Homegrown Hillsborough Year One Qualitative Evaluation

Executive Summary

Overview

The Center for the Advancement of Food Security and Healthy Communities (CAFSHC) was approached by Hillsborough County, Florida, to conduct a qualitative evaluation of a novel food systems initiative: Hillsborough Homegrown. This report presents the first year (2023-2024) of these findings, with year two of this initiative (2024-2025) currently underway. This report includes a summary of the methodology, key findings, discussion of results, and future recommendations.

CAFSHC trained Hillsborough County paid interns (District Ambassadors) to conduct qualitative interviews with key stakeholders and organizations in the Hillsborough food system, which the study team then analyzed through thematic coding to explore emergent themes and sub-themes. In total, 119 semi-structured interviews were performed throughout the 2023 period. CAFSHC additionally conducted bi-monthly check-ins with District Ambassadors and Monica Petrella, Hillsborough County Food System Proertonst.(s)-1c(yz)4 (e)4 (d t)houghout the she 2023 pe4 (odi)-2 (d

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Introduction

The United Nations Food Systems Summit (von Braun et al., 2021) identified that food systems are essentially interrelated services (e.g., foodbanks) and programs ("farm to table") that create nested ecosystems of food "networks," that exist at multiple scales containing the global, regional, national, and local. With a global population expected to hit 9.8 billion by 2050, the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA, 2024) encourages research in, and evaluation of, sustainable systems and programs that will help ensure continued food security. This report primarily concerns a "local" food system, in this case in Hillsborough County, Florida, which is simultaneously diverse in its demographic makeup while also being very specific to its context and geographic setting.

Investigating and building local food system resilience and capacity, especially considering the economic- and health impacts/fallout of COVID-19 (Galanakis, 2020), is a burgeoning area of study in both "traditional" research exploring critical problems in the built- and social-environment as well as applied work that seeks to address longstanding disparities in food systems, including food insecurity (Béné, 2020). Homegrown Hillsborough is a county initiative that aims to support the Hillsborough County food system, which began with a year of exploratory research. Hillsborough continues to lead this community development initiative, where participating organizations network, coordinate food system programs, and perform outreach. Specific to this report, the University of South Florida's (USF) Center for the Advancement of Food Security and Healthy Communities (CAFSHC) was approached by Hillsborough to conduct a qualitative evaluation of this new endeavor.

Established in 2020, CAFSHC aims to transform the food security conversation through research, education, and programs that facilitate social equity to create healthier communities (CAFSHC, 2024a). Since its inception, CAFSHC has completed a variety of projects, such as evaluating the efficacy of food prescription programs for adults with non-communicable diseases, including Type 2 Diabetes in collaboration with Feeding Tampa Bay and Evara Health (Himmelgreen et al., 2024). CAFSHC also recently collaborated with Tampa Family Health Center (TFHC) to survey East Tampa residents about utilizing an on-site food pantry and an urban garden near the clinic (CAFSHC, 2024b). From these results submitted to the USDA, TFHC received a grant to implement the project.

Hillsborough County continues to involve local stakeholders through community engagement, providing an additional avenue to improve food system resilience and address food insecurity "on the ground." Based on findings from Year 1 of this evaluation, it was determined by Homegrown Hillsborough and the evaluation team that there is a large desire amongst participants for the development of educational materials and outreach resources (e.g., nutritional pamphlets, recipes, information about how to perform urban gardening). However, as Year 1 was an exploratory evaluation, these lines of inquiry have not yet led to the development of services or programs. Based on the results of the first year of evaluation, it is believed by Homegrown Hillsborough organizers that meeting this desire for educational needs will lead to a more cohesive Hillsborough County food system, amongst other ongoing pursuits. Such an approach will be one aspect of "Year 2" of this initiative, starting in Spring, 2024. This Year 1 evaluation hopes to provide insights that will help inform the direction of Year 2 and further into the future.

Methods

Data collected from the interviews were analyzed through content thematic coding via modified grounded theory (MGT). Thematic analysis and coding allow for a rich understanding of any recurring themes among, and within, various participant stakeholder groups to determine any overarching similarities among the groups (Braun and Clarke 2022). This was especially important given the structure of this year of evaluation work, as interviews could organically be coded and analyzed as they came in on a weekly basis. Participants were recruited through emails, phone calls, and snowballing from a stratified sample of potential participants. Interviews were conducted by District Ambassadors and recorded with participant permission, afterwords uploaded to a shared digital drive and scrubbed of identifiers by the evaluation team. Each recording was transcribed then coded to discern major themes from the participants' responses. Participant responses were also uploaded into an Excel file, with designated columns for each question and rows for each interview. Codes were developed based on the interview notes and were assigned to relevant portions of the interviews. In addition, relevant or interesting direct quotes were flagged for consideration to highlight participant experiences, some of which will be provided throughout this evaluation to illustrate key themes and takeaways. Coding assignments were cross reviewed by two individual researchers to ensure researcher parity and validation before final counts for the codes were tallied.

Results

In total, 119 interviews were conducted and transcribed, with 12 master codes (themes) developed which housed 217 individual codes (sub-themes) that fell within them. These 12 themes were further organized into two categories: 1) Context, and 2) Evaluation. The Context category concerned the "**Who**," the individual participant and their organization, while Evaluation focused on the "**Why**," their perception of the Hillsborough County food system, and their understanding of the Homegrown Hillsborough initiative. The following table is an organization of those categories and 12 themes. For reference where appropriate, tables or figures will be provided for each category theme, and while quantified (tabulated), it is the stories and perspectives that are most important in terms of qualitative data and interpretation. On that note, while salient themes were quantified, the number of responses will vary based on the question and the participant's discussion. Participants may feel strongly about a particular subject (which can branch into other topics, and potentially more "themes" developing) or may feel a particular question does not strongly fit themselves or their organization, for example.

Theme Category: Context	Theme Category: Evaluation
1. Position	1. Needs, Wants, General Desires
2. Organization	2. Hillsborough Challenges
3. Mission	3. H.H Interest
4. Serve (Communities Served)	4. H.H. Reservations
5. Values	5. Partnership Desires
6. Role	6. Partnership Dislikes

Context Themes

Theme 1: Participant's Position

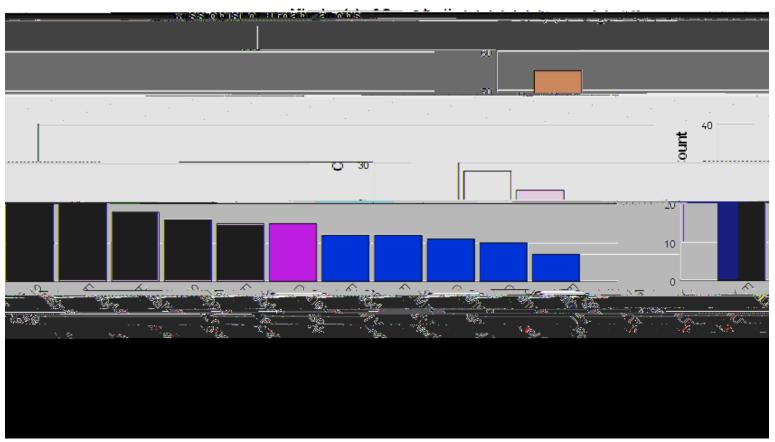| Position	#	%
Director / Co-Founder / Fellow	51	40.8
Educator / Researcher	13	10.4
Civic Worker	12	9.6
Management		

Figure 1: Bar chart visualization of participating organizations' missions.

Theme 5: Values of the Organization

Values   **#**

Relevant Question 1: Are there specific values your organization holds? If so, what would they be?

Relevant Question 2: Considering your organization's goals, how does your work supporting the food system meet those goals?

Organizational values reported by participants most often corresponded to promoting an equitable food system (n=12, 22.3%), relatedly food security was highly valued (n=16, 17%), promoting/selling organic food (n=15, 16%), promoting environmental conversation (n=13, 13.8%), community building (n=11, 11.7%), reducing waste (e.g., food waste) (n=11, 11.7%), with "Other" including n=7 (7.4%) additional response.

There is, of course, a great deal of overlap between these topics. When appropriate, participant responses that coincide with multiple of these themes were counted in multiple categories, the intent is to not draw lines that separate these organizations into neat boxes, but rather show commonalities and overlapping interests as this evaluation concerns Hillsborough's efforts to create an interconnected food system.

Theme 6: Role of the Organization

Relevant Question 1: How does or how would your organization work within, or support work within, the food system?

Relevant Question 2: What motivates your organization to participate in food system work?

Concerning how each participating organization perceived their "fit" or role within the food system, "education" was once more the most prevalent underlying theme (n=28, 40.6%). As this report now turns towards more qualitative descriptions of the analysis that was performed, the reader will continue to see education as front-and-center in responses. This is followed by a focus on nutrition promotion (n=15, 21.7%), which often overlapped with education, commercial pursuits (n=11, 15.9%), promoting wellness (n=6, 8.7%), serving as an outreach organizer or network (n=5, 7.2%), with "Other" including n=4 (5.8%) other responses.

Evaluation Themes

Theme 1: Needs, Wants, General Desires

Needs, Wants, Desires	#	%
Education	37	14.7

Representative Quotes: Desire for more urban gardens

Participant 1: "We have a space where we are able to welcome in community members to help us grow food. The more hands, the more we can grow, and we do not add any chemicals to our garden. So, everybody who joins us, we really are interested in finding chemical free or organic food."

Representative Quotes: Promoting local options and increased food access

Participant 1: "In my opinion I would say that there's not a lot of access to food not [found] in grocery stores and I think that the few options that we do have as far as people that own farms and sell food aren't advertised as well as they could be because we do have a lot of people locally that are selling food and growing their own food and it might not be in quantities that the grocery stores are doing it at but they definitely make enough to share and to sell and I don't think that we showcase that as well as we could."

Concerning the perceived needs, wants, and desires of participating organizations, education (n=37, 14.7%) was once more the focus. As "education" is a very broad term that ranges from public health nutrition campaigns to cooking brochures, its prevalence and perceived importance amongst participants' perceptions concerning their organization reaches and penetrates across themes and categorizations. For example, a large number of organizations were involved in some capacity with promoting food security, and an aspect of that health and wellness promotion involved the development, or the desire for, educational materials and ways to promote self-efficacy amongst their constituents. Additionally, as a large segment of the participant pool included educators and researchers, there were also considerations for developing materials that would benefit multiple age ranges from young children, adolescents, as well as college students. However, there was also commercial interest in education and outreach resources, for instance databases, online resources, and pamphlets/brochures concerning topics ranging from cooking recipes to information about where food is being locally sourced.

Education was followed by a desire for more urban gardening spaces (n=32, 12.7%), promoting local options (n=27, 10.7%) and promoting food access (n=25, 10%). These topics overlap with each other, and in many cases also with education, as participant organizations involve themselves with further investing in, and ingratiating themselves with, their constituent communities and those that they serve. Relatedly, there was a common thread concerning a need and desire to promote food access and local options due to a variety of challenges within Hillsborough, including income inequality and racial disparities in rates of food security, commercial "big agriculture" pushing out smaller farms and local growers, and community members lacking the information and greenspaces that would facilitate local and community growing initiatives. These topics are engaged with more directly in the next theme.

Theme 2: C Hillsborough County

ges in Hillsborough	#	%
ood deserts	31	22.3
lity	20	14.4
not supported	19	13.7
cessed foods	13	9.4
lack of farms	12	8.6
Obesity / health concerns	9	6.5

Representative Quotes: Problems in food access and income inequality

Participant 1: "My initial thought of the food system is that it is broken."

Participant 2: "I don't know. I just, if this is supposed to be a food system, it is very, very poor… it's for-profit."

Participant 3: "We produce a lot of food, but it's not enough for 900 families to help them overcome their food hunger or their weekly needs and such."

Representative Quotes: Local growers not being supported

Participant 1: "I can tell you that driving out to where I used to live, it's no longer cow farms. They're housing development strip malls."

      Concerning perceived challenges found within Hillsborough that need to be addressed, participants most often discussed issues related to inequalities in food access (n=31, 22.3%), for instance a common understanding of the county having areas which would be considered as food deserts. Relatedly, income inequality was the next most often identified challenge (n=20, 14.4%) and local growers as well as farmers not being supported (n=19, 13.7%). As the evaluation team regularly performs food insecurity research and evaluates programs attempting to address food insecurity, it is useful to note that along with income inequality, a high prevalence of fast food and processed foods were also mentioned by participants (n=13, 9.4%). Food insecurity is intimately linked with income inequality, and it is a common perception that calorie-dense fast foods contribute to rates of obesity and related health concerns, also mentioned here (n=9, 6.5%).

Theme 3: Homegrown Hillsborough Interests

HH Interests

Theme 4: Homegrown Hillsborough Reservations

HH Reservations	#	%
Time investment	25	41.1
If lacking clear deliverables during participation	13	21.3
If H.H. and organizational goals do not align	11	18
If financial contribution would be required	8	13.1
Other	4	6.6

Representative Quotes: Potential time investment

Participant 1: "[On a scale of one through five for Homegrown Hillsborough interest] I'm a 'four' or 'five.' I'm really excited about the work that [Homegrown Hillsborough] is doing. I am a little bit nervous like I do have a lot of time commitments. And so that's the reason that I would say a 'four' is I'm just nervous about the amount of commitment on my side."

There were not many stated reservations or uncertainties about organizational or personal involvement in Homegrown Hillsborough. However, the most commonly cited reservation (n=25, 41.1%), if any, was the concern that the initiative may take up too much of their time. Participants who expressed these potential concerns mentioned feelings of already being over-taxed concerning the amount of time available to them, or expressed worries that it may take time away from running their business or conducting work for their organization.

It should be noted/reiterated that the purpose of this evaluation was also to gauge participant interest in this *new* initiative, so such concerns may be alleviated when participants better understand the intended scope of Homegrown Hillsborough. After conducting interviews, participants were given packets of information about the program and were invited to join the network, which may change perceptions about time availability. Exploring this perception in Year 2 may also prove beneficial.

Theme 5: Partnership Desires

Representative Quote: Shared Goals

Participant 1: "To me, the value that we have is in the partnerships that we make… Partners that

Theme 6: Partnership Dislikes

Partnership Dislikes	#	%
Lack of follow through / commitment	6	35.2
Being taken advantage of	5	29.4
Overcommitted	2	11.8
Low energy or drive	2	11.8
Lack of measurable outcomes	2	11.8

Finally, it is worth mentioning that when participants were asked to describe any negative experiences when working previously in partnership with other organizations, only a few dislikes were mentioned. These most often included a lack of follow through and commitment from the other organization (n=6, 35.2%) and being taken advantage of by the organization (n=5, 29.4%). However, this is a very small percentage of the 119 interviews.

Discussion

The goal of this Year 1 Evaluation was to provide feedback concerning the perceived desire and need for a concentrated Hillsborough County food system, through the Homegrown Hillsborough initiative. This qualitative evaluation was performed through the analysis of 119

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Appendix – Qualitative Interview Guide

First, I'd like to talk about your organization and the work your organization does.

1. Please tell me about your organization and your position within the organization.

2. What is your organization's overall mission or vision?

    a. Are there specific values your organization holds? If so, what would they be?

3. Who does your organization primarily serve?

4. How do you currently serve your target clDC -0.i4 (a)4 (bn)4 (l)-2 (l)-2 ( ]TJ18.13 0 i)15 3. Ò2 (r)-2 (nk) (t)

8. Is there anyone in your organization who is particularly knowledgeable or the "go to" person about the food system or food system issues?

    a. [*Follow-up based on response*] Can you explain why you thought of them?

9. If you have been involved in food system work before, how did you get started?

    a. *[Probe]* What inspired your decision to do this work?

10. In your opinion, how well is the food system in Hillsborough County performing?

    a. [Probe if answer is something like "not so well" or "pretty well"] Can you explain your answer?

11. Any other thoughts you'd like to share on the food system?

We are now about at the half-way mark, just being conscious of time.

This next part in the interview is to learn more about your goals and priorities within the food system, which may or may not be your (r)rted?(t)-2 4n(e s)-1 (ha)4 (?-6(i)-2 (n H)2 (i)-2 (l)-2 (l)-2 (

11.

b. How does agricultural production impact your work, if at all?

c. How do you see agricultural production moving into the future?

13b. Next is the same question but for <u>community nutrition</u>. Again, the question is "in the context of Hillsborough County, what does community nutrition mean to you?

a. What does community nutrition look like to you?

b. How does community nutrition impact your work, if at all?

c. How do you see community nutrition moving into the future?

13c. Lastly, <u>food entrepreneurship</u>. What does that mean to you?
[Definition, if needed: Put simply, food entrepreneurship refers to the process of creating, developing, and managing a food-related business venture.]

a. What does food entrepreneurship look like to you?

b. How does food entrepreneurship impact your work, if at all?

c. How do you see food entrepreneurship moving into the future?

14. Do you have a specific goal for the food system in Hillsborough County?
    a. [*Probe, if "Yes" without explaining*] What would that goal be?

    b. [*Probe, if needed*] Can yood -2 (e4 (tB(-2 (e4 (tB(-2 o (h043 BDC /TT2 1 Tf-0.002 Tc 0.002 Tw 9.96

17. Does your organization often partner with others on projects or does your organization prefer to do most of that work in-house within the organization?

    a. Can you explain why that may be the case?

17a. What kinds of things do you try to vet or look for in potential partners?

17b. Have you ever had a negative experience with a partner within the food system?

    a. [*Probe*] Please explain.

18. Homegrown Hillsborough is imagined to be a network of community partners working towards a common food system goal or series of goals. Do you think something like this would be useful to your organization?

    a. [*Probe*] Please explain why.

19. What would encourage you to participate in Homegrown Hillsborough?

20. What would deter you from participating in Homegrown Hillsborough?

21. What are some resources a coordinating network like Homegrown Hillsborough could provide to your organization to make you successful in your food system work?

22. Now that you are more familiar with the vision for Homegrown Hillsborough, on a scale of 1-