

## **Cultivating Youth Leadership Through Sustainable Agriculture**

The Food Project seeks \$10,000 to support its innovative, proven youth development and food access programs. While youth programs are currently suspended due to the Covid-19 crisis, The Food Project hopes to resume in July. In the meantime, The Food Project is actively working on ways to engage with and pay youth during the hiatus and get fresh, healthy, affordable food to those who need it most.

### **At The Intersection of Youth, Food and Community**

The Food Project's mission is to create a thoughtful and productive community of youth and adults from diverse backgrounds who work together to build a sustainable food system. Growing food for residents of the city and suburbs, providing youth leadership opportunities, and supporting others to create change in their communities, The Food Project envisions a world where youth are active leaders, diverse communities feel connected to the land and each other, and everyone has access to fresh, healthy, affordable food.

The Food Project brings young people from the city and the suburbs together using the common ground of food and farming to bridge race, class, and cultural differences. Youth start out at age 14 in *Seed Crew*, where they learn critical workplace and communication skills, help to grow over 200,000 pounds of produce and learn about social justice, food systems, and environmental sustainability. After completing a summer on *Seed Crew*, youth move on to *Dirt Crew*, which is a nine month program that spans the academic year. *Dirt Crew* youth deepen their confidence as food systems leaders as they construct raised-bed gardens for families and engage the greater community through workshops, volunteer service days, and garden festivals. The next step is *Root Crew*, where youth use the skills and foundation knowledge that they developed in *Seed Crew* and *Dirt Crew* to manage affordable farmers' markets and support resident-owned fresh food supply chains.

At each stage, youth intersect with partner community organizations. They learn about the depth and breadth of initiatives needed to create positive social change. In their journey from *Seed Crew* to *Dirt Crew* to *Root Crew*, young people advance from skill- and knowledge-building experiences to leading change in their communities. Through lessons gleaned from hands-on work and personal and group reflection, young people experience growth beyond what is typically expected of high-school youth, learning to transcend difference through shared work in service of a more just and compassionate world.

Currently, The Food Project employs 145 youth from diverse backgrounds. Many of The Food Project's young people are hired directly from Lynn and Boston's historically under-resourced neighborhoods including Dorchester, Mattapan, Dudley, and Hyde Park. 60 percent identify as people of color; approximately half as female and half as male; and half identify as low-income.

These youth work on the Food Project more than 70 acres of urban and suburban farms, including a 10,000 square-foot greenhouse. The suburban farms (31-acre Baker Bridge Farm in Lincoln, and the 34-acre Reynolds Farm in Wenham) are the largest. The urban farms (Dudley Farms and Greenhouse in Dorchester and Roxbury, and the Ingalls School Farm in Lynn) provide lush urban growing space, serve as gathering places for community building, and grow the most in-demand crops for affordable farmers markets and local retailers. All farms serve as platforms for youth and volunteers to learn about sustainable agriculture, connect to the natural world, and participate in a sustainable food system. These farms directly improve the local food system by providing fresh, healthy, affordable produce to low-income, under-resourced communities and hunger relief organizations in Boston.

### **Engaging Youth for Almost Thirty Years.**

Launched in 1991, The Food Project sought to bring together teenagers from diverse racial and socio-economic perspectives to engage with their communities and learn work readiness and life skills through rigorous agricultural work and hunger relief efforts. During the program's first growing season, three staff and 18 teenagers planted, harvested and donated 20,000 lbs of food from 2.5 acres of land. Since then, The Food Project's impact has grown and the cumulative numbers are staggering. More than 1,770 youth have graduated from the organization's youth programs. They cultivated 4,700,000 pounds of produce, provided approximately 100,000 hours of service at hunger relief organizations and built more than 1,300 raised-bed gardens in backyards and community spaces.

The Food Project is unique and a leader in its field. Few youth development programs position youth as community leaders, opening their eyes to inequity and empowering them with the knowledge and the tools to do something about it. Fewer still engage teens around food and farming, and of those that do, many can trace DNA back to The Food Project.

Over the years, The Food Project gained national recognition and set best practices in the fields of youth development, sustainable agriculture, and food justice. The organization published two books (*Growing Together* and *French Fries and the Food System*) that describe its approach and curriculum, and include program-specific manuals for practitioners. Other organizational highlights include:

- Launching and growing a robust North Shore program, which currently serves 65 youth and includes farms in Lynn and Wenham.
- Initiating and spinning off national food justice and sustainability programs, *Rooted in Community* (1998) and *Real Food Challenge* (2007).
- Piloting an innovative matching program at Central Square Farmers' Market in Lynn (2006), which eventually became the Massachusetts Healthy Incentive Program (HIP), a \$6.5 million program managed by the state.
- Partnering with Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative to operate the 10,000-square-foot Dudley Greenhouse in Dorchester (2010), a year-round learning center for residents and gardeners, and more recently with North Shore Community College to manage their new 1200-square-foot greenhouse in Lynn (2019).
- Hosting winter and summer "Institutes" attended by more than 500 individuals from 38 states and overseas to widely share its model.

Another unique aspect of The Food Project is its commitment to involving community residents and community organizations at all stages of program planning and implementation. The organization is intentional about its partnerships to ensure that programs are not duplicative, but are also reflective of the needs, desires, and goals of the community. In the Dudley Square Neighborhood, The Food Project partners closely with community residents and the Dudley Square Neighborhood Initiative to identify resident needs and priorities. In Lynn, the organization works closely with The Lynn Food and Fitness Alliance, the Lynn Housing Authority, and community residents to advance and support resident goals as part of the broader Lynn Grows initiative.

### **Addressing the Wealth Gap Through Quality Early Employment**

Youth need meaningful summer and out-of-school work opportunities that prepare them for success. As of 2018, only 34.6% of teens held summer jobs, down from 51.7% in 2000 and reflecting a grim new reality, as the figure has barely increased from a low of 29.6% during the

Great Recession. Furthermore, there are huge disparities in employment for young people of color, as an estimated 78% of all summer jobs for teens nationwide went to white teens (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Teen employment is a predictor of economic success. A 2014 study showed that “for a young adult in high school ... 20 hours per week of part-time work ... resulted in annual earnings that were 20 percent higher 6-9 years after graduation” (Employment Policies Institute). In an effort to bridge this opportunity gap and bring young people together across differences to foster mutual understanding, The Food Project employs teens from diverse racial, cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. For many, participation is only possible because it is paid work. The Food Project’s pay structure rewards young people for commitment and growth, instilling positive work habits.

By positioning youth for success through early employment, The Food Project can close the significant and growing inequities in the communities in which it works. One of the most segregated cities in America, Boston has a significant and growing wealth gap. African American households have a median net worth of just \$8 compared to \$247,500 for their white counterparts. Over half of households in the Dudley neighborhood live on less than \$25,000 per year. Although just ten miles north of Boston, Lynn also sees some of the highest rates of poverty in the region, with twenty percent of the total population living at or below the federal poverty level.

The Food Project pays youth crew members competitive wages, a practice essential to bridging the opportunity divide that too many young people face. Seed Crew teens earn a stipend linked to minimum wage, and Dirt Crew and Root Crew members earn an hourly wage that starts at the minimum wage and increases with each year of experience. This system rewards young people for commitment and growth, instilling positive work habits from their first paid job. Additionally, The Food Project covers the cost of transportation for all teens to and from work sites, as many young people are unable to access jobs outside of their neighborhoods without this support.

### **Healthy Fresh Food is a Right Not a Privilege**

The Food Project’s fresh food access initiatives are firmly anchored in the conviction that *high-quality, fresh food is a right, not a privilege*. The Food Project works tirelessly toward the goal that all people—regardless of race, culture, age, economic status, or zip code—have access to life-giving, vibrant, healthy food. All produce is grown, harvested, washed, and packaged with deep care and consideration. Fresh food distribution is much more than an efficient transaction of goods. The Food Project sees sharing food—whether through hunger relief, farmers markets, or CSA shares—as an opportunity to hear stories, understand needs, and strengthen vital relationships.

The Food Project works in communities that face significant food access and health issues. Over half of households in Dudley live on less than \$25,000 per year. Dudley resident’s diabetes rates (15%) are nearly double the average of Boston as a whole (8%). In 2017 Massachusetts Public Health Association reported Lynn as one of the top cities in Massachusetts to experience a “grocery gap” with limited access points to fresh food. Lynn’s obesity rate (28%) and diabetes rate (11%) both far exceed state and national averages, and its public school district is in the ten most overweight and obese in the state.

The Food Project supports these communities by providing low cost CSAs, offering affordable produce at local farmers markets and corner stores, helping residents plant their own raised bed

gardens. The Food Project also donates 180,000 servings (60,000 pounds) of fresh food, planted, grown and harvested by youth, each year to 10 hunger relief partners and incubating two resident controlled food system movements: Dudley Grows and Lynn Grows.

### **The Food Project's Goals for 2020**

The Food Project program's strength comes from its interdisciplinary nature, working at the intersection of youth, food, and community. Each component strengthens the other, deepening the impact of the work. The organization's 2020 goals include:

#### **Youth Development:**

- Expand paid employment and leadership opportunities to 145 teenagers in FY 2020.
- Deliver curriculum that supports all youth in achieving core competencies across the fields of workplace skills; communication, teamwork, and leadership skills
- Teach youth about social change, community engagement and sustainable agriculture
- Provide youth with the tools to work across differences
- Measure for at least a 60 percent gain in knowledge and skills.
- Engage youth in meaningful and rigorous work on farms and in the communities of Lynn and Boston, creating a sustainable and just local food system

#### **Food:**

- Sustainably manage 70 acres of urban and suburban farmland and greenhouses, growing over 200,000 lbs of food.
- Distribute at least 600,000 servings of fresh produce to hunger relief organizations, farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs with a focus on reaching individuals eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

#### **Community:**

- Collaborate with the City of Boston on the DoubleUp SNAP-matching pilot program at corner stores, doubling the purchasing power of low-income consumers without cost to businesses.
- Provide community-led growing space for 30 groups at the Dudley Greenhouse, enabling residents to learn and grow produce for themselves and community partners of their choice.
- Build at least 95-100 raised garden beds for low- to moderate-income residents in the City of Lynn and in and around the Dudley neighborhood of Boston.
- Advance residents' priorities for increasing access to fresh, healthy, affordable food in their neighborhoods alongside the Lynn Grows and Dudley Grows steering committees.
- Continue to strengthen partnerships with organizations that are mission-aligned.

### **Measuring Impact**

The Food Project contracted with the consulting firm SEED Impact to take a fresh look at the evaluations of its youth programs. This project began with Seed Crew in 2019, is currently extending to Dirt Crew and will soon be applied to Root Crew. In Seed Crew, youth are assessed (pre- and post-program) to measure skills acquisition in five key areas:

- Sustainable Agriculture: Learning basic farming tasks, growing food, and developing a strong connection to the land.
- Working Across Difference: Forging deep connections with others from different backgrounds.

- **Communicating Powerfully:** Developing tools to have open and honest communication to use the power of their voice to create social change.
- **Workplace Skills:** Developing strong workplace practices to approach all work with rigor and responsibility.
- **Local Food System Change:** Building an understanding of disparities in accessing healthy food and a commitment to sharing that knowledge.

To assess organizational efficacy in increasing fresh food access, The Food Project tracks the following metrics in a custom-built database:

- Sales of fresh produce at The Food Project farmers markets and mobile markets;
- Percentage of farmers market sales transacted through federal and state benefits;
- Supply of fresh food to small businesses in Dudley and Lynn;
- Pounds of fresh food donated to hunger relief organizations;
- The number of gardens constructed by youth crews.

The Food Project also collects feedback from community partners about youth-led activities and hunger relief impact, collaborate with Lynn Community Health Center to measure the impact of a fresh food subsidy pilot for food insecure individuals who lack access to state or federal assistance, and work with the City of Boston to assess the efficacy of a SNAP-match pilot in corner stores.

### **Mission Driven Staff**

The Food Project's unique body of work has greatly impacted not only the lives of community members and youth who participate in our program but also the organization's own staff.

*"The Food Project is an incredible place for folks of all different backgrounds--youth, volunteers, staff, CSA members-- to come together in a shared space and learn about food systems. I love getting the chance to change the way people think about and interact with food. I feel that what we eat is one of the most important choices we make on a daily basis and it's very exciting to be a part of that decision for such a diversity of people." - Alex Ode, Lincoln Grower's Assistant and CSA Manager*

*"I am passionate about the work The Food Project does because I was once that excited, eager, confident youth who was given a chance to learn and expand their horizons. Now as the Supervisor that gets to foster and grow relationships with youth, nothing gives me more excitement than to see youth go through their journey, with smiles, laughter, and amazing memories to share with others!" - Omar Carranza, Youth Development Specialist*

*"I believe that the staff at The Food Project work hard to create a really unique community for our youth and neighbors. It is a community where all skills, ideas, and abilities are honored. I am passionate to work in a farming environment of this kind- because I believe this is the only way forward in creating an inclusive food system that works for all of us." - Danielle Andrews, Dudley Farm Manager*

### **Proposed Budget and Funding Sources**

Please refer to the attached budget for additional funding sources.