



GREENING THE PATH TO HEALTH & NOURISHMENT:

An Evaluation of North Lawndale Fresh

October 2026









ABOUT LIFESPRING CONSULTING

LifeSpring Consulting, LLC is a research and evaluation firm dedicated to fostering more equitable communities by deploying data-informed solutions. We partner with public and private institutions who want to refine, expand, or measure the impact of their community development projects. More information about our work can be found on our website at ***https://www.lifespringconsultingfirm.com/***

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ABOUT THE GRANT PROGRAM

North Lawndale Fresh is a grant program supported by a collaboration between Builders Vision, Food: Land:Opportunity, the Lumpkin Family Foundation, The Steans Family Foundation, and the Walter S. Mander Foundation. The program represents a five-year commitment to invest $1.2 million annually in organizations serving the North Lawndale neighborhood on Chicago's West Side. These investments aligned with the North Lawndale Quality of Life Plan, focusing on projects that expand access to healthy food and green spaces for North Lawndale residents, as well as advancing resident agency within the food system through workforce development, agricultural training, and food and nutrition education.

PROGRAM IMPACT AND EVALUATION

In its first four years of operation (2022–2025), North Lawndale Fresh awarded $4.7 million across twelve North Lawndale organizations. As the program approaches the end of its initial five-year commitment, a need has emerged to assess the impact of these investments and gather community feedback to inform future grant-making decisions. LifeSpring Consulting was engaged to evaluate North Lawndale Fresh's impact on the North Lawndale food landscape and to provide funders with the information needed to make decisions about potential renewal of the fund.

The evaluation addresses the following key questions:

1. ***How successful were grantees in executing their program goals?***
2. ***How did grantees overcome challenges faced in program execution?***
3. ***To what extent has the program changed North Lawndale's food landscape?***
4. ***To what extent has the program influenced broader change in the North Lawndale neighborhood?***
5. ***Where can the fund's approach in the community be improved?***

The findings uncovered through exploration of these questions demonstrate that in the process of supporting expanded food infrastructure and food access, North Lawndale Fresh has meaningfully contributed to the social, environmental, and economic fabric of the neighborhood. Grantees distributed over 1.6 million pounds of food, reached more than 891 residents with nutrition education, and sustained a combination of full-time and seasonal employment. Grantees overwhelmingly credit deep community partnerships and trust as central to their success, and those relationships have strengthened North Lawndale’s broader food system infrastructure in ways that will allow for continued growth beyond the lifecycle of the grant. At the same time, this exploration also surfaced areas for growth in the administration of the grant program itself. By improving communication, modifying funding cycles, and eliciting more substantive community input, North Lawndale Fresh can deepen the relational and collaborative approach valued by grantees and funders alike.

METHODOLOGY

LifeSpring employed a mixed-method research methodology, guided by a utilization-focused evaluation approach, to assess North Lawndale Fresh's impact on the North Lawndale food landscape. The process was launched with two separate focus groups convening grant funders and grant recipients. Both focus groups provided an opportunity for participants to share their insights on hopes for the evaluation process. The content of these discussions were utilized to finalize the evaluation questions and data collection tools for the research process.

This evaluation is primarily outcomes-focused, relying on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze both secondary data and data collected during the evaluation process. LifeSpring conducted a systematic review of grantee applications and reports to identify common metrics across grantee organizations, which were then aggregated to calculate collective outputs across the four-year grant period. Applications and reports were also analyzed thematically to surface patterns in program successes and implementation challenges across the grantee group. To gain deeper insight into the conditions reflected in these reports, LifeSpring developed a 22-question interview tool. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding to identify key successes, challenges, and areas for program improvement.

To incorporate broader perspectives into the work, LifeSpring interviewed the grantee community reviewer and conducted engagement exercises at the North Lawndale Community Farmers Market. These activities facilitated direct interaction with 14 community members, capturing their impressions of North Lawndale’s progress as it relates to public space and healthy food access. A parallel community survey was developed and distributed through grantee organizations’ networks, gathering similar input from an additional 18 respondents. In total, 32 residents contributed their observations of how the neighborhood has changed since 2022, when the grant program first launched.

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

NORTH LAWNDALE LANDSCAPE

North Lawndale is a historically significant community situated on the west side of Chicago. Once a hub for industrial activity, North Lawndale housed the world headquarters for Sears, Roebuck & Co., as well as large manufacturing plants such as International Harvester Plant and Western Electric's Hawthorne plant. Combined, these industries employed more than 67,000 workers.[i] Like other rustbelt communities, the closure and relocation of North Lawndale's main drivers of commerce left physical and economic gaps that the neighborhood has struggled to recover from.



Today North Lawndale is home to approximately 34,000 residents and roughly 34% of North Lawndale households make less than $25,000 per year.[ii] According to 2020–2024 American Community Survey estimates, the neighborhood's unemployment rate stands at 15.6%, nearly double the citywide rate. Economic hardship combined with lack of neighborhood infrastructure have created inequitable health conditions. In 2026, the only major grocery store in the neighborhood closed, leaving just two smaller specialty markets. ***"Fresh fruits and vegetables are difficult to access in a community with only one grocery store for 35,000 people,"*** observed one longtime North Lawndale resident and grantee. The consequences are dire. Grantees who work in the community discussed disproportionately high rates of diabetes and hypertension across the neighborhood, as well as a 17-year life expectancy gap between North Lawndale and the nearby suburb of Oak Park.

Although decades of disinvestment have left a visible mark on the community, North Lawndale organizations carry on in the tradition of mutual aid and community organizing to improve quality of life for local residents. In 1966, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. selected North Lawndale as the northern base for furthering Civil Rights activism, moving his family to North Hamlin Avenue to lead the Chicago Freedom Movement in its campaign for fair housing policies.[iii] Today North Lawndale has a rich network of organizations mobilizing to address both structural and acute crises. Across grantees, leaders speak to the interconnectedness of community organizations and the personal stake that many of them carry in this work, having grown up in, or spent decades serving, the same streets where they now run programs. When given tools and space, residents show up: tending gardens, building new programs out of their own experiences, and claiming public spaces as their own. ***"All of our hub partners are led by people that live in North Lawndale,"*** noted one grantee. ***"How do you get the community involved? We are the community."*** By investing in the North Lawndale community, North Lawndale Fresh is strengthening the capacity of the people and organizations fighting to build a healthier and more equitable neighborhood.

In its first four years (2022-2025), North Lawndale Fresh awarded 23 grants totaling $4.7 million to twelve organizations working across four priority areas: building the North Lawndale economy through food related businesses, expanding access to quality green spaces and food production, developing and promoting food and nutrition education, and expanding emergency food relief efforts.

GRANT PROGRAM FORMATION

North Lawndale Fresh grew out of out of early conversations among funders about opportunities to collaborate on advancing food security on Chicago's West Side, informed by research examining food access, income and health disparities across Chicago communities. This research identified Austin and North Lawndale as two West Side communities with disproportionate barriers to food access. In 2020, Builders Vision, the Christopher Family Foundation, and the Lumpkin Family Foundation joined together to launch Austin Fresh—a five-year collaborative, place-based fund that would invest in organizations advancing food access, health equity, and green spaces in the Austin neighborhood. Food:Land: Opportunity, a collaboration between Kinship Foundation and Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust, and the Walter S. Mander Foundation joined the funder collaborative in the second year. Building on the lessons learned from the Austin Fresh grant program and original research, the Lumpkin Family Foundation and Builders Vision approached members of the funder collaborative to expand their commitment to advancing food security on the West Side by launching a second place-based fund focused on North Lawndale.

In 2022, Builders Vision, Food:Land:Opportunity, the Lumpkin Family Foundation, The Steans Family Foundation, and the Walter S. Mander Foundation came together to launch North Lawndale Fresh. Like Austin Fresh, North Lawndale Fresh reflects a shared belief among its funders that access to healthy, affordable food is a human right and is critical to community health. The funders aligned their investment with the 2018 North Lawndale Quality of Life Plan, which identifies strengthening food access and expanding green spaces as key community priorities. From the outset, funders sought to listen and learn from the community in shaping the fund's design, integrating resident and community organization perspectives into their grant-making goals. Community voice remains connected to the annual grant-making process through a community representative who helps evaluate funding applications.

The grant program is managed by Fresh Taste, a collaborative funding initiative working to improve the Chicago region's future through food. In this administrative role, Fresh Taste coordinates the application cycle, engages grant applicants, and manages reporting between grantees and the funder group. Their administrative leadership provides the structure that allows the collaborative to operate efficiently while remaining focused on community impact.

THE FUNDERS GROUP

BUILDERS VISION

Builders Vision was founded in 2018 by Lukas Walton with a mission to realize a human and healthy planet while changing markets and minds for good. The organization focuses on building a more resilient future through its work across food and agriculture, energy, and oceans. With offices in Chicago and San Francisco, Builders Vision supports organizations and entrepreneurs working to strengthen communities, transform food systems, protect the environment, and advance human health.

FOOD:LAND: OPPORTUNITY

Food:Land:Opportunity is a multi-year initiative that aims to create a resilient local food economy that protects and conserves land and other natural resources while promoting market innovation and building wealth and assets in the Chicago region's communities. Since its inception, Food:Land:Opportunity has supported a thriving urban agriculture system that is firmly embedded in the assets of local Chicago neighborhoods. Food:Land:Opportunity is a collaboration between Kinship Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust and funded by the Searle Funds at the Chicago Community Trust.

LUMPKIN FAMILY FOUNDATION

The Lumpkin Family Foundation is a private, family foundation created in 1953 from the estate of Besse A. Lumpkin of Mattoon, IL. This foundation is a multi-generational, family-governed organization whose programs reflect the collective aspirations of a diverse family living in communities across the country. The Lumpkin Family Foundation awards grants and conducts programs that support people working together to build healthy, sustainable communities in East Central Illinois and beyond.

WALTER S. MANDER FOUNDATION

The Walter S. Mander Foundation is the legacy of Walter S. Mander, who created the foundation to advance his charitable interests during his lifetime. Upon Mr. Mander's passing from cancer in 1999, a significant portion of his estate was left to the foundation. The Walter S. Mander Foundation is managed by a board of directors that includes family members, former co-workers, colleagues, and friends.

STEANS FAMILY FOUNDATION

The Steans Family Foundation was established in 1987 following the family's experience supporting students from the Lathrop Homes in Chicago through college. This experiences shaped the Foundations' commitment to addressing the challenges facing low-income individuals, families, and communities. Since 1996, the Foundation has taken a place-based approach, partnering with residents and leaders in North Lawndale, and more recently North Chicago to advance community development and systems-level change across early childhood, education, and employment.

GRANTEE DEEP DIVE

GRANTEE PROFILES

A SAFE HAVEN FOUNDATION- A Safe Haven Foundation provides housing services and employment training for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Through North Lawndale Fresh support, A Safe Haven re-launched its Culinary Arts Training Program, enrolling participants in an immersive curriculum that combined classroom instruction with hands-on job training at the organization's catering social enterprise.

CHICAGO GROWS FOOD- Chicago Grows Food (CGF) works to dismantle barriers to urban gardening by equipping residents of low food access communities with the materials, knowledge, and ongoing support they need to grow their own fresh, culturally relevant produce at home. With North Lawndale Fresh support, CGF operated its Grow Your Groceries program in North Lawndale, distributing hundreds of grow kits and installing custom Home Gardens.

CHICAGO HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY (WINDY CITY HARVEST)- Windy City Harvest operates the VeggieRx produce prescription program in partnership with Lawndale Christian Health Center. VeggieRx provides free weekly boxes of fruits and vegetables to patients managing diet-related illnesses, creating a direct link between clinical care and sustained dietary change, supported by bilingual nutrition education and hands-on cooking courses.

COMMON THREADS- Common Threads delivers hands-on cooking and nutrition education to under-resourced schools and community organizations to build culinary skills and healthy eating habits. Common Threads partnered with Sumner Math and Science Academy, Chicago Youth Centers Epstein, and Corkery Elementary to bring farm-to-school programming to students and caregivers.

DION'S CHICAGO DREAM- Dion's Chicago Dream operates several interconnected programs to address hunger and promote health equity, including Dream Deliveries (weekly fresh produce delivery to homebound families), the Dream Vault (a 24/7 community food storage facility), and a Produce Prescription program that partners with healthcare providers to integrate nutrition into medical care. Through North Lawndale Fresh support Dion's Chicago Dream launched the North Lawndale Food Alliance, coordinating food deliveries in partnership with Stone Temple Church, Above & Beyond, Firehouse Community Art Center, and YMEN.

FAITH IN PLACE- Faith in Place is an interfaith environmental organization that partners with religious communities to advance environmental justice, food access, and community health. In partnership with Stone Temple Missionary Baptist Church, Faith in Place is investing in green space and community food infrastructure to create a permanent site for nutrition programming, cooking education, and food entrepreneurship opportunities available to North Lawndale residents.

FOOD ACCESS PROJECT (VIVERY)- The Food Access Project connects food-insecure individuals with tailored nutritional support through partnerships with local health systems and food providers. Their Food is Medicine Delivery Pilot, launched in partnership with Mt. Sinai Hospital, serves West Side residents managing chronic health conditions by providing bimonthly deliveries of medically tailored groceries and fresh produce through a network of local food pantries and produce partners.

GARDENEERS- Gardeneers operates school garden programs that engage students in experiential agricultural education, building their knowledge of nutrition and food justice while producing fresh food for their communities. In North Lawndale, Gardeneers has run year-round programs at Holy Family Ministries, Homan Rails Farm, North Lawndale College Prep, and Roswell B. Mason Elementary.

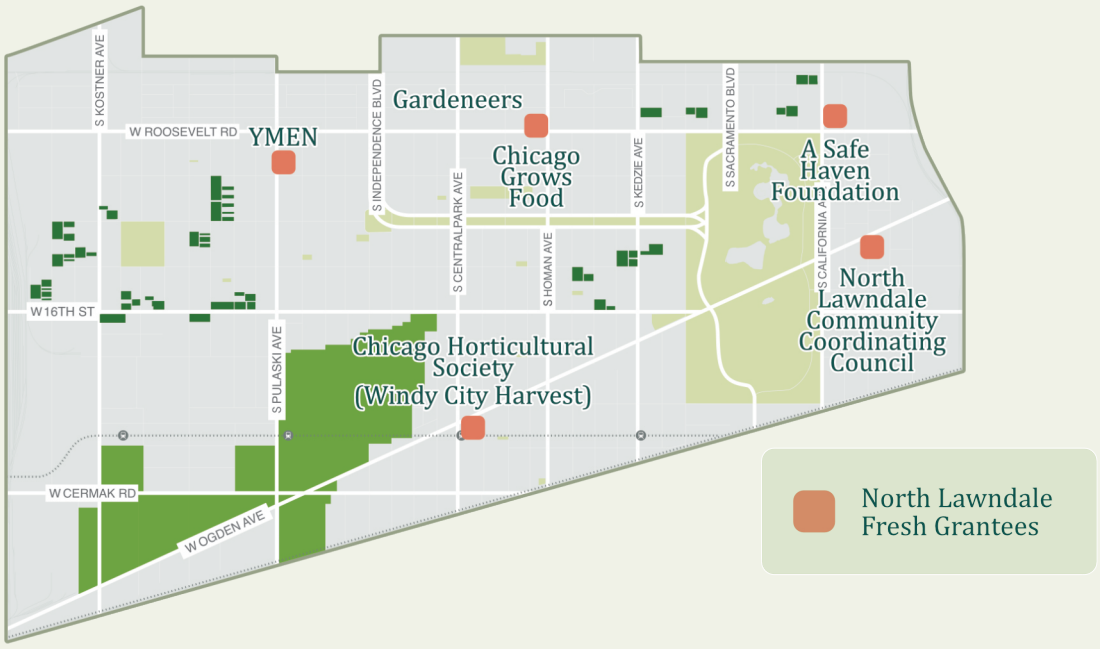
GOOD FOOD CATALYST- Good Food Catalyst builds more equitable local food systems by connecting growers, food entrepreneurs, and consumers to markets, resources, and each other. In North Lawndale, Good Food Catalyst partnered with neighborhood organizations to deliver nutrition education events, drop-in cooking classes, culturally relevant community meals, and provide training and technical assistance to 28 local growers and 25 food businesses.

NORTH LAWNDALE COMMUNITY COORDINATING COUNCIL - NLCCC is a coalition of community-based organizations, businesses, elected officials, and residents working collaboratively to guide planning and economic development in North Lawndale. North Lawndale Fresh supported NLCCC with a community Food Collaborative that expanded food access through a partnership with Top Box Foods and provided resources to Black-owned local grocery businesses, and the Lawndale Gateway project. This is a multi-year effort to design and develop an affordable, full-line grocery store in the neighborhood.

NORTH LAWNDALE GREENING COMMITTEE- NLGC develops and stewards urban agriculture spaces throughout the neighborhood, with a focus on growing high-quality, nutrient-dense produce and building the knowledge and capacity of local growers and residents. With North Lawndale Fresh support, NLGC alongside YMEN, expanded its garden network, introduced a Freight Farm Agricultural Pod capable of year-round controlled-environment growing, and delivered an extensive series of grower education classes, permaculture workshops, and cooking demonstrations to community members.

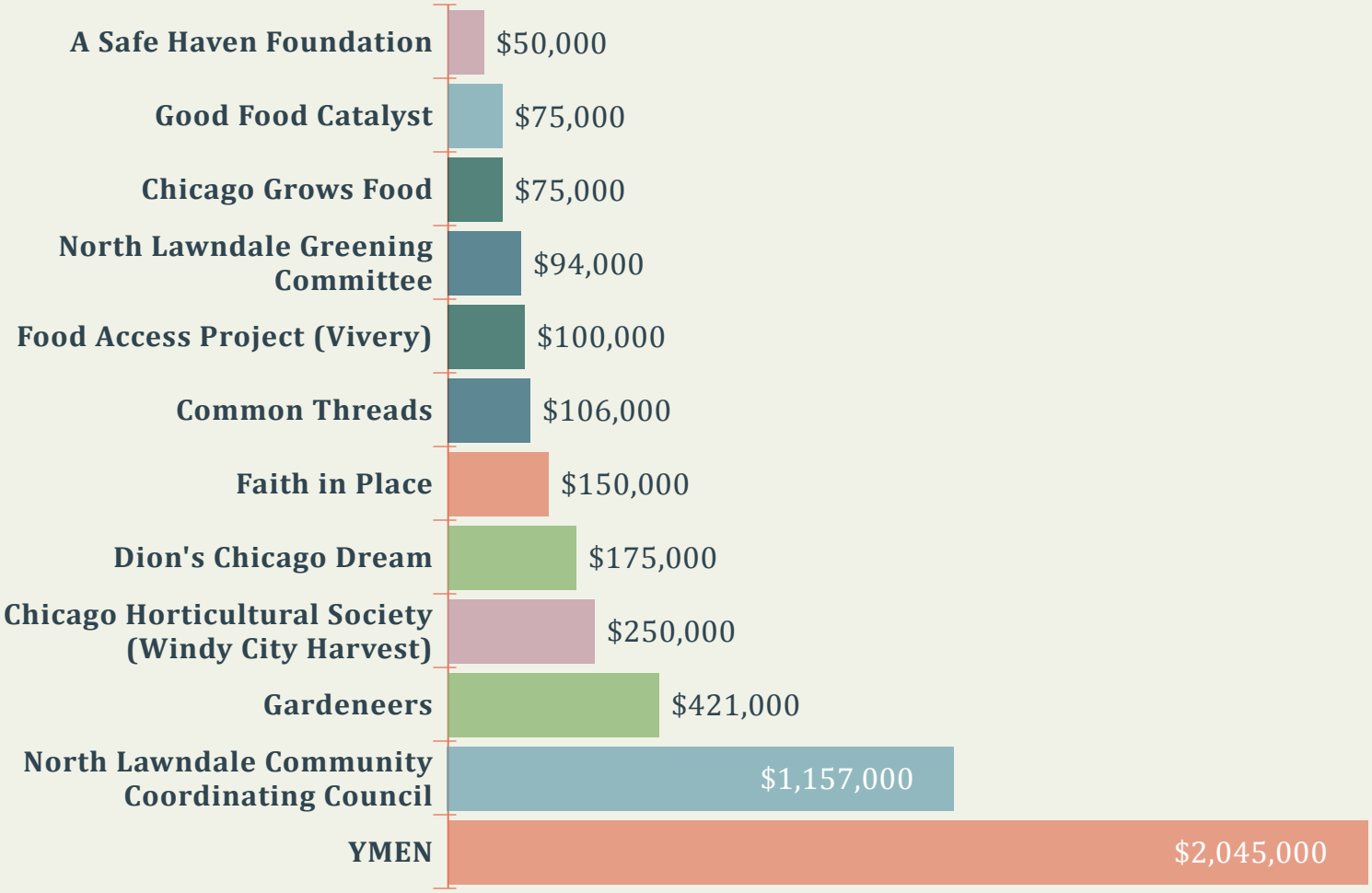
YMEN- YMEN leads the Garden to Table (G2T) Pipeline in partnership with North Lawndale Greening Committee, Stone Temple Church, and The Firehouse Community Arts Center. G2T Pipeline is a neighborhood-wide food system initiative that brings together community gardens, food rescue operations, and prepared meal programs across a coordinated network of community partner hubs.

GRANTEE ORGANIZATIONS HEADQUARTERED IN NORTH LAWNDALE



GRANTEE AWARDS

Between 2022 and 2025, North Lawndale Fresh distributed a total of $4,698,000 in grant funds across 12 organizations. While all grant awards are for one-year terms, half of the organizations received project support for multiple years. On average, organizations who receive multiple awards are funded twice and only thirty-three percent of organizations were funded more than two years [YMEN, Chicago Grows Food, Common Threads, Gardeneers].



RETURN GRANTEES BY YEAR

GRANTEES	2022	2023	2024	2025
Chicago Horticultural Society (Windy City Harvest)*	●			●
North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council (NLCCC)*	●	●		
YMEN	●	●	●	●
Chicago Grows Food		●	●	●
Common Threads		●	●	●
Gardeneers		●	●	●
North Lawndale Greening Commitee		●		
Faith in Place*			●	
Food Access Project			●	
A Safe Haven Foundation				●
Dion's Chicago Dream				●
Good Food Catalyst				●
% RETURN GRANTEES		33%	67%	63%

* Grantee organizations that did not reapply or receive a new grant due to an approved project extension.

FOOD SYSTEM SECTORS

The work that North Lawndale Fresh funds is not only increasing direct access to food, but promoting a stronger local food system. The food system is an interconnected network of actors and processes involved in producing, processing, transporting, consuming, and managing waste by-products of food. Fifty-eight percent of grantees have projects that touch more than one food sector.

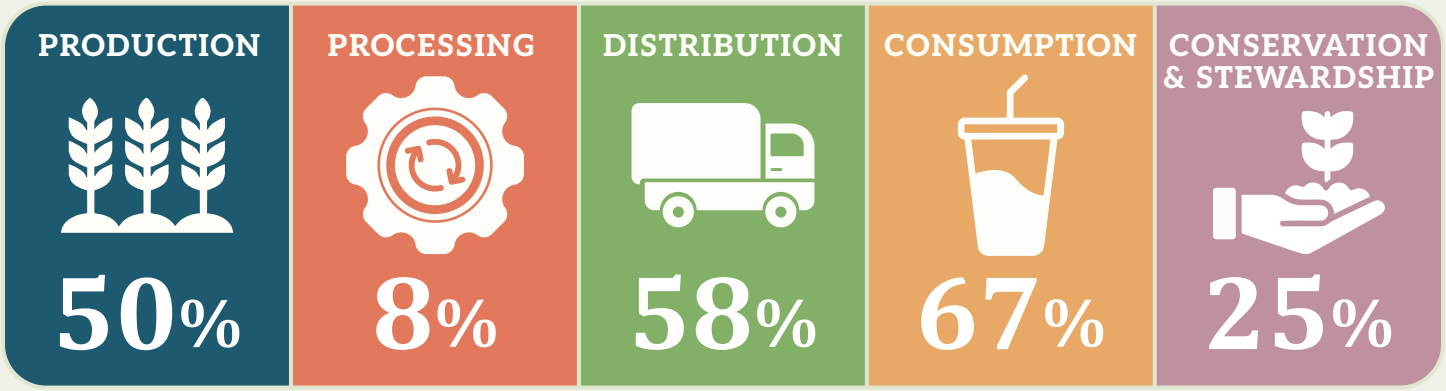
PRODUCTION- The cultivation of crops, raising of livestock, and other agricultural activities that generate raw food products. This includes urban agriculture, aquaponics, and greenhouse growing.

PROCESSING- The cleaning, treating, or transformation of raw food into forms suitable for distribution or sale, including the development of packaged, preserved, or prepared goods.

DISTRIBUTION- The storage and transportation of food products to wholesalers, retailers, or end consumers.

CONSUMPTION- The preparation and eating of food products in restaurants, community spaces, or people's homes. This includes efforts to build knowledge around nutrition and healthy dietary behavior.

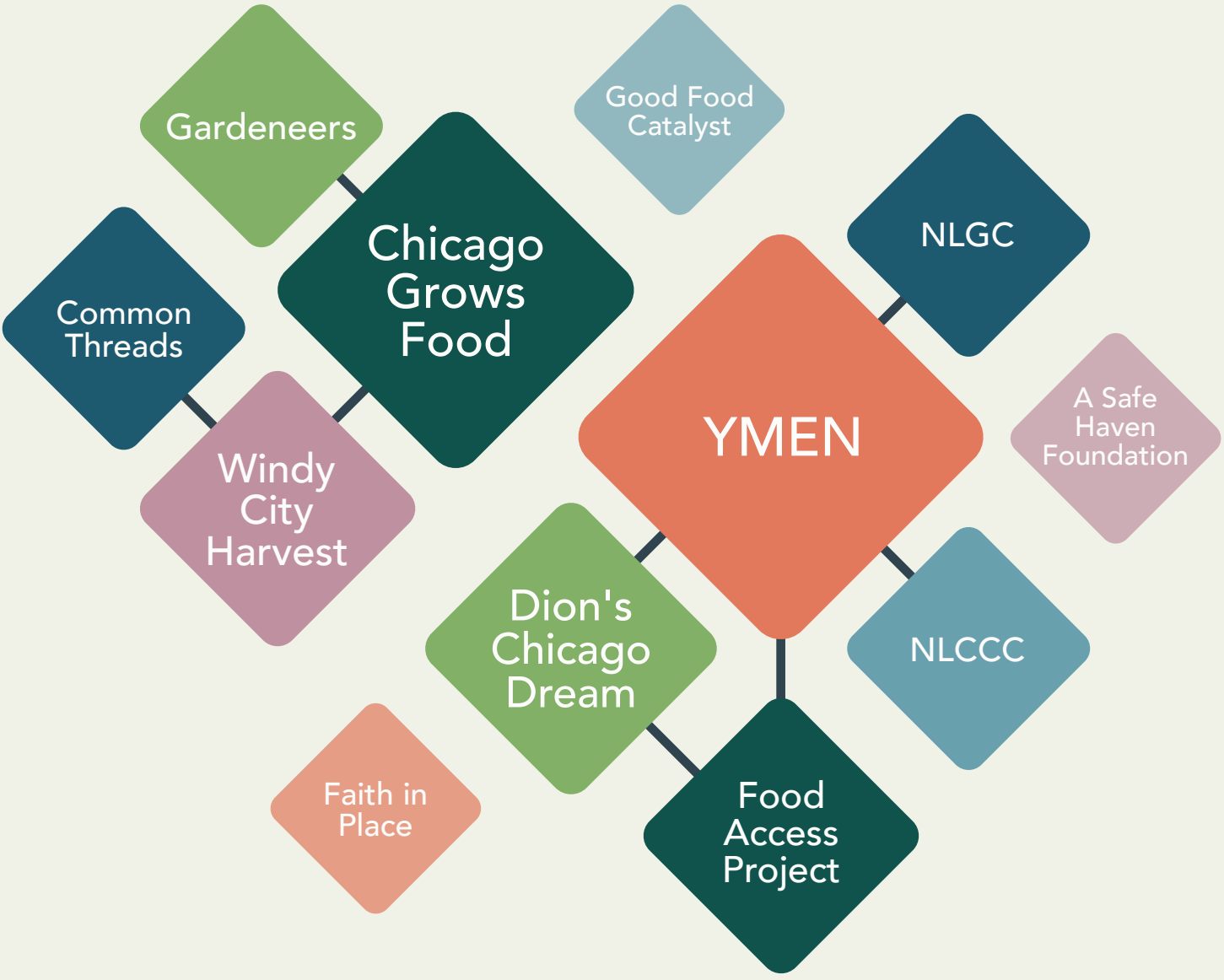
CONSERVATION & STEWARDSHIP- Practices that reduce food waste, protect natural resources, and promote the long- term ecological health of food systems. This includes food rescue, composting, land stewardship, and sustainable agricultural practices.



GRANTEE PARTNERSHIPS

Collaborations between grantee organizations as well as a range of external actors are core to the work being carried out in North Lawndale. These partnerships support organizations in executing programming directly while simultaneously building capacity to address the root causes of food and health injustices in North Lawndale. Projects like the Garden to Table Pipeline are made possible through coordinated efforts of multiple independent organizations, including several grantee organizations. Grantees are also brought together formally by convening organizations like the North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council (NLCCC) to work on issue-specific subcommittees like the GROWSS (Greening, Reclaiming, Open space, Water, Soil, and Sustainability) working group. These collaborations provide opportunities for grantees to share knowledge and resources, align priorities and coordinate programmatic efforts.

PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN GRANTEE ORGANIZATIONS



GRANTEE PARTNERSHIPS WITH EXTERNAL ORGANIZATIONS*

A SAFE HAVEN FOUNDATION
- Illinois Department of Employment Security
- Chicago Continuum of Care
- Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity
- Freedman Seating
- Near West American Job Center in Chicago's Pilsen
- Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises

NORTH LAWNDALE GREENING COMMITTEE
- Stone Temple Church
- School of the Art Institute of Chicago
- Northwestern University
- Bionutrient Food Association
- Columbia University
- Chicago Food Policy Action Council

CHICAGO GROWS FOOD
- Stone Temple Church
- Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy
- Chicago Housing Authority
- Lawndale Pop Up Spot
- University of Illinois Extension
- UCAN

GARDENEERS
- Holy Family Ministries
- North Lawndale College Prep
- Roswell B. Mason Mathematics & Science Academy
- After School Matters
- AmeriCorps

FAITH IN PLACE
- Stone Temple Missionary Baptist Church

GOOD FOOD CATALYST
- Firehouse Community Arts Center
- UI Health
- Rush University Medical Center
- Mt. Sinai Hospital
- Farm on Ogden
- Stone Temple Love Fridges

NORTH LAWNDALE COMMUNITY COORDINATING COUNCIL (NLCCC)
- Top Box Foods
- New Covenant Community Development Corp.
- Boxing Out Negativity
- Firehouse Community Arts Center
- Sinai Chicago
- Sinai Community Institute

YMEN
- Stone Temple Church
- Firehouse Community Art Center
- After School Matters
- UCAN
- Rush Hospital
- One Summer Chicago / Sinai Institute

DION'S CHICAGO DREAM
- North Lawndale Food Alliance
- Stone Temple Church
- Above & Beyond
- Firehouse Community Art Center

FOOD ACCESS PROJECT (VIVERY)
- Mt. Sinai Hospital
- Above & Beyond Pantry
- Beyond Hunger
- Harmony Community Cares
- Pilsen Food Pantry

COMMON THREADS
- Sumner Math and Science Academy
- Chicago Youth Centers Epstein
- Corkery Elementary
- Just Roots Chicago
- Cedillo's Fresh Produce
- Plant Chicago

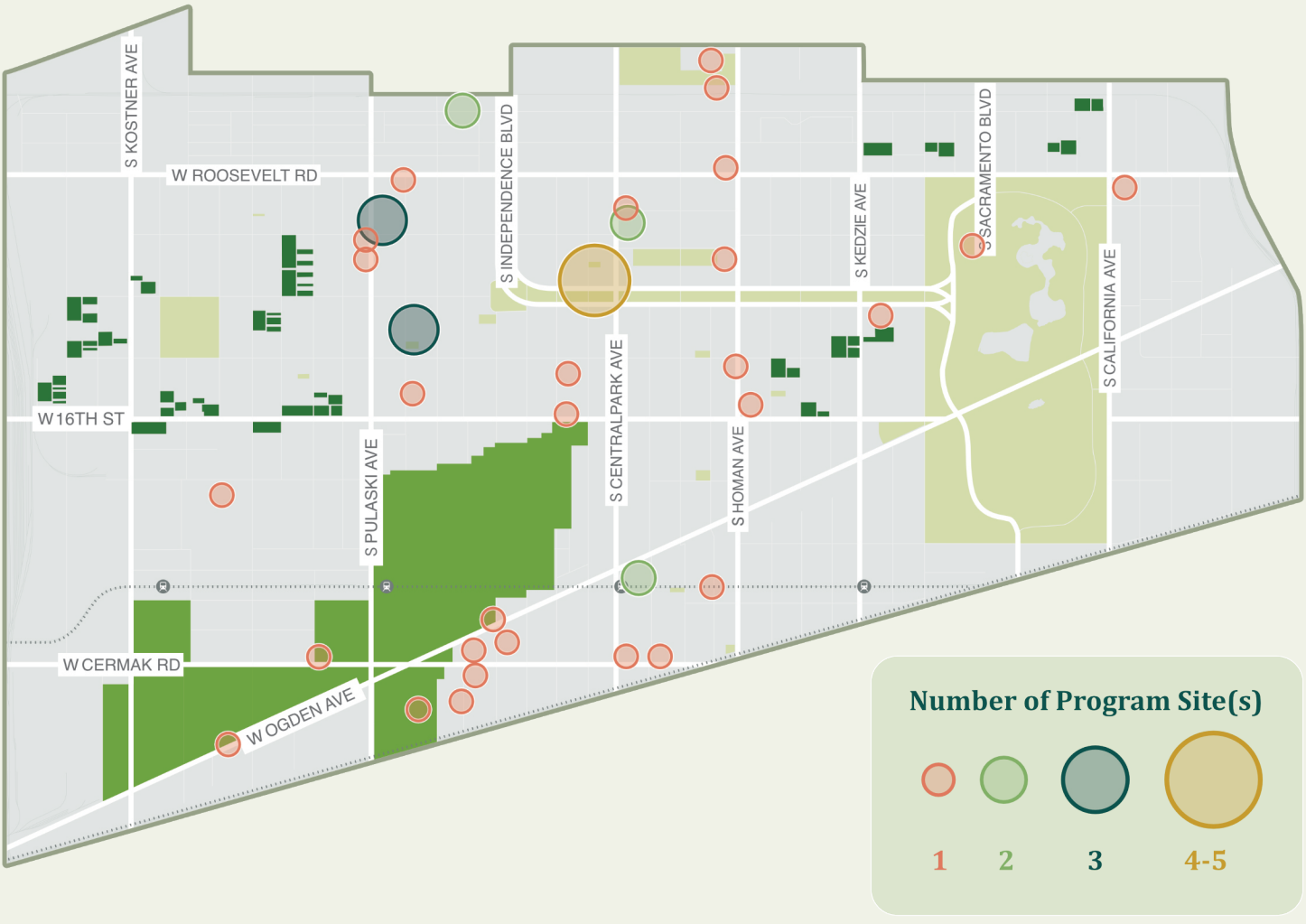
CHICAGO HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY (WINDY CITY HARVEST)
- Lawndale Christian Health Center
- Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion
- Good Food is Good Medicine
- Center for Nutrition & Health Impact

* For clarity, the graphic includes a selection of 4–6 external partners per organization rather than a comprehensive list.

GRANTEE PROGRAM SITES

Evidence of collaboration among grantee organizations is also evident in the locations of program sites. Though not all grantee organizations are headquartered within the boundaries of North Lawndale, program sites are distributed throughout the neighborhood with several locations serving multiple purposes for multiple grantee organizations. For example, Stone Temple Missionary Baptist Church serves as the primary location for Faith in Place's incubator kitchen project, while simultaneously participating in the Garden to Table Pipeline as a food hub and also hosting a Love Fridge that serves as a distribution site for meals prepared by Good Food Catalyst. A number of other locations in the neighborhood similarly serve multiple grantees as sites of food production, educational programming, or even shared office space.

DISTRIBUTION OF FUNDED PROGRAMMING AND ACTIVITIES



GRANTEE METRICS

2022-2025 TOTALS

COMMUNITY GARDENS

5 community gardens/ green spaces were enhanced or expanded



14 new gardens established

HOME GARDENS

1,288 new home gardens (via grow kits or installation)



1,358 residents received gardening education*

* Average 345/year

FOOD DISTRIBUTION

41,984 lbs. of food produced



1,149,609 lbs. of food were rescued, donated, or purchased



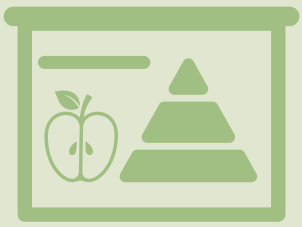
69,233 food boxes distributed

197,080 healthy meals or snacks were served

1,671,825 lbs. of food distributed to residents



EDUCATION AND JOBS



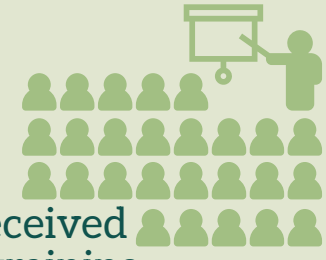
2,610
residents received nutrition education*

* Average 653/year

7 full-time positions each year



65
residents received workforce training





66
part-time/seasonal positions each year

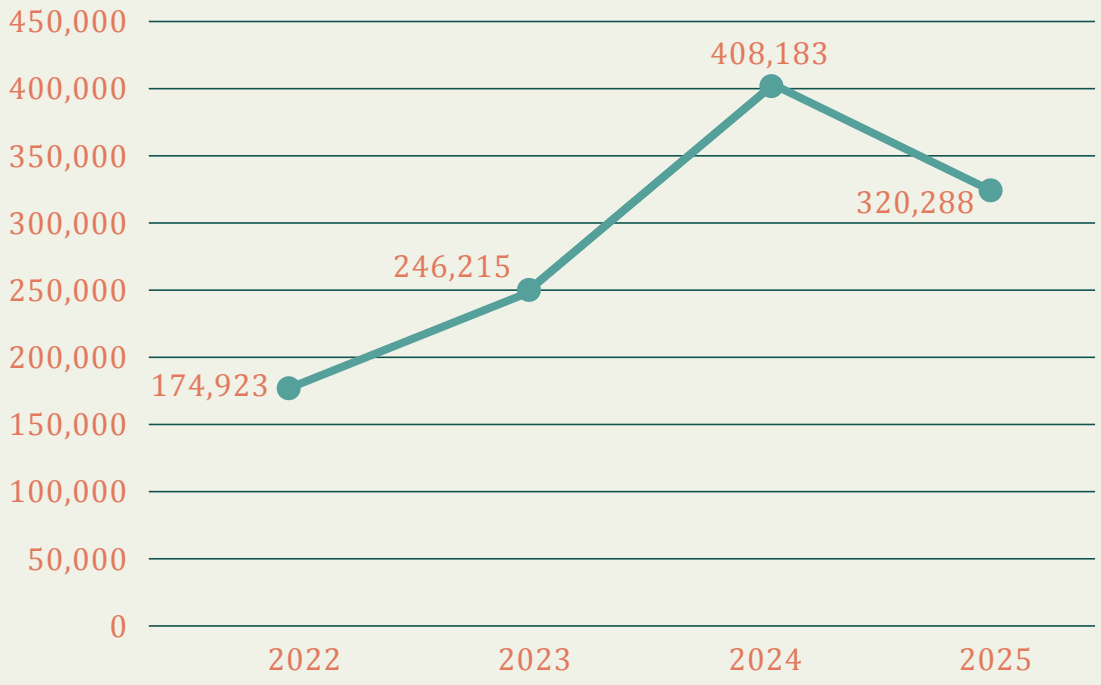
EVALUATION FINDINGS

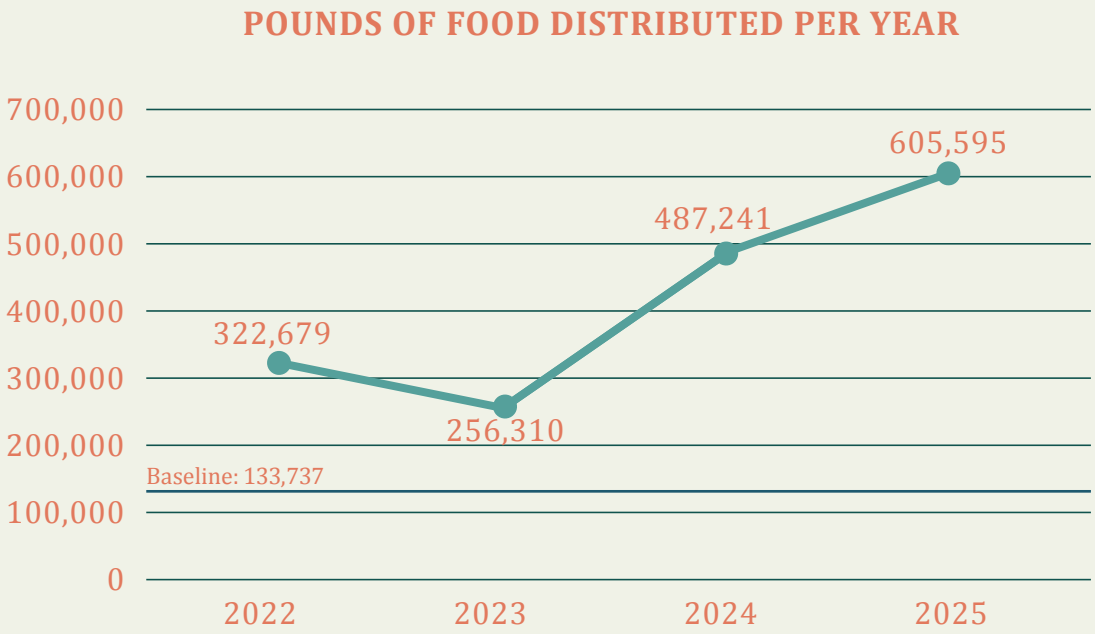
TO WHAT EXTENT DID THIS PROGRAM CHANGE NORTH LAWNDALE'S FOOD LANDSCAPE?

FOOD ACCESS

A significant portion of grantee programming has worked to provide greater food access for North Lawndale residents. While efforts to open a new full-service grocery store are still in development, grantees have filled the gap in the short-term through significant food production and distribution efforts. Over the first four years of the grant program, North Lawndale Fresh funding has supported the distribution of at least 1,671,825 pounds of food, with 67% of grantees engaging in food access work. This includes 41,984 pounds of produce grown by grantee organizations, as well as 1,149,609 pounds of food rescued, donated, or purchased from 2022 to 2025. In addition, a total of 197,080 healthy snacks or meals were prepared and served through weekly community meals and after school programming. Two pilot programs, which grantees reported were only feasible because of North Lawndale Fresh funding, have made additional efforts to incorporate residents' cultural preferences in their food distribution efforts as well. ***"Our neighbors can use an app to take surveys, to place orders, to customize their orders. So, because of that technology, we were able to give neighbors the opportunity to select the foods that work best for themselves and their families."***

POUNDS OF FOOD RESCUED, DONATED, OR PURCHASED PER YEAR





While increasing access to food and nutrition education has yielded health benefits for some, the relief available is still outpaced by community need. Thirty-four percent of residents surveyed did not perceive an increase in fresh and affordable food options since 2022, and grantees described an ongoing need for direct food assistance, with one organization noting that its programming had increasingly shifted toward "just straight up getting people food." Another grantee captured the scale of the challenge:

"...we're doing 300,000 pounds of food. It's a lot, but it's not. It's just for one little section and one little area."

The projects funded by North Lawndale Fresh are expanding access, and many surveyed residents perceive improvements in availability—but the neighborhood is still in need of greater support to increase food security. The level of need emphasizes the importance of multipronged approaches to addressing food insecurity, both through direct food relief and investments in food infrastructure.

GREEN SPACE EXPANSION

Over the first four years of the grant program, 14 new community gardens were established on formerly vacant lots, and 5 existing green spaces were enhanced or expanded. Some residents have noticed the difference: 19 of the 32 residents surveyed (59%) reported that North Lawndale had more parks and community gardens than in 2022. While data on the exact number of residents interacting with these spaces is particularly challenging to track, anecdotal evidence suggests increased engagement and growing interest in gardening more generally:

"One of the big things is just how many residents are now wanting to garden, because they've interacted with our gardens. We did a garden on the block, and now there's like five people from that block that have their own little individual garden at their house. So it's something that people are imitating on a personal level... so it's a beautiful multiplication of that."

Grantees have supported residents in growing food in their own backyards; 1,250 grow kits were distributed for residents to garden at home, and 38 home garden installed.

TO WHAT EXTENT HAS THE PROGRAM INFLUENCED BROADER CHANGE IN THE NORTH LAWNDALE NEIGHBORHOOD?

By supporting programs that expand food access, strengthen community relationships, and create more opportunities for residents to participate more fully in community life, North Lawndale Fresh is helping to create stronger food and community infrastructure at the local level. While many of these outcomes are still at the emerging stage, NLF's contributions are supporting organizations in laying the foundation for projects with great potential to spawn long-term change.

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Social cohesion is not an explicit goal of North Lawndale Fresh, nor is it an easily measurable indicator; however, increased community connectivity is one of most prominent outcomes of this grant program's funded activities. Eighty-eight percent of grantees identified partnerships and relationship building as a program success. Grantees described the development and strengthening of connections among community organizations, residents, schools, and local businesses, with some noting these connections have contributed to greater trust and shared ownership of the neighborhood. One grantee reflected: ***"We now see this neighborhood as collectively our neighborhood. So there's a shared ownership and there's a strong relational trust."***

Shifts in community connectivity are being witnessed by organizational leaders and community residents alike. Of the 32 residents surveyed about the shifts they had witnessed in North Lawndale between 2022 and 2026, 66% believed there were more opportunities for residents to gather in public spaces and 72% reported meeting more people in their community by attending public events since 2022. Sixty-six percent of participants reported feeling welcome visiting parks or community gardens. While these participants represent only a small sample of the broader population, their sentiments mirror the shift in community connectivity that grantee partners and their participants are grateful for.

Multiple grantees indicated that their programming provides a safe space for residents to commune together despite tensions that traditionally keep some groups of people from crossing certain neighborhood boundaries. The ability to bring youth together is a particular point of pride due to safety concerns that they are more vulnerable to: ***"it's hard to get the youth together because, I mean, the youth are scared. They're scared to be out, unfortunately, in that area, so you bring them to a safe place".*** In addition to helping community members overcome barriers to connection across geographic and social boundaries, programming is also helping to ease intergenerational divides. Programs that engage youth as community advocates to help grow, educate, and distribute healthy food within the community have helped challenge prevalent harmful narratives some older residents maintain about youth:

"The way our community talks about our teens has always been a problem… when our community members see that our youth are the ones that are giving them, or distributing food that they grew for the community… they're also able to tell these members, oh, this is how you use it… Not only do the teens take agency for themselves as community members in that. Our adults are a little more—I don't want to say protective, but they ease up a little off how they treat our youth."
Programs that activate and provide economic incentive for youth helps increase social cohesion, while also promoting community safety.

When studied in isolation, communal bonds may appear to be tangential to a broader goal of food security. However, the existence of strong communal bonds or the lack thereof, have strong consequences for the strength of a community food system, perhaps even more so in neighborhoods where food infrastructure is weak. Communal networks between organizations and residents become vital sources of support and sustenance in the absence of robust formal food system structures. Through reports and interviews, grantees repeatedly spoke to community members spreading the word about programming, bringing their friends to participate, and at times not having enough resources available to support the expanding number of participants. Several grantee organizations have partnered together, exchanging knowledge and even financial resources to increase their reach in the community. Grantees who do not grow food themselves often patronize local growers and food purveyors, not only circulating grant dollars back into the North Lawndale economy, but specifically into community-driven organizations. Through these communal networks, groups exchange information that draw more program participants, strengthen capacity for revenue generation, connect organizations to more consumers, and increase potential to organize for policy change. When local organizations don't trust and support each other, the potential to recirculate educational and financial resources may decline. When individuals don't feel safe to participate in programs, organizational reach and program sustainability can become stunted. North Lawndale Fresh's role in supporting social cohesion is directly tied to creating a stronger community food system and increasing food and health equity in North Lawndale.

RESIDENT EMPOWERMENT

In addition to supporting social cohesion broadly, programming also contributed to resident empowerment. Forty-five percent of grantees interviewed discussed increased sense of agency among participants as a result of their funded projects, particularly those with a focus on young people. As one grantee pointed out, youth programming holds potential to empower young people while simultaneously connecting them with their community. Grantees also shared anecdotal evidence that programming has contributed to a sense of shared ownership and pride in community spaces: ***"They get to point to that for years. They can come back 20 years from now and say, that's my tree."*** As discussed earlier, interest in the work happening in public spaces also inspired excitement about what could be done at home, with neighbors that interacted with community gardens taking up the practice in their own homes.

ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT

North Lawndale Fresh has invested in four organizations that are working to improve the economic landscape of North Lawndale (NLCCC, Faith in Place, A Safe Haven Foundation and Good Food Catalyst). Through a combination of infrastructural investments and workforce training programs, these organizations are directly supporting the growth of the local food economy. Seventeen percent of grantees offered job training to residents or support for local food entrepreneurs, reaching 64 residents and demonstrating some progress on the front to advance food entrepreneurship. Indirectly, NLF grantees are more broadly supporting the economic advancement of the landscape through mutual support of local farmers markets, gardens and farms. Thirty-three percent of grantees spoke to purchasing from or supporting local food purveyors, and therefore helping recirculate funds within the North Lawndale economy.

Across the 2022–2025 reporting period, funded projects sustained an average of 7 full-time and 66 part-time or seasonal positions each year. In reflecting on how much programming has meant to the community, one grantee shared the following experience of a program participant:

> ***"He had lost a son and just really had begun spiraling and ended up experiencing homelessness…through coming in and being able to kind of get stabilized in a safe place where he could kind of regroup…he was saying it's more than just income to help him be self-sufficient, but it's kind of given him a sense of purpose that has served as a protective factor from the spiraling that he had previously experienced. You know, it's kind of given him a reason and helped him discover things that he was capable of doing that he didn't realize."***

With the help of NLF funding, twelve individuals experiencing homelessness received culinary workforce training. Of those participants, 83% earned a safe serve food handlers certification, 70% earned a safe serve hospitality managers license, and 92% were placed in jobs. However, the program working to expand jobs skills training and employment among those experiencing homelessness was not regranted. Evaluator comments cited unclear program alignment and neighborhood impact as the reason for decline:

> ***"The team was unclear on how well aligned the program is with our goal of expanding healthy food access or nutrition education, or whether the project grant would specifically support food access rather than general workforce development. Additionally, the project's impact on North Lawndale residents specifically was unclear."***

Despite the reason provided for rejection, the organization's application and report materials detailed direct connections between their funded programming and healthy food provision: "Trainees receive hands on experience in sanitization and food preparation in the industrial kitchen located within ASHF's cafeteria, which provides over three nutritious meals and snacks daily for ASHF's transitional housing residents…our industrial kitchen that prepares more than 1,200 healthy meals a day." The nature of the program's design addresses multiple food system gaps. By training and feeding unhoused populations with nutritious meals in North Lawndale, the culinary education program is a vehicle for healthy food access, food education, and food-focused social entrepreneurship. These are all components that directly align with the goals of the North Lawndale QLP and North Lawndale Fresh, but the evaluators' inability to see it as such might be tied to a combination of two possible oversights:

1- UNDEFINED EXPECTATIONS AROUND HOW MANY CRITERIA A PROGRAM MUST MEET. The current evaluation criteria asks whether the idea "expands healthy food options in North Lawndale; expands access to green spaces and food production; develops education or nutrition assistance; build food-related or nutrition-education related enterprises; and/or build the North Lawndale economy through food-related enterprises?" The program in question addresses 3/5 options above, meanwhile there are other grantees who fulfill less than 3/5 options. On the surface, this could imply that fulfilling the first criteria of expanding food access is a non-negotiable for receiving funding; however, other programs, like Dion's Chicago Dream, met the first criteria and still did not receive additional funding. These inconsistencies indicate undefined expectations around minimum thresholds.

2- ASSUMED RESIDENCY BIAS. The industrial kitchen is located in North Lawndale and a large percentage of students are employed by the program following graduation, yet evaluators still cited lack of clarity around whether North Lawndale residents are impacted. Further conversation with the grant administrator explained that by nature of the program working with unhoused populations, funders may have been unclear on how the program could prove that students were actual residents. Given that grantees do not provide proof of residency for participation in their programs, this highlights an assumed residency bias toward programs working with housed populations.

The organizations possessing some of the greatest potential for catalyzing economic change and reducing structural inequity have also faced the greatest barriers to program implementation and the largest reduction in funder investment. Each year, NLF awards 1-2 grantee organizations with economic advancement potential and the percentage of funds awarded to this category each year has declined exponentially. In 2022, investment in economic advancement represented 55% of the grant pool compared to only 17% of the grant pool in the most recent 2026 funding cycle. This reduction in funding is in part explained by two of the organizations facing external challenges that extended their project timelines. As mentioned earlier, the project to open a new grocery store in the neighborhood has faced significant roadblocks, and has yet to fully materialize, though progress is being made. Efforts to stand up a commercial kitchen and a new grocery store are complex processes that require more than just funding to overcome. There are bureaucratic challenges that can significantly stall progress and drain resources in the process. Although these projects are still underway, their completion will help bolster North Lawndale's food economy through job creation and expanded revenue generating potential for current and aspiring food entrepreneurs.

INVESTMENT IN ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT 2022-2026

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
NLCCC	$672,000	$485,000			
Faith in Place			$150,000		$100,000
Good Food Catalyst				$75,000	$75,000
A Safe Haven Foundation				$50,000	
TOTAL INVESTMENT %	**55%**	**40%**	**17%**	**9%**	**17%**

ADVANCING THE NORTH LAWNDALE QUALITY OF LIFE PLAN

North Lawndale Fresh's investments align directly with the North Lawndale Quality of Life Plan, with NLF funded projects advancing the following goals and strategies within the Greening & Open Space and Health & Wellness areas.

Greening & Open Space: We will promote greening efforts that beautify our neighborhood and also expand social and economic opportunities that encourage entrepreneurship, education, social engagement, and environmental stewardship.

- **Strategy 1:** Utilize our available green spaces and vacant lots to promote cohesion, develop North Lawndale as a hub for the greening industry, promote healthy living, and environmental awareness.
  - **1.1** Provide information on gardens and parks in a centralized location and identify organizations to adopt and maintain existing green spaces.
  - **1.2** Create a welcoming business climate to foster the success of the North Lawndale greening industry.
  - **1.3** Encourage the development of larger urban agriculture enterprises on contiguous vacant parcels in high-vacancy areas.
  - **1.4** Continue to activate vacant lots and open spaces throughout the community by transforming them into community gardens and parks.
- **Strategy 2:** Empower residents and organizations to create artistic, beautifully landscaped, clean, and environmentally diverse streetscapes.
- **Strategy 3:** Create and maintain welcoming, safe, and high-quality parks and recreation areas throughout the community.

Health & Wellness: We will address health inequities in North Lawndale by educating residents and advocating to improve the overall health and wellness of the community.

- **Strategy 1:** Increase our residents' healthcare access.
- **Strategy 2:** Widen the scope and increase the availability of mental health services in the community.
- **Strategy 3:** Establish new programs and systems that support physical wellness.
  - **3.1** Implement programs focused on shifting community health behaviors through nutrition education.
  - **3.2** Host community fitness events and programs.
  - **3.3** Create community produce partnerships with local gardens and farms/expand backyard gardens.

GRANTEE NAME	GREENING & OPEN SPACE			HEALTH & WELLNESS			BOTH
	OVERALL	1.2	1.3	OVERALL	3.1	3.3	OVERALL
CHICAGO HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY (WINDY CITY HARVEST)				●	●		
NORTH LAWNDALE COMMUNITY COORDINATING COUNCIL (NLCCC)	●	●					
YMEN	●			●		●	●
CHICAGO GROWS FOOD	●			●		●	●
COMMON THREADS				●	●		
GARDENEERS	●		●	●	●		●
NORTH LAWNDALE GREENING COMMITTEE	●			●	●	●	●
FAITH IN PLACE	●						
FOOD ACCESS PROJECT				●	●		
A SAFE HAVEN FOUNDATION	●						
DION'S CHICAGO DREAM				●			
GOOD FOOD CATALYST				●	●		
TOTAL COUNT	7	1	1	9	6	2	4
TOTAL %	58%	8%	8%	75%	50%	17%	33%

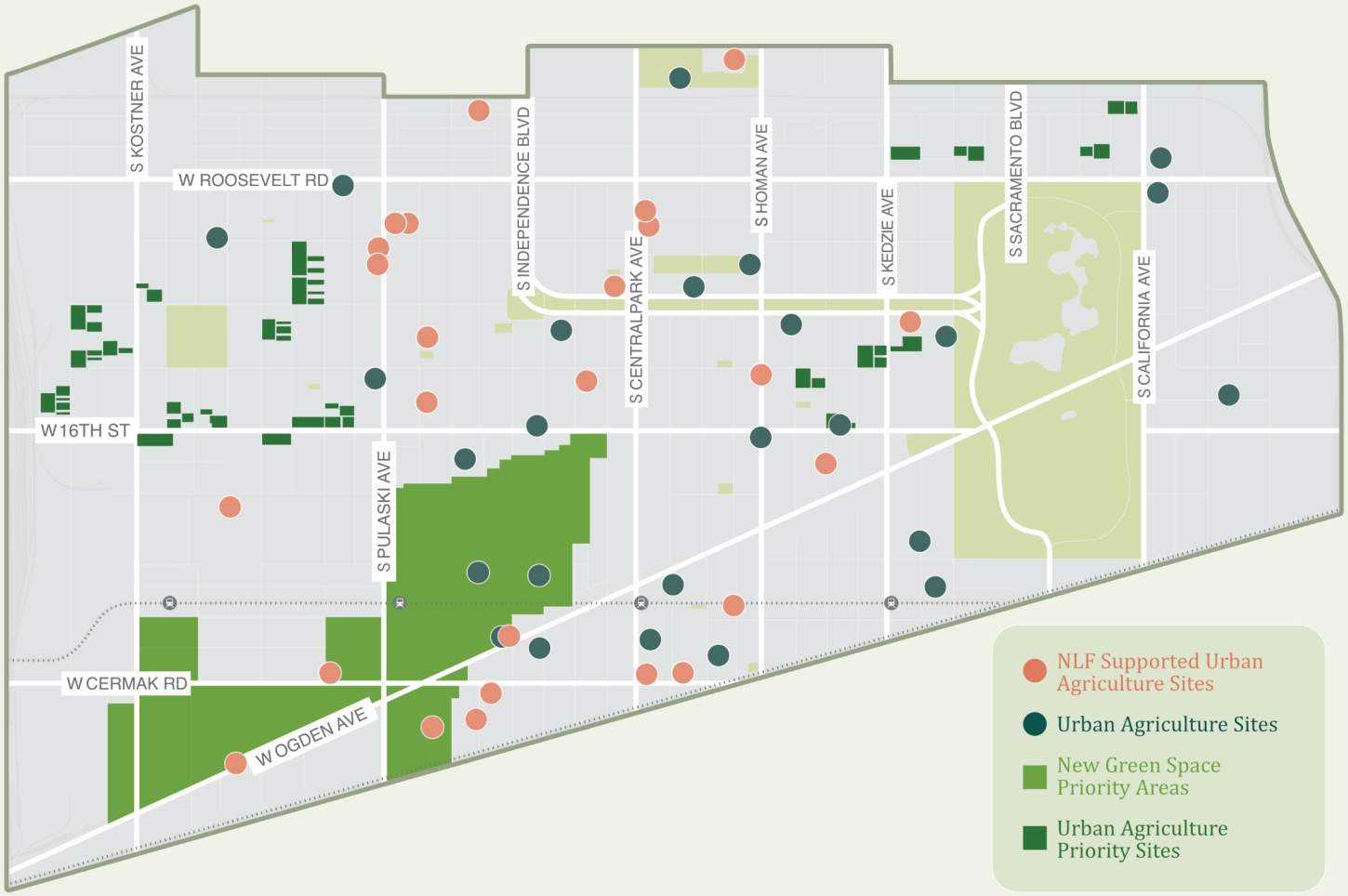
GREENING & OPEN SPACE

Every year, North Lawndale Fresh funds three to four projects that support the Greening & Open Space Goal within the North Lawndale QLP to "promote greening efforts that beautify our neighborhood and also expand social and economic opportunities that encourage entrepreneurship, education, social engagement, and environmental stewardship".[iv] Fifty-eight percent of grantees funded between 2022 and 2025 advanced greening and open space goals (A Safe Haven Foundation, Gardeneers, Chicago Grows Food, North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council, North Lawndale Greening Committee, Faith in Place, and YMEN).

These grantees primarily engage in activities that advance Strategy 1: Utilize available green spaces and vacant lots to promote cohesion, develop North Lawndale as a hub for the greening industry, promote healthy living, and environmental awareness. In total, grantees expanded four agricultural gardens, converted 14 vacant lots into food producing community gardens, planted 20 fruit trees, installed 38 home gardens, and distributed 1,250 grow kits for community members to grow food at their own residence.

Not including home gardens, North Lawndale Fresh grants directly and indirectly supported 28 urban agriculture sites. Four of these fall directly within a green space priority area identified in North Lawndale's 2018 Quality of Life Plan, and another five urban agriculture sites are located within one block of a green space or urban agriculture priority area. The North Lawndale QLP defines urban agriculture priority sites as "vacant lots within Zone 3 of the Land Use Framework where urban agriculture land uses should be prioritized" versus new green space priority areas that serve as a catchall for efforts that beautify the community and create new opportunities for accessing open space.[v]

URBAN AGRICULTURE SITES AND QLP PRIORITY AREAS



Source note: *Green space and urban agriculture priority areas were sourced from the North Lawndale Quality of Life Plan (QLP), and urban agriculture sites were drawn from the Chicago Urban Agriculture Mapping Project (CUAMP), which was also the data source used for the QLP. LifeSpring associates checked the CUAMP dataset against the urban agriculture sites reported by grantees and updated where necessary.*

While the program is reactivating existing spaces and creating opportunities for connection, just over half (59%) of surveyed residents reported more parks or community gardens than in 2022, suggesting room for improvement in spreading the news to the community and improving resident perceptions of community infrastructure.

HEALTH & WELLNESS

The majority of North Lawndale Fresh funding is distributed to projects that advance the QLP Health & Wellness Goal, with 75% of grantees working to "address health inequities in North Lawndale by educating residents and advocating to improve the overall health and wellness of the community"[vi] (Chicago Horticultural Society, YMEN, Chicago Grows Food, Common Thread, Gardeneers, North Lawndale Greening Committee, Food Access Project, Dion's Chicago Dream, and Good Food Catalyst). Grantees are advancing this goal through a combination of direct healthy food relief and nutritional

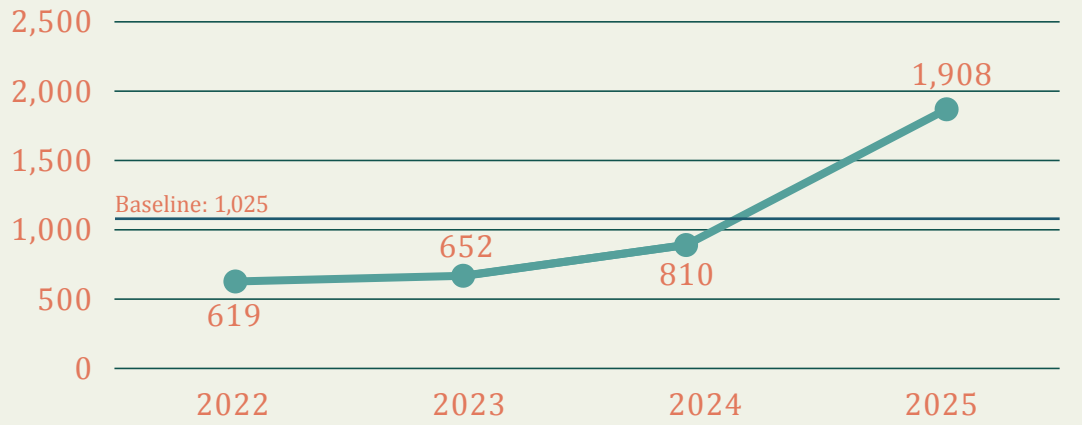
education. At least 67% of grantees offer a combination of nutrition, cooking, and gardening classes. On average, 653 residents engaged in nutrition education each year (including healthy cooking instruction) and 345 residents engaged in gardening education each year. As one grantee observed, the power of food and nutrition education lies in "Giving people the confidence and knowing that it's available shifts the perspective on it, shifts their ability to do it… and their comfort with it."

Due to discrepancies or variations in grantee reporting, a full picture of how programming impacted residents' behaviors annually is not immediately apparent. However, grantee reports described anecdotal changes in participants' food choices and health outcomes, ranging from decreases in blood pressure to reduced anxiety and depression. Of the grantees that provided educational programming, 50% were able to demonstrate changes in participants' behavior as a direct result of their programming through collection of survey data. One youth program that administered pre- and post-surveys found that an average of 79% of participants reported improved understanding of nutrition and healthy eating, and 76% of participants reported a change or intent to change their behaviors across the three years they received funding from North Lawndale Fresh. Participants of another gardening education program found that, on average, 91% of participants reported increased confidence in growing food at home, with 89% of participants reporting reduced spending on their grocery bill as a result.

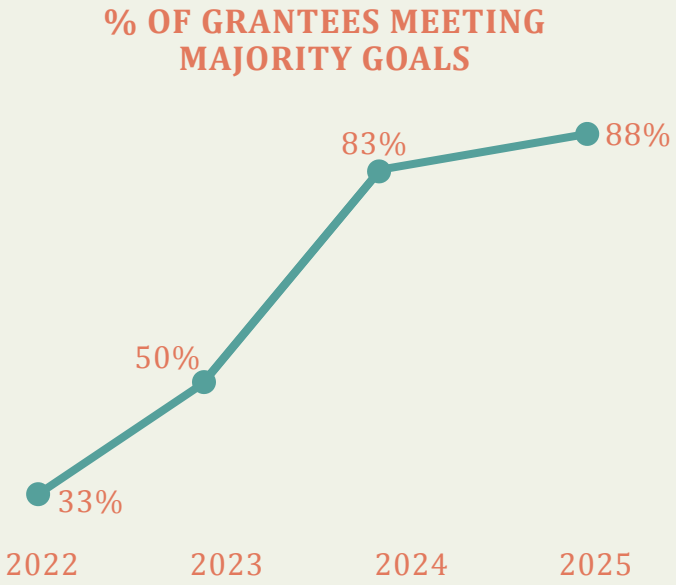
LifeSpring engaged 32 North Lawndale residents to understand how community members experience the neighborhood food environment and perceived changes in their ability to access food locally. Eighty-four percent of residents engaged reported knowing more about nutrition and healthy eating than four years ago, and 78% reported being healthier now than four years ago. Approximately half of respondents (53%) had participated in a nutrition or healthy eating program, and attributed their healthier food choices to what they learned.

While inconsistencies in data collection across funded projects impedes conclusive evidence of larger neighborhood level shifts in health outcomes the data shows an emerging connection between improved food access, nutrition knowledge, and healthier behaviors among program participants.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE ENGAGED IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING



HOW SUCCESSFUL WERE GRANTEES IN EXECUTING THEIR GOALS?



North Lawndale Fresh grantees were largely successful in meeting the goals outlined in their grant applications. Based on a document review of applications and reports, on average, 64% of grantees met the majority of their program goals annually. The percentage of grantees meeting their goals has increased every year from the initial launch of the program from 33% of organizations with majority goals met in 2022 to 88% of organizations meeting the majority of their goals in 2025. Organizations who failed to meet the majority of their goals often fell just shy of their proposed benchmarks. Across a range of programming, grantees shared stories of notable success in leveraging partnerships, marketing, and community participation.

LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS

Frequently cited as a success was the idea that funded programming resulted in new or strengthened relationships among grantees and other partner organizations, with 73% of grantees commenting on this aspect of their work. Often, grantees are partnering with similar community-based organizations directly to carry out programming; in some cases, these partnerships have allowed grantees to significantly expand the scope of their work. Grantees also discussed cross-sectoral partnerships that had enabled them to improve or expand their programming; for example, grantees mentioned working with health-care organizations, academic institutions, for-profit businesses, and city agencies on various aspects of their funded projects. These entities serve as referring agencies, data and research partners, or food suppliers among others. One grantee pointed to how funding from North Lawndale Fresh served as a catalyst for building out a network of organizations in the area: ***"This initial program funded by North Lawndale Fresh enabled us to really start building those relationships. And now because of that, we're able to have even more impact on the ground and with more partners."*** By leveraging new and existing partnerships in carrying out their work, grantees are indirectly boosting their own visibility in addition to increasing their capacity to serve residents of North Lawndale.

MARKETING

A smaller proportion (27%) of grantees spoke to successes in relation to marketing their programs or services. One organization discussed how they have successfully marketed their social enterprise by catering events when they convene stakeholders in the North Lawndale neighborhood. ***"I think that's really strengthened our partnerships, because folks don't just recognize us as a provider of services to individuals who are homeless in the community. But they see that we've also got this, you know, business enterprise that they can lean on, and they can hire for their own events."*** Another grantee discussed their strategy of being proactive in recruitment efforts prior to the launch of their program, which has put them ahead of similar efforts in neighboring areas that faced delays in operations for lack of immediate interest.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

More than half of grantees interviewed (55%) commented on the high level of participation in funded programs, with several suggesting that the demand outweighed their ability to provide services. One organization working with youth described how participation grew throughout the course of the programming: ***"They came and they participated and they were consistent... we actually ended up with more [than expected], because some people just started to come because their friends were coming."*** Others commented on participants' consistency despite significant barriers. One grantee working with unhoused populations commented, ***"Individuals who've experienced, you know, chronic persistent trauma, have comorbidities of mental health and substance use disorder... to commit through an 8-week training program is pretty fantastic."***

HOW DID GRANTEES OVERCOME CHALLENGES FACED IN PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION?

The successes outlined above did not come without significant obstacles. Major challenges reported by grantees included difficulty navigating bureaucracy, limited capacity, concerns over sustainability and difficulty in measuring impact.

NAVIGATING BUREAUCRACY

Of the grantees that participated in interviews, 64% reported challenges related to navigating bureaucracy, and 45% specifically pointed to issues arising from changes in the federal policy landscape. Grantees carrying out projects involving capital improvement were significantly delayed in part due to requirements and processes at the local level. These grantees have continued to move forward with their projects, but have lost time and funds in the process that were not budgeted for. Two grantees carrying out agricultural programming reported that the neighborhood's elected representation was not supportive of converting vacant lots to agricultural use, but some of the work these organizations have done in the neighborhood seem to be changing the alderwoman's perspective. One of these grantees reported that the alderwoman attended an event in support of a new garden, speaking in support of the project. ***"There was definitely a process I think she went through of seeing the value added, not only in just reclaiming space, but building community."*** One grantee also discussed their program's inability to collect survey data for their youth program due to challenges navigating Chicago Public School's Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. Where possible, they have tried running programming through other youth-based community centers and organizations that do not require the same approvals, but it remains a challenge to collect data while working within the public school system.

Under the current federal administration, grantees reported having to divert resources from certain programs to address more immediate needs resulting from SNAP cuts and rising grocery prices; having federal grants abruptly terminated due to crackdowns on use of equity-related language; being forced to terminate dozens of AmeriCorps service members due to cuts to that program; seeing reduced community participation as a result of increased ICE presence; and rising barriers to food entrepreneurs facing increased costs related to tariffs. These challenges in particular have had a lasting impact on grantees' capacity, and most have not been able to fully recover. One grantee reporting a more than 50% reduction in the amount of food they were able to produce due to a loss in both federal funding and AmeriCorps support. ***"Now it's all hands on deck. How do we overcome this? I don't know, 'cause we're still in it."***

LIMITED CAPACITY

As discussed in the section above, many grantees reported lacking adequate resources and capacity to meet the increasing demand for their programming. One grantee, referring to their rapidly expanding program, said, ***"At this point, it's about a million dollar program, and that is just scratching the surface."*** A majority of the grantees interviewed (73%) discussed challenges related to adequate funding, ability to hire staff or maintain a volunteer base, or access the physical infrastructure necessary to support their work. Smaller organizations in particular lack sufficient staff to maintain smooth operations: ***"If I get enough funding to hire a CPA or hire someone from the community that is experienced at doing the books and taxes, I will be fine with it. But right now I'm a grower... that takes most of my day, and I do administration. It would help if I had someone that I could pay to do those things, and that would free up some of my time."*** One grantee pointed to need for building capacity in terms of both personnel and infrastructure simultaneously as they attempt to expand and meet the current level of need in North Lawndale. ***"It would be a combination of expanding both [staff and infrastructure] at the same time... We would only be able to ramp up to a point given our capacity in terms of physical space."*** Grantees' greatest counter to these limitations has been through partnerships and pooling resources. Projects involving coordinated efforts by multiple organizations has allowed staff from different sites to step in where needed. Even organizations not formally working together on the same programming have found ways to coordinate longer-term approaches to similar goals. For example, one grantee working in the Food is Medicine space discussed regular calls with organizations doing similar work, to share expertise and strategize about future integration of 1115 waivers. However, without access to additional funding and personnel, many remain concerned about their ability to meet the needs of North Lawndale residents.

SUSTAINABILITY

Just under half of the grantees interviewed (45%) brought up concerns about the sustainability of their programming. As one grantee put it, ***"Each year, essentially, it's like we're building from scratch."*** Particularly given increasingly unpredictable federal funding streams, grantees have been forced to adjust their fundraising efforts: ***"I'm pounding the pavement to bring on philanthropic resources so that we can have a year two and beyond, because I don't want to forge partnerships and be serving the community and be on the ground, and then have to [terminate the program]."*** Several grantees discussed strategies their organizations are undertaking to diversify funding streams and stretch resources. Like the grantee above, many are spending more time pursuing private funding, including individual donor engagement and corporate partnerships. One grantee mentioned a small fee-for-service on certain programming, which would be negligible at the individual level but provide some funding at scale to put back into other programs. Others are exploring the potential to sell value-added products, but expressed hesitation to do so: ***"Supplying people with free food and selling some food to the same people... You know, that's a difficult choice, but it's worth consideration."***

There is an underlying concern about what would happen if North Lawndale Fresh (or other major funders) were to abruptly pull out of the area. Though grantees remain committed to providing services with whatever resources are available, one grantee pointed to the need for transparency and intentional strategy on the part of funders, stating that ***"We have to make sure that if we're being weaned off, that it's done in a way that doesn't hurt any of the organizations, or hurt any of the growth that we're trying to make."***

IMPACT MEASUREMENT

Relatedly, while not explicitly raised as a challenge to carrying out funded programs, several grantees (25%) also expressed an aspiration to better capture their impact through enhanced data collection and management practices. Grantees hope to make changes to current data practices (e.g., manually entering data into Excel versus more integrated systems of data management) as well as desires to capture new kinds of information, whether that be collecting more qualitative data or tracking quantitative data more consistently to gauge long-term impacts. ***"It appears that we're helping folks establish that foundation of skills that are needed for sustainable employment in the workplace in general. But [I would like] to kind of look at those numbers over a 5 to 10 year period."*** For grantees with limited capacity, data collection and management is, by necessity, a lower priority to carrying out direct services to residents. However, greater support in this area could also work to address several other challenges, including better communicating the impact of programming to secure funding.

WHERE CAN THE FUND'S APPROACH IN THE COMMUNITY BE IMPROVED?

North Lawndale Fresh's collaborative approach to funding, and its emphasis on trust and relationship building are viewed as strengths both internally among the funders and externally among the grantees. Funders described trusting relationships and network building as central to their approach, with one noting that their work is grounded in a ***"human-centered approach"*** that combines trusting relationships and network building with data and strategy. Grantees similarly emphasized that this approach extends beyond the provision of financial resources, with 67% highlighting the value of being heard and trusted by the NLF funders. As one grantee noted, the funding team ***"really listens to the awardees as to what's needed and trusts... that the awardees know what they're talking about."*** This human-centered approach is reflected in the nimbleness of NLF funding during times of crisis and their ability to accommodate grantees who encounter unforeseen program challenges rather than revoking funding. Grantees also expressed deep gratitude that the funders trust in their ability to carry out the work without instituting laborious reporting requirements. Half the grantees (50%) specifically described the reporting process positively, highlighting its manageability and minimal administrative burden.

North Lawndale Fresh's collaborative approach extends beyond organizations directly impacted by funds. The fund strives to integrate broader community perspective into the funding process by appointing a community stakeholder to participate in the reviewing and scoring of applications, site visits, and funding decisions. The community stakeholder who supported this process credited North Lawndale Fresh for creating a more inclusive grant review process than other funding processes they'd experienced. Conversations with grantees and the community stakeholder revealed several key areas where North Lawndale Fresh can strengthen its grant process to build greater trust and strengthen its approach in the community.

EXPAND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

When asked if there is anything the fund can do to improve its approach in the community or source more community reviewers, the current community stakeholder identified that it would be beneficial to have at least one reviewer with lived experience of food insecurity and that there is potential to source more candidates through the existing grantee network. The community reviewer's recommendation aligns with

grantee calls for increased community participation as well. Multiple grantees echoed the sentiment that if the funders were more aware of the services that residents considered to be most vital, that certain programs would have been more likely to receive continued investment. Grantees suggest that there is opportunity to broaden community input beyond the formal grant review process. Suggestions included engaging North Lawndale residents directly through town halls or other community conversations to better understand whether residents are experiencing change because of the investment and which programs and services are most valued.

SUPPORT GRANTEE CONNECTIONS

While some grantees believe that relationship building rests solely on the shoulders of the granted organizations, at least 42% of grantees expressed a desire for NLF to play a more intentional role in facilitating connections among organizations.

"Our greatest need beyond funding is opportunities to convene with other North Lawndale Fresh grantees. Regular convenings create valuable opportunities to share lessons learned, identify partnership opportunities, coordinate programming, and better understand gaps in services across the neighborhood. We would also welcome opportunities to connect with healthcare partners, food system organizations, and other funders that can help strengthen and sustain this work over the long term."

Grantees noted that funders could help organizations identify complementary work, make introductions, and create opportunities to learn from one another. One way funders might organically facilitate grantee connections is through hosting an annual luncheon. An annual gathering of new and returning grantees can provide space for organizations to share milestones and lessons learned. It could also double as a space for other funders and community members to learn about the work happening in North Lawndale and opportunities to get involved.

Additionally, funders can leverage existing networks to connect grantees with supportive services. Organizations like Compass Pro Bono could assist grantees with back office work, freeing up staff time to focus on programming. Referrals to those with specialized expertise, including reliable contractors or architect services for grantees pursuing capital improvement projects or academic and data partners for grantees focusing on nutrition could reduce some strain on organizations. Some also raised the potential for the funding team to help coordinate development opportunities for grantees: ***"maybe if you also... have a seminar on grant writing... because some people can have some amazing ideas, but just don't know how to get them to where you can understand them."***

Overall, more intentional facilitation among grantees, and connections to outside organizations and resources that can support their missions, would provide much needed help with building capacity.

IMPROVED COMMUNICATION

While funders expressed confidence in the human-centered approach to funding and the group's ability to identify strong candidates, the current process for notifying applicants of their award status at times creates fissures with community organizations the fund is working to build trust with. Twenty-five percent of grantees raised concerns about communication regarding declined applications. Some grantees reported that the reasons for funding decisions were unclear, while another learned that their application had been declined only after checking the grant portal.

"I also didn't get any notifications this past year when our application was declined. I just happened to check the portal, and it said declined, and so I reached out to see if they had any feedback, which is when they did give me, like, the rubric. And that doesn't feel great, you know, you spend a lot of time and energy."

Although technological errors or staff turnover may sometimes explain gaps in communication, this grantee's experience is also indicative of a process restraint. North Lawndale Fresh does not automatically provide feedback or decline justification to applicants—even for applicants who were previously awarded grant funds. Any declined applicant who desires feedback regarding their application must initiate contact with North Lawndale Fresh to request feedback. Standard decline letters that require specific requests for feedback are common among larger foundations inundated with applicants. As a hyperlocal funder granting an average of six awards per year, North Lawndale Fresh is in a position to better uphold its human-centered funding approach by providing return applicants with direct explanations of decline decisions in the decline letter and offering to discuss the decision in more detail over a phone call if desired. This minor adjustment can go a long way in demonstrating respect for the relationships built with previous grantees and provide an opportunity for them to understand how they can adjust their approach for a more successful application in the future.

In addition to greater transparency around the decline process, grantees would also like NLF funders to be forthcoming about their long-term plans for the fund overall.

"I think what would be most helpful moving forward would be if and when they decide to stop funding, or to wind down funding, or to fund in a different neighborhood, to really meet with us, and to let us know what those intentions are."

By understanding the long-term plan for the funders investment in the community or timeline for transitioning out, grantees hope that they will have adequate time to prepare for possible changes in funding that might impact the sustainability of their work.

MULTI-YEAR FUNDING

Sustainability was highlighted as an ongoing priority for many grantees, and organizations see a link between multi-year grants and increased sustainability potential. Just over half of the grantees interviewed explicitly raised longer term funding as something they would like to see the fund offer should it continue into the future. When asked how the North Lawndale Fresh community could support them in overcoming their challenges, one grantee said, "multi-year contracts, multi-year funding cycles. So we're not, you know, constantly in this existential risk every year." Notably, most of the grantees that did not raise extended funding as a potential improvement were those that had consistently received funding from the grant program. Four of the five grantees that participated in an interview but did not propose multi-year funding had been awarded consecutive years of grant funding from North Lawndale Fresh, and may not have felt the same immediate impacts of the one-year cycle as those that had not.

RE-FOCUS THE GEOGRAPHIC IMPACT CRITERIA

Projects receiving NLF funding are expected to primarily service North Lawndale residents; however, grantee organizations do not submit proof of residency for participation in their programming. This means that funder decisions to deny applicants are partially biased by default assumptions of which programs serve enough residents to meet their unstated threshold criteria. Programs servicing highly vulnerable and/or protected populations, such as people experiencing homelessness or medical patients,

appear to be held to a higher burden of proof than other programs, even though they experience greater difficulty in accurately tracking the percentage of residents reached. As a result, the only economic advancement program who didn't experience project delays and successfully spurred growth in the community, was not accepted as a return applicant. A person experiencing homelessness does not have a zip code to prove residency; however, their ability to regularly participate in programming and complete certification in the North Lawndale neighborhood could be a proxy measure for acknowledging their status as a community member. NLF Funders should redefine the geographic impact criteria to clarify a focus on supporting projects operating in the North Lawndale community rather than attempting to disqualify organizations whose programs might have a greater reach. This would reduce inequities within the funding process, while also acknowledging that broader program reach is a strength and not a weakness.

CLARIFY INTERNAL PRIORITIES & APPROVAL CRITERIA

Improving food equity and equitable health outcomes depends on combined efforts to improve food education, health education, food availability, food accessibility, and agency within the food system. Many of the NLF funded programs increased the availability of food (i.e. increased food production, food rescue, and meals served) but only 25% of programs actively reduced food accessibility barriers by increasing people's proximity to food without the requirement of additional labor (Dion's Chicago Dream, Chicago Horticultural Society, Food Access Project). In a community where 31.3% of households do not have access to a personal vehicle,[vii] providing direct access to healthy food without requiring additional time investments by self-growing or traveling to community meals can allow for increased reach to community members with more advanced transportation barriers, such as the elderly, disabled, or immunocompromised. While funders may be cautious about how much funding is allocated to food relief, caps on food relief efforts should account for the unique benefits of programs that are increasing food accessibility as well as food availability.

Funders should determine and document whether direct food relief efforts are expected to be combined with additional goals, and if there are unique expectations for partnership efforts. There are currently inconsistencies in how return applicants are evaluated, indicating a need for more clearly defined acceptance criteria. An organization's program idea is currently evaluated across five possible criteria without clear language around how many of those criteria must be met and if expansion of food access is a minimum requirement for all programs. Additionally, some organizations who received an initial award were denied for factors that existed in their initial application. This raises the question of whether return applicants are held to a different standard in how many or which types of criteria they are expected to meet. For example, while A Safe Haven Foundation's Culinary Arts Training Program was not believed to have enough alignment with the funder's goals of expanding healthy food access, Dion's Chicago Dream North Lawndale Food Alliance provided direct food relief but was not regranted because funders did not see a clear enough distinction between the impact of their work and that of other granted partners. It is not clear why these concerns didn't prohibit the initial grant awards nor why they weren't defined as an expectation in the grant criteria during the subsequent application rounds.

Overall, these recommendations point to opportunities for North Lawndale Fresh to deepen the relational and collaborative approach that both grantee organizations and the funders already value. This includes creating more intentional opportunities for community members to inform the Fund's priorities and decisions, using the Fund's position to strengthen connections among grantees and community partners, providing greater clarity and communication throughout the grantmaking process, and connecting organizations to resources and relationships that can support longer-term funding sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

IMMEDIATE ACTION (MONTHS 1-4)

1. REFINE SELECTION CRITERIA

1A. Redefine the geographic criteria from residency-based exclusion to community presence to reduce possible inequities in the funding process and better reflect the realities of programs serving highly vulnerable populations. Reframing the standard around whether a project is operating in and for the North Lawndale community creates spaces to support transformative programs even if they have a broader participant reach.

1B. Document and communicate the refined geographic impact criteria so that applicants fully understand how their programs will be evaluated before they apply.

1C. Refine program idea criteria guidelines regarding how many criteria a program idea must meet to be eligible for an award, whether any of the program criteria are minimum requirements, if there are different expectations for initial awards vs. returning applicants, and if there are different expectations for funding partnerships.

1D. Determine if there are caps on the percentage of funds allocated to food distribution, food business activity, nutrition education, or growing, to better communicate which types of activities are being prioritized within the funding cycle during the call for applications. Consider including a distinction between funding caps for programs that increase food availability vs. food accessibility when determining funding allocations for direct food relief programs.

2. DEEPEN COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE GRANT PROCESS

2A. Expand the community reviewer pool to include residents with lived experience of food insecurity to sharpen the fund's ability to prioritize the programs most valued by the people it serves. North Lawndale Fresh's existing grantee network is a natural pipeline for identifying and recruiting additional community reviewers.

2B. Create structured opportunities for resident engagement beyond the formal review process to ensure the fund stays accountable to community need over time and not just during application season. Grantees identified town halls and community conversations as mechanisms to better understand whether residents are experiencing meaningful change as a result of the investment.

SHORT-TERM GOALS (MONTHS 5-9)

3. STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION AROUND FUNDING DECISIONS

3A. Proactively provide feedback to return applicants to better uphold the fund's human-centered approach. Decline letters sent to organizations that have previously received North Lawndale Fresh Funding should include a clear explanation of what impacted the decision and offer to discuss further by phone.

3B. Communicate proactively about the fund's long-term direction to give grantees the runway needed to plan for either more ambitious activities or alternative funding structures. Sharing intentions around anticipated shifts in funding priorities or timeline for transitioning out of the community with advanced notice can better position grantees to adapt to upcoming changes.

4. EXPLORE MULTI-YEAR GRANTS

4A. Come to a decision about the funds ability to offer multi-year grant awards for organizations with demonstrated track records so that grantees can make longer-term investment decision and deepen programming. This approach would formalize the funds existing practice of supporting organizations across multiple grant cycles, but allow organizations to have greater certainty in planning around the investment dollars.

LONG-TERM GOALS (MONTHS 10+)

5. FACILITATE KNOWLEDGE AND RESOURCE SHARING

5A. Host an annual convening to create dedicated space for new and returning organizations to connect, share milestones, lessons learned, and identify partnership opportunities across the neighborhood. An annual gathering can also serve as a venue for other funders and community members to learn about the work happening in North Lawndale.

5B. Leverage funder networks to connect grantees to capacity-building resources and reduce some of the organizational strain that limits program sustainability. Organizations like Compass Pro Bono might be able to assist grantees with completing assessments and developing solutions to organizational strategy challenges.

5C. Support grantees in developing more robust data management plans as part of the application process. Grantees have varied experience and capacity to track and report on their impact. While nearly all of the grantees track program data, individual data points are shared in ways that make it difficult to aggregate and analyze impact at the collective level. Funders can assist organizations in identifying metrics relevant to the goals of North Lawndale Fresh and, support the development of data collection and management plans within grantees' existing capacity without creating undue burden. For example, grantees can come to an agreement on the key metrics to be reported for each sector of food system work, identify shared questions for incorporation into participant surveys, and report outcome metrics as total numbers rather than percentages.

5D. Separate baseline and target metrics for annual reports. End of year reports currently request baseline and target data in the same column, increasing the likelihood of an oversight in providing both metrics. Should funders move forward with standardizing a set of relevant metrics, those should also be included in the 'Evaluation Indicator/Metric' table.

APPENDIX

CITATIONS

[i] Chicago Tribune. 1985. “Lawndale's LOTS Eerily Empty, Haunted by Economy That Died,” November 17, 1985. *https://www.chicagotribune.com/1985/11/17/lawndales-lots-eerily-empty-haunted-by-economy-that-died/*

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[iii] Gibson, Tammy. 2022. “MLK’s Legacy in North Lawndale, Chicago,” January 17, 2022. *https://chicagodefender.com/mlks-legacy-in-north-lawndale-chicago/*

[iv] NLCCC, CMAP, LISC Chicago. 2018. “North Lawndale the next Chapter.” LISC.org. *https://cmap.illinois.gov/wp-content/uploads/NLCCC-Quality-of-Life-Plan_Final_11012018_web.pdf.*

[v] NLCCC, CMAP, LISC Chicago. “North Lawndale the next Chapter.” LISC.org. *https://cmap.illinois.gov/wp-content/uploads/NLCCC-Quality-of-Life-Plan_Final_11012018_web.pdf.*

[vi] NLCCC, CMAP, LISC Chicago. 2018. “North Lawndale the next Chapter.” LISC.org. *https://cmap.illinois.gov/wp-content/uploads/NLCCC-Quality-of-Life-Plan_Final_11012018_web.pdf.*

[vii] U.S. Census Bureau. "Household Size by Vehicles Available." American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B08201. Accessed on 27 Sep 2026.

GREEN SPACES ENHANCED OR EXPANDED

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
North Lawndale Greening Committee	N/A		4		
Faith in Place	0			1	
TOTAL	**0**	**0**	**4**	**1**	**0**

NEW COMMUNITY GARDENS

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
G2T Pipeline*	9	11	3		
TOTAL	**9**	**11**	**3**	**0**	**0**

*Includes metrics from all G2T partners, including YMEN, NLGC and Faith in Place (Stone Temple)

NEW HOME GARDENS

	TYPE	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
Chicago Grows Food	**Grow Kits**	550		520	730	
	Home Installation	0		7	9	22
TOTAL		**550**		**527**	**739**	**22**

POUNDS OF FOOD PRODUCED

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
G2T Pipeline*	2,655	6,100	8,100*	8,200	11,200
Gardeneers	1,082		1,995	3,858	2,531
TOTAL	**3,737**	**6,100**	**10,095**	**12,058**	**13,731**

*Includes metrics from all G2T partners, including YMEN, NLGC and Faith in Place (Stone Temple)

POUNDS OF FOOD RESCUED, DONATED, OR PURCHASED

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
G2T Pipeline*	N/A	174,923	246,215	408,183	320,288
TOTAL	**N/A**	**174,923**	**246,215**	**408,183**	**320,288**

*Includes metrics from all G2T partners, including YMEN, NLGC and Faith in Place (Stone Temple)

POUNDS OF FOOD DISTRIBUTED

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
Chicago Horticultural Society (Windy City Harvest)	47,000	141,656			221,568
G2T Pipeline*	2,655	181,023	254,315	416,383	331,488
Gardeneers	1,082		1,995	3,858	2,531
Food Access Project	83,000			67,000	
Dion's Chicago Dream	0				50,008
TOTAL	**133,737**	**322,679**	**256,310**	**487,241**	**605,595**

*Includes metrics from all G2T partners, including YMEN, NLGC and Faith in Place (Stone Temple)

FOOD BOXES DISTRIBUTED (SUBSET OF FOOD DISTRIBUTED)

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
Chicago Horticultural Society (Windy City Harvest)	5,886	17,707			27,696
G2T Pipeline*	4,000	10,479	2,491	3,209	
Food Access Project	2,035			1,400	
Dion's Chicago Dream	0				6,251
TOTAL	**11,921**	**28,186**	**2,491**	**4,609**	**33,947**

*Includes metrics from all G2T partners, including YMEN, NLGC and Faith in Place (Stone Temple)

HEALTHY MEALS OR SNACKS SERVED

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
G2T Pipeline*	9,000	43,090	48,200	36,851	61,011
Common Threads	0		1,283	1,345	
Good Food Catalyst	4,000				5,300
TOTAL	**13,000**	**43,090**	**49,483**	**38,196**	**66,311**

*Includes metrics from all G2T partners, including YMEN, NLGC and Faith in Place (Stone Temple)

RESIDENTS ENGAGED IN WORKFORCE TRAINING

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
A Safe Haven Foundation	10				12
Good Food Catalyst	50				53
TOTAL	**60**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**65**

RESIDENTS ENGAGED IN GARDENING EDUCATION PROGRAMMING

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
Gardeneers	300		243	564	336
North Lawndale Greening Commitee	N/A		15		
Chicago Grows Food	N/A				200
Faith in Place	0			21	
TOTAL	**300**	**0**	**258**	**585**	**536**

RESIDENTS ENGAGED IN NUTRITION EDUCATION PROGRAMMING

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
Chicago Horticultural Society (Windy City Harvest)	225	619			
Common Threads	0		229	225	172
North Lawndale Greening Commitee	225		165		
Good Food Catalyst	275				1,200
TOTAL	**725**	**619**	**394**	**225**	**1,372**

RESIDENTS ENGAGED IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING (NUTRITION & GARDENING)

	Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
Chicago Horticultural Society (Windy City Harvest)	225	619			
Common Threads	0		229	225	172
North Lawndale Greening Commitee	225		180		
Faith in Place	0			21	
Good Food Catalyst	275				1,200
Gardeneers	300		243	564	336
Chicago Grows Food	N/A				200
TOTAL	**1,025**	**619**	**652**	**810**	**1,908**

NUMBER OF POSITIONS SUPPORTED BY NLF FUNDING

		Baseline	2022	2023	2024	2025
G2T Pipeline*	*Full-time*	0	4	4	4	5
	Part-time	0	15	17	83*	149
A Safe Haven Foundation	*Full-time*	N/A				11
	Part-time	N/A				
TOTAL	***Full-time***	**8**	**4**	**4**	**4**	**16**
	Part-time	**0**	**15**	**17**	**83**	**149**

*Includes metrics from all G2T partners, including YMEN, NLGC and Faith in Place (Stone Temple)

Note: *Baseline metrics listed as N/A were unavailable either because data was not collected, or LifeSpring associates were unable to confirm metrics with grantee organizations. Baseline metrics listed as 0 were reported as such in grant reports, and indicate that the program did not advance those specific metrics in North Lawndale prior to receiving funding.*