

# Food Councils and Students across NC Partner to Improve Health Equity in a New Internship Program

## PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM

Causal factors of health disparities related to food include, but go far beyond individual choice, diet, and price. Social and economic systems, and the built and natural environment deeply impact how health disparities are reinforced within a food system. Food Councils promote more resilient food systems by identifying and strengthening connections between food, health, natural resource protection, economic development, and agriculture production. Using a cross-sector approach, food councils create broad food system change by giving communities more control over the food they consume. Many North Carolina food councils use a “local food systems” lens to improve aspects of their food system that exacerbate health disparities for people living in their communities. Unfortunately, food councils are severely under-resourced, most accomplishing their community-based work with volunteer labor and sporadic funding, despite the fact that their work often builds a critical bridge between local governments or leaders and community perspective.<sup>1</sup>

## TAKING ACTION

With funding from the North Carolina Division of Public Health as part of CDC’s “National Initiative to Address COVID-19 Health Disparities Among Populations at High-Risk and Underserved, Including Racial and Ethnic Minority Populations and Rural Communities” grant, the North Carolina Local Food Council (NCLFC) and Community Food Strategies sought to increase capacity of local food councils in their efforts to address equitable food systems by establishing the Food Inspired Resilience and Equity (FIRE) internship program. This program paired college students with local food councils for the Fall 2022-Spring 2023 academic year to increase local food councils’ capacity and expose students to community initiatives that address health disparities using a local food systems lens. Among the 35 food councils in the [NC Food Council Network](#), 19 applied to host a FIRE intern, demonstrating significant need and interest for food councils to expand capacity to address disparities in local food systems. Ultimately, eight local food councils were selected to host interns.

Demonstrating a commitment to diversity and representation within historically marginalized communities, 78% of selected interns identified as Black, indigenous or people of color, 50% of interns were supervised by people of color within the host food council, and 33% of FIRE internship organizations were black-led community food organizations. Moreover, two of the six colleges from where interns were selected represented rural communities. Interns and food council hosts met individually each month with a program coordinator to review projects and discuss insights and challenges related to the work of the food council. Interns participated in professional development and peer-to-peer virtual workshops frequently. Professional

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<sup>1</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; Health and Medicine Division; Board on Population Health and Public Health Practice; Committee on Community-Based Solutions to Promote Health Equity in the United States; Baciu A, Negussie Y, Geller A, et al., editors. Communities in Action: Pathways to Health Equity. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2017 Jan 11. 3, The Root Causes of Health Inequity. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK425845/>

development topics included an overview of local food systems, the [North Carolina Healthy Opportunities Pilots](#), Black Farmer panel, and Professional Careers in food systems. At the end of their semester working with their local food council, the interns presented their work and its impact to fellow interns, food council hosts, and program representatives during a closing session in April 2023.

## **IMPACT**

The FIRE internship program increased food council capacity by offering and providing mentorship through paid internships to support the day-to-day operations and work on strategic initiatives of food councils. This program also provided additional capacity for partners working within local food systems to respond to food-related health disparities that impact residents in North Carolina.

As a result of the FIRE internship program, 100% of responding food councils reported increased capacity to address health disparities in their communities, and an amplification of resources to initiate new projects important to the goals of the food council. Moreover, 100% of responding food councils also reported an increased public visibility for the food council, enhanced relationships and new partnerships that benefited the food council, and an injection of resources to adapt to the changing needs of the community.

Specific intern efforts and accomplishments reported by participating food councils included:

- *Assisting in organizing and implementing a multi-farm Community Supported Agriculture Program (CSA) that served 20-25 customers per week during their internship. The CSA generated income to 13 local farmers and helped employ 2 people in rural communities in NC.*
- *Assisting a grassroots urban food network, led by people of color, in transitioning their financial management to an open-source format, building a foundation for a more transparent cooperative budgeting process.*
- *Serving as the president of the first youth-led food council in North Carolina, increasing the organization's capacity to engage youth in climate-crisis education, a major factor in the current and future outlook of food system resiliency, designing a new organizational website, and sourcing and distributing local produce to communities with three counties in persistent poverty.*
- *Developing recruitment and installation strategies for a partnership between a Local Health Department and local military base to ensure stakeholders have a voice in policies and projects initiated to address health equity in the regional food system; a process leading to six new council members being onboarded.*
- *Supporting data collection, analysis, and dissemination of needs assessment data impacting local farmers markets across North Carolina that aim to expand SNAP and WIC FMNP as a state-wide network.*

Local food councils were not the only beneficiary of this program, as interns also bolstered their skill sets to make them more marketable for future employment in the field of food security.

Interns reported increased skills in website and application development, community engagement, data collection and analysis, social media content development, and a deepened perspective on how community-based nonprofit work can make positive change in public health nutrition services.

Internship programs can place a heavy burden on community organizations that are already stretched beyond capacity. The wrap-around approach of the FIRE internship program brought the personnel expertise, institutional resources, and administrative capacity of Community Food Strategies and NCLFC to food councils and interns, allowing for community groups to lead on what is needed locally, with partnering institutions investing their resources in paying people doing the work and supporting their efforts through consistent, personalized guidance.

This approach allowed for local food councils to take on the internship program that would ultimately expand their capacity in terms of community engagement, without stretching it in terms of personnel development, a true win-win. As one food council mentor put it, *“the internship has increased public visibility of our work, improved existing relationships, and has built new partnerships, and increased the number of food access points. Our current local food system and its ability to adapt to the changing needs of the community is stronger and more flexible.”* As food councils continue building back from the challenges presented by COVID-19, the FIRE internship shows promise as a model for engaging communities, students, and food systems in a symbiotic relationship to reduce health disparities and hunger.