

Local Food Coordinators:

Who are they, and why are they important?

Many groups and organizations can play a role in building a local food system. However, experience suggests the most efficient way to create a sustainable, healthy, and effective local food system with the greatest economic impact is to hire a coordinator who can orchestrate and lead its evolution. The creation of a resilient local food system requires the participation of many different community stakeholders: producers, consumers, institutions, businesses, those with tenuous food security, and government agencies. Because of the number of participants with varying priorities, each community is best served by hiring and supporting its own local food coordinator (LFC).

How could a Local Food Coordinator benefit your community?

- Create a more interconnected community by developing trusting relationships across sectors, and bringing unexpected allies together to create efficient working groups that succeed in reaching common goals.
- Provide opportunities for communities to gather, celebrate, learn about food, and engage in the conversation about food access and farm viability, providing the foundation for a stable local food system.
- Promote gardening and access for beginning and niche farmers at multiple scales.
- Promote a commitment to an economically vibrant, ecologically and nutritionally sound, and socially just local food system.

Examples of community impacts

- Coordinators in the Iowa Regional Food Systems Working Group raised more than \$1.6 million in the two year period from 2012 to 2013.
- Coordinators were able to track 171 new jobs created in Iowa (2012-2013) as a result of the local food sector.
- Between 2011 and 2016, seven additional entities, including five Extension offices, have hired LFCs to meet the growing demand for locally grown food.

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ISU Extension and Outreach and Local Food Coordinators

Cathann Kress, vice president of ISU Extension and Outreach, notes that Iowa needs rainmakers: "... a person who, through his or her skills and abilities, can bring people and resources together to meet the challenges facing extension, now and in the future." The regions of Iowa with the most effective local food systems have hired a coordinator -- a "rainmaker." These leaders have become essential to the communities that host them. "I get a dozen calls a day from people wanting to convene meetings about why local foods are important, from local farmers wanting to sell products, and from institutions wanting to know how they can source local produce," said one local food coordinator.

As consumer demand increases across Iowa for better access to fresh, locally grown foods, many county extension councils have responded by funding a local food coordinator position. County extension offices are an ideal base for a coordinator, as a critical component of success is to be anchored in a community-based organization. In northeast Iowa (ISU Extension Region 4), institutions like schools, supermarkets, and hospitals spent \$1.2 million in 2012 on locally grown food. That is almost \$1 million more invested in the local economy than was spent in 2005.

County extension councils have leveraged funds creatively to support coordinator positions, including rearranging existing county extension council funds, earning external grants, and forging partnerships (Resource Conservation and Development agencies, the University of Northern Iowa, county boards of supervisors, corporate entities, etc.) Regional council partnerships, where several county councils pool funds to hire a coordinator for the region, has been a particularly effective approach to sustainable funding.

Interested in having a local food coordinator serve your community? Contact our team to learn more about local food coordinator best practices, knowing if your community is ready to support a coordinator, sample job descriptions, onboarding checklists, and many more resources that can support you in hiring and setting up a coordinator for success. Visit us online at www.extension.iastate.edu/localfoods/ or contact Caitlin Szymanski, county support with the Local Foods Program, at szy@iastate.edu.

		Local food coordinators in the eight surveyed regions who have this responsibility							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Facilitation	Build coalitions and partnerships								
	Create / update and maintain a newsletter								
	Work with advisory boards and lead meetings								
	RFSWG member/coordinator/steering committee								
	Facilitate the development of (community) gardens								
	Buy Fresh Buy Local chapter coordinator								
	Assist local farmer's market								
	Other local organization member/leader								
	Technical assistance/resource for institutional buyers								
	Facilitate development of a food hub								
Education	Educational programs for farmers								
	Educational programs for consumers								
	Public information on local food systems for communities (Conferences, conventions, county fairs...)								
	Farm to School program								
Data / Evaluation	Local food database								
	Plan and implement appropriate impact evaluations and reports								
	Collect and analyze data and metrics to measure strength of local food systems								
Funding	Research funding and grants (for position and projects)								
Marketing	Organize public meetings for outreach (farm tours, farm crawl, bike n bite...)								
	Promotional marketing (fliers, branding campaign, logos, videos...)								
	Media use (tv, radio, newspaper, social media)								
	Website								
Business Development	Find opportunities for young farmers								
	Opportunities for "farmer in the middle"								
	Local food business model for region (aggregation and distribution)								
	Develop ag-based economic development strategies. Link them to local foods for schools and vulnerable communities.								

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