



Published - February 2024



Analysis of Ohio CAN:

Ohio's Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Program



Department of
Agriculture



Department of
Job & Family
Services

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program, or LFPA. The State of Ohio received funds to support LFPA, which has been branded Ohio CAN (Community + Agriculture + Nutrition) in Ohio. The State of Ohio received \$13.5 million for round one and for round two, or LFPA Plus, will receive a little over \$13 million for a total of \$26.5 million over a roughly three-year period.

The Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program was designed by USDA to maintain and improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency. LFPA uses non-competitive cooperative agreements to provide up to \$900 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) funding for state, tribal and territorial governments to purchase foods produced within the state or within 400 miles of the delivery destination to help support local, regional and underserved producers. The cooperative agreements allow the states, tribes and territories to procure and distribute local and regional foods and beverages that are healthy, nutritious, unique to their geographic areas and that meet the needs of the population. In addition to increasing local food consumption, the funds will help build and expand economic opportunity for local and underserved producers.

Source: USDA

The Ohio Department of Agriculture, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, and Ohio Association of Foodbanks engaged **Dr. Howard Fleeter and Dr. Jennifer Olejownik to conduct an independent analysis of Ohio CAN's early outcomes to identify strengths, benefits, challenges, and areas for improvement. This report provides a summary of the key themes and findings they surfaced.**

Key understanding of terms that will commonly be found throughout:

Aggregators - or food hubs are distributors who are a key component of any local food system. Specifically, for small and mid-sized producers to remain profitable, aggregators provide an efficient and economic means to market and deliver to consumers.

Foodbank Representatives - were typically foodbank sourcing or operations staff who spoke about their day-to-day experiences in receiving, handling, and distributing LFPA product.

Farmer, Producer, Supplier, Grower - will be used throughout interchangeably as they each supply locally produced food products through LFPA.

Socially disadvantaged - suppliers who identify as historically underrepresented, such as women, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, veterans, and small, emerging, and disabled farmers, as well as those whose income is derived from a public assistance program.



**Department of
Job & Family
Services**



Provide funding to designated parties and reports on and monitors outcomes.

LEFPA

PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY 

otherwise known as

Ohio CAN



Department of Agriculture

Marketing, outreach support, and onboarding to new suppliers

Ongoing technical assistance, trainings, and supportive services for suppliers



Procurement and contract management

Forecasting and distribution with suppliers and foodbanks

Technical assistance and budget management



Food hubs and aggregators

Forecasting and aggregating
Packing, packaging, delivery

Technical assistance



Forecasting, planning, and production

Delivery and transport to foodbanks/food pantries



Regional Foodbanks

Inventory management, storage, and distribution

Partnership models to supply food to vulnerable populations



Breads and Grains:

11,805 lbs
\$175,409.76



Dairy and Milk:

222,631 lbs
\$287,315.01



Eggs:

38,683 lbs
\$58,010



Fish and Seafood:

647 lbs
\$9,900



Meat and Poultry:

450,266 lbs
\$2,332,773



**Nut seeds
and Legumes:**

110,960 lbs
\$301,794.94



Produce:

2,563,134 lbs
\$3,413,476.01



**Snacks and
Condiments:**

281,542 lbs
\$518,866.22



**Mixed Boxes
from Aggregators:**

864,651 lbs
\$2,721,523.74

Reflects a cumulative breakdown of
poundage and value of product in each
category procured through the Ohio
CAN program in the first year of
implementation.

In Year One of Implementation:



**Purchased from 164 individual
suppliers, famers, and growers**



**59.8% of these farmers identify
as socially disadvantaged**



**Majority of food procured comes from these
socially disadvantaged farmers (54.3%)**



\$9,819,086: Value of the food produced



**Partnership with 5 regional
aggregators or food hubs**



**Distributed to 12 regional Feeding America
foodbanks that serve individuals that fall at or
below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines**

Marketing Ohio CAN to the Supply Chain

Researchers found that “program administrators used a variety of channels and approaches to market the program and to engage producers. These strategies were thoughtfully selected and implemented to ensure information was widely disseminated.”



Local Media:

Newspaper articles and video features, radio stations, etc.



Word of Mouth:

Hearing about the program from someone else.



Digital Outreach:

Social media ads, boosted posts, email blasts, etc.



Strategic Outreach:

Meeting with stakeholders in the field, such as presentations, trade shows, etc.



Overall, the program was well-received by those who participated, and most participants reported that the **administrators were extremely approachable** and available to provide guidance whenever obstacles arose. **Growers appreciated the opportunity** to participate in the program and reported that the **delivery and implementation exceeded their expectations.**

“[I’ve] **seen a ton of small farms and small distributors go belly up, because basically that it's difficult as far as the regulatory side of things**, even finding a pathway into doing any business, especially small farms outside of CSA is extremely difficult. How do you make that jump? **So, we're really interested in this program**, and I've been talking to [program administrators] about hey, what's [it] gonna look like, how can we work together on this? Because we're kind of, we thought, **we were really uniquely positioned as far as what we do our capabilities, our connections to farms. So we can really help with this.**” - Aggregator

“We had seen an **email blurb** about it...we had like a meeting before the market began the season, and she [the market organizer] just had **passed out flyers essentially.**” - Producer

“We have a **small town newspaper** around here...and it was listed right inside the front page as a new program that was going to come into play this year.” - Producer

“A fellow vendor was kind of one of the first people [program manager] had reached out to, and I was the first person he had reached out to, and said, Hey, this is probably a **perfect fit for your farm. Obviously female farmer, first generation, all of that fun stuff!** And I was looking to expand. So, it worked out really, really well.” - Grower



Overall, producers were drawn to participate in the Ohio CAN program because **sharing high quality products with communities in need was often central to their core mission and personal values.** Partnering with local food banks gave producers a sense of meaning and purpose knowing **their products were helping to address access and food insecurity issues.**

“It’s just awesome to think that there’s **high quality, local food going to people who they’re not going to be able to afford** to stop at our farm stand and get that or visit us at a farm market and buy it, most likely, but they’re getting **access to that through this program.** And I think that’s important.” - Producer

“It’s been a godsend for us and that we are incredibly grateful. And that it really is connecting... **we’re on the front lines of food insecurity and food stability by being able to purchase from local producers.**” - Farmer

“This is an area of high need. You know, it’s an area that had historically been red lined. So, there’s a high population of people of color, and people of color on occasion though there are certain items that they definitely, culturally are more closely appropriate to them. **So, getting items like okra is something that I never get offered. But one of our local farmers is starting to bring in a little bit,** and I’m hoping that, you know we’ll be able to work more closely with her to get larger, larger quantities in next year.” - Foodbank Representative



“This is top shelf -- and I don't care if they even know it--It's almost like we're subversively changing the health of people because it is the **best product that you could have nutritionally. Also not coincidentally, happens to be the best flavor available. And they're getting this because of this program.** And I don't know how you even measure the success of that and the impact of the health on these people. **But I guarantee you that there are stories we'll never know by the hundreds or thousands of people that are, you know getting this nutritional level that is rivaled by none, in the state. That's incredible.** I love that, and I love that those folks, you know, are able to have access to that, whether they understand it or know it or not.” - Aggregator



Meeting Expectations and Establishing a Sense of Purpose

Researchers found that “producers overwhelmingly gave glowing reviews about the program. Growers felt completely supported through every step of the process. Aggregators were generally pleased with the execution of the program and how it was implemented. Foodbanks had positive remarks to share about their overall impressions of Ohio CAN and are optimistic about its evolution.”



Healthy and quality food



Mission Alignment



Making an impact on food security



Making an impact on local food systems

Economic Impact

Researchers found “that overall, the program facilitated growers' access to new markets and business opportunities, offering them peace of mind to explore growth strategies. Stable funding from Ohio CAN enabled producers to invest in improvements and expand their operations, leading to job creation and improved wages. Aggregators benefited by optimizing transportation routes, expanding their businesses, and enhancing efficiency. Distributors noted increased productivity during slow months and the opportunity to move excess products.”



Increased Revenue:
More money coming into the business



Growth and Expansion: New markets and overall capacity



Operational Improvements:
Facilities, land, or better equipment



Agricultural Workforce: Retain and expand staff



Producers frequently discussed how the Ohio CAN program impacted daily operations and they routinely commented on how it **provided steady and reliable business to local growers. Specifically, having dependable revenue brought some growers a sense of relief** knowing they had reliable income they could count on. Overall, producers made substantial investments in the form of equipment, facilities, and land to augment their operations. Funding from the Ohio CAN program **enabled growers to feel confident in these purchases knowing they had reliable funding to sustain and support their growth.**

“So, we when we first found out about it, it was a big deal for us. **It increased our revenue by 12 percent and increased the amount of [product] that we were [selling] from our Ohio family farm by 43 percent**, so it was very much so, and this came at a time when our sales were at our lowest because of some other factors that had played in, and we were near death, more or less. And so, when Carrie reached out and said, “Hey, you know, here's the PO,” ... people start crying just because you know, [it] came at such a time when we needed it, but also it aligned so much with what it is that **we are trying to do of enriching our community.**” - Grower

“Really to work together, to design a way that we would be able to **help bring more small and socially disadvantaged in particular producers who will not be GAP certified by the end of this program into this opportunity that we're able to offer**, but to get to know us through that, so that we're able to offer market share and market opportunities for them afterwards.” - Aggregator

“Giving us this capital to help **uplift our local farmers.** Farmers that are kind of overlooked by these big programs that, you know, churn out truckloads of product...Well, it **leaves out our local farmers are maybe BIPOC farmers, and our minority owned farms. Just those these little farms that aren't powerhouses, but they're in our communities. So, giving us this money that's specifically for them -- even if we have to pay higher prices, I'm totally fine with that** because we are kind of injecting this capital into these communities into these farms to help them grow their operations, and improve upon their businesses and eventually help them. So that's my focus. And I try to, I'm trying to guide more of the funds for LFPA [hyper] locally as we go [about] it.” - Foodbank Representative

“High quality food is important and unfortunately, there is a major economic gap. You know, **there's an access issue in this country with that and I appreciate that Ohio CAN is bridging the gap.**” - Farmer

Overall, Foodbanks reported that meeting community needs in culturally appropriate ways was one of the more significant benefits they noted about the Ohio CAN program. While aggregators identified a **range of benefits that the Ohio CAN program created including the flexibility to partner with inexperienced growers, along with several advantages it brought to Ohio communities** including the building of community and contributions to consumer health and wellness through access to high quality, nutritional food.

“I think there's been a lot of **thoughtfulness and care for the neighbors who are receiving the food.** And a lot of thoughtfulness on [the program managers'] behalf on making sure **that each food bank is able to be very specific about what is most pertinent to their population and make a lot of choice.**” - Aggregator

“We've always been excluded from government funded purchasing just because, you know, they have to spread their dollars far, and that's understandable. But I think what gets forgotten is the multiplier effect. When you do source from these small local farmers, we know that about **local food is that it's going to go back into your community.** And so, what a beautiful program that's been set up to be able to **share nutritiously dense food grown right here. And shared with our community members to then go back and support this business that provides jobs to our community is huge.**” - Grower



“But I think that if anything came out of this for me is that I need to-- There'll be a bunch of farms that get a little bit bigger because of Ohio CAN. **A healthy farm means there'll be more food for the people in need.**” - Farmer



Community Impact

Researchers found that, “overall, growers reported several unintended benefits... it boosted morale for some and contributed to a sense of inclusion for others who have historically been excluded from government grants and contracts. Distributors discussed how the program and their businesses facilitated the development of local producers. Foodbanks felt Ohio CAN is helping infuse their communities with high quality, nutrient-dense, and culturally appropriate foods. They observed that the program provided some relief to help address growing demand for products.”



Culturally Relevant Foods



Healthy and Quality Food



Inclusive and Diverse Food System



Keeping up with the Need for Assistance

Areas for Improvement

Researchers found “overwhelmingly, suppliers indicated that they highly recommend the program and actively encouraged others to participate. Aggregators expressed concerns about the sustainability of the program for growers and worried about whether or not they have adequate resources to develop and expand their business. Foodbank representatives widely recognized that any new program was going to require a certain degree of adaptability and flexibility. All participants appear to show flexibility and willingness necessary to make needed modifications.”



“We also got some **interesting mixed produce, like we got these bags of produce that were specifically mixed stew vegetables. One of our local farmers had these small little 3, 4-pound kits of a couple of different produce items...So little home fries kits, a salsa kit - those were fun to see, and we'd never get this product in large quantities. That's always been a tough thing with LFPA, like, how do we best offer this to our agencies?** We have like a shopping list we put out, and we have our inventory of available products for agencies to order from. But if we only get 50 to 100 of these little kits we can't put that out there to all our agencies. Two or three of them get it, and everybody else is like, ‘What happened?’ I've always staged low quantity product over [in our small marketplace so] that agencies can shop around and see what's available... to get those small produce orders out to agencies as best we can.” - Foodbank Representative

“The only negative thing I can think to say is, I feel like the government should have given us more money... there's so many producers in Ohio. **I'm thankful for the amount we got. But really, we could like quadruple [the amount]... [and] really had a lot more farmers started or funded.**” - Supplier

“One of the things that concerns me is... let's say this program's got two years' worth of funding left... **If you build these small farms up, and then you pull the rug out from underneath them, because this channel, this pipeline they've been relying on is gone, I don't think it's giving them enough time to be able to develop their programs,** to be able to become commercially viable... that was one of my biggest concerns about this program is that it's not sustainable funding.” - Aggregator



“We had to augment some of our food safety standards. **We changed some of our standards to allow for dealing with some of these smaller farms that might not necessarily have the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) standards and the audit standards we typically require...** We kind of set up a cooler where we isolate that product [from fresh cut processing]... so it's not messing up our other audits.” - Aggregator

“The price point is a **disadvantage for them versus what we're [normally] paying. When I'm buying from the secondary market farms... it's about a third [of the cost]. If it's on our dime, it would be hard. There would have to be some serious negotiations with the suppliers.** You know, paying a little bit more for a better product isn't the issue. It's just, the **gap between what we [traditionally are able to] pay and what they charge is very great.**”

- Foodbank Representative



Concerns about the end of LFPA funding

Researchers found that “growers are grateful for the support they received thus far from the program and hope it will continue. Growers have realistic expectations about the longevity of the program and are expanding their connections and diversifying their revenue streams. Foodbanks are concerned about how [the possible end of Ohio CAN] might impact growers who have been making investments to scale up operations.”

“I think that **bringing more farmers and more processors, food manufacturers to the food banks is kind of creates a new story that says to the USDA, we should keep doing this... like this program is going to end in 2025. And I really think it needs to be a permanent program** that, like going back to just commodity food for food banks would be a huge mistake. So, you know, on the one hand, I want to be grateful for what this program has afforded our community...There's been some real benefits, because of this program, and I also feel like I sure hope they don't just end it, because, like everybody's building capacity to keep doing this. And we don't want to say to our employees...Well, that grant is over, so you don't have a job anymore, you know. So, you know, of course, **we're trying to look for ways to have that level of sales after this is over, but it it's so much more our mission to be doing this work.**”
- Grower

“That would certainly impact us negatively. You know, **we want to see a program like this grow. If it went away, it would have a negative impact economically on our business, without a doubt.** You know, we're looking for ways to, **how can we partner with other food banks or other entities, to be able to grow more into this space and help out other farms.** Because we can do that. So, if it goes away it, it hurts us economically, but it certainly hurts the farms as well. So, it's you know it wouldn't be good if it went away. That's for sure.” - Aggregator

“I think it's a great program. I'm hoping that it will be able to live past the funding of after fiscal year 20[24] or after 2025, so you know whatever I can do to help get the word out and then stuff would be great to keep this program going, **I think it's important to the food systems, and all the all the communities across Ohio.**” - Foodbank Representative

“This is a **huge boost** to what I'm doing, and it allows me to wiggle my way into other projects.”
- Producer

“The **pressure relief that we get from this program** is allowing us to slowly look at other options and add other options instead of you know, like scrambling to try to find ways to make the farm profitable.” - Farmer



Conclusion

Researchers found that “Overall both the quantitative data and the information gathered from interviews with producers, aggregators, and the foodbanks clearly indicate that the initial year of the Ohio CAN LFPA program has been a success by any measure. **Particularly noteworthy has been the universally praised quality of the food produced and the increased ability to provide culturally appropriate food to foodbank users.** Having said that... there is room for improvement in several areas, however, all actors appear to show the flexibility and willingness necessary to make needed modifications.

On the negative side, the largest concerns appear to be desire from the foodbanks and aggregators for greater quantity of the high quality food being produced, and concern from all parties about what will happen if funding for Ohio CAN is ended after the initially planned timeframe.”



Next Steps: Looking Ahead Together

Continued collaboration between the Ohio Association of Foodbanks, USDA, Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA), Ohio Department of Education (ODE), Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS), and LFPA participants, including suppliers, farmers, growers, aggregators, food hubs, Feeding America regional foodbanks, and food pantries, will support continued progress with Ohio CAN. Some of the next steps Ohio CAN partners are enthusiastic about include:

- ODA has created a new onboarding guide which includes accessible invoice templates and Bill of Lading templates
- Partners will be hosting an Ohio CAN convening to bring together wholesale buyers, institutional buyers (food banks/schools), community stakeholders, agriculture agencies, suppliers, farmers, growers, aggregators, and state agencies to join in collective education, resources, and networking
- OAF + ODA will be partnering with ODE and other farm-to-school programs to help better prepare suppliers for selling through farm-to-school programs
- OAF will be completing best practice listening sessions with food bank staff on their direct-to-pantry programs and how to engage with suppliers beyond LFPA
- Partners are connecting growers and suppliers with opportunities for capacity building such as the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure grant through ODA
- Partners are working to get more direct feedback to participants, such as:
 - Consistent recurring meeting schedule between suppliers and aggregators
 - Connecting more growers directly with distributions and pantries to receive direct community feedback
- Partnership with Fair Share CSA on specialty crop block grant, “Scale to Wholesale,” which will help conduct multiple workshops for growers and suppliers

Thank you to Dr. Jennifer Olejownik and Dr. Howard Fleeter of Howard Fleeter & Associates for conducting the comprehensive analysis of the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA), also referred to as Ohio CAN as independent third-party evaluators. Thank you to the farmers and partners who dedicated their time to this analysis and for their continued work to implement this program.




OHIO
**ASSOCIATION OF
FOODBANKS**
ohiofoodbanks.org



Scan to visit the Ohio Department of Agriculture website for further information about the Ohio CAN Program