

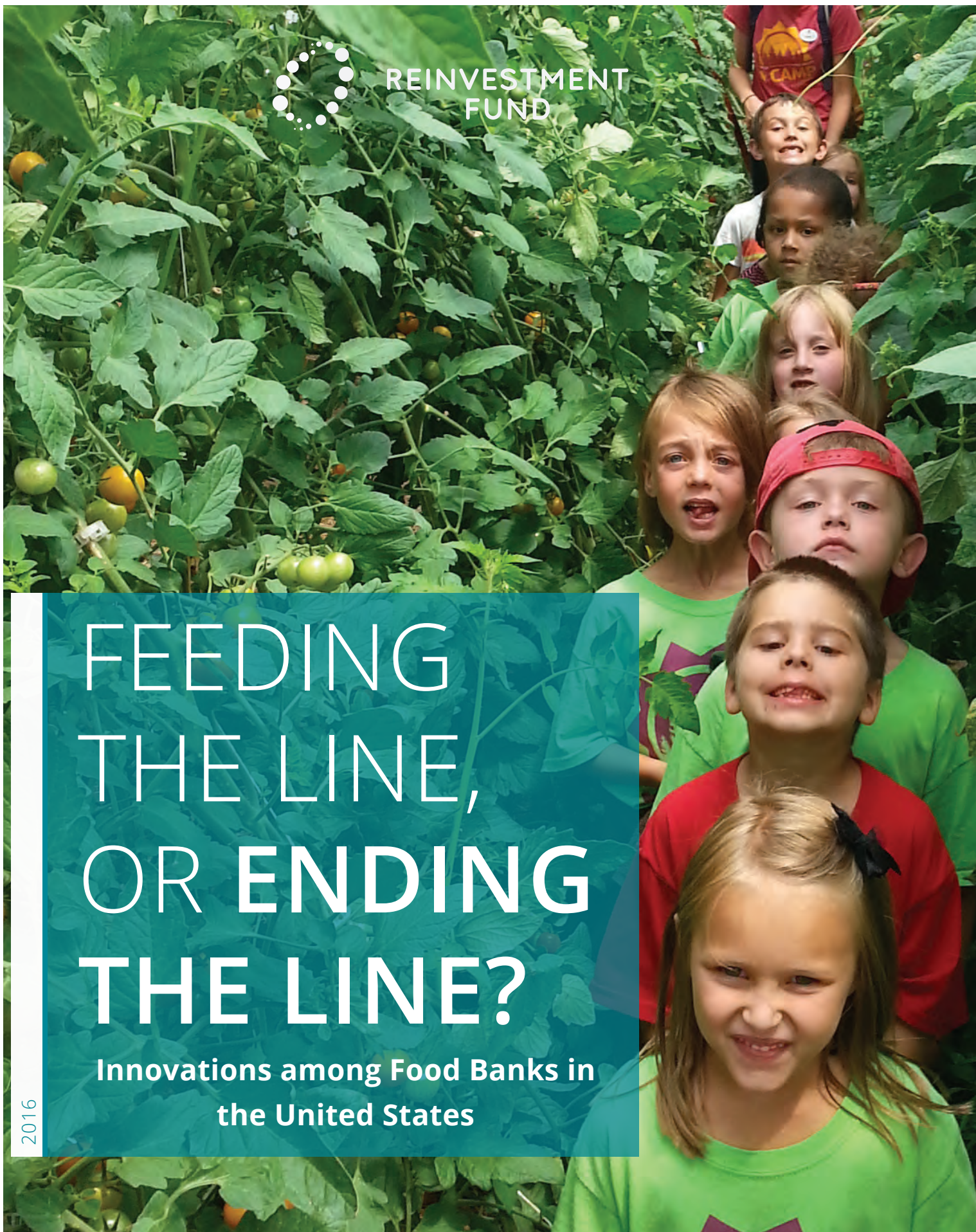


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FEEDING THE LINE, OR ENDING THE LINE?

Innovations among Food Banks in
the United States

2016





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Innovations among Food Banks in the United States

By Reinvestment Fund

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Introduction

A fundamental paradigm shift is taking place right now in how food banks approach hunger. Across the country, food banks are looking at their mission through a number of new lenses: health; education and technical assistance; farming; economic and workforce development; business enterprises; and community empowerment and advocacy. Within each of these categories, food banks are adopting a variety of approaches to achieve both the short- and long-term goals of feeding the hungry and permanently ending food insecurity.

Food bank leaders are actively seeking opportunities for collaboration—with each other and with other service organizations in their communities. They are exploring collective efforts that would have a greater impact on hunger than isolated efforts alone. Several are changing their mission statements and writing new strategic plans to incorporate ideas about social justice, individual self-sufficiency and the web of challenges that cause hunger in the first place, such as low wages, lack of affordable housing and child care, and other stresses stemming from poverty.

To address these critical factors, food banks are taking a holistic approach to understanding the needs of their clients and leveraging their existing resources and connections to improve how the food system serves struggling families. They are fostering relationships with local farmers, retailers of every size, health care providers, universities and chefs to shape a healthy food infrastructure that meets the needs of everyone in their community. Many are adopting the motto **“Don’t just feed the line. End the line.”**

In this report, Reinvestment Fund examines how these new programs represent a paradigm shift within the food bank movement, in which food banks are fundamentally transforming their role. These findings emerge from interviews Reinvestment Fund conducted with 16 food banks and hunger-relief organizations that address the issue of hunger holistically, examining how to affect its root causes as well as its impacts on the health and security of individuals. The report offers a snapshot of the new trends among food banks and identifies ways to build support and momentum for programs that help people put healthy food on their tables, every single day.



THE FOOD BANK MOVEMENT

The country's emergency food system consists primarily of food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens that serve cities, suburbs and rural areas. Typically, the banks receive donations of surplus food from corporations and distribute them to the region's kitchens and pantries.¹ Kitchens and pantries distribute food to people in need at the local level, often through religious institutions that are motivated by a sense of charity to help those who are struggling to make ends meet.

The first food banks in the United States emerged in the late 1960s, out of two very different ideas. One was a response to the issue of inventory management. In Arizona, a retired businessman named John Van Hengel was volunteering at a soup kitchen when he observed that it did not have sufficient capacity to store all the donations of food it received. He developed the idea of food banking, opening the first facility in 1967. In 1976, he received federal funding to create more food banks across the country. When funding was discontinued only a few years later, the food bank movement had already taken off.²

At about the same time that Van Hengel opened his first warehouse, the Black Panther Party began a series of Survival Programs to ensure access by African Americans to critical services and resources. Among these were:

- The Free Food program, which delivered to “Black and other oppressed people” in the face of increasing food prices.³
- Free Breakfast for Children, which began in an Oakland church and quickly expanded to a series of kitchens across the nation, serving breakfast to 10,000 children daily.⁴

These two very different origin stories created a food bank movement that shared a common goal: to put food into the hands of people who are hungry.

In the 1980s, food banks received an unplanned stimulus from the federal government. Sweeping cuts to federal entitlement programs, including the Food Stamp Program (what later became Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program or SNAP, benefits) forced the number of people relying on food pantries for

sustenance to sky rocket. At the same time, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was storing over 500 million pounds of commodity cheese—as well as other dairy products—in warehouses across the country. Under the government’s price-support programs, these products were subsequently left to rot. Public outcry about government-subsidized waste at a time when the nation saw a surge in hunger led the USDA to distribute 30 million pounds of surplus (often moldy) cheese to emergency food providers. Facing rising public pressure and increasing storage costs, the government continued to distribute commodities regularly to emergency food providers. In 1983, the USDA launched the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) to institutionalize the commodity distribution program. To process the dramatically increased volume of donations, new food banks emerged, creating a vast infrastructure for emergency hunger relief efforts.⁵

The food bank movement has grown into a robust arm of the nonprofit community. Today, Feeding America—the nation’s largest domestic hunger relief organization—has a network of 200 food banks.⁶ In 2013, these organizations provided emergency food for 46.5 million, or one in seven Americans. Until recently, food banks have predominantly operated as charities, and most of their donations come from corporate partners. It is largely volunteers who staff food banks, packing boxes primarily of processed food to distribute to people in need. New approaches are now inspiring banks to take steps such as creating gardens to supplement their supply of fresh produce. This helps to feed the line while banks’ educational and social programs strive to shorten the line in a lasting way.

A PARADIGM SHIFT

Many food banks have long understood that hunger is not an isolated event, but a symptom of larger challenges that struggling families and individuals face in every part of the country. Over the last few years there has been a shift in how food banks are addressing hunger. Since 2008’s Great Recession, food banks have observed growing lines of people continuing to cycle through the system, treating the banks not as an emergency resource but as a routine solution. In response, a new wave of leaders are questioning the traditional food bank approach and introducing fresh perspectives on these programs.

At the same time, many food banks are receiving fewer donations, as supermarkets and food producers become more efficient in managing their inventories and finding secondary markets for their products. The mainstream media routinely discuss new research on the direct link between diet and health, and the Obama Administration has made nutrition education and improving access to healthy food a priority. Finally, the local food movement has become popular across the economic spectrum, elevating the universal importance

A note on language

This report uses the terms “food insecurity” and “hunger” interchangeably, but many members of the hunger and community development movements articulate a stark distinction between the two. According to Janet Poppendieck’s *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, hunger means “people are skipping meals because there’s not enough food to go the whole month.”⁷ Food insecurity takes into account the broader spectrum of social, economic and psychological factors that lead to hunger. Poppendieck reports that food security includes “at a minimum (a) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and (b) an assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”⁸

of access to healthy, local food—including those served by food banks. Faced with this changing landscape, food banks are adopting a more holistic approach.

They are striving to create lasting solutions to hunger by expanding to include initiatives that address:

- health;
- education;
- farming;
- economic and workforce development;
- community empowerment and advocacy.

This report explores each of these themes in greater detail and provides examples of organizations developing programs within each category. Notably, many of the organizations we interviewed are working across all five of these themes. Nearly all of them are taking the time to analyze their role in low-income communities and how to best leverage their immense knowledge and resources to maximize impact. This evolution within the field may not yet be universal, but a new set of powerful ideas and innovations are leading the food bank movement—not merely to feed the line of hungry Americans in our communities, but to shorten it.

Oregon Food Bank PORTLAND, OR

Pioneering long-term solutions to hunger

In the early 1990s, Oregon Food Bank (OFB) revised its mission statement to read: “To eliminate hunger and its root causes... because no one should be hungry.” In 1999, the U.S. Department of Agriculture named Oregon the hungriest state in the nation.⁹ Distributing food was a challenge in this predominantly rural landscape, where it is not uncommon to live 100 miles from a grocery store. In the face of this challenge, OFB started to think more broadly about how to adapt the local food economy to meet community needs.

Believing that communities need their own unique solutions, OFB founded FEAST (Food, Education and Agriculture Solutions Together), a community organizing process that engages local participants in discussions about food access. FEAST provides frameworks that enable communities to work together to build a healthier, more equitable and more resilient local food system.

To connect its food distribution efforts to other challenges facing those it serves, the bank is mobilizing healthcare providers to address the connection between food insecurity and health. Through a program called Screen and Intervene, OFB collaborates with clinics and hospitals across the state to offer food insecurity screenings and clinics with information on local resources.¹⁰ OFB is now working with state government to make this practice mandatory by 2017 for any healthcare provider that serves Medicaid patients.

Efforts to empower communities have resulted in stronger food systems and increased attention to the relationship between food and health. FEAST has catalyzed economic development across the state, including new farmers’ markets, community gardens and nutrition programs. Many communities have now established relationships between schools and farmers, applied for economic development grants and developed local food guides. OFB has facilitated approximately 80 FEAST events and shared its model with organizations in 12 other states. Partnering with 200 organizations across the state, OFB has used Screen and Intervene to reach new audiences and engage the health sector in the fight against hunger.



Health

Food banks are becoming more concerned about the nutritional value of the food they distribute and are emphasizing fresh produce.

In recent years, the most widespread transformation in the food bank industry has been the focus on more nutritious food. As a result of corporate donations, most of the products that food banks traditionally distribute are processed and have long shelf lives, which makes storage and distribution easier and more affordable. Recent research has shown these foods to have a direct negative impact on an individual's health and that a diet heavy in processed food leads to chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, cholesterol and obesity.¹¹ Rates of diet-related diseases are highest among low-income families. Of households that food banks serve, 58% have a member with high blood pressure, and 33% have a member with diabetes.¹²

As the public dialogue has brought these facts to light, several food banks have begun to integrate health-focused initiatives into their programming and have become more selective about the type of food they distribute to their clients. Some organizations, including the Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine, have gone so far as to hire full-time nutritionists to review the nutritional value of all donations, and will turn away donations that do not meet certain standards.

Other banks are taking steps to increase the volume of fresh produce and proteins they distribute:

- Others, such as Sacramento Food Bank, buy produce directly from regional farmers—guaranteeing the farmer a predictable stream of revenue for produce it could purchase at a fixed, affordable price. Many farmers encourage the practice of gleaning: harvesting what they would otherwise throw away or leave in the fields as unsellable. (They generally only sell about half their crops in the marketplace, due to commercial demand for produce that meets certain standards of appearance.)¹³
- Some have established gleaning programs with nearby farms to increase access to fresh local produce. Northern Neck Food Bank in Virginia and the Vermont Food Bank are two examples.

- Several banks operate their own farms and gardens. The Greater Lansing Food Bank’s Garden Project, now 30 years old, distributes over 1 million pounds of fresh produce locally each year.

Sourcing and distributing fresh food also requires significant investments in infrastructure (refrigerated trucks and storage facilities), as well as new ways to get these items into the hands of clients. Many organizations—such as the Chester County Food Bank in Exton, PA; Foodlink in Rochester, NY; and the Mid-Ohio Food Bank—use mobile grocery markets and produce trucks to bring fresh produce directly to the communities they serve. Feeding America, the national network of hunger relief organizations, has begun to institutionalize this movement toward healthy food, hiring a director of nutrition in 2011 and releasing the *Foods to Encourage* nutrition guidelines in 2012.¹⁴ Currently, 68% of the food the Feeding America network distributes falls within those guidelines of “foods to encourage,” which includes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins and low-fat dairy.¹⁵

Northern Neck Food Bank

WARSAW, VA

Gleaning as a source for fresh produce

Partnering with 27 local farms, the Northern Neck Food Bank runs gleaning programs from Memorial Day to late fall, relying heavily on volunteers, including community members, school groups and regional businesses. Building relationships with farmers has led to donations beyond the gleaning program, such

as the Monday Produce Run, which collects what farmers markets did not sell the previous Sunday.

Of the food Northern Neck distributes, 40% is produce—much of which would have ended up in a landfill without its gleaning program. In addition to providing access to fresh, local food, gleaning supports community members in learning about healthy food and farming.

Food banks are forming partnerships with health care and public health organizations to design diet-related health interventions.

Banks are now looking beyond the daily mission of delivering food to evaluate other ways to mitigate long-term food insecurity and work toward the broader goal of helping clients create healthy lives. This increased awareness has led to success with partners in health care who bring valuable expertise to this shared public health challenge.

Working with public health organizations, banks are seeking to understand the links between food and health in their communities and to design strategies that can address these issues. According to the 2014 Feeding America study, “Hunger in America,” 66% of food bank clients in the United States had to choose between paying for food and medical care in 2013.¹⁶ By creating partnerships with local healthcare organizations, food banks help ensure that families no longer have to choose between their health and food on the table.

Building these relationships has required a grassroots approach. Fostering relationships with healthcare organizations can be challenging, as many are already struggling to keep up with the demand for their services. Identifying mutual benefits is one way to move these collaborations forward. Conducting food insecurity screenings at health clinics can make it possible to intervene in time to prevent a diet-related disease from getting worse—thereby minimizing the number of doctor’s visits a patient requires.

Throughout the nation, food banks are taking steps to integrate food education and health awareness:

- Oregon Food Bank partners with individual clinics across the state to institute a food security screening for all patient visits; it offers clients guidance on applying for food assistance programs in each region.
- The Northern Neck Food Bank and the Food Bank of South Jersey are establishing partnerships with local hospitals to conduct health screenings at food pantries or provide mobile food markets.
- The Food Bank of North Alabama and the Mid-Ohio Food Bank have studied the rates of diabetes and high blood pressure among the communities they serve.

The Mid-Ohio Food bank is even working with federally qualified health centers to bring healthy food directly to the clinics. This trend signals a shift in how food banks approach their role in fighting hunger. They are beginning to look beyond people’s immediate need for food to the effect that food has on healthy living, and they are reaching out to other partners who can bring valuable expertise.

Food Bank of North Alabama HUNTSVILLE, AL

Impacting heart health through diet

In 2014, when the Food Bank of North Alabama learned that 71% of its 360 clients suffered from high blood pressure, it partnered with the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Public Health to create the educational Good Food Project. Together, they designed a seven-week menu to lower blood pressure. In

addition to a weekly menu and recipes, each Good Food Project order includes a PowerPoint presentation to teach clients about lowering blood pressure through heart-healthy food choices. The food bank purchases food from a supermarket at a discount, using donated funds. Many of the Food Bank of North Alabama’s local partners have eagerly adopted The Good Food Project, which is still in its pilot phase.¹⁷





Education

Through hands-on education programs and environmental changes, food banks are teaching clients how to choose and cook healthy food.

Making the shift to healthier food choices has been challenging for some clients. Fresh produce is often unattainable in low-income communities where the main food sources are fast food chains or a convenience store. Some clients are accustomed to cooking with more affordable processed food and simply do not know how to prepare and serve some of the fruits and vegetables that food banks make available. Additionally, clients in temporary housing may not have access to a full kitchen or the experience or the tools to prepare healthy food.

Some food banks bring in experts to speak to groups of clients. Classes range in intensity, from demonstrations at local pantries to six-week programs that provide the opportunity to learn about good nutrition, go to the grocery store as a group, learn to shop on a budget, and cook new meals.

- Share Our Strength, a national nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., has developed a curriculum entitled Cooking Matters to help food banks and other members of the food ecosystem provide free and accessible nutrition education and cooking classes.
- Foodlink in Rochester, NY, and the Good Shepherd Food Bank in Auburn, ME, have built education programs based on Share our Strength's Cooking Matters curriculum.
- Chester County Food Bank runs educational classes for people of all ages throughout their community.

- Mother Hubbard's Cupboard in Bloomington, IN, invites clients and community members to share their knowledge and cooking expertise with one another via a range of courses and workshops.
- The Sacramento Food Bank has trained community members to be nutrition ambassadors, who connect with an even broader audience and provide important knowledge and resources.

To encourage healthy choices and address affordability, some food banks offer incentive programs that enable SNAP benefits to go twice as far when buying fruits and vegetables. These efforts increase demand for healthy food and work with clients to change long-term behavior. Clients are empowered by experiences in class to make healthier food choices. They may begin to share their knowledge with family, friends and each other. This can, in turn, also impact local retail food outlets, which may begin to sell produce to meet the increased demand.

Mother Hubbard's Cupboard BLOOMINGTON, IN

Fostering community leaders

A philosophy of community empowerment informs Mother Hubbard's Cupboard's approach to its education programs. It offers a wide variety of courses and workshops that help clients enjoy healthy food while eating on a budget. Workshops include classes on make-ahead meals, smart shopping, breastfeeding and infant nutrition.

Mother Hubbard's also provides a library of cookbooks and cooking tools that participants can borrow. In addition to bringing in nutritionists and cooking experts, Mother Hubbard's encourages clients and other community members to become teachers and share their knowledge about healthy cooking with one another. These leadership opportunities build self-esteem and also confidence.



Food banks are helping existing food suppliers increase healthy food choices and accessibility to inspire behavior change among clients.

In many distressed communities, the primary food sources are small convenience stores and food pantries, which stock very little—if any—fresh produce and healthy food items. To address these challenges, food banks are working with pantries and neighborhood food retailers to add healthier food and transform the shopping experience. By offering technical assistance and funding to pantries and neighborhood food retailers, they are adopting a client-centric approach that encourages healthy choices and strives to improve service to their clients.

- Foodlink's Corner Store Initiative has led to the full renovation of two convenience stores. In addition to adding new refrigeration, many aesthetic changes make the store clean and approachable to encourage people to buy produce there.
- The Vermont Food Bank's VT Fresh program provides grants to food pantries to implement small-scale renovations that improve a client's shopping experience.
- Both programs encourage clients to change behavior and make healthy choices by offering a more conventional shopping experience.

Vermont Food Bank *BARRE, VT*

Transforming the shopping environment and experience

Through the VT Fresh program, the Vermont Food Bank seeks to transform existing food environments and create spaces that support the wider distribution of produce and encourage clients to make healthy choices. It offers small grants for shelving, displays, signage, storage and prepackaging to regional food pantries that typically have neither the infrastructure to support healthy food nor an atmosphere that encourages people to seek it out. The bank also supports cooking demonstrations and food tasting. Creating an attractive and fun environment around clients' critical points of

decision, the regional pantries encourage healthy choices in the short term with the hope of changing clients' preferences over the long term.

Between 2014 to 2016, VT Fresh worked with 21 food pantries, conducted 589 cooking demonstrations, and had 6,750 participants. After tasting new food, 60% of participants liked a specific vegetable more and 75% said they are more likely to eat that food again.

The program changed not only client behavior, but also the mindset of the food pantries that received the grants. Before, they thought all money should be spent on procuring food, now, they've realized the value of investing in a food environment that encourages healthy choices.





Farming

Food banks are managing their own farms and gardens to help clients connect with food and with each other while also increasing the local supply of fresh produce.

Several food banks are bringing the local food movement to struggling communities by creating community farms and gardens with unique programming. According to Feeding America's 2014 "Hunger in America" report, community gardens represent 1.1% of grocery distribution programs that food banks operate.¹⁸

Food banks with these gardens make a commitment to building a cohesive community with the tools and knowledge to combat food insecurity in a sustainable way. For example:

- The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona hires young people to work on its farm, Las Milpitas de Cottonwood, as part of its youth farm project. There they learn about urban agriculture and lead educational programs for the community.
- In Milwaukee, the Hunger Task Force runs a 200-acre farm that supplies over 10% of the food bank's fresh produce. It also offers educational programming and training aspiring farmers.
- The Sacramento Food Bank, Michigan's Greater Lansing Food Bank, and Foodlink in Rochester, NY, offer educational workshops to empower community members to grow fruits and vegetables at home.

Community gardens offer clients the opportunity to:

- Experience the processes of planting, growing and harvesting fresh produce;
- Learn where their food comes from, which often results in better eating habits and greater intake of fruits and vegetables;¹⁹
- Become contributors and advocates of a healthy food ecosystem;
- Develop relationships with one another as they actively engage in communal efforts; and
- Enjoy a safe outdoor space, which can be rare in many distressed urban communities that food banks serve.

THE HUNGER TASK FORCE MILWAUKEE, WI

Farming as a solution to hunger

In 2011, the Hunger Task Force entered the farming business, taking over a 250-acre family farm that had been built in the 1830s and operated for several decades as an inmate work farm. The original farmland now also includes 100 acres of nature preserve. The Hunger Task Force Farm—the largest farm operated by a food bank—relies heavily on volunteers willing to drive tractors and harvest dozens of acres of crops. The farm offers nutrition education programs and

partners with local public schools on after-school programs. Young farmers from the University of Wisconsin at Madison School of Agriculture also come to the farm for training.

The Hunger Task Force Farm provides 10% of the produce the bank distributes. For many clients, the only fresh produce they eat comes from the farm, because otherwise it would be too expensive. Over 5,000 people volunteer each year, up from 500 in the first year of operation.

Food banks are creating business opportunities for small farmers.

As food banks make a concerted effort to distribute more fresh produce, most encounter problems finding reliable sources from which to purchase it. Many have begun to contract directly with small, local farmers, who often struggle to find markets for their crops at fair prices. At the start of the season, banks will guarantee to purchase a percentage of the farmers' crops at a certain price. Some arrangements allow swapping one type of produce for another. If the broccoli crop fails, the farmer can still count on income, because the food bank will purchase potatoes instead. Some farmers will plant specific crops to meet the food bank's preferences. These arrangements create a predictable source of revenue for small farmers that generally do not have leverage in price negotiations with wholesalers.



The following are examples of how food banks are contributing to the local farm economy:

- The Northern Alabama Food Bank founded the region's first food hub, the Farm Food Collaborative, to help build the capacity of farmers to meet the requirements of buyers. So far, it has facilitated \$470,000 in regional food sales to grocery stores, schools and other institutions.
- Michigan's Lansing Roots program acts as an incubator for small-scale farmers, many of which are immigrants and refugees. It offers financial and marketing support as they try to bring produce to market for the first time.
- The Sacramento Food Bank's Farm to Fork program established arrangements with local farmers to purchase a certain amount of produce in exchange for becoming each farm's designated charity.
- The Mainers Feeding Mainers program at the Good Shepherd Food Bank has letters of agreement with several regional farmers, which guarantee a minimum purchase of their crops each season.

GOOD SHEPHERD FOOD BANK **AUBURN, ME**

Partnering to benefit local farms

In 2014, Good Shepherd distributed 2 million pounds of local produce to families facing hunger. The Mainers Feeding Mainers program uses the food bank's buying power to create a new market for small and midsize farmers, thereby responding to the needs of these local businesses as well as those of Good Shepherd. As part of their agreement, farmers deliver crops to Good Shepherd or its partner food pantries in the region, which in turn distribute the healthy produce to clients.

The food bank works with 25 farmers and is often their number-one customer, which can have a considerable economic impact, especially for small businesses. One farmer was able to afford to enroll his son in college, because he finally had a reliable income. Good Shepherd also reports that once community members are exposed to a new fruit or vegetable, they start to shop for it on their own and often patronize same farmers at farmers' markets and farm stands.





Economic & Workforce Development

Food banks are using their food preparation, processing and distribution operations to train clients for jobs.

Many food bank clients are food insecure because of under- and unemployment:

- 70% percent of all adult pantry clients are unemployed.
- 33% percent of unemployed adult pantry clients are recurrent pantry clients.
- 29% of adult pantry clients who are employed full time are recurrent pantry clients.
- 32% of adult pantry clients who are employed part time are recurrent pantry clients.²¹
- The median monthly household income of food bank clients is \$927 and the median annual household income is \$9,175.²⁰

Some food banks are implementing job training programs to create a pathway out of poverty for their clients. These programs generally have dual purposes. They help community members who struggle to find jobs because of a lack of skills, and they provide value-added culinary services to the food bank, such as processing of fresh food or preparation of meals for distribution to clients.

The Vermont Food Bank, Philabundance and the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona have each implemented workforce development programs. They offer more than culinary job training, often employing social workers to address other immediate needs, such as child care, health care and liaising with the criminal justice system.

The food banks see their job training programs as an investment that can stabilize their clients' lives over the long term; they view these programs as transformational rather than transactional.

The Vermont Food Bank's Community Kitchen Academy awards college credits for its training course, offering an entry point into higher education, which for many participants may have once seemed inaccessible. Students develop lasting relationships with classmates and instructors and carry that network of support with them as they move on to college or new jobs.

Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona TUCSON, AZ

Creating stability through skills training

The Community Food Bank's Caridad Community Kitchen seeks to help people achieve long-term stability. The Community Kitchen began in the mid-1990s as a food preparation program at a nearby Catholic Church. The food bank took over in 2011 and hired an executive chef to create a 10-week training program based on other models throughout the country. Each 10-week class is open to 14 students, and the food bank usually graduates at least a handful of students from each class. Caridad

Community Kitchen does more than teach students how to cook. Those who enroll often face many other obstacles that make it challenging to find employment; Caridad works with a social worker to provide support, including job and life skills training. In addition to gaining valuable professional skills, students at the Caridad Community Kitchen serve 14,000 meals a month to people in need. The program has helped students overcome health challenges, achieve stable jobs with advancement opportunities, and buy homes for their families.



Food banks are shaping local retail food markets by creating new businesses—or supporting existing ones.

Food banks are exploring active, innovative ways to improve access and create jobs in their communities by supporting business enterprises in a variety of ways: through financing, business incubators or starting grocery stores themselves. Given their organizational capacity and longstanding relationships with local donors, retailers, producers and clients, food banks are well positioned to assume the risk of launching or investing in businesses. Through these new enterprises, food banks are striving to create jobs, eliminate the situations that bring clients through their doors, improve access to healthier food and foster a more equitable and sustainable food system.

- The Food Bank of Northern Alabama has taken on the role of a community lender. After trying to start a grocery store and failing to attain financing for its construction, it recently launched the Hiatt Loan Fund to provide seed funding and technical assistance to help small businesses in the food industry get off the ground.
- The Mid-Ohio Food Bank owns and operates Southside Roots Café & Market, a mixed-income shopping experience. The café operates on a pay-what-you-can model and customers with the resources can pay it forward by donating meals to a hungry neighbor. The market sells affordable produce and groceries.
- Philabundance opened a nonprofit supermarket in 2013 to bring affordable food choices to a Chester, PA—a city that had been without a grocery store for over a decade.

Several food banks deliver fresh produce and other staples to people who are not able to travel. While mobile markets are becoming more prevalent among food banks, many still deliver produce for free.

- Foodlink's Mobile Pantry in Rochester, NY, travels to rural and under-served areas in 10 counties.
- Milwaukee's Hunger Task Force delivers products directly to a local network of 80 food pantries, soup kitchens and homeless shelters.

Philabundance PHILADELPHIA, PA

Opening Chester's first supermarket in a decade

After decades of providing emergency food relief in Chester, PA—a distressed, post-industrial port city of 33,000 whose last supermarket closed in 2001—Philabundance decided to transform that city's food environment by opening and operating a nonprofit grocery store. Financing the project was a complex undertaking, because the business model was untested. Philabundance worked with a variety of organizations in order to bring the project to fruition, including Reinvestment Fund.

Fare & Square, a 16,000-square-foot grocery store, created 69 full- and part-time jobs, filled primarily by Chester residents. It provides a dignified and affordable means for families to put healthy food on their tables. Grocery store staff members are building relationships with community members in order to learn about their needs. Philabundance also partners with a job readiness program to increase clients' confidence and preparedness and help Chester residents apply for other jobs in the area.



Food banks are developing lines of revenue-generating business and products to ensure their own long-term sustainability.

For decades, food banks have offered corporate donors a way to dispose of nearly expired foods without turning to the landfill, which saves them from paying dumping fees. Recently, however, secondary markets have begun to give corporate donors the opportunity to sell their excess food. In regions where secondary markets exist, wholesalers and retailers are less likely to donate to food banks. Faced with this increased competition, food banks are exploring new food sources, many of which cost money, and to ensure they have funds to stock their warehouses, banks are exploring ways to generate revenue. Almost all revenue-generating programs are in early stages and do not yet operate at a scale that can offset the costs, however, they do reveal a culture change from relying solely on charity to fund food bank operations. A sample of successful initiatives includes:

- The Food Bank of South Jersey which sells a salsa made from peaches that are grown locally;
- The Northern Alabama Food Bank which charges membership fees for its Farm Food Collaborative, that connects producers and retailers to help strengthen the local food economy; and
- Philabundance and the Mid-Ohio Food Bank which both operate grocery stores with the goal of creating revenue as well as increasing food choice and access.

Food Bank of South Jersey **PENNSAUKEN, NJ**

Developing a marketable product

Looking for ways to bolster its ability to buy produce for its clients, the Food Bank of South Jersey began to think of additional ways to generate revenue to support its operations. Leveraging local assets, the Food Bank of South Jersey began working with regional farmers and the Campbell's Soup Company, headquartered in the adjacent city of Camden, to develop a product they could sell.

Each year, farms in South Jersey generate thousands of imperfect peaches that they

cannot sell to retailers, and these typically end up in landfills (which costs the farms \$80,000 in dumping fees). The local farmers now sell these peaches to the food bank at a low cost for Just Peachy Salsa, a healthy, shelf-stable product developed at Campbell's research laboratory. Campbell's also donates the costs of manufacturing and shipping, and approximately 200 Campbell's employees volunteer to box and pack the salsa for distribution. The food bank sells the product online and in regional supermarkets. In 2012, Just Peachy Salsa brought in nearly \$100,000 in profits, all of which supports the food bank's programs.



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Community Empowerment & Advocacy

Food banks are building partnerships and empowering communities to organize around their strengths.

As food banks expand their traditional charitable roles, many are engaging in community organizing. These banks believe that their communities must develop their own solutions to food insecurity for changes to have a lasting impact. They are seeking to build partnerships with organizations that also want to foster community-based action. Rather than seeing clients as recipients of charity, these food banks strive to empower community members to be their partners in—and ultimately leaders of—change.

- The Oregon Food Bank has developed a robust community organizing process to help residents identify their challenges and assets and then implement a plan to address food insecurity. The process it facilitates buy-in among community members and ensures that they see projects through to successful completion.
- Michigan's Greater Lansing Food Bank worked with the city parks department to help neighbors create a garden in a public park. Collaboration around the project then led community members to form a neighborhood association, which has since tackled other projects promoting health and safety.
- Mother Hubbard's Cupboard in Indiana used external experts to run its education programs, but now relies on the expertise of individuals within the community.

With these approaches, food banks help each community bring to bear its unique assets, thereby offering tools and guidance to help families address food insecurity in ways that are meaningful to them. Serving as community organizer in this way and making a commitment to sustainable solution changes a bank's traditional function as solely a provider of emergency food.

Greater Lansing Food Bank LANSING, MI

Building community through gardening

Greater Lansing's focus on community empowerment began in the early 1980s when it started its Garden Project to provide community members with the land, tools and education to grow their own food. The food bank also offers a leadership training course to equip community members to manage their own gardens. Lansing's Garden Project contributes over 1 million pounds of fresh produce to the local food economy each year. There are 120 gardens in the network, most of which are managed by community members who completed the leadership training course. Based on their experience with the Garden Project, some residents have since formed

neighborhood associations and tackled other projects in their neighborhoods.

More recently, Greater Lansing started Lansing Roots, an incubator program for aspiring farmers who want to grow and sell produce but cannot afford the startup costs. Lansing Roots is currently working with 25 farmers, 75% of whom are refugees who farmed in their native countries. The food bank provides space for 15 small farms, offers hands-on technical support, and helps market the produce which it also offers to low-income families at a subsidized price through its multi-farmer, community-supported agriculture program.

Many food banks are working to change policy to address the root causes of hunger.

Links between poverty and hunger are well documented, including statistics on how many of the clients served by the food bank network are living in poverty, are under- and unemployed, or must choose between food and other life necessities.²² Increasingly, individual food bank leaders are speaking out about the importance of food justice, living wages, affordable housing and health care. As food banks begin to address the root causes of hunger, they are finding that the web of poverty is far too great for them to make much headway on their own. Several food banks are forming partnerships to influence public policy in meaningful ways:



- The Oregon Food Bank collaborated with over 200 health clinics across the state to implement its Screen and Intervene program, and it is working with the state to make this a mandatory practice for all clinics that serve Medicaid patients.
- California's Alameda County Community Food Bank has an advocacy team that lobbies for a variety of policies to help the families they serve achieve financial and food security—including a living wage.
- The Mid-Ohio Food Bank has established a Foodbank Advocacy Network, by which volunteers can engage and take action with regard to local, state and national legislation related to food security.

In March 2015, the bank's executive director provided testimony to the state's House Finance, Health and Human Services Subcommittee on the governor's budget proposal and implications for hunger relief efforts, including funding for the Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program.

Closing the Hunger Gap (CTHG) NATIONAL NETWORK

Coordinating a national network

CTHG, a national network of food banks with a shared vision for redefining their role in communities, offers a promising platform on which to build a collaborative, multi-stakeholder movement to promote food justice. This national network of food banks, anti-hunger advocates and food justice activists works to position food banks as valuable advocates and collaborators in policy efforts addressing the root cause of hunger. After its inaugural gathering in 2013, its

second gathering took place in September 2015. More than 500 participants attended the 2015 CTHG conference. They represented 41 states and 3 Canadian provinces as well as 275 different organizations, including food banks, nonprofits health and human service organizations, school districts, farms and universities. These conferences—and the working groups that have emerged from them—create spaces where practitioners can share experiences and build each other's capacity to embrace new roles in the anti-hunger movement.





Challenges

As food banks move into uncharted territory, designing innovative programs and partnering with community stakeholders to create lasting solutions to hunger, they face a number of challenges. During our interviews with the 16 banks in this report, staff members shared a number of common obstacles, from how to measure their success, to dilemmas over whether to refuse donations of food that do not meet nutritional standards and navigating a number of external factors.

METRICS

Funders and investors generally evaluate a food bank on the number of pounds of food it distributes to needy families and keeps out of landfills. As their roles change, some food banks are concerned that measuring the pounds of food distributed does not capture the positive effects of innovative programs such as those in this report; yet identifying other appropriate measures has been challenging. Some food banks are testing new metrics to capture the impact of new programs, such as the number of jobs created, degree of behavioral change, rates of diet-related disease, and increase in revenue for local farmers. Others are partnering with local universities and community organizations to design new evaluation tools.

MISSION ALIGNMENT

Food banks find that when they attempt to move away from the conventional model of emergency food relief, donors, board members and government officials may criticize them for mission drift. Many long-standing supporters believe that food banks should simply distribute as much food as possible and play a limited role in addressing the broader issue of hunger.



NUTRITIONAL VALUE

Tensions have arisen in the food bank community, as some banks have chosen to reject donations based solely on nutritional value, abandoning the conventional wisdom that “beggars can’t be choosers.” Among some, there is concern that this may threaten important longstanding relationships with donors, who may instead look to donate their excess food to other organizations. Many innovators are caught between the value of these donor relationships and the nutritional quality of donated food that is being offered.

HEALTHY EATING

Many food banks seek to elicit behavior change, coaching people on healthy shopping, cooking at home, and growing their own food. However, the progress on this front is slow, given that changing ingrained habits takes time and requires cultural sensitivity. Additionally, in many communities, fast food and processed food are more readily available, and many families default to buying junk food rather than planning for, shopping for, and preparing home-cooked meals. The banks find they must spend time, energy and resources on creating effective educational programs that build clients’ understanding of the food environment and food culture—which is a prerequisite for behavior change.

FUNDING INNOVATION

Food banks rely almost entirely on grants and donations to operate, and new program innovations lead to new costs. These costs do not always fit within the scope of the donor-supported work. Many funders want food banks to continue to play their traditional roles—providing emergency food relief—which puts the banks in the vulnerable position of trying to meet these expectations while also exploring new programs. Food banks are finding it difficult to raise the seed funding needed to support innovation. Funders who



are interested in social enterprises may provide seed capital, but often do not offer longer term operating support. Once launched, it is challenging and often costly to keep the programs going, forcing banks to make cuts prematurely. Long-term, flexible investments will allow a bank to foster a culture of innovation, build infrastructure, and test new and potentially risky ideas.

PUBLIC POLICY

Understandably, national anti-hunger advocacy organizations focus primarily on defending SNAP against significant budgetary cuts and changes in eligibility requirements. Currently, more than 46 million Americans rely on SNAP to help feed themselves and their families. However, some food bank leaders want to expand their sector's public policy agenda, devoting more advocacy time and resources to programs that help struggling families achieve stability, improve access and build healthier food systems. While some food banks are starting to form local partnerships to promote policies that address the root causes of hunger, a large-scale, national advocacy effort led by anti-hunger organizations is still in its infancy.





Value in a Trip Upstream

One day a resident of the community sees a baby floating down the river. She rushes out to save it, and, with the help of her neighbors, finds dry clothing, a crib, a blanket. The next day two babies are rescued, and the day after that, several more. Soon the babies are arriving in large numbers, and they become a regular feature of life in the village; very nearly the whole village becomes involved in rescuing them. Finally, one of the villagers suggests making an expedition upstream, to see how the babies are getting into the water in the first place. The villagers, however, are afraid to take time and energy away from the immediate rescue project, afraid that babies will drown if they are not there to save them.

— Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*

There have been exciting developments in how food banks—as powerful community organizations with impressive connections and immense reach—are playing a new role in the fight against food insecurity. The interview with each food bank left Reinvestment Fund feeling inspired about the direction this movement is taking. The new, more holistic philosophy that is informing food bank programs offers tremendous new opportunities for collaboration with community development financial institutions (CDFIs) and others to improve the lives of people facing poverty across the United States. The innovations are building bridges between emergency food providers and the broader community development movement. The many lessons these banks shared with us include:

- Listen to community members and empower them to make their own decisions about making changes.
- Be flexible and responsive to feedback.
- Look to existing strengths and resources as opportunities to invest.
- Start with modest projects and then learn and build from your successes.
- Do a self-evaluation and then create a strategic plan to guide goals for each phase of change and implementation.



Each of these actions works toward mitigating the risk inherent in innovation and growth. Despite the risks, we are optimistic about the movement toward a more holistic approach. As this report reflects, some food banks are daring to take that trip upstream to explore new solutions to hunger, while striving to ensure they have the infrastructure to provide emergency support that 46.5 million people rely on each year.²³ Their commitment to meeting short-term needs while pioneering long-term solutions is a powerful model for impact, with the potential to transform the landscape of hunger in America.

SOME FOOD BANKS ARE DARING TO TAKE THAT TRIP UPSTREAM TO EXPLORE NEW SOLUTIONS TO HUNGER.



Appendix

METHODOLOGY

In preparing this report, Reinvestment Fund conducted 16 phone interviews with leaders of food banks and other hunger relief organizations to learn about their programs, challenges and impact—and to hear directly whether practitioners on the ground also sensed a paradigm shift. We supplemented these interviews with a thorough review of the organizations' websites, literature and news articles on food banks.

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Foodlink, Inc., Rochester, NY

Good Shepherd Food Bank, Auburn, ME

Greater Lansing Food Bank, Lansing, MI

Hunger Task Force, Milwaukee, WI

Mid-Ohio Food Bank, Grove City, OH

Mother Hubbard's Cupboard, Bloomington, IN

Northern Neck Food Bank, Warsaw, VA

Oregon Food Bank, Portland, OR

Philabundance, Philadelphia, PA

Sacramento Food Bank and Family Services,
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Vermont Food Bank, Barre, VT

Why Hunger, New York, NY

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We thank those who shared photos and images for this publication. Photos shared by the following organizations:

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RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY REINVESTMENT FUND

Patricia Smith, Senior Policy Advisor

Tess Hart, Strategic Communications Intern

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1700 Market Street, 19th floor
Philadelphia, PA 19103
TEL 215.574.5800 FAX 215.574.5900

BALTIMORE

1707 North Charles Street, Suite 200B
Baltimore, MD 21201
TEL 410.783.1110 FAX 410.637.8265



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