



Fiscal Year 2020-2021 IMPACT REPORT

We did it! We wrapped up Year One of our new vision. But mostly, we're all still here... doing important work to improve the food system despite crises, adaptations, and ever-changing conditions. This fiscal year started in July 2020, in the midst of the first surge of COVID cases in Texas and the prospect of continued closures, safety protocols, and uncertainty. A second surge happened in January, followed closely by a devastating winter storm that left Central Texas frozen and without power and water for days. Late spring and early summer offered a welcome—though fleeting—respite from COVID surges and the opportunity for SFC to reflect on challenges met and make plans for work to be done.

Through this year of service to folks on both sides of the food system spectrum—producers and consumers—our program areas have developed more interconnected ways to collaborate and support each other. For example, our supply chain team, which matches producers with wholesale and institutional buyers, is working closely with our food access team as our Double Up Food Bucks incentive program grows throughout the state, offering new opportunities for farmers to increase the amount of healthy food available to people using federal benefits. Similarly, our food access manager is working closely with our policy folks to build statewide support for increased government funding for nutrition incentives. These kinds of collaborations are a key outcome of Year One and the work that laid the path toward our vision of a just and regenerative food system.

As needs have grown across our community due to COVID, weather-related destruction, a population explosion, and soaring land costs, Sustainable Food Center's programmatic reach is broader than ever. Your generous funding and steadfast support empower us every day to pursue our updated mission to transform the food system to nourish our health, land, and livelihoods. We are so grateful for your partnership.



Supporting Farmers Through Crises

A flourishing local food system starts with healthy farms. Farming is a labor of love, particularly for small family farmers in Texas. Margins, if any, are small; weather can be fierce; and farmers wear multiple hats to survive. Our Farm Viability initiatives work directly with small and midsized farmers and ranchers to bolster their small businesses and ensure they have the resources and knowledge they need for regenerative agricultural operations.

Through on-site farm visits, which resumed in fall 2020 after a COVID-imposed hiatus, [SFC staffers spent time with Central Texas producers](#), learning about their crops and farming methods. Using a Sustainability Impact assessment tool we developed, we collected data to tailor the business and regenerative agriculture resources farmers need. By year end, we had **completed 35 assessments and connected producers with more than 200 resources and educational opportunities** related to conservation, land access, record keeping, financial management, sustainable packaging, digital and social media marketing best practices, and grant assistance.

“The financial planning has provided us with valuable information that informed our decision around packaging, identifying equipment needs, and our approach to sales,” said one farmer who gained new business knowledge from SFC’s trainings.

This program came to be known this year as Farm Development Services (FDS). The first half of the year gave SFC the chance to really get to know our network of farmers and understand their needs—which turned out to be vital preparation for this year’s surprise second crisis, Winter Storm Uri. The devastating winter storm plunged Texas into a weeklong deep freeze in February and wreaked havoc on farms and ranches, damaging infrastructure, killing livestock and crops, and delaying spring planting. By the end of the first frozen weekend of the crisis, SFC had mobilized to solicit donations from community members for our **Farmer Relief Fund**,



Flame Leaf Farms, like much of Texas, was covered in snow and ice during February’s winter storm.

garnering \$18,000 in the first 10 days. As the weather thawed and farmers assessed the damage, **SFC raised more than \$275,000** thanks to ongoing donations and generous commitments from foundations.

Within three weeks of the first freeze, SFC began making direct payments to farmers to address immediate needs, including repairs, paying bills, and spring transplants. We also allocated funds to cover market booth fees to ensure no-cost sales outlets through August, allowing farmers to get back to the business of growing and selling food. As donations and interest in helping recovery efforts grew, SFC developed a disaster relief strategy to provide support that wasn’t immediately forthcoming from the state. One outcome of that strategy was the **Farmers of Color Relief and Resiliency Fund**, established to address historic inequities in resources available to farmers of color. SFC invited proposals for projects and **distributed \$82,000 to all 14 applicants**.

“We lost our entire irrigation system in the freeze. I cannot thank you enough for your relief support,” shared one farmer who received relief funds. “This will help bridge the financial gap until our vegetables come in during early summer,” shared another.

All told, **SFC’s winter storm relief funds reached 72 farmers and ranchers in 23 counties** across the state, including producers outside of our network, as far away as Falfurrias (an hour north of McAllen), Baytown (east

of Houston), and Hill County (north of Waco). These recipients and dozens more new producer connections will spread awareness of our mission and available services well beyond Central Texas.

Growing the Local Food Pipeline



SFC's supply chain manager visits a peach farmer.

Another way SFC serves the producer community is through our [Supply Chain Matchmaking initiative](#). This project had a rocky start in 2020, when every institutional buyer in the program saw an immediate halt to their procurement plans as the pandemic set in. Schools and event centers suddenly went virtual; they weren't serving meals, so they didn't need to buy produce. SFC staffers shifted gears and cultivated other wholesale buyers (food hubs, retail, restaurants, wholesale suppliers) to match with ready producers.

Part of that cultivation process is helping buyers understand the value of buying local, as well as some of the nuances of buying from small farms rather than large-scale distributors. To address these needs, SFC convened a cohort of 10 buyers and 10 producers. This virtual meet-up provided both sides of the supply chain the opportunity to discuss challenges they faced and changes they implemented, as well as to develop business relationships. The response was very positive, and we're planning more of these gatherings. In addition, **SFC provided wholesale-readiness training to 33 farmers and made two successful matches.** The launch of SFC's supply chain work, while complicated by multiple disasters, has crystallized the need for matchmaking (aka, "value chain

coordination") and producer wholesale readiness support. SFC is well poised to meet the need, and we are finding enthusiastic responses from both producers and buyers.

Double Up Grows Statewide

Our Supply Chain initiative is also involved in cultivating grocery stores to increase local food access through nutrition incentives—namely our flagship Double Up Food Bucks (DUFb) program. This is an exciting example of how our program areas overlap and support each other. DUFb matches federal SNAP and WIC benefits (up to \$30/week) for fruit and vegetable purchases. These incentive funds equip families with additional purchasing power to stretch their food assistance benefits toward the highest quality, most nutritious ingredients available—locally grown produce.

When SFC established DUFb in 2012, it was the first program of its kind in Texas; it centered around farmers' markets (including SFC's) and mobile markets. Nearly a decade later, despite all the challenges presented by COVID and the winter storm, SFC's efforts to grow the Double Up program in Texas have taken root. Last year, SFC formed the Double Up Texas Steering Committee, a coalition of 12 partners from around the state interested in learning about or ready to implement DUFb in their communities. Since July 2020, SFC has welcomed sites in Galveston, Brownsville, and San Antonio. They join partners in Houston, Fort Worth, and the South Plains/Panhandle region, bringing the **Double Up Texas network up to 67 sites**, including eight grocery retailers. As we move forward in Year Two, we're looking forward to further integration of our food access work with our supply chain efforts, which will grow to include—and benefit!—small farmers around the state.

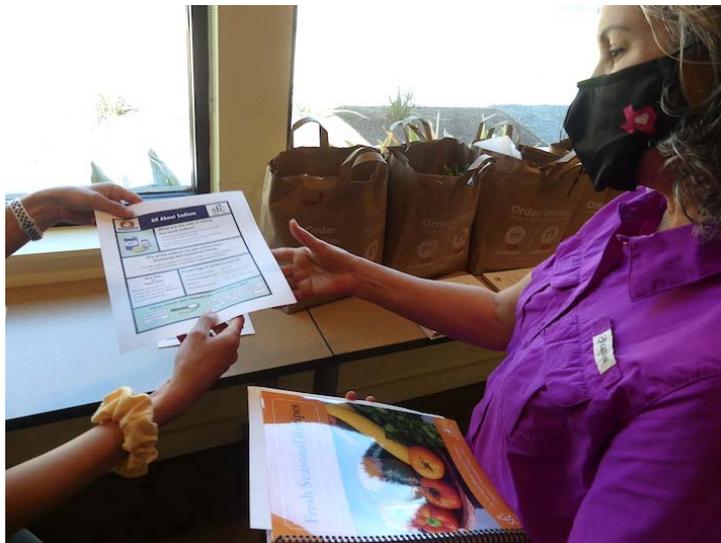
More healthy food in the pipeline means more options for equitable access to healthy food, regardless of a person's means, location, transportation options, or other factors. As we've seen throughout the pandemic—and in the aftermath of the winter storm—equitable food access continues to be a critical need. The government expanded SNAP benefits as part of COVID relief, and we saw SNAP and DUFb participation jump.

Austin locations (including our partner Farmshare Austin’s curbside deliveries) saw **\$145,146 in food access sales**, with statewide sales garnering another \$70,000. As customer awareness of the DUFB Texas program increases in new locations, there is huge potential for program growth. With that in mind, SFC is preparing to apply for a significant USDA grant in early 2022 to support this program’s potential.

Community Outreach is Essential

But just because a program like DUFB exists, that doesn’t mean people know about it. That’s where [our community engagement efforts come into play](#). The Food Access Help Desk SFC formed at the onset of the pandemic is still going strong. In fact, it recently received federal funds to expand to serve our DUFB sites outside of Austin. The Help Desk, staffed by bilingual *promotoras*, started as a resource to answer client questions about COVID-driven program delivery changes. But it soon became clear that the Help Desk could serve a much bigger purpose in encouraging participation in SFC’s food access and education programs.

[The work of our promotoras is always important](#), but during the pandemic their outreach has been crucial. Through phone calls and texts, SFC’s *promotoras* reached 100 percent of the WIC and SNAP customers in SFC’s database, offering help navigating benefits, ensuring customers could successfully place orders for curbside delivery from our partner Farmshare Austin, sharing nutrition info and recipes for fresh ingredients, and encouraging people to join our “Come Fresco y Sano” Facebook community with 1400+ active members. This outreach contributed to more than **\$80,000 in food access sales at SFC two farmers’ markets and nearly \$75,000 in food access sales at other participating sites in the Austin area.**



A Happy Kitchen participant picks up groceries and class materials.

“I found a connection between health, exercise, and food access. After that, it was not difficult for me to envision that if I want to help my community, I need to be able to plant that seed in other people,” says SFC promotora Maria Tello. “I connect people with different resources, and SFC offers programs to grow your own food, cook nutritious meals, and provides DUFB, a project that encourages families to go to farmers’ markets and farm stands and get fresh local food.”

Classes Go Virtual and Advocacy Kicks Off

These targeted outreach strategies combine with our longtime nutrition and gardening education offerings to reach more and more people who lack equitable food access. Before the pandemic, SFC was exploring ways to make our classes—both Intro to Food Gardening and The Happy Kitchen/*La Cocina Alegre*[®]—accessible to people who may not be able to attend in person. After the COVID lockdowns in spring 2020, we spent the summer [retooling class design and curriculum for Zoom delivery](#). This new virtual model allowed participants who may live farther away from our programming locations to connect online. In our cooking classes alone, we reached participants in more than five different counties in Central Texas. However, this new model also had its challenges. One barrier to participation was Internet access (an inequity many parents and schools have faced for months). Another challenge was grocery distribution. Yet despite slightly below-average enrollment, survey results remained positive. **Nearly 90 percent of participants reported that they eat more homemade meals than before they took the class**, and they would share what they learned with family and friends.

For our gardening classes, we set up a drive-thru distribution where participants picked up their curriculum packets and starter gardening supplies outside the SFC office. Similarly, we used a no-contact model for our

Spread the Harvest Resource Giveaway Days, hosting events at new sites and strengthening our relationship with Austin Parks and Recreation in the process. In March, we partnered with TreeFolks to provide fruit and shade trees—which was especially helpful after the winter storm, when many participants lost trees in addition to their food gardens. These were our [most successful Giveaway Days ever](#), with resources going to **838 gardens**. Spread the Harvest participants reported a total of **17,416 meal equivalents harvested from their gardens**. As Austin’s urban core continues to transform, and low-income populations increasingly move to exurban and rural areas, SFC’s education initiatives will continue to be available.

SFC’s [burgeoning policy area](#) is also working to support our food access efforts. After designing a policy agenda for Year One, SFC’s policy manager worked closely with our food access manager to establish the Texas SNAP Incentives Coalition to advocate for government funding for Double Up Food Bucks. This statewide group of stakeholders meets regularly to share opportunities, best practices, and challenges in each region. SFC is also convening several focus groups with SNAP participants to gather information about their experiences statewide. Currently, Austin is the only municipality in Texas to fund DUFEB, a win-win-win for families, local agriculture, and the local economy. But other states have models for broader municipal and even statewide support of more equitable food access programs. This work will be the cornerstone of SFC’s policy efforts in the coming years.

Finally, after months of retooling and adjusting to comply with ever-changing safety protocols, the staff at our two Farmers’ Markets got to take off their masks and greet visitors (for a little while, anyway). Our markets are where so many of our programmatic efforts intersect, from Double Up Food Bucks to Farm Development Services and Supply Chain. They’re also where our community—some 100,000 people per year—has been able to gather safely during this long and ongoing pandemic. People from all walks of life meet at the markets to bring home fresh, healthy ingredients grown by the hardworking farmers who persevere through every kind of Central Texas weather. If you haven’t been lately, head over to the market nearest to you, introduce yourself to a farmer, and [join your local food system](#).



SFC’s Farmers’ Markets have been essential food access points throughout the pandemic, offering our community access to healthy local foods and providing area producers crucial sales outlets.

Your Support is Vital—and Valued

As we look forward toward 2022, a year that holds so much promise, we’re keeping our big-picture focus. Double Up Texas continues to grow into new markets, and we’re excited to learn all we can about DUFEB in a retail grocery store. With two major USDA grants in hand, we’ll be kicking off a [new Farm to School project](#) that will match farmers with school district procurement needs and will form a learning collaborative for school food staffers to learn more about how to buy local. One key component of our new vision is to work at more of a systems level, effecting positive change for more people. Our work in Year One—despite, or perhaps because of all the challenges—laid the groundwork for big-picture work that transforms the food system to nourish our health, land, and livelihoods.

We are so grateful for your support and partnership in this vital work.