to serve the Hmong community with which we partner, and we look forward to sharing resources that build on the deep agricultural roots and rich culinary traditions of the Hmong community to strengthen our model.

A PILOT BUILT ON PARTNERSHIP

Hmong American farmers occupy a unique place in the history of Minnesota's local foods movement. Since Hmong refugees began resettling from Laos and Thailand to Minnesota in the 1970s as political refugees after the Vietnam War, many families have relied on their agricultural heritage to make a living, growing produce and flowers for local farmers markets.

By the late 1980s, Hmong farmers had revitalized the Saint Paul and Minneapolis Farmers Markets, transforming them into some of the most vibrant markets in the country, while also changing Minnesota's taste buds to appreciate Thai chili peppers and Chinese bok choy. As hardworking farmers, they provided the fresh produce that fueled the exponential growth of farmers markets into suburban communities and urban corridors, and greatly increased the supply of nutritious, affordable food.

Today, Hmong American farmers are leading the Twin Cities local food economy, making up more than 50% of all the farmers in metropolitan farmers markets. Hmong farmers are at the center of a Minnesota-based local foods economy that according to AgStar Financial Services generates over \$250 million in annual sales. Without Hmong farmers, this explosion



Early care provider Souvanh Thao presents meals made with local HAFA produce.

of awareness and interest in local foods and small-scale farming in Minnesota would not be possible.

In 2011, a group of Hmong American farming families formed the **Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA)**. HAFA is a membership-based nonprofit that works with over 100 Hmong farmers in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Despite their hard work and deep experiences, Hmong farmers continue to be disadvantaged when accessing farmland, new markets (beyond the farmers markets), capital, credit, research and training programs compared to other white vegetable, fruit and flower growers. HAFA's mission is to advance the economic prosperity of its farmers through policy and systems change; community engagement and advocacy; and individual capacity building so that HAFA farmers can grow their self-efficacy, as well as intergenerational and community wealth.

As part of an integrated approach to community wealth building, HAFA manages a 155-acre farm in Dakota County where member families can lease land, hone their business and agricultural practices, and sell produce to the HAFA Food Hub. The typical HAFA farmer is someone who has been farming for over 20 years on less than 10 acres of land, in the Twin

Cities but farming in Washington or Dakota County. Most HAFA farmers grow a variety of vegetables and flowers for the local farmers markets.

The HAFA Food Hub aggregates and sells members' produce through community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares, farm to schools, retailers and institutions.

Through collective farm business development, education and advocacy, HAFA is building paths to wealth creation, not just income generation, toward a sustainable, fair food economy for all. HAFA believes that true equity requires system level change and only occurs when people recognize each other, align their shared values and act in community-driven solidarity. As such, we regularly partner with other organizations, sharing information, resources and organizing together to advocate for changes to the local food economy and promote equity for all Hmong farmers and the BIPOC community.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) is a Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization with a 35-year history of pursuing cutting edge solutions that benefit family farmers, rural communities and the planet. IATP's work extends from advocating for more democratic and economically just trade

agreements to spearheading Farm to Head Start programs. Connecting the dots has made IATP unique in that IATP matches high-level research and analysis with on-the-ground engagement to bring policies to fruition. IATP's technical expertise and credibility within a variety of fields has enabled us to serve as a convener, collaborator and trusted source for NGOs, policymakers and public agencies around the world. IATP's location in Minnesota is fortunate and strategic, as the deep tradition of civic engagement in this state has allowed us a laboratory to test innovative solutions that have been replicated around the country and world.

IATP's Community Food System Program's long-term goal is to build vibrant community-based food systems that give all people access to sufficient, safe, culturally appropriate and nutritious food while also developing local food supply chains that will allow small- to mid-scale farmers to access a variety of newmarkets. We envision decentralized, local food systems that are accountable to, and largely controlled by, the community members who depend on them, where food is produced and distributed in a manner that builds equity, justice, and resiliency in policy and practice.



HAFA team in front of their delivery truck.

OUR FARM TO IN-HOME EARLY CARE CSA PILOT

HAFAs and IATP have partnered on projects since 2014, when we launched the first Farm to Head Start model in Minnesota, which involved serving HAFAs vegetables in meals, developing a new curriculum and supporting enriching field trips where kids, families and Head Start staff got to visit HAFAs farm. (You can learn more about this initiative in [our previous case study](#).)

Building on our previous experience, we are now working together on adapting Farm to Early Care to work for the in-home family day care context, with weekly delivery of CSA boxes of HAFAs fresh, healthy foods to a cohort of Hmong in-home daycare providers on the East Side of St. Paul. We are also developing a bicultural/bilingual curriculum and supportive menu and recipe resources that will highlight connections with Hmong cultural traditions and recipes, designed with the in-home setting in mind. Through this project, we will connect women-of-color-owned daycare settings with healthy, culturally appropriate food at a reduced cost, simultaneously building a new revenue stream for HAFAs farmers and giving kids access to delicious food that helps them to thrive long term.

As part of our project, HAFAs will work with their Hmong farmer members to train them on food safety and good agricultural practices, as well as aggregating produce from them and coordinating delivery of the weekly CSA boxes.

To boost the long-term resources that providers have to purchase their meals, we will share information with providers in our cohort about the federal food program, called the Child and Adult Care Food Program



HAFAs CSA distribution at Mississippi Market Co-Op in St. Paul.



Children unpack a HAFAs CSA box at an in-home early care site, October 2022.

(CACFP), which provides reimbursement to providers for every meal they serve. Enrolling in CACFP can be intimidating, and immigrant providers like those in our cohort face additional barriers when trying to navigate the paperwork and processes to join. This extra money could be highly beneficial to providers wanting to serve healthy meals and purchase local, in particular, since providers have reported that cost is a barrier, all while ensuring that farmers receive a fair price for their produce. We hope the extra reimbursement money will enable providers to continue purchasing local after our pilot phase concludes.

In addition to encouraging providers to sign up for CACFP, we will collect their feedback on how the process could be easier for them. We are collaborating with the Minnesota Department of Education and food program sponsoring organizations to look at CACFP processes and how they could be streamlined into a more equitable system for immigrant providers, such as those in our cohort.

We will also gather feedback from our cohort of in-home daycare providers as we develop the curriculum materials to support and introduce a healthy, culturally appropriate meal plan that meets



Early care provider Souvanh Thao shows HAFA CSA vegetables to a child.

the federal CACFP requirements. We will test the resources we create with our cohort of providers and use their input to refine materials to make them more user friendly. Ultimately, we will produce a package of hands-on curriculum activities, menu plans and recipe resources designed for the in-home context that will be available for free in the hopes that more providers can use them, even if we aren't working with them directly.

“Receiving a box of fresh produce weekly helps me tremendously and it provides me an array of produce to choose from for the meals. The fresh lemongrass received has made my children’s favorite dish, chicken and herb soup, more flavorful and soothing.”

— MayLee Yang, participating provider

“Participating in the Farm to In-home Daycare program reduces the time I need to purchase produce and helps me with meal preparation in advance. It also gives me the opportunity to spark conversations with my children and incorporate them in a learning curriculum.”

— Participating provider

ADAPTING TO THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

When HAFA and IATP made plans for this pilot, we had not anticipated that we would have to operate within the context of a global pandemic. COVID-19 had a huge impact on initiative, both because it limited our own supportive activities and engagement strategies, and also because of the tremendous hardship it created for our farmers, childcare providers and the young children in their care. However, we also found that the CSA model we had originally developed was well suited to operating in the pandemic context, and we were grateful to fulfill a positive purpose in the midst of a difficult year.

Our original plan for this project centered relationship-building as a key strategy and valuable outcome we hoped to cultivate over the year. Our intention was to have multiple in-person meetings at each provider’s location where we could learn about their goals, share information and bring partners in to meet them when appropriate, as well as connect providers to each other in a cohort model and with their farmers at an in-person end-of-season harvest celebration meal. Of course, we had to drastically alter these plans to accommodate only connecting with providers via phone and Zoom. We were just building our cohort in the spring of 2020 when the pandemic began. Providers were making their own adaptations as public health guidance was changing day by day; some of them were taking on more children and supporting school-age kids in remote learning as in-person schools were closed, while others were choosing to close or were forced to close as their families pulled children out of their care. It was a very difficult time for providers to



Erin McKee leads a seed-planting activity at an early care provider site visit, June 2022.

commit to a new initiative, and our pool of interested providers shrank as they grappled with the enormously stressful and constantly changing situation. Eventually, we confirmed a cohort of nine providers to participate in our pilot year, scaled down from our original intent to work with 15 providers.

At the same time the pandemic impacted our partners, it also increased the urgent need for initiatives like ours. Food insecurity rates have jumped higher for communities of color during the pandemic, and disparities with their white counterparts have widened. The challenges brought on by the pandemic have demonstrated the fragility and brittleness of our current system, where individuals and farmers bear the risk, and highlighted the necessity to bolster support for farmers and community-based food systems into our structures.

References

- 1 Minnesota Department of Human Services. Legislative Report: Status of Child Care in Minnesota, 2019. February 2020. <https://www.leg.mn.gov/docs/2020/mandated/200311.pdf>
- 2 Center for Law and Policy. An Anti-Racist Approach to Supporting Child Care Through COVID-19 and Beyond. July 14, 2020. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/anti-racist-approach-supporting-child-care-through-covid-19-and-beyond>

NEXT STEPS

Through our experience with the cohort of providers who participated in this pilot, we have seen the power and the potential of Farm to Early Care initiatives for the in-home child care setting. We are eager to build and improve on what we have learned during our first year as we expand our cohort to more providers from a wider geographic area. We are pleased that as our initiative continues, we have been able to cultivate deeper relationships with our providers and are planning to create opportunities to connect the cohort through in-person celebrations in 2023. We plan to formally publish a bicultural/bilingual curriculum, menu, recipe and logistical resources to support others in replicating our model, as well as seek opportunities to present and share our story at conferences and trainings. We are also excited to build connections with other partner organizations who are interested in future collaboration to potentially adapt our model to meet their community needs. The first year of this project was a challenging one, but has only deepened our commitment to the farmers, providers and families who helped us succeed. We are looking forward to the next phase of this work!

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