



Building Local Food Systems Through Investment



Growing local and regional food systems will require investment of all kinds – capital, capacity, and time.

Becca Jablonski, an assistant professor and a food systems extension economist at Colorado State University who spoke at the 2018 “Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas” symposium, gave a handful of examples of the economic impact of these businesses. For instance, farmers’ markets have been shown to boost nearby businesses during the times they’re in operation. The markets can also act as incubators for related businesses.

Food businesses aren’t the only focus for Network Kansas, the State of Kansas’ entrepreneurship office. They are a new area of attention, however, with the 2018 rollout of the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative, a public-private partnership that provides financing and technical assistance to new and growing food ventures.

“Prior to the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative, Network Kansas lived in more of a general sense of small-business entrepreneurial development,” said Imogene Harris, director of Strategic Partnerships & Impact Investment for the organization. “Having more focused education around the food system and how it interacts with community development, economic development and entrepreneurs has been really interesting.”

Harris and Tiffany Nixon, manager of Referral Center Operations for Network Kansas, both attended the Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas Symposium in 2018, just a few months after the Kansas Health Food Initiative launched.

The initiative is designed to serve all parts of the food system, Harris said, from production to distribution to even the end of the “food cycle” dealing with food waste.

Rural grocery stores have been among the program’s first participants, receiving combinations of loans and grants to build or maintain stores. The initiative hopes to recruit other businesses as well.

“This work has been very important in rural communities,” Harris said. “Going forward, we are talking about how we can be more intentional about supporting all of the pieces of the food cycle.”

Network Kansas serves rural and distressed urban areas of the state, Nixon said. They match beginning and growing businesses with resources, education, assistance and sources of capital. Their referral center receives about 300 calls a month from entrepreneurs in various stages of starting or growing businesses.

They continue to search for new partnerships. Nixon said she met a staff person from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment at the Harvesting Opportunity symposium.

“We are connected with KDHE already, but this person was in a different bureau” than their other contacts, Nixon said. “I met with him after the meeting, and he started including me on a list letting people know about grants for communities. Now I know of other grants that are being sent to local health departments or economic development offices. I share the information with the team, and keep it on hand for referrals.”

For more information about the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative, visit kansashealthyfood.org.

Note: Sarah Green, who wrote this piece, has provided input on the Kansas Health Food Initiative as a member of its advisory board.