DC RESILIENT FOOD SYSTEM

2026 ANNUAL REPORT

COLLEGE of ARTS & SCIENCES
HEALTHY SCHOOLS, HEALTHY COMMUNITIES
Cultivating an equitable food system in DC.

American University's Department of Health Studies
Healthy Schools, Healthy Communities Lab

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In FY26, the third and final year of the Resilient Food System (RFS) project, funded by Novo Nordisk, Inc. (FY24-FY26), the Healthy Schools, Healthy Communities Lab continued working toward a DC food system that is more local, more connected, and more equitable, particularly for residents of Wards 7 and 8. Across the three years of the grant, we have directly reached 36,518 people, including 11,624 in this final year. Below are highlights of this year's achievements.

Through four sub-grants, RFS supported 64 farmers with robust training, coaching, and direct grants.

- **Infrastructure Investment:** RFS awarded $72,000 to 16 farms through the Agriculture Infrastructure and Equipment program, a 31% increase compared to FY25.
- **Training the Next Generation:** Twenty-seven new and beginning farmers completed Future Harvest's Beginner Farmer Training Program, 74% of whom identify as being from a historically underserved background.
- **Diversifying Market Channels:** The Chesapeake Ag Innovation Center's coaching helped farms unlock $422,000 in grant funding and 13 new sales outlets.

Our five sub-grants to distributors moved 105,703 pounds of locally produced food from more than 122 farms, reaching an estimated 11,000 people.

- **Farmer Revenue:** FRESHFARM and Arcadia's RFS-funded procurement activities generated $850,000 in revenue for regional farms.
- **Affordable Access:** Of FRESHFARM's sales at six farm stands in Wards 7 and 8, 86% of sales used food access incentives (SNAP, WIC, Produce Plus, etc).
- **New Food Retail Space:** DC Central Kitchen and The Fresh Food Factory are building new market spaces in Wards 7 and 8. Both markets are projected to open in 2027.

RFS convened food system leaders and stakeholders to strengthen collaboration and coordination across the DC food system.

- **Convening Partners:** Leaders from 12 key DC organizations attended the October 2025 Salon Dinner, and 40 attendees working across the food system attended the June 2026 Local Sourcing Luncheon. Both events focused on strengthening the DC regional food system.
- **Shared Data Driving Accountability:** In partnership with the DC Food Policy Council, we built a data dashboard with 74 metrics and data from more than 27 organizations. The DC Food System Data Dashboard will launch in 2027.

The RFS program laid a strong foundation for a more resilient DC food system by strengthening regional production, distribution, and cohesion across DC food system advocates and decision-makers. However, meaningful work is still needed to increase equitable access to fresh, healthy foods that support longer, healthier lives.

We look forward to building on this momentum together with you,

-The Healthy Schools, Healthy Communities Team

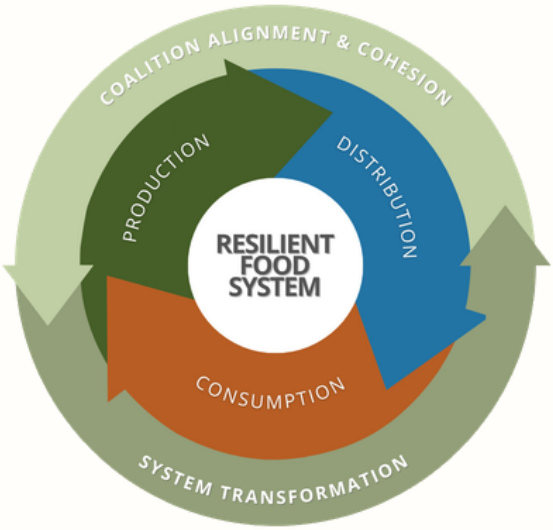


Dr. Stacey Snelling, HSHC Lab Principal Investigator, delivers opening remarks at the RFS Salon Dinner held at American University on October 21st, 2025.

RESILIENT FOOD SYSTEM PROJECT

American University's Healthy Schools, Healthy Communities Lab (HSHC) focuses on proven strategies of facilitating change, from the individual-level to system-wide policies, that increase access to healthy foods and physical activity, support healthy behaviors, and reduce factors that contribute to chronic disease. You can read more about the Lab's 20 years of demonstrated expertise collaborating with stakeholders and funders to implement and evaluate community-based programs and strategies that improve health here.

Figure 1: HSHC Resilient Food System Model

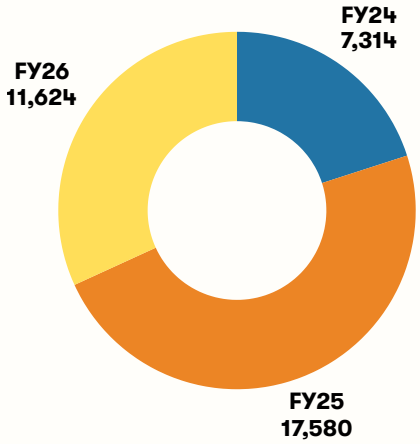


In 2023, HSHC received a three-year, $2.8 million grant from Novo Nordisk, Inc. to support the transformation of the DC food system by improving local food supply chains and healthy food options, particularly for residents in Wards 7 and 8, who lack sufficient and reliable access to healthy and nutritious foods (DC Hunger Solutions, 2025). The Lab's RFS project targets three key pillars of the food system: production, distribution, and consumption. To achieve an equitable food system that works for all in DC, the program engages in coalition alignment work, which we call 'cohesion.' This work aims to build system collaboration and trusted partnerships across all actors of the food system.

In this third phase of RFS, the project has placed greater emphasis on the pillars of production and distribution: increasing the capacity of regional farms and strengthening local food distribution to residents in DC. While the RFS project defines local as produce grown in DC, Maryland, and Virginia, RFS partners utilize regional procurement, sourcing from small and medium-sized farms from nearby states including Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, North Carolina, and West Virginia.

Over the entire duration of the project, we have **directly reached 36,518 people** via our grants, including **11,624 in FY26**. You can read more about our work and results in FY24 here and FY25 here.

Figure 2: Directly Reached Participants Across the RFS Program*



*Directly Reached is defined as all persons receiving services first-hand. This includes participants in cooking and/or nutrition classes, partners who receive produce, farmers that provide produce, farmers that were trained, farmers that participate in events, and other community members that participate in events held by AU or other sub-grantees.

2026 GRANTEES

Future Harvest's Beginner Farmer Training Program provided educational support and technical assistance to 27 new and beginning farmers, increasing the number of trained farmers growing food locally.

Agriculture Infrastructure and Equipment Grants

The HSHC Lab provided direct awards to 16 farms in the region through our Agriculture Infrastructure and Equipment grant program, expanding local farms' production and distribution capabilities.

Food Animal Concerns Trust partnered with the Food Finance Institute to deliver a financial bootcamp for 10 farms, delivering one-on-one coaching, training, and resources to strengthen financial management practices and enhance long-term sustainability.

Conference Sponsorships

The Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance and the Mid-Atlantic Black Farmers Caucus collectively convened over 400 farmers, community leaders, and advocates between their two respective conferences, creating needed space for sharing knowledge and resources and building community.

Chesapeake Ag Innovation Center provided tailored coaching and technical assistance to 11 regional farms, helping them expand into wholesale and other markets.

Arcadia Mobile Markets held five weekly and bi-weekly mobile markets in areas of need in the District, including in Wards 7 and 8, ensuring customers have consistent and affordable access to local produce.

FRESHFARM expanded DC residents' access to fresh, healthy, and local foods through the Food Hub's partnerships with community organizations and farm stands in Wards 7 and 8.

DC Central Kitchen expanded its healthy food distribution at THEARC, a thriving community campus of nonprofits and educational programs in Ward 8, ensuring students and community members have access to locally sourced, healthy meals.

The Fresh Food Factory is in the process of launching a new market hub on Kenilworth Ave, expanding its local procurement and distribution network, and providing workforce and entrepreneurship training to DC Metro region residents, improving Ward 7 residents' access to fresh, culturally-relevant foods.

The Metropolitan AME Church procured and distributed bags of healthy produce, including locally sourced produce in partnership with The People's Market, to its 100 food pantry clients every month for a six-month period.

Production

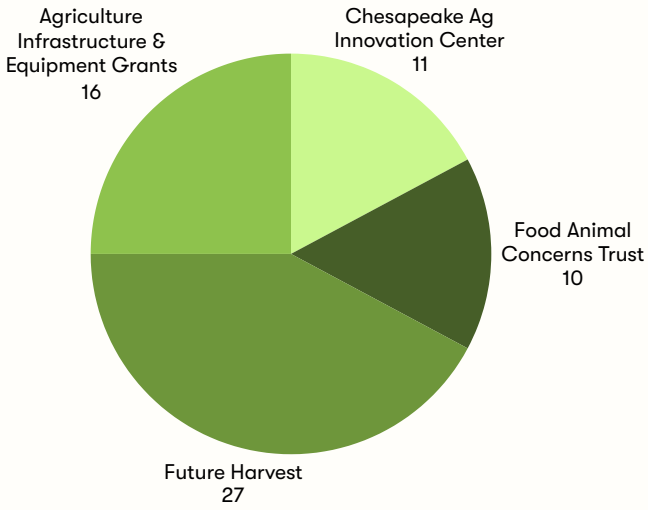
Distribution

IMPACT ON PRODUCTION

Supporting Local Farm Growth and Resilience

A key goal of building a more resilient local food system is ensuring that sustainable, locally grown food from diverse farmers is abundant in the region. This year, the RFS program supported **64 farmers** with targeted financial and technical assistance to increase production and operational capacity. These investments were designed to strengthen farm revenue and financial sustainability while expanding the region's capacity to produce and supply locally grown food.

Figure 3: Farmers Receiving Financial & Technical Assistance from RFS Partners

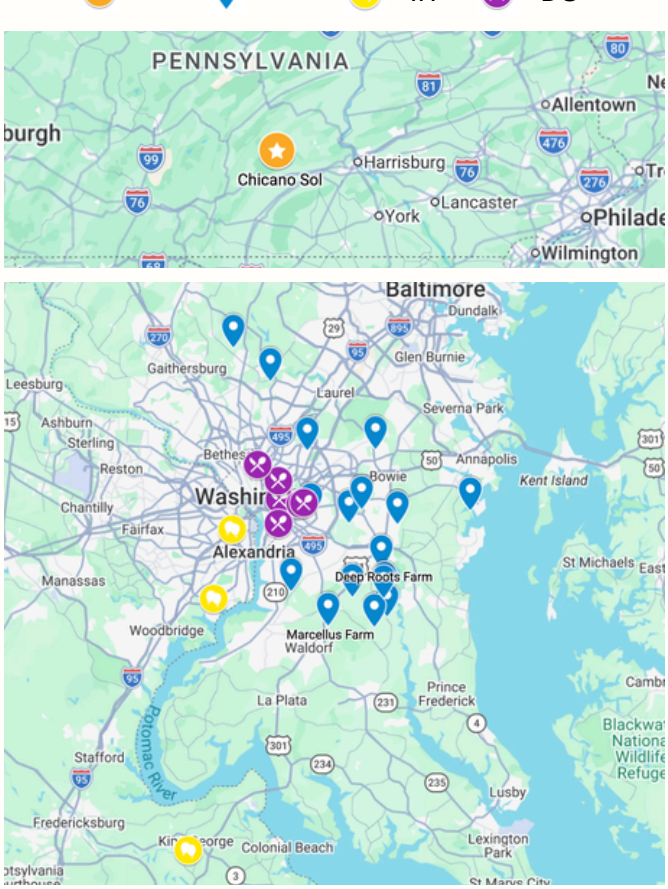


Investing in Farm Production and Capacity

HSHC launched the second year of our **Agriculture Infrastructure and Equipment (AIE) Grant** program, which provided farmers with $2,500-$5,000 in equipment and infrastructure investments needed to expand agricultural production and strengthen farm operations. These small, strategic investments help farmers improve operational efficiency, increase productivity, and generate greater revenue. More information about the impact of our AIE grants can be found here.

In 2026, we awarded approximately **$72,000 in grant funding to 16 farms** in the region. This represents 31% more funding in FY26 as compared to FY25. Over the two years of implementing this grant program, **28 farms** have been supported. Recipient farms demonstrated operational need and a strong commitment to supplying the DC metro region, particularly Wards 7 and 8, with locally grown fruits and vegetables. Through these investments, the RFS program strengthens the regional food system by supporting the financial sustainability and success of local farms.

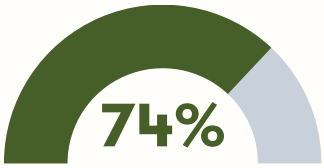
Figure 4: Map of FY25 & FY26 AIE Grantees



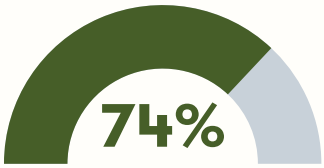
Building Knowledge and Skills

RFS deployed grants to farmer technical assistance partners, **Future Harvest** and **Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT)**, to increase farmers' production capacity and business operations.

The RFS grant to Future Harvest supported the Beginner Farmer Training Program (BFTP), which trains new and beginning farmers on sustainable farming techniques and other skills relevant to operating a farm. The program, which combines the 10-part Sustainable Farming Fundamentals online course, farm field days, and on-farm apprenticeships, **engaged 27 new and beginning farmers**. A majority of the BFTP participants identify as female or as BIPOC. While these groups make up a rapidly growing share of new and beginning farmers, they often face systemic barriers in access to land, capital, and resources. BFTP aims to help these new and beginning farmers, particularly historically marginalized farmers, feel better equipped to start their own farms or continue farming in management roles.



20 out of 27 BFTP participants identify as black, indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC)



20 out of 27 BFTP participants identify as female



A current BFTP trainee shares information on irrigation for tree nurseries to field day attendees.

As a result of the extensive training they received, **90% of participants surveyed reported increased knowledge on fundamental farming topics and techniques**. Additionally, **95% reported applying what they had learned to their farming work**. This demonstrates that the program is effective in bolstering the number of trained regional farmers who utilize resilient farming practices.

The RFS grant to FACT targeted producers further along in their farming career. FACT, in partnership with the Food Finance Institute, provided eight hours of in-depth instruction as well as **one-on-one mentoring to 10 farms**. The course focused on strengthening financial skills and was limited to 10 farms and 20 participants to allow for deeper engagement and tailored guidance. FACT received more than 24 applications, which demonstrates that therer is strong need and interest in such opportunities in the Mid-Atlantic.

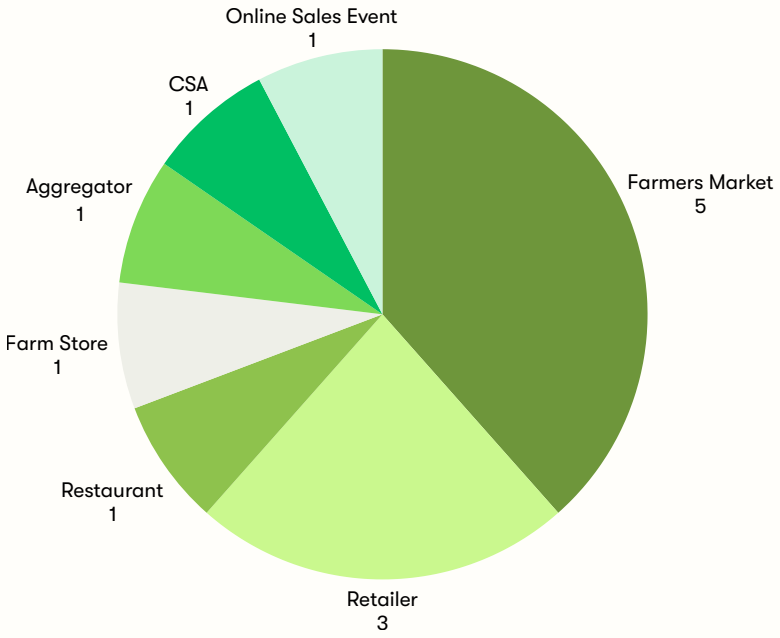
Survey results (N=5) indicate that the training met its learning objectives: **100% agreed or strongly agreed that the bootcamp improved their understanding of their farm's business model and increased their confidence** in developing and managing their farm's financial plan. These skills are key to operating a farm as a profitable business. All respondents said they would recommend the training to a fellow farmer and were likely to apply the knowledge they gained to their farm business.

Supporting Farms in Scaling Up to New Markets

Via an eight-month mentorship program, the **Chesapeake Ag Innovation Center (CAIC)** delivered tailored business coaching and services to **11 producers** who aimed to expand their farm business and move into wholesale and institutional markets. CAIC worked with the farms to establish goals for growth and expansion, matched farms with experts who could guide them toward those goals, and funded services to make these plans a reality. For example, farms received support related to business planning, marketing, streamlining operations, and applying for grants. In total, CAIC support unlocked **$422,000 in federal and other grant funding** for the cohort as of August. These investments will allow the farms to expand their offerings and increase their production, tapping into new sales and opportunities.

As the farms participating in the program are working on scaling production and processing, they are also marketing themselves more effectively to wholesale buyers, like distributors, grocery stores, and more. As of August, CAIC's expert consultants provided the farmers with **60 hours of tailored business coaching** and **140 hours of hands-on support carrying out the recommended services.** RFS also allocated funding for the production and distribution of farm marketing materials. These investments successfully enabled the cohort to reach **13 new sales outlets** in total, including new farmers' markets, restaurants, retailers, and more.

Figure 5: Types of New Sales Outlets Entered by CAIC Participants



Chesapeake Gold Farms, a dairy farm participating in CAIC's mentorship program, received support to update their business and marketing plans, as well as sales resources geared to wholesale outlets. In July, Chesapeake Gold began selling to Mid-Atlantic distributor, Teddy Bear Fresh. In providing this support and facilitation of these connections, CAIC is helping farms increase their revenue and overall financial security.



Farmer Laurie at Brown Cow Creamery in Maryland entered four new markets including two farmers markets, a restaurant, and a farm store as a result of working with CAIC.

IMPACT ON DISTRIBUTION

Strengthening Local Produce Distribution in Washington, DC

The underlying goal of the RFS program has been increasing Ward 7 and 8 residents' reliable access to affordable, healthy, and nutritious foods. To do this, RFS administered five sub-grants aimed at increasing the distribution of local produce through markets, schools, and other institutions and organizations. Through these sub-grants, RFS distributed **105,703 pounds** of fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods. This produce reached an estimated 11,000 individuals, the majority of whom reside east of the Anacostia River and in other neighborhoods identified as having limited food access or security.

Expanding Community Access to Fresh, Local Food

RFS support to **FRESHFARM** and **Arcadia Mobile Markets** helped preserve and expand Ward 7 and 8 residents' access to fresh, local, and healthy foods. FRESHFARM operates **six farm stands** and delivers produce to **30 partner sites** east of the Anacostia River. Through these two distribution avenues, FRESHFARM has moved approximately **70,000 pounds of produce into Wards 7 and 8** between October 2025 and August 2026.



Produce available for purchase at a FRESHFARM farmers market.

Meanwhile, Arcadia operates **five core market locations** which are visited weekly or bi-weekly, as well as several pop-up locations. Locations are selected based upon need and resident interest and, of the core locations, three are located in Wards 7 and 8. Between May 2026 and August 2026, Arcadia served **46,811 servings of locally sourced produce** to **3,236 residents** across its core locations.



Arcadia's Mobile Market truck at Sibley Memorial Hospital.

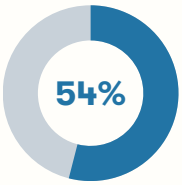
Both organizations move large quantities of healthy, local food to residents in need of affordable, reliable access. Of FRESHFARM's farm stand sales, **86% used food access incentives** such as SNAP, SFMNP, WIC, Produce Plus, or Fresh Match. About **75% of Arcadia's sales across the core locations used food access incentives, discounts, or other subsidized purchasing mechanisms.** This year, Arcadia worked with market ambassadors to boost attendance and sales. The ambassadors distributed $5 coupons to neighbors in their community, encouraging new customers to shop at the markets. Not only did Arcadia observe strong engagement from market ambassadors, but coupon redemption increased by about 35%, compared to previous years in which coupons had simply been mailed to households near Arcadia Mobile Market sites.

Increasing Farmer Revenue

Organizations distributing local and regionally produced foods bolster our regional food system. Upstream, farmers partnering with **FRESHFARM** and **Arcadia** for RFS-grant funded activities received strong benefit: their local procurement initiatives resulted in approximately **$850,000 in revenue**, ensuring our regional farms are more financially viable and sustainable.

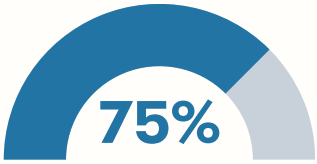
$850,000
in revenue generated for local procurement initiatives across FRESHFARM & Arcadia

By linking food access with support for regional farmers, FRESHFARM and Arcadia connect consumers and producers. Arcadia sources **73 food items** from **21 producers**, including their own farm, to supply their consumers with a diverse array of fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, tofu, eggs, and dairy. Of this produce, **54%** was procured from Arcadia's own farm located in Alexandria, VA.

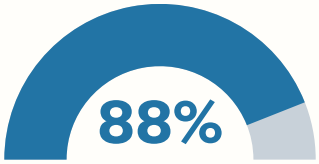


of Arcadia's Mobile Market produce is sourced directly from their own farm

Meanwhile, FRESFHARM engages **41 farms** in their Food Hub, securing purchases from buyers and then aggregating orders from various farms in their network to meet this demand. In surveys, farmers in the Food Hub report strong benefit from being in the network.



report that their overall revenue has increased since joining the Food Hub (N=14)



said that the Food Hub has improved their farm's financial stability (N=14)

In addition, on average, **farmers participating in the Food Hub have seen their revenue grow by 24%** throughout their time in the network. This financial stability strengthens agriculture in the Mid-Atlantic, enabling our regional farms to to buy more land, hire more staff, invest in infrastructure, and reduced food waste.

Strengthening Food Infrastructure

The RFS project aimed to boost DC's processing and distribution capacity by creating more avenues for local produce to be sold and distributed. The RFS grant to **DC Central Kitchen** supported the development and planning of their new market and cafe space at THEARC campus, in which local produce will be sold and utilized. Similarly, RFS supported **The Fresh Food Factory** to open a new market space in Ward 7, and to acquire cold storage trucks to support local food procurement and distribution to not only Fresh Food Factory markets, but to buyers interested in procuring local food for their organizations or business.

Both markets anticipate opening in early 2027. While both organizations already support farmer income through their existing local procurement initiatives, the opening and operation of these businesses will create additional market opportunities for regional farms, strengthening their long-term financial sustainability while increasing local food access.



Fresh Food Factory's Kenilworth Market under construction in April 2026.

IMPACT ON COHESION

Advancing a More Connected Food System

A critical component of the RFS strategy is uniting the three pillars of the food system: production, distribution, and consumption. These pillars, and the stakeholders who work in these areas, are often siloed. Through our partnerships and research across the food system, we aim to build strong networks of collaboration, from the communities and farmers we serve to our government and private industry partners.





Attendees mingling at the RFS Salon Dinner held at American University on October 21st, 2025.

Cohesion Through Data

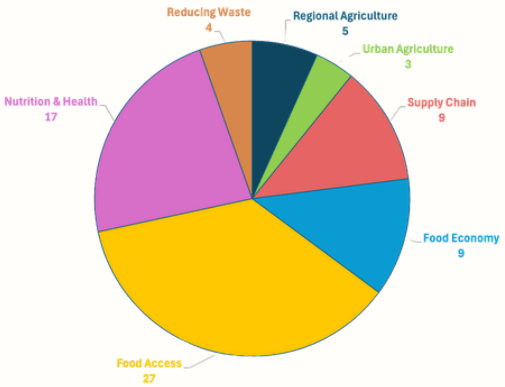
Last year, RFS identified a need in the DC food system for more robust data that tracks how food system sectors are progressing toward goals of sustainability, resilience, and health. While valuable data exists, it is often difficult to access, compare, and interpret. Therefore, RFS, in collaboration with the DC Food Policy Council, developed a centralized data dashboard that assesses changes in the DC food system over time and supports coordination and collaboration across organizations, agencies, and other stakeholders.

Reviewing state and city food system plans and monitoring tools, RFS created an initial set of core metrics to monitor and evaluate DC's food system. Through a series of consultations with District agencies and community partners, RFS refined key indicators and coordinated data entry and validation. As a result, the dashboard captures **74 metrics across seven pillars** of the food system with **data from more than 27 agencies and non-profits**. Together with the DC Food Policy Council, we expect to launch the DC Food System Data Dashboard in early 2027.

Cohesion Through Partnerships

RFS also seeks to strengthen collaboration and coordination across the food system by convening stakeholders and partners to engage in collective problem solving. In October 2025, RFS hosted a Resilient Food System Salon Dinner, bringing together decision-makers across **12 organizations** in the food system, including funders, government representatives, and other leaders. Attendees discussed opportunities and challenges facing the DC food system and explored how addressing these issues could deepen collaboration, including through shared investment and collective influence. The event aimed to fortify partnerships among key actors across the DC food system. You can read more about the event and its outcomes here.

Figure 6: Distribution of Current DC Food System Dashboard Indicators



Cohesion Through Partnerships

Building on these efforts, RFS convened a larger, specialized group of food system actors in June 2026. Through our investments and research these past three years, RFS identified local food procurement as a vehicle for larger, system-wide change. To further this work, RFS convened procurement leaders from DC universities and other institutions to discuss the power of institutional purchasing in supporting local and regional food systems and promoting sustainability. The event also convened stakeholders working across the supply chain, including organizations that represent producers, distributors, value chain coordinators, and others. The **40 attendees** collaboratively identified current successes in local food procurement. This convening fostered relationship building, aligned stakeholders around shared priorities, and laid the groundwork for future collaboration. You can find a summary of the convening here.



Georgetown's Sara Hoverter addresses attendees at the Local Sourcing Luncheon at American University in June 2026.

Thank You to Our Boards

Our Community Advisory Board and Board of Advisors serve as critical partners in advancing RFS's systems change efforts. Throughout FY26, board members provided strategic guidance and technical expertise through board meetings and individual engagements, helping to shape the design and application of the DC Food System Data Dashboard. Their contributions ensure that the dashboard reflects the full breadth of the food system and captures indicators that meaningfully measure progress toward a more resilient and equitable food system.

Our Board of Advisors:

Enid Borden
Chris Bradshaw
Caroline Howe
Diana Rios Jassa
LaMonika Jones
Alison Powers
Joelle Robinson
Lindsay Smith
Brandon Starkes
Beverley Wheeler

Our Community Advisory Board:

Mary Blackford
Kenny Bridgers
Mary Douglas-Brown
Ashley Drakeford
Ajowa Ifateyo
Maiya Lay
Dylan Owens
Rhonda Watson
Isaac Zama

ROADMAP FOR WHAT'S NEXT

For the past three years, we have been supported by a generous grant from Novo Nordisk, Inc. to build a more resilient food system in DC. The outcomes of this work have been substantial and affirm our commitment to and belief in investing in the local food system.

While this work has generated many lessons learned, two are particularly critical:

1. **Farmers First**. To meet growing demand for local food, we must strengthen regional food production and ensure the livelihoods of the farmers who feed our communities. To do this, we must invest in supporting farmers to scale up their production and to expand their market base.

2. **Purchasing is Power**. Procurement is a powerful tool to strengthen the local economy, improve health, and promote environmental sustainability. With these values in mind, and as demand for local food increases, higher education and other anchor institutions should increase their local food purchasing.

Together, these lessons move us toward a food system where farmers thrive, institutions lead by example, and every resident has access to fresh, local food. Investing in farmers and anchor institutions delivers lasting returns for our local and regional economy, and for our communities.

We invite funders and partners to join us in building the connected systems that will achieve collective resilience for DC's food system.






IN THE MEDIA

ABC 7 News

Growing Food and Cultivating Careers: How College Students are Helping a Local Farm

Read about American University's support to the Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food and Agriculture, including the HSHC Lab's AIE grant to the Arcadia Farm. Read more here.

AU Magazine

Rooted in Resilience

Read about the RFS project's approach to strengthening the resilience of the DC regional food system, and the impact it has had on our communities. Read more here.

Health Snaps Podcast

Why is Community a Cornerstone of Sustaining Public Health Programs?

Listen to this episode of AU's Health Snaps podcast, in which Dr. Stacey Snelling describes how the HSHC Lab has built meaningful community partnerships, including through the RFS project. Listen here.

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