



# Nourishing Neighborhoods

A Multi-City Approach to Confronting Childhood & Youth Food Insecurity

A report from  
Rite Aid Healthy Futures  
& Sankofa Consulting



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## Thank You!

The Nourishing Neighborhoods Report captures only a small portion of the incredible work of our Strengthening Cities grant partners.

Rite Aid Healthy Futures extends our sincerest gratitude to each and every organization mentioned in the following pages. Your efforts create stronger neighborhoods, ensuring children and families have access to one of the most important building blocks of good health: the food we enjoy every day. Though you might not hear it enough, the work you do matters. We remain in awe of your determination, commitment and courage. Thank you for all you do.

Healthy Futures would also like to sincerely thank Sankofa Consulting for generously sharing its expertise throughout the creation of this report. Your partnership has been invaluable, and we consider all of you an extension of our Healthy Futures family.

We look forward to our continued collaboration. Let's uplift our neighborhoods – together.

Keep Growing Detroit

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Share Food Program

## A Message from Our Executive Director



### People often ask me “Why does addressing food insecurity for children and youth matter so much?”

Rite Aid Healthy Futures has endeavored to answer this important question by working closely with community leaders, innovative organizations and resilient neighborhoods over the past two years through our Strengthening Cities initiative. It has been quite a motivating and high-stakes journey.

The full report provides much more depth and local examples but here are the most compelling answers.

**First and most succinctly, there is a direct line between nutritious food, good health and racial equity.** When communities – many served by our affiliated company, Rite Aid – face disproportionately higher rates of food insecurity, they face disproportionately higher rates of adverse medical conditions. Poor diets and food insecurity as a child leads to higher probability of chronic diseases as an adult, including hypertension, coronary heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease and much more. Food insecurity and health disparities have particularly devastating effects on Black and Brown neighbors and neighborhoods. Such compounded cruel realities harden one’s life course, decrease quality of life and, heartbreakingly, often lead to premature death. With 1 in 6 Americans facing food insecurity, its extraordinary implications require our action and compassion. Lives and futures are literally at stake. Right now.

**Second, we believe that nutritious food is the “everyday factor” that can improve health outcomes, with corresponding value to other vital social determinants of health.** For example, when kids aren’t hungry at school, their cognitive function and learning potential increases dramatically. Through neighborhood-based investments and partnerships, Rite Aid Healthy Futures has witnessed how nutritious food can serve as an incredible and accessible leverage point to impact many lives and futures, while fortifying local food systems. Again, the stakes are so high, every day, around the clock, for our children and families.

**Third, by listening and learning from organizations and residents when addressing food insecurity, we can provide much-needed agency to youth, plus dignity, empowerment and sovereignty to communities that is purposely missing too often for too many given the biased systems and structures in society.** Such agency and empowerment – with its multiplier effect – creates hope and opportunity for all involved that spans the seasons of years and lives.

### Healthy food matters at every age and stage of life.

It singularly and pervasively touches everyone all the time. And with 13 million children alone facing food insecurity daily, there are 13 million more reasons to act, boldly, now. But we must move with more purpose and urgency to eradicate hunger in America. We can’t wait any longer. It is a moral and social imperative.

But please answer that important “why food?” question too by reflecting on this report and sharing your own experiences and perspectives with us. We strive to learn and grow and care, every day.

We hope the story of our partners and neighborhoods inspires you as much as us.

Thanks for your caring interest and your own actions and compassion. We’re all in this together. Let’s author a new narrative and change conditions so healthy futures are truly attainable for all.

### Onward, Matt DeCamara

Executive Director  
Rite Aid Healthy Futures

# Overview

## Food has power.

People turn to it for energy, comfort and connection. A fully stocked refrigerator can fuel children through pivotal years of development and help them live longer, healthier lives as adults.

The power of food also becomes apparent when pantry shelves sit empty and when an absence of grocery stores forces families to replace fruits and vegetables with less nutritious processed foods.

**Lack of access to nutritious food inflicts a profound impact on communities,** impacting health outcomes while also shaping preferences and demand.

In these areas, where grocery stores offering healthy choices are scarce, residents often develop a diminished desire and palate for nutritious foods. Consequently, there's reduced demand for such items in local stores, perpetuating a vicious cycle of limited availability and low consumption of healthy options.

**This detrimental cycle not only affects individuals' health but also exacerbates socioeconomic disparities** and undermines the overall well-being of the community. Addressing lack of access to nutritious food is essential to break this cycle, fostering healthier communities, and promoting equitable access to nutritious foods for all.

**While good food leads to prosperity, food insecurity too often leads to poverty, rising disease rates and many additional health stressors.** A lack of healthy food even contributes to the ultimate measure of health – life expectancy – with structural racism sadly leading communities of color to bear a disproportionate burden.

But, fighting against that stark reality, hundreds of organizations across the country have dedicated themselves to creating more equitable food systems.

Over the past two years, **Rite Aid Healthy Futures has supported 28 of those organizations in six major U.S. cities through its Strengthening Cities grant program.** In that time, those organizations have addressed food insecurity in ways that respect the agency, dignity and inherent strengths in communities including Baltimore, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Fresno and Philadelphia.

The past two years have proven that when philanthropic funders listen to local organizations and then trust them with catalytic funding, those same urban farms, regional food banks and equity-oriented organizations create the innovative solutions that lead to well-stocked refrigerators and, ultimately, healthier futures for children, families and communities.



Intersection of Change

# The Roots of the Strengthening Cities Initiative

The devastating COVID-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning of 2020 led Rite Aid Healthy Futures to a clear inflection point. As a public charity committed to the health of its communities, Healthy Futures needed to conduct its grantmaking in a more intentional way, one that empowered its grantees and drove more equitable health outcomes at the neighborhood level.

One staggering data point, one that Healthy Futures found heartbreaking, propelled that mission. Too many people in Black and Brown neighborhoods were dying far too soon. In some places, residents lived an average of 20 years less than people just five miles across town.

While ZIP code and skin color could predict life expectancy, numerous interconnected and hyper-local factors contributed to those missing years. Those factors are known as the social determinants of health, and encompass all the conditions that influence a person’s overall health. They include access to safe housing, nutritious food, quality educational opportunities, appropriate health care and even the racism that people of color still face today.

With a long-held focus on children’s health and wellness – and with its connection to the Rite Aid retail pharmacy chain – Healthy Futures agreed that addressing these root causes provided the best opportunity to improve health outcomes. By ensuring kids and families had more access to the resources they needed most would help them live better and healthier lives – now and into the future.

Taking a closer look at key neighborhoods around Rite Aid stores, Healthy Futures compiled health profiles that provided a stronger understanding of community needs. Conversations with Rite Aid leaders and community advocates augmented the health profiles, further informing Healthy Futures and its emerging grantmaking priorities.

Repeatedly, Healthy Futures saw that food insecurity negatively contributed to the health disparities affecting Rite Aid communities. With few to no grocery stores and little to no access to affordable, fresh and healthy foods within many city neighborhoods, residents needed sustainable solutions that treated food as the medicine it is. National data reinforced those findings.

Those at highest risk include low-income families, single-parent households and households of color. Experts in the food-sovereignty field have described this as food apartheid, a system of segregation that divides people of color from an abundance of nutritious food available to others.

Coupled with the cascading effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and inadequate social support systems, food insecurity leads to a vicious cycle resulting in poorer health outcomes for children, families and communities.

## According to an alarming 2022 United States Department of Agriculture report:

→ **1 in 8 households (12.8%) experienced food insecurity, an estimated 44.2 million Americans.**

→ **Over 1 in 6 households with children (17.3%) were food insecure, a 40 percent increase from 2021.**

→ **Disproportionately high rates of food insecurity existed among Black (22.4%) and Hispanic (20.8%) households.**

# With health as the focus, Rite Aid Healthy Futures designed an initiative to accelerate local solutions for sustainable food systems.

Known as the Strengthening Cities signature initiative, the grant program launched in 2022 with a \$10 million, two-year commitment to support local organizations to widen food access, advance food sovereignty and improve health outcomes.

Now, with the first funding cycle complete, Healthy Futures and Sankofa Consulting have partnered to review its initial results, as well as to inform the next grant investments addressing food insecurity.

Additionally, the following report will focus on how Healthy Futures constructed the Strengthening Cities grant program and highlight innovations and promising practices that have emerged over the past two years. It will share lessons learned from locally driven work, and highlight how the relationship between funders and partners can collectively advance food security initiatives.

Finally, this report will focus on four major areas of progress demonstrated by Healthy Futures partners and will explore how these organizations used funding to sustain and accelerate their work.

The review was based upon impact reports filed by funded organizations, conversations with grantees, staff learnings from visits to partner locations and an in-person Strengthening Cities Summit held in September 2023.

## What is Food Apartheid?

A term developed by New York farmer Karen Washington, food apartheid forgoes natural terms such as “food desert” to account for the systemic and human-created injustices that segregate communities from healthy food available to others.

This vantage point applies a critical lens to entire food systems and further examines how racism, socio-economic disparities and additional inequities deny Black, Indigenous and People of Color from nutritious food.

For more information about food apartheid, visit [www.climatejusticecenter.org/newsletter/food-apartheid-explained](http://www.climatejusticecenter.org/newsletter/food-apartheid-explained)

# Strengthening Cities Portofolio Overview

Healthy Futures took a comprehensive approach to its first round of Strengthening Cities grant funding by investing in **organizations that expand equitable food access and create more nourishing, just food systems.**

As part of the initial \$10 million Strengthening Cities investment, Healthy Futures provided two years of funding to 28 change-making organizations in six cities with a significant Rite Aid presence:

- **Baltimore, Maryland**
- **Buffalo, New York**
- **Cleveland, Ohio**
- **Detroit, Michigan**
- **Fresno, California**
- **Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

Data showed that each city encountered a lack of accessible grocery stores, life expectancy gaps from neighborhood to neighborhood, and a history of race, health and socio-economic disparities that negatively affected health outcomes.

**At the same time, dynamic urban farming projects, multi-generational community gardening programs, food-rescue programs, agricultural training initiatives focused on youth and numerous other projects offered immense opportunities to build truly just food systems that benefited everyone in these six cities.**

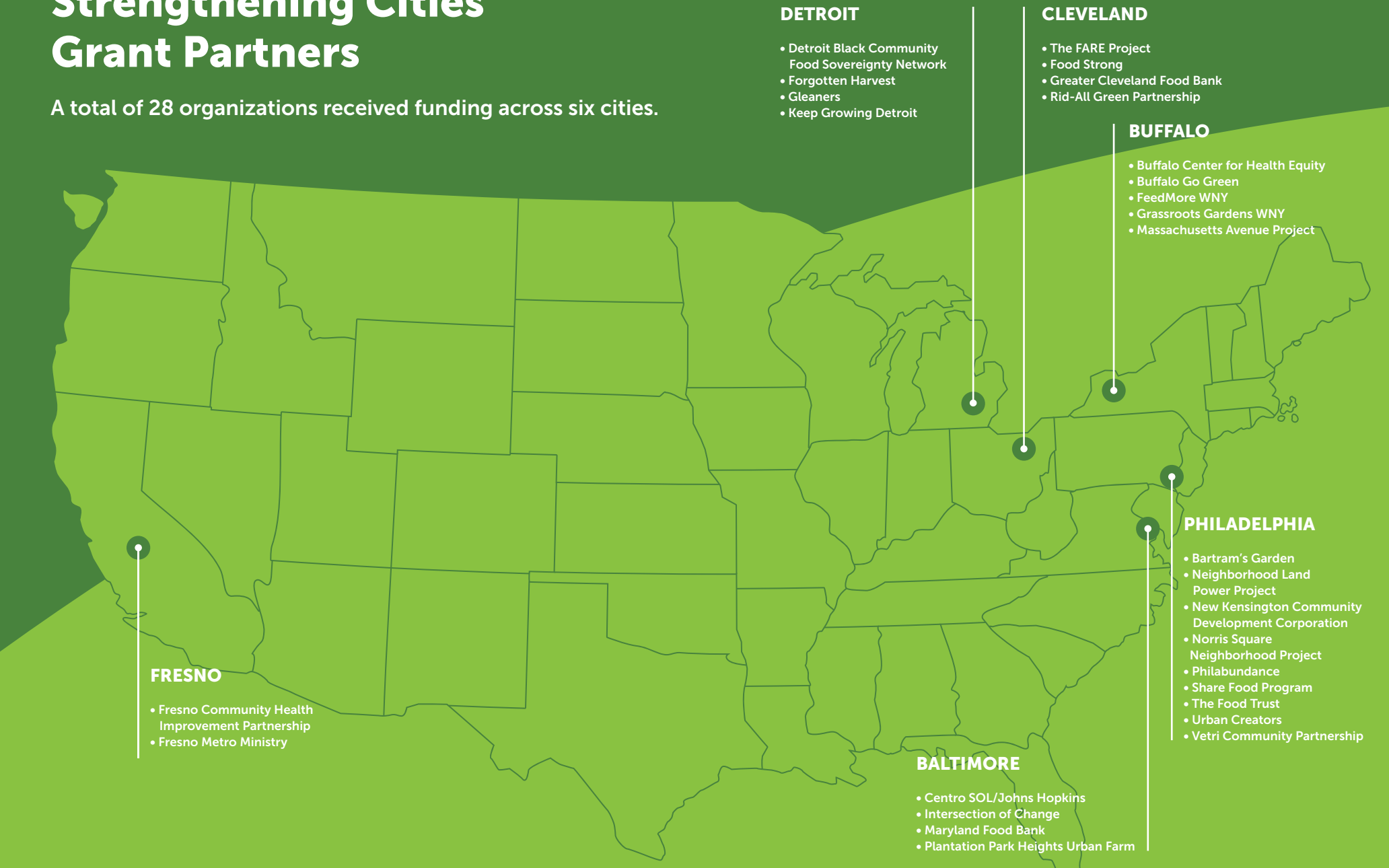
Because local factors heavily impact health disparities, Healthy Futures intentionally funded community organizations already demonstrating success while working in and for targeted, high-opportunity neighborhoods. Relatedly, Healthy Futures acknowledged that its partners were experts in their communities and provided funding for grantees to build capacity and accelerate progress on their terms.

The Strengthening Cities grants supported both grassroots organizations – many of them Black and Brown led – and regional food banks in tandem. Food banks can move significant amounts of nutritious food into communities, respond to crisis situations and influence policy, while grassroots organizations have the local relationships and credibility essential for authentic community engagement, education and advocacy.

Sharing a deep commitment to expanding food access and improving community health, both sets of funded organizations can have incredible impact in building a just food system when working together.

# Strengthening Cities Grant Partners

A total of 28 organizations received funding across six cities.



# Innovations & Promising Practices

The 28 organizations in the Strengthening Cities portfolio demonstrate a deep commitment to addressing food insecurity despite facing disinvestment and a changing landscape of federal support. Partners focus on youth and families as agents of community change and bring innovative techniques to their work.

Four major thematic categories emerged as particularly exciting areas of innovation encountered during the first two years of the Strengthening Cities program.

Fostering a Holistic Relationship with Food

Creating an Adaptable and Place-Based Food Supply

Expanding Reach and Resilience through Strategic Partnerships

Cultivating the Next Generation of Food System Leaders

While only a sample, the following examples illustrate the collective efforts of the entire Strengthening Cities portfolio.



Buffalo Center for Healthy Equity

## Highlighted Accomplishments

Partners across the Strengthening Portfolios have made tremendous impacts throughout their communities. Here, we highlight only a few of the tangible accomplishments that partners have reported over the past two years.



**CENTRO SOL**



Centro Sol's obesity-prevention program has improved Body Mass Index (BMI) and other measures of cardiovascular risk among Latino children ages 5-12 years old in Baltimore.



**FRESNO METRO MINISTRIES**



Fresno Metro Ministries rescued and redistributed more than 1 million pounds of healthy food during the first nine months of its grant for the direct benefit of underserved community members.



**KEEP GROWING DETROIT**



Keep Growing Detroit engaged more than 20,000 children and youth in more than 1,600 gardens across Detroit.



**MARYLAND FOOD BANK**



During a six-month period in 2022, Maryland Food Bank partnered with and supported distribution of food to 55 schools in Baltimore City and supplied more than 11,000 Households with a diverse mix of nutritious, staple groceries.



**PLANTATION PARK HEIGHTS**



Plantation Park Heights grows 300,000 pounds of food to ensure more sustainable access to healthy food for children and families in the Park Heights neighborhood.

## Fostering a Holistic Relationship with Food

Healthy Futures' partners teach youth how to grow food and, by extension, forge deeper connections to the fruits and vegetables that fuel their own growth.

Beyond imparting the hard skills of agriculture, Strengthening Cities grantees pass on generational wisdom about crops, the land that nourishes them, and ancestral and cultural foodways.

**By empowering youth to grow ingredients themselves, partners inspire the next generation to better understand the origins of their food, grow their sense of pride and identity, and reach back in time to rediscover time-honored practices that unlock the healing power of food.**



### Detroit Youth Receive Hands-On Lessons about Food Sovereignty

Malik Yakini, executive director at the Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network (DBCFSN), emphasizes understanding one's relationship to the earth, recognizing the sacredness of soil and making intentional decisions about which foods to grow and how. That mindset is part of an approach that blends urban agriculture with youth education to achieve food sovereignty for Black residents in Detroit. And it comes to life through the DBCFSN's Food Warriors Program, which engages over 100 students annually through hands-on learning about food justice and holistic wellbeing from an African worldview.

Food Warriors educates students across all aspects of the food system – ensuring they have a deep understanding and more personal connection to food. In addition to garden education, youth participate in health and nutrition education classes, all while absorbing community-centered wisdom.

Tying together food sovereignty and cultural values, the Food Warriors curriculum also integrates the Nguzo Saba, or Seven Principles, a set of traditional African values that include unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith.



### NSNP Brings Puerto Rican Farming Practices to Philadelphia

Norris Square Neighborhood Project (NSNP) is a cultural hub committed to uniting and inspiring the surrounding Kensington community through programs aimed at the cultivation of young leaders, the preservation of Puerto Rican cultural heritage, and the stewardship of community land and environmental practices. One of NSNP's youth programs, Raíces de Cambio (Roots of Change) improves access to culturally important agricultural practices. Through a paid apprenticeship, high school students are prepared for entry-level positions in horticulture or agriculture and are taught about Puerto Rican history and indigenous Taíno gardening practices.

Participating students learn about gardening, farming, food justice, the cultural impacts of urban green spaces, and how to run a weekly farmstand selling produce to their community. They also strengthen their cultural ties to Puerto Rico by growing five different crops common to the island and not normally found in Philadelphia's growing region. In 2022, NSNP after-school programming increased its enrollment of youth apprentices and introduced stipends, demonstrating the sticking power of this holistic and culturally driven approach to food education.



### Bartram's Garden Intertwines Food, History and Community

By connecting individuals and institutions to natural agricultural practices, safe and welcoming ecosystems, and culturally relevant foods, the Sankofa Community Farm at Bartram's Garden honors the history of its land in a way that fulfills the social, spiritual and health needs of community members.

That community-focused approach expands beyond the borders of the public park nestled along the Schuylkill River in Southwest Philadelphia. Through its partnership with Healthy Futures, Bartram's Garden installed 100 home gardens in the neighborhood around it, providing residents with their own space to grow, harvest and enjoy fresh ingredients in their meals.

Back on the farm, Bartram's Garden nurtures youths' intergenerational bonds with the land and African Diaspora foodways through an inclusive series of free public workshops, community meals, panel conversations and family-friendly events. This interweaving of food, farming and culture sparks insight about the origins of food while building pride and connectivity within the community.



## Creating an Adaptable & Place-Based Food Supply

Hunger and food insecurity manifest differently in every community, creating the need for hyper-local strategies tailored to individual contexts and conditions.

Over the past two years, Healthy Futures partners have excelled at crafting solutions that fit their respective communities, evident in community gardens, farmers markets, mobile markets and strategically located food pantries found just steps from people's homes.

**At the same time, Strengthening Cities grantees have built formal and informal coalitions of businesses, civic organizations, schools, places of worship and more behind a common goal – to grow not only food, but community connection, resiliency and pride, too.**



### Fresno Metro Ministry Creates Interconnected Food Network

In the agricultural hub of California, Fresno Metro Ministry connects the dots of the local food system from soil to stove to stomach.

The Yo'Ville Community Garden offers hundreds of eager youths to dive into the world of hands-on cultivation, fostering not only their green skills but also meaningful bonds with their neighbors and classmates. At Yo'Ville, it's not just about planting seeds; it's about nurturing a sense of belonging and empowerment within the Southwest Fresno community, developing connections, fostering resilience, and sowing the seeds of a brighter future for all.

The six-week Cooking Matters course is another innovative program by Fresno Metro Ministry. Designed to equip students with essential skills, this course goes beyond the kitchen to educate on smart shopping, culinary preparation, and the enjoyment of wholesome, locally sourced foods. It dives into the heart of our community's food culture, empowering youth to make healthier choices and embrace the abundance of fresh produce.

The Strengthening Cities grant also enabled Fresno Metro Ministry to expand its Food to Share food recovery and distribution program. Working with local retailers, schools, warehouses, and gleaners, to rescue surplus food that would otherwise go to waste. This bounty is then swiftly distributed to local pantries and churches, serving as vital nourishment for individuals and families across the community. Reducing food waste while ensuring that no one in our neighborhood goes hungry.

By testing these kinds of approaches in targeted ways, Fresno Metro Ministry aims to create high-performing models that can drive systemic change for tens of thousands of San Joaquin Valley families over the next decade.



### Philabundance Builds Partnership in Philadelphia

Philabundance started as a food delivery service run out of the back of a Subaru. Now it now distributes more than 50 million pounds of food to its neighbors in the greater Philadelphia area each year.

Through its partnership with Healthy Futures, the food bank focuses on five target communities: Strawberry Mansion, Tioga/Nicetown, Hartranft and Frankford. Philabundance provides a combination of immediate food assistance paired with strategies designed to give individuals and families the resources they need to remain food-secure for the long term.

When rising neighborhood violence made it difficult for residents in the Hartranft neighborhood to access food bank services, Philabundance displayed the power of adaptability and local collaboration. The food bank partnered with a local college and career preparatory school to develop a meal delivery and school-based meal and pantry program. Together, Philabundance and The U School provided six months of meals (about 1,600 meals) through the home delivery program, and more than 1,200 directly inside schools.



**Plantation Park Heights Growing Baltimore’s First “AgriHood”**

Plantation Park Heights Urban Farm rose to the occasion when its community needed it most. Recognizing the disproportionate effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had on its neighborhood, the Plantation Park Heights team revived its weekly farmers market to offer socially distanced access to free, fresh foods.

The farm also mobilized student volunteers to operate new on-site distribution channels, meeting urgent nutritional needs. Overall, more than 500 youth and family members from the Park Heights community benefited from the real-time response.

While indicative of the community’s resilience, the urban farm’s nimble, hyper-local model also demonstrated how to build convenience and social ties during a time of intensified vulnerability.



**“While the most acute phase of pandemic has eased, Plantation Park Heights is still building toward its vision of the city’s first “AgriHood,” a thriving food marketplace that offers educational and career opportunities for local youth and a safe space for community connection.”**

## Expanding Reach through Strategic Partnerships

**The power of collaboration proves a dynamic force in shifting the food system and securing healthy food access for children and families in local neighborhoods.**

Grantees have built partnerships aligned to their missions, allowing them to extend their collective reach and impact. Collaboration helped partners widen their scope, pool resources and combine innovative approaches to maximize their ability to address food access issues and provide comprehensive support to families.

Taking the time to make space for community has yielded enhanced ideas, collective ownership and a clear focus on improving health outcomes.



### Maryland Food Bank's School Pantry Program Reaches Neighborhoods

More than 200,000 children go hungry in Maryland every day. Without enough food to eat, children struggle to concentrate and communicate with others at school.

Hunger contributes to lower grades and test scores, behavioral challenges, and more frequent illnesses.

The effects of food insecurity in children can last for a lifetime, bringing a greater risk of type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure as well as lower educational and career achievement.

Since 2010, the Maryland Food Bank (MFB) has built partnerships with more than 200 Maryland public schools statewide to provide a reliable source of healthy food to K-12 students. School pantries provide a lifeline for children and their families, reducing stress and minimizing stigma by making food easy to access in everyday, familiar settings.

Between March 2022 and December 2023, MFB distributed 1.8 million pounds of food, the equivalent of 1.5 million meals to 83 School Pantry Partners in Baltimore City. In addition to food distributed, MFB was able to provide refrigeration, freezers, shelving, storage to these schools so they can safely store and distribute shelf stable, fresh produce and healthy proteins to the communities they serve.

### Centro SOL Programs Address Childhood Obesity and Overweight

Partnering with the world-renowned John Hopkins Hospital, Centro SOL has become a driving force for community health improvement in Baltimore.

With the goal to promote healthy lifestyles among Latino families with children struggling with obesity, Centro SOL meets families in East, Southeast and South Baltimore for interactive cooking classes, grocery shopping and educational opportunities.

Healthy Futures supported Centro SOL in relaunching the evidence-based and culturally appropriate Active and Healthy Families program after the COVID-19 pandemic led to its pause. Through the program, community health workers teach families how to build healthy lifestyles with interactive workshops about nutrition, including how to read labels to evaluate ingredient quality, and physical activity.

Using a Spanish-speaking model, Centro SOL specifically addresses fears around health-related risk factors and connects community health partners to provide direct support. This holistic approach provides critical health education by eliminating barriers to understanding healthy food consumption.





### FARE Uses Collaborative Hubs for Big Impact

In Cleveland, Food Access Raises Everyone (FARE) builds bridges between grassroots groups and institutions that have a platform to enable greater reach. It identifies and invests in local groups focused on expanding food access and health programming within the Clark-Fulton, Hough and St. Clair Superior neighborhoods.

By investing in expertise and funding, FARE pools resources from community organizations to build collaborative hubs that run urban farms, provide cooking and nutrition classes, and offer distribution sites and training.

FARE expects to have six hubs thriving across the three districts throughout 2024, promoting and sustaining community self-sufficiency through a web of services, especially for youth and families of color facing disproportionate impacts of food apartheid.

These collaborative hubs have established channels to provide funding to each neighborhood. Rite Aid Healthy Futures ensures that FARE can lead this convening of health-focused organizations and leaders to determine how neighborhoods can build capacity in addressing healthy food access. This ground-up, collaborative approach allows neighborhoods facing disparities to guide solutions tailored to local priorities while closing significant systemic gaps.

### Collaboration – Not Competition – Guide Western New York Partners

In one of the more distinct funding arrangements for the initial round of Strengthening Cities, the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) and Grassroots Gardens of Western New York applied jointly for support of their Buffalo Food Justice Project.

The project aimed to build food equity and sovereignty in East Buffalo by strengthening the local food system, supporting local farmers and entrepreneurs, and cultivating family and youth engagement.

While MAP and Grassroots Gardens concentrate on distinct areas within food access and urban agriculture, they share a similar grassroots approach grounded in engagement, outreach and empowerment. Together, MAP and Grassroots Gardens creatively maximize funding, most recently securing a multi-year USDA grant supporting public land advocacy and seasonal staff through 2026.

Through coordination instead of competition, the organizations model how unified efforts can advance community health, food access and urban-farming capacity.



Bartram's Garden

# Cultivating the Next Generation of Food Systems Leaders

Providing hands-on food and nutrition education gives children and families practical skills to lead healthier lifestyles starting at an early age.

Through growing, cooking and learning about nutritious foods, organizations build participants' knowledge and their ability to make informed choices. A hands-on approach allows for meaningful development of food-preparation abilities, nutrition understanding and exploration of food justice.

**Equipping children and families with fundamental food literacy empowers them to adopt nutritious diets and has intergenerational impacts on eating habits and health outcomes.**



## Fresno Empowers Futures Community Health Leaders

The Fresno Community Health Improvement Partnership (FCHIP) empowers high school students from under-resourced communities to become health equity leaders. Its Youth Leadership Council program educates students about the root causes of health inequities – factors such as income inequality, poverty and racism – and arms them with professional development and collaboration skills.

At the program's culminating mini-conference, students present original research on pressing local issues such as mental health in students, poverty and food insecurity in Fresno, and how diabetes affects Latino teens in Fresno County.

The 10 students in the 2022 cohort developed knowledge and public speaking skills while educating community leaders on key social determinants impacting their peers. By fostering this promising group's passions, abilities and connections, FCHIP has cultivated the next generation of competent, socially conscious leaders to advance community health.



## Keep Growing Detroit Prepares Youth to Drive Systems of Change

While running a 1.38-acre farm in the heart of the city's historic Eastern Market District, Keep Growing Detroit envisions a future where people from Detroit grow most of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the city – and it's preparing the next generation of food leaders to get there.

Through its Garden Resource Program, Keep Growing Detroit provides more than 16,000 children annually with first-hand garden experiences, building relationships with nutritious food at an early age. Keep Growing Detroit also fosters this passion in adolescents, engaging youth in its paid Summer Youth Apprenticeship program.

These programs provide a pipeline for youth to enter food system careers, with many becoming urban farmers, launching food businesses or pursuing employment and secondary education opportunities in food-related fields.

Keep Growing Detroit's emphasis on leadership accelerates knowledge and self-sufficiency in Detroit's regional food system, and gives youth the skills they need to inspire systems of change.



## Rid-All Gives Cleveland Youth First-Hand Urban Ag Experiences

Rid-All's Young Farmers Program engages Cleveland students who have dropped out of traditional education pathways. Many of the participants come from the Lower Kinsman/Central neighborhood, a majority Black community tucked just southeast of the city's downtown.

Supplemented by visits to see Rid-All farm sites in action, the programming breaks down barriers to learning and growth opportunities through hands-on classroom learning that covers across three distinct areas: green infrastructure, the business of urban agriculture and food service, and leadership and life skills.

Through a mix of classroom curriculum and field trips, students enjoy hands-on experiences that spark their interest and career opportunities in growing, selling and running a business that serves fresh, healthy foods.

By actively involving youth, Rid-All cultivates the next generation's passions, abilities and career opportunities to increase food sovereignty and improve health from the ground up.

# Strengthening Cities Partners Summit Fosters Collaboration

Drawing upon the power of shared experiences, Rite Aid Healthy Futures hosted the inaugural Strengthening Cities Summit in 2024, convening leaders from Baltimore, Buffalo, Detroit, Fresno, Cleveland and Philadelphia to discuss the present – and future – of work in the urban agriculture, food distribution and food sovereignty spaces.

More than 50 leaders from grantee organizations attended the summit, held at Rite Aid’s Collaboration Center in Philadelphia. The event proved that philanthropic partnerships could extend beyond funding arrangements and lead to deepened relationships and collaboration.

During their time in Philadelphia, summit attendees **connected with, learned from and supported others** working in a field that can be challenging and isolating at times. Many guests acknowledged that the chance to have open and in-depth conversations came too rarely – even for organizations that call the same city home.

Over the course of two days, summit attendees discussed everything from sourcing long-term staff to protecting valuable open land from development. The group also toured Bartram’s Garden to learn more about their work supporting the surrounding Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood, and absorbed wisdom from panel participants and keynote speakers.

Underscored by a distinct energy of togetherness, the **Strengthening Cities Summit** provided a critical relationship-building opportunity, reinforcing the belief that strong networks can overcome shared challenges and increase their collective impact.



“The Summit offered a unique opportunity for organizations working in different parts of the food system to come together to build relationships, learn, and find synergies. Having six U.S. cities represented made the sessions even more important.”

“The Strengthening Cities Summit was unique and powerful in that it provided a space for diverse participants to come together for a common purpose yet be their authentic selves, sharing from the depths of their situations from a historical (cultural) context and lens of each community served.”



“The summit made me realize how important my role as a farmer is and gave me a blueprint of the work I need to do moving forward.”

# Shared Challenges

Despite their many achievements and innovations, Healthy Futures partners have also faced significant challenges while bringing healthier food to children and families in their communities.

Apart from large-scale, systemic stressors impacting neighborhoods and cities, organizations also encountered specific, often daily, struggles that limited their ability to achieve maximum impact.

These challenges offer valuable insights into the most pressing issues for organizations focused on addressing hunger. Additionally, examining these struggles can spark further dialogue around potential solutions.

**The list summarizes the most cross-cutting operational challenges facing the Strengthening Cities portfolio.**

## 01

### Collecting Data and Synthesizing Stories

While leaders recognize the need to measure and report data, many organizations found this area challenging or an aspirational objective. Leaders recognize the critical need to capture data to guide decisions and demonstrate results to stakeholders, yet question how to communicate their stories.

Multiple organizations noted they struggle to tell their story in a way that invited additional funding. This includes the ability to demonstrate human-centric outcomes and accurately reflect how their work has improved the lives of people in their communities

## 02

### Organizational Capacity and Sustainability

Partners identified several challenges related to building organizational capacity and sustainability, foremost being the interconnected issues of low wages, burnout and staff turnover.

Staff (and volunteers) are essential to building successful operations, stewarding stakeholder relationships and scaling impact over time. Yet, many funders provide little to no support for core staffing functions. This makes it difficult for organizations to invest in talent while managing already tight budgets propped up by short-term, often restricted, funding.

## 03

### How to Evolve Collaborations into Bigger Movements

Partners have forged new relationships, yet wonder how they can adopt a more collective approach to building movements, increasing resources and amplifying their impact.

Instead of competing for the same funding, organizations could form collaboratives and harness their network to fill structural gaps. Partners recognize how important relationships are to delivering results yet have noted several barriers to further successful collaboration, such as competing for the same grant funding.

## 04

### Need to Grow Stronger Voice for Policy and Advocacy

Partners would like a stronger voice in the decisions that influence their communities, yet often find themselves without a seat at the table with political power brokers.

They shared concerns that city councils and state lawmakers often fail to pay attention to those “at the bottom” – meaning the very organizations on the ground working for social change. Government restrictions and cumbersome processes, especially regarding land access and use, also slow or stymie progress altogether.

# Key Takeaways & Discussion

## Rite Aid Healthy Futures sees access to food as a gateway to better health outcomes for children, families and communities.

Pertaining to food, Healthy Futures also recognizes the role systemic inequities have played in maintaining the health disparities that many communities face.

Food apartheid is crippling communities. Systemic disinvestment, the impacts of the social determinants of health and persistent discrimination leaves neighborhoods disproportionately impacted by poor health, chronic disease and early death.

Through the work spearheaded by partners within the Strengthening Cities initiative, Rite Aid Healthy Futures sees the opportunity to collaborate with communities to drive better health outcomes for children, youth and families.

Creating the Strengthening Cities initiative began with the acknowledgement of racism and its role in systemic health inequities. It continued through trust-based investments in grassroots organizations and regional food banks committed to the health of their communities. Healthy Futures built upon the grant program with a Strengthening Cities Summit convening partners to exchange findings for the betterment of local and statewide food systems.

Partners have used Strengthening Cities funding to make tangible progress. As the examples in this report show, partners have developed new infrastructure for food cultivation and delivery; added new events and programming; increased internal capacity; and built news relationships while strengthening existing ones.

Now, as Healthy Futures concludes its first two years of Strengthening Cities funding, this report has found that:



Forgotten Harvest, Detroit, Michigan.

### Programs Confront Daunting Realities of Racism and Poverty

Living within neighborhoods with significant poverty rates and vast health disparities has fatal outcomes, especially for Black and Brown residents. The ongoing impacts of redlining and generations of discrimination has led to disproportionately poor health.

Decades of systemic disadvantages have resulted in lack of access to fresh foods, quality healthcare, nutrition education and mental health support, all which culminate into higher rates of chronic diseases and early death. With the very survival of these communities at stake, a sense of urgency is critical from not just those who reside in these neighborhoods, but also those with the power and resources to accelerate progress.

Strengthening Cities partners confront the realities of racism and poverty by addressing challenges within the food system and city initiatives from the ground up. These trusted advocates understand that lasting change originates directly with individuals and neighborhoods.

Their programs uplift community voices to drive hyper-local impact, then radiate these solutions outward to aligned partners and intuitions, solving an array of societal issues – not just those based around food. This ground-up approach fills gaps left by decades of disinvestment and discrimination, and sustains focus on long-term culture change as much as short-term solutions to food insecurity.

### Organizations Build More Vibrant Food Systems Within Cities

Strengthening Cities partners focus on multiple solutions. They work toward increasing access to foods, as well as advancing nutritional educational programs to reinforce efficacy by teaching communities how to locate, cook and enjoy healthier food options.

In addition to food production and distribution, partners also teaching children, youth and families how to engage as active participants or food leaders within the process.

Organizations teach kids how to grow, cultivate and implement entrepreneurial aspects through the sale of produce at local farmers market stands and the use of mobile markets. Additionally, access to home delivery services and community fridges make more healthy food options available to Rite Aid neighbors and neighborhoods.

Many Strengthening Cities partners also place an emphasis on the importance of educating children and youth on their ancestral roots of culturally appropriate food. Reconnecting those who lack reliable access to green spaces or land to the places where their food grows provides an important link between those communities and new ways of thinking and living. This approach helps restore community members' agency.

When children and youth learn city farming and food cultivation is sacred work done on sacred land, it fosters pride and commitment. Knowing they have the power to make food choices that directly contribute to their own health and the health of their neighbors promotes a sense of sovereignty and autonomy.



Fresno Metro Ministry, Fresno, California.





Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network

### Community Resilience Empowers Progress and Change

The strength and resiliency of local communities within the Strengthening Cities initiative is paramount. Discriminatory practices such as housing segregation and redlining have continually denied opportunities and access to residents over several decades.

This compounding denial of access has perpetuated **substantial racial disparities over time**. Despite the hardships, these neighborhoods prove repeatedly to be rich in leadership, determination and the ability to create assets from the limited resources available.

Strengthening Cities partners are critical members within their neighborhoods, providing tangible resources and safe spaces to talk, convene and live. Each of these six cities has a powerful sense of pride, community and family. Within all these neighborhoods lies persistence, connectedness and grit.

The core belief that neighbors are stronger together assists these cities in leaning on one another to find creative ways to ensure they have access to healthy food options.

### Social Investments Help Drive Food Security

The Strengthening Cities grant initiative aims to acknowledge and invest in outstanding organizations that have long provided healthy food options to communities in select cities and neighborhoods. Though these organizations might not have received extensive funding in the past, partnerships can provide a level of funding to accelerate, expand or leverage their work to create greater access for even more children, youth and families.

By providing catalytic funding to grassroots organizations and food banks confronting racial inequities and health disparities daily, philanthropy can increase access to critical resources in neighborhoods and support communities as they collectively find solutions.

With the very survival of these communities at stake, accelerating progress requires not just the urgency of those who live in these neighborhoods, but also the will and resources of those able to help.

Investing in traditionally disinvested organizations and communities is critical and intentional for helping to uplift these neighborhoods. When people in a community can define and shape their local food system, it positively impacts their life and moves them closer to food sovereignty.

Building upon committed financial support, funders can empower smaller organizations with larger dollars to help them reach their goals faster and accelerate change within their neighborhoods.



The FARE Project, Cleveland, Ohio

**“By providing catalytic funding to grassroots organizations and food banks confronting racial inequities and health disparities daily, philanthropy can increase access to critical resources in neighborhoods and support communities as they collectively find solutions.”**

# Conclusion

**In 2022, Rite Aid Healthy Futures launched the Strengthening Cities initiative with the aim to create healthier and more equitable neighborhoods by widening food access, advancing food sovereignty and improving health outcomes.**

The prerogative grew from the acknowledgement that persistent racial discrimination significantly harms entire communities and contributes to lower life expectancy.

While the root causes of health disparities are myriad, Healthy Futures intentionally focused on one, the lack of access to nutritious food, when crafting the first iteration of its Strengthening Cities grant program. Two years later, this review outlines tangible accomplishments of Strengthening Cities grantees and speaks to the potential that future investment in programs focused on food sovereignty holds for neighborhoods and the people who call them home.

From an initial \$10 million investment, Rite Aid Healthy Futures has seen ample examples of change, opportunity and impact. Organizations and their leaders increased food access, expanded nutrition education, developed creative partnerships, strengthened existing operations, and developed stronger bonds between people, the land and the food that they grow on it. At the same time, significant challenges and heartbreaking realities remain.

The resilience, ingenuity and drive of Strengthening Cities partners and their communities have tremendously moved and motivated Healthy Futures. Early outcomes from the still young program hints at the potential for substantial change through continued focus on food sovereignty-minded organizations.

The philanthropy sector – and the donors within it – have a tremendous opportunity to accelerate life-changing work by intentionally funding organizations that work closely with their local communities but often go unnoticed.

Through an increased focus on food systems and the support of regional food banks and grassroots nonprofits committed to local communities, the field of philanthropy can combat the health and racial disparities that prevent millions of Americans from the quality of life they deserve.

Philanthropic leaders must recognize and deliver on a collective call to action – to fight racism and help build healthy futures for all.



