

NE Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative Successes April 2007 - December 2008

Climate for policy and systems change through the procurement & consumption of local healthy foods in our community.

In Iowa the policy climate is changing at the state government regulatory level. Based on questions coming from the FFI, state level civil servants are becoming aware of the policy climate needed to support healthy food systems and are responding in kind (albeit slowly). The following story makes this point. In 2007, the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm (NIFF) Coalition, a work group of the NE Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative was distributing its Institutional Food Survey to collect baseline information about activities and attitudes towards local food purchasing as part of its FFI activities. During distribution of the survey, personnel from hospitals and nursing homes were reporting they would like to purchase local foods but said state policy prohibited those purchases. Several even reported that they had been written up by state health facility inspectors for making local food purchases and were told they needed to buy all their food from approved vendors.

When NIFF Coalition and FFI leaders learned of this, they contacted a NE Iowa FFI Coalition organizational partner, the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) for an explanation and written policy of approved vendors. From their contacts at IDPH, they learned that nobody could find language in the Iowa code that supported these enforcement claims and in fact, there is no state policy that requires inspection of fresh whole fruit and vegetable purchases. In a separate incident but at the same time, a representative from the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's (IDALS) Bureau of Agricultural Diversification and Market Development had been contacted by a farmer. This farmer had tried to sell produce to a health facility but was told by the institution that state policy prohibited it.

In the fall of 2007, members of the NIFF coalition attending a statewide Regional Food System Working Group meeting hosted by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture shared their story with the group. The IDALS representative who had been in contact with the farmer was in the audience, heard their concerns, and began to understand the breadth and depth of the issue. She followed up on her own by conducting an extensive search of Iowa code. When she could not find reference to such regulations, the IDALS representative identified and communicated with the agency she knew was most likely to address the issue: the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeal's Division of Health Facilities. The Health Facilities Division is the certification agency responsible for inspecting, licensing, and certifying various health care entities, as well as health care providers and suppliers operating in Iowa.

After months of negotiations, in March, 2008, the IDALS representative reported, "After six months of correspondence with the Department of Health Facilities we have a document that clarifies the purchasing of local fruits and vegetables. [T]he last draft issued left a feeling of skepticism about purchasing locally. [The Chief of the Division of Health Facilities] has revised the document and I feel this is fair and does not discriminate against local purchasing. I had asked her if this ruling would include hospital purchases as well. Additionally, I asked if she would make this available to all nursing homes and inspectors to eliminate the confusion that currently exists." (Note: It was the IDALS Bureau of Agricultural Diversification and Market Development which ultimately took responsibility to mail the statement out to 402 nursing

homes and hospitals across the state.) Below is text from the statement, titled "Purchase and Use of Fresh Produce in Nursing Facilities":

The [Division of Health Facilities] has recently received an inquiry regarding the purchase or use by nursing facilities of locally grown raw agricultural products, such as fresh apples, melons, sweet corn, etc. Although there is no specific rule or regulation that addresses the purchase or use of locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables, nursing facilities and other health care facilities should follow standard food safety procedures when working with these food items.

All practices related to the safe procurement, storage, preparation and service of any food in a health care facility would also apply to locally grown fruits and vegetables. When considering the purchase or acceptance of fresh produce from any source, the facility should inspect the food and reject or discard any showing evidence of fungal or insect infestation. Any items that have an altered appearance, odor, or texture should be examined and discarded as necessary. All fresh produce should be thoroughly washed before use. Bruised or damaged areas should be cut out before preparing the food. Any fruit or vegetable that has been cut or sliced prior to delivery should be rejected by the facility.

The following message from the Chief of the Health Facilities Division accompanied the document: "You can distribute the attached file as you deem appropriate. We think it might be best if you simply reference the Department's position, as reflected by the contents of the attached document, rather than try to describe or characterize it. That way, there will be no misunderstanding. This document would also apply to hospitals. We plan to publish this document in our Spring edition of Insight and will post it as a Hot Notice on the Department's website." As of April 22, 2008, the information had not yet been posted on the Health Facilities Division's website. When the IDALS representative was made aware of this, she sent an inquiry to the Health Facilities Division Chief regarding the timing and release of the clarification document, which generated the following response: "We have plans to reference this in the next issue of Insight, as well as providing the information on our website. Our Division Administrator will be making our [inspectors] aware via a periodic update in which he provides relevant information regarding current topics and issues."

One of the FFI co-conveners reported that a week after the clarification document was released to health care facilities, she attended an FFI county planning team meeting where hospital personnel were delighted to report they had received the letter and were now able to purchase local produce from local growers. The letter, dated April 3, 2008 and issued on IDALS letterhead, read (italics added):

Dear Nutritionist/Food Service Personnel

By purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables from farmers within your community, you not only offer your residents fresher fruits and vegetables; you also provide a boost to the local economy. The Center for Disease Control defines healthy communities in its Designing and Building Healthy Places page as "A community that is continuously creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources that enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing to their maximum potential."

You can feel good about the additional health benefits you provide to your residents when you purchase local foods, as these foods will generally be fresher and the fresher the products, the more nutrients they contain. Many of the varieties of fruits and vegetables offered through

local supermarkets and vending sources are selected for the ability to harvest and transport them, and neither for their flavor nor nutrient content.

We have been working with the Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA), Division of Health Facilities to obtain clarification regarding the ability of nursing homes and hospitals to purchase fruits and vegetables from local farmers. The following statement is from DIA “All practices related to the safe procurement, storage, preparation and service of any food in a health care facility would also apply to locally grown fruits and vegetables.”

The document, from the Division of Health Facilities is attached for your reference. Please post this document or keep a copy available for your procurement and food preparation personnel. I hope you will make every effort to support your local farmer and treat your residents to the goodness local foods offer.

If you need help locating local growers, you can utilize one of the many on-line directories such as that offered by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship or you may contact Tammy Stotts at tammy.stotts@idals.state.ia.us or by phone 515-281-7657. You may access our directory through our website at: <http://www.iowaagriculture.gov/agDiversification.asp>.

Critical elements that led to this change in the interpretation and enforcement of this "pseudo regulation" was an awareness of the issue and understanding of its detrimental impact at the local level; the presence of networks that provided FFI leaders access to champions who were skilled at navigating state bureaucracy; and the ear and sentiments of at least one government champion who had the knowledge, administrative support, fortitude, skills, and commitment to gain meaningful access to the appropriate agencies with the power to make changes.

Youth are actively engaged in FFI planning and decision making processes.

In Iowa, youth involvement in the NE Iowa FFI continues to expand, strengthen, and diversify. A mechanism that encourages youth engagement is the Youth work group within the Regional Leadership Team that is addressing FFI issues of interest to youth. Twelve youth, a school superintendent and a principal serve on this team, led by an ISU Extension Youth Development Specialist and a recently hired Youth Coordinator. In the process of involving youth in these and other FFI activities, adult FFI leaders have learned important lessons about ways to effectively engage youth. First, they have learned that youth are typically action oriented and do not have a high tolerance for the amount of processing adults do nor a high tolerance for the way in which some adults might try to use meetings to promote personal or organizational agendas. FFI leaders also learned that youth think adult led FFI meetings are boring. In response, the FFI Regional Leadership team has now made it possible for youth to convene on their own outside of the Regional Leadership meeting times so the youth can focus on activities and dialogue meaningful to them. Another challenge the Initiative has encountered is finding a time when both youth and adults can attend FFI meetings. Times that are convenient for adults aren't necessarily convenient for youth. When the Initiative asks youth to participate in daytime meetings, it cuts into their time at school. One solution to this dilemma is Internet technology. Youth are using Adobe Connect and teleconferencing to meet outside the Regional Leadership

Team meetings to communicate with each other. On Adobe Connect, they post meeting agendas, share documents, and vote online. Parents join in too; however, electronic communication is not without its own set of challenges. Adult FFI leaders know that not all youth team members have Internet access and are working to resolve the issue. Practical challenges aside, youth members of the FFI have much to report in terms of achievements. 1) The first relates to food assessments they have conducted in the schools. FFI youth have administered a survey about concession stand food offerings. From this survey, they learned that people in schools want healthier foods and want to start by limiting some of the more tempting options offered at concession stands. The youth presented these results at a Kellogg hosted youth conference in Arizona and are presenting results at FFI meetings in the region too. All of these activities are indicators of youth engagement. Another indicator of youth engagement is their achievement in terms of drafting a plan for the future. The next step youth are pursuing is the creation of school-based food and fitness youth teams, which shows FFI youth are not only engaged but are engaging others. Four new school-based food and fitness youth teams have been started in the last month in three of the four counties.

Schools are actively engaged in FFI planning and decision making process

The Initiative had decided that the participation of **schools is critical to the future of the project**. This is where the most vulnerable children and their families can be reached throughout the region, having the biggest impact on the health of children and their families. Schools were not an easy partner to engage. The Initiative therefore invested a whole host of resources in developing ways to effectively engage schools, including:

- Pulling together two to three people from each school in the region on May 14th, 2008 and using site visits with school wellness committees as key informant interviews that provided insights into the situation of schools as it relates to food and fitness.
- Participants agreed a second meeting was necessary and agreed to attend after the school year ended in June, but the flood intervened and the meeting was cancelled.
- Members of the Initiative's School Engagement Work Group, led by a curriculum coordinator/food service director, superintendent, and school principal were heartened by the results and agreed to do much of the legwork for ensuring that school administrators and superintendents felt compelled to attend the follow up meeting to be held in September, 2008.
- Superintendents from 16 of the 17 school districts in the region agreed **develop a regional school partnerships** focusing on schools creating environments where students, families and staff have access to local healthy foods and spaces and places for physical activity and play, everyday. Each school committed two staff members to attend five full day meetings and the NE Iowa FFI Regional Team committed resources to pay for substitutes to cover staff while they attended these planning meetings. The Regional School Planning work group has become a learning community. In January, the youth from the NE Iowa FFI will be sharing with them the results of their survey work around food concessions and school food options. In addition, the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition has begun to work with the School Regional Work Group to plan for a pilot Farm-To-School program in 2009.

Leadership of the NE Iowa FFI has evolved in terms of realizing the value of inclusivity and community engagement. This paragraph, excerpted from the last quarterly report, includes a specific story and clearly demonstrates an early “win” for the project

The NE Iowa FFI is also making progress in terms of **broadening understanding about community engagement** and why it is important to the project. The group has used the diversity training it received from Kellogg to expand its notion of diversity from one based on race and ethnicity to one that includes other characteristics, including gender, class, age, religion, and sexual orientation. The group engaged in this activity to bring it closer to effective community engagement. The FFI is attentive to ways of improving and measuring. Leaders have already articulated the need to bring those with less social, economic, and political power to the table to make decisions. At a Regional Leadership Team meeting, one leader said he wanted to see more Latino leaders at the table and that it is not enough to receive updates on what is happening in the Latino community. The Latino liaison had similar sentiments in the sense he feels overwhelmed that he should represent all of the voices from the Latino community in the region when there are so many varied and distinct voices that need to be heard. This discomfort with what "is" in this regard will likely provide impetus for the group to move closer to what it wants to be. On a related note, FFI leaders are better understanding one way to move in that direction is to advocate for those with less power, participation, and voice so they become empowered to get involved in their communities. Additional **evidence of advocacy** is apparent when the Initiative makes funding requests to support inclusion efforts such as language translation and engaging low resource families, communities, and youth and in the project.