

Homegrown Hillsborough Year One Qualitative Evaluation

Prepared by the USF Center for the Advancement of Food Security and Healthy Communities
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Acknowledgements

This report provides the results of the Year 1 Homegrown Hillsborough qualitative evaluation. This evaluation is the result of coordinated efforts among Hillsborough County, Florida, in partnership with Hillsborough WellBuilt Cities and the University of South Florida (USF) Center for the Advancement of Food Security and Healthy Communities (CAFSHC).

We are grateful for the insights and support of our partners, especially Monica Petrella, Food System Program Coordinator for Hillsborough County, as well as the amazing team of District Ambassadors that performed interviews and outreach for this evaluation. We are also thankful to the participants who shared their experience and perspectives concerning this novel food system program for Hillsborough County, as well as their insights concerning the different aspects of the overall food system in which we all participate. Homegrown Hillsborough began in 2023, where CAFSHC was approached to conduct a qualitative evaluation of this new endeavor. It is our hope that this first-year evaluation report provides insights and possible future directions for key stakeholders and policy makers within Hillsborough County, especially as we turn our sights on this continued partnership into Year 2 of this burgeoning food system program.

Sincerely,
The USF Center for the Advancement of Food Security and Healthy Communities.

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Homegrown
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**Center for the Advancement of Food
Security and Healthy Communities**

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 Program Coordinator, throughout the study period to discuss initial findings, and provide guidance for continued interviews. Preliminary results were also presented to Homegrown Hillsborough stakeholders in December, 2023, and February, 2024.

Key Findings

Participant Summary

- Most participants held a leadership position (e.g., program director, co-founder).
- Many organizations were non-profits, worked with school systems, or were commercial.
- Organization missions were primarily aligned with education or sustainability.
- Organization values included promoting an equitable food system and food security.
- Organizations often served some combination of the local community or broad audiences.
- Organizations perceived their role primarily concerning education or nutrition-promotion.

Evaluation Summary

- Education promotion (e.g., desire for materials/resources, nutrition education), more urban gardening spaces, and promoting local options were common desires.
- Perceived challenges in Hillsborough included lack of food access, income inequality, and local growers not receiving necessary support.
- Potential interest (4.38 out of 5 on Likert Scale) in Homegrown Hillsborough included potential collaboration opportunities, and communication/coordination/logistics support.
- While few, reservations of Homegrown Hillsborough involvement included the potential time commitment that may be required.
- Participants desire to work with organizations that share similar goals, which Hillsborough County's food system initiative can facilitate moving into the future.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	0
Executive Summary	1
Overview	1
Key Findings	1
Table of Contents	2
Introduction	3
Hillsborough County Demographics	4
Evaluation Overview	4
Methods	5
Results	5
Findings Summary	6
Figure and Table Interpretation	6
Context Themes	7
Theme 1: Participant’s Position	7
Theme 2: Participant’s Organization	8
Theme 3: Mission of the Organization	9
Theme 4: Communities Served	11
Theme 5: Values of the Organization	12
Theme 6: Role of the Organization	13
Evaluation Themes	14
Theme 1: Needs, Wants, General Desires	14
Theme 2: Challenges in Hillsborough County	16
Theme 3: Homegrown Hillsborough Interests	17
Theme 4: Homegrown Hillsborough Reservations	18
Theme 5: Partnership Desires	19
Theme 6: Partnership Dislikes	20
Discussion	20
Future Directions	21
References Cited	22
Appendix – Qualitative Interview Guide	23

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.

Hillsborough County Demographics

With a population of 1.46 million people as of the 2020 US census, 6.8% of Florida's residents live in Hillsborough County, making it Florida's third most populous county (Office of Economic and Demographic Research [OEDR], 2023). Between 2010 and 2020, the population grew by over 200,000 people (OEDR, 2023). In this county, 72.9% identified as White, 30.5% Hispanic or Latino, 18.5% as Black or African American, 4.8% as Asian, 3.1% as two or more races, 0.6% as American Indian and Alaska Native, and 0.1 as Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (US Census Bureau, 2020). In 2021, the employment rate for Hillsborough County was 4.3%, but the preliminary unemployment rate was 2.6% for 2022. 14.3% of people in the county of all ages lived at or below the poverty line in 2021, with 19.5% of individuals under the age of 18 living at or below the poverty line (OEDR, 2024). The Median Household income for 2021 was 64,164 dollars and 79,014 dollars for the Median Family Income (OEDR, 2024). For 2020, Florida as a whole received an income inequality score of 0.472, measured using the Gini index (Deloitte et al. 2020). Feeding America, a nationwide network of food banks, found that 10% of Hillsborough County residents experience food insecurity, with 33% of that population falling above the threshold for governmental food assistance programs (Feeding America 2021).

Evaluation Overview

CAFSHC was approached and tasked with conducting a qualitative evaluation for Year 1 of Homegrown Hillsborough (USF IRB ID: STUDY005421, exempt status) while a county research team separately conducted a quantitative survey. This report concerns the qualitative findings from this study, which will be broken down by section below. Prior to evaluation implementation CAFSHC met with Monica Petrella, Hillsborough County Food System Program Coordinator, to discuss and implement the proposed study design, including feedback concerning the research instrument (interview guide) and recruitment materials. District ambassadors hired by the county conducted the interviews and participant recruitment for this study, collecting interview data for the CAFSHC evaluation team to transcribe and analyze. Over multiple training sessions CAFSHC trained district ambassadors for each step of this process, including research ethics training, providing workshops to learn interview and recruitment techniques, and instructions for how to properly record, store, and transmit interview data to the evaluation team. CAFSHC, along with Monica Petrella, additionally held weekly and then bi-monthly check-in meetings during the entirety of this Year 1 evaluation.

Year 1 primarily focused on multiple key areas:

- Participants' organization and role within the Hillsborough County food system.
- Understandings of the food system, including perceptions of challenges or strengths of the food system in Hillsborough County.
- Organizational goals in the food system, as they relate to agricultural production, community nutrition, or food entrepreneurship.
- Perceptions, desires, and perceived need for a coordinated Hillsborough County food system.

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

Findings Summary

Participants were most often held a leadership position (e.g., a program director, organizational co-founder, or fellow) working for a non-profit organization, and participating organizations in this evaluation generally valued food and nutrition education as well as efforts to promote sustainability (both in the environment and food system). Organizations primarily served some combination of broad audience (e.g., commercial interests, “the county” broadly), or their local communities (for instance, in the case of community and urban farms or faith-based organizations).

In terms of beliefs and desires, organizations most often perceived that food access, income inequality, and local food growers not being supported were pressing concerns for Hillsborough, and participants largely desired more ways to promote food and nutrition education/outreach, more local food options, and there additionally was a common desire for more urban gardening and green spaces.

Participating organizations were overwhelmingly interested in Homegrown Hillsborough (4.38/5 on a Likert-scale measuring likelihood of interest, the only quantitative question asked in the interview guide). Additionally, the possibility for logistical support options (e.g., databases, organizational directories and resources) and increased communication channels between organizations also fueled desires concerning potential partnerships and collaboration in this Homegrown Hillsborough initiative.

Figure and Table Interpretation

Figures and tables have been color coded for quick reference (green = high number of responses; yellow = medium number of responses; red = low number of responses; orange = “Other” which constitutes very low numbers of responses condensed together). These colors are not meant to prescribe meaning (for instance, saying that “red” is a negative or unfavorable response) and should not be read or interpreted as such.



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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	12	9.6
Farmer / Grower	10	8
Team Member	10	8
Small business owner	5	4
Other	12	9.6

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

One caveat with these numbers (which applies to all of the following responses as well) are that they are based on participants *explicitly* identifying what position they hold in their organization, not every participant indicated their position, and it is not our role as evaluators or researchers to “fill in the blanks” if the participant does not respond in the way we would expect. This is an important note as, for instance, there were more farmers and growers recruited than the n=10 number would indicate (farmers and growers are better represented in the next theme, “Organization” below), so these numbers should be approached conservatively as a general “ballpark” of the most commonly held positions.

That being said, the overwhelming majority of participants for Year 1 of Homegrown Hillsborough identified their role in the organization they either lead or work for as the program director, co-founder, or fellow (n=51, 40.8%). These “upper level” positions were condensed together as often these individuals may simultaneously occupy multiple positions in this regard, and the overall functioning of this position was to take some form of leadership role in everyday decision making for their particular organization. This was followed by educators and researchers (n=13, 10.4%), civic workers (n=12, 9.6%), and management positions (n=12, 9.6%). The fewest respondents corresponded to farmers and growers (n=10, 8%), small business owners (n=5, 4%) and the remainder falling under “Other” (n=12, 9.6%).

Theme 2: Participant's Organization

Organization	#	%
Non-profit	25	20.8
University / School System	20	16.7
Commercial	16	13.3
Community Farm / Garden	15	12.5
Farm	13	10.8
Municipality	11	9.2
Healthcare/Wellness	6	5
Faith-based	6	5
Other	8	6.7

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

Non-profit organizations (n=25, 20.8%) and closely followed by university and school systems-related organizations (n=20, 16.7%) were the most represented organizations interviewed. Commercial businesses and institutions (n=16, 13.3%), community farms and community/urban gardens (n=15, 12.5%), non-urban farms (n=13, 10.8%), municipalities (n=11, 9.2%), healthcare and wellness services (n=6, 5%), and faith-based organizations (n=6, 5%) followed these numbers in descending order of representation. "Other" accounted for a sizeable number of organizations that could not so easily be lumped together (n=8, 6.7%).

Theme 3: Mission of the Organization

Mission	#	%
Education	55	24.8
Sustainability	28	12.6
Food Security	23	10.4
Health / Wellness	18	8.1
Support Food System	16	7.2
Food Sovereignty / Empowerment	15	6.8
Food Entrepreneurship	12	5.4
Environmentalism	12	5.4
Community Engagement	11	5.0
Community Gardens	10	4.5
Engagement with Nature	7	3.2
Other	15	6.8

Relevant Question 1: What is your organization's overall mission or vision?

A graph of this data for visual reference is found on the next page. Concerning the overall “mission” or “vision” of the participant’s organization, education was the overwhelming focus (n=55, 24.8%), which was a common theme found throughout the evaluation at each stage of the data collection and analysis process. This was distantly followed by promoting sustainability (n=28, 12.6%), addressing food security (n=23, 10.4%), health and wellness promotion (n=18, 8.1%), and supporting the food system (n=15, 6.8%). Less represented but still present missions/visions constituted food entrepreneurship (n=12, 5.4%), environmentalism (n=12, 5.4%), community engagement (n=11, 5%), community gardens (n=10, 4.5%), and engagement with nature (n=7, 3.2%). “Other” included 15 other low-response answers to this question.

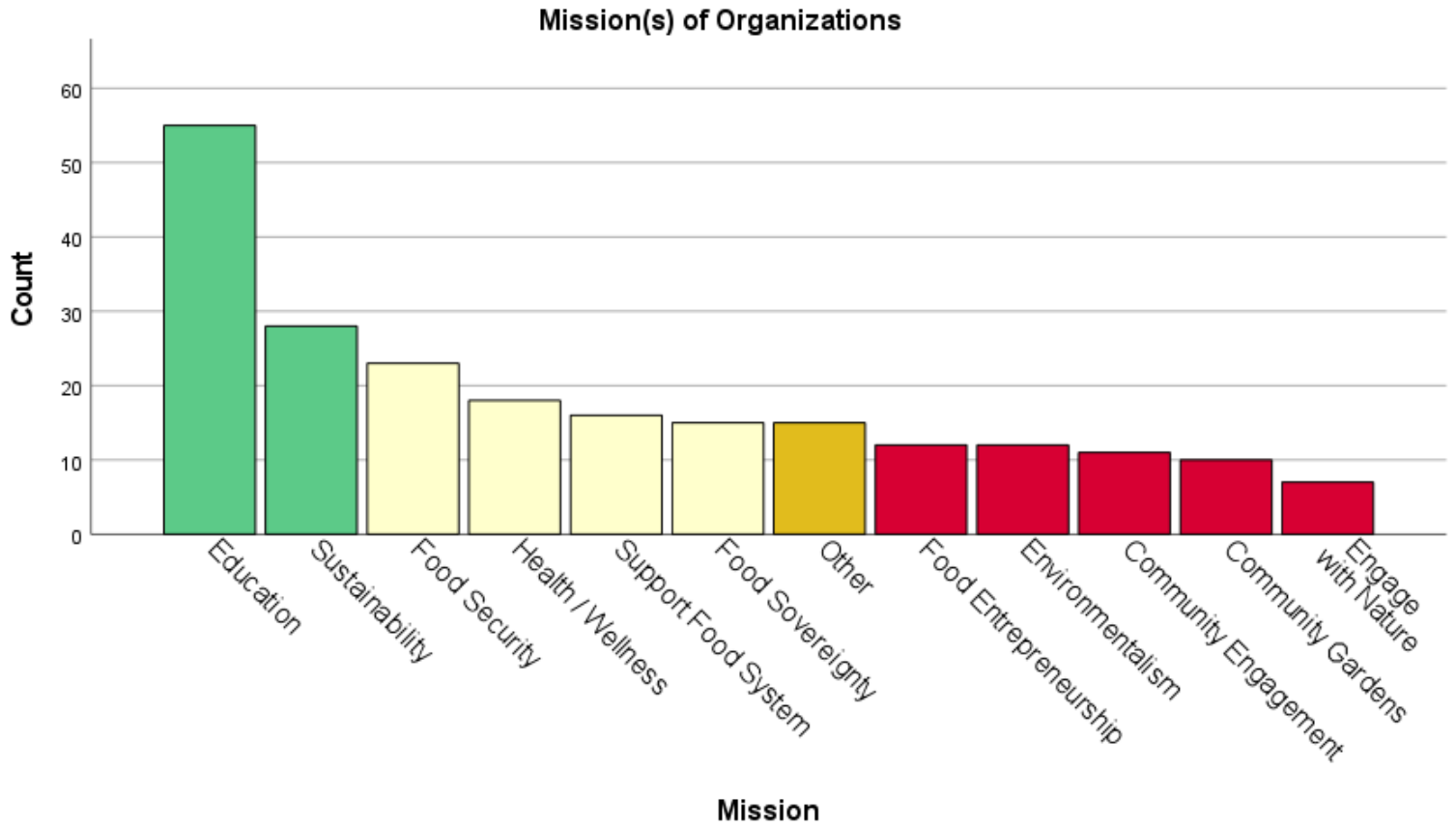


Figure 1: Bar chart visualization of participating organizations’ missions.

Theme 4: Communities Served

Serve (Communities Served)	#	%
Local Community	29	19.3
Broad Audience	28	18.7
Youth	23	15.3
Food Insecure	21	14
Commercial Clients	12	8
College Students	12	8
Community Gardens	7	4.7
School Systems	7	4.7
Other	11	7.3

Relevant Question 1: Who does your organization primarily serve?

Relevant Question 2: How do you currently serve your target clientele?

When participants were asked to describe the community or population their organization serves, their local community (n=29, 19.3%) and a broad audience (n=28, 18.7%) were closely matched. For instance, a food truck purveyor or other business may not be particularly concerned about catering to a specific population, while a community garden may primarily be attempting to administer to their local community. Following these two themes, serving youth (K-12 students or generally non-adults) followed (n=23, 15.3%), as well as food insecure populations (n=21, 14%), commercial clients (n=12, 8%), college students (n=12, 8%), community gardens (both serving the gardens themselves and their utilizers/constituents) (n=7, 4.7%), and school systems (more broadly than college or K-12)(n=7, 4.7%). Finally, “Other” constituted a moderate size (n=11, 7.3%).

Theme 5: Values of the Organization

Values	#	%
Equitable Food System	21	22.3
Food Security	16	17
Organic	15	16
Environmental Conservation	13	13.8
Community Building	11	11.7
Waste Reduction	11	11.7
Other	7	7.4

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

Role	#	%
Education	28	40.6
Nutrition	15	21.7
Commercial	11	15.9
Wellness	6	8.7
Outreach	5	7.2
Other	4	5.8

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
More urban gardens	32	12.7
Promoting local options	27	10.7
Promoting access	25	10
Funding	24	9.5
Food Choice / Culturally relevant food	14	5.6
Rethinking agriculture	12	4.8
Coordination	11	4.4
Policy development	10	4.0
Nutrition-based healthcare	9	3.6
Data	8	3.2
Composting	8	3.2
Other	29	11.5

Representative Quotes: Desire for more education opportunities

Participant 1: “There's no point in providing the community with food, nutritious food resources, and targeting that [food] accessibility and that availability if the community is not well educated on the importance of food and nutrition and the impact on our health. And that is done through training, through programs. So that's what community nutrition looks to me.”

Participant 2: “[Nutrition education] is going to benefit community nutrition moving forward in schools, and why in schools? Because at an early age, children will be able to receive that education on the importance of healthy eating, the importance of nutrition, the importance of healthy eating habits. And that is so, so important when we talk about the lack of education in our community, [and] lack of nutrition education in our communities that begins at an early age.”

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: Challenges in Hillsborough County

Challenges in Hillsborough	#	%
Food access / food deserts	31	22.3
Income inequality	20	14.4
Local growers not supported	19	13.7
Fast food / Processed foods	13	9.4
Development / lack of farms	12	8.6
Obesity / health concerns	9	6.5
Soil health	7	5.0
Exporting too much food	5	3.6
Lack of knowledge and skills	5	3.6
Other	18	12.9

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	#	%
Collaboration opportunities	34	34.7
Communication / Coordination	23	23.5
Logistical support	19	19.4
Aligns with goals	6	6.1
Nutrition promotion	4	4.1
Resources / Data	4	4.1
Tangible results	4	4.1
Other	4	4.1

Representative Quotes: Interest in collaboration

Participant 1: “Because we can't, you know, start a food system project on our own. We need the assistance and the collaboration and the knowledge from other community members and other leaders that are well equipped and very much knowledgeable on the issues, the needs, and the solutions.”

Participant 2: “We believe in whole system voices... that if we want to have a flourishing community, all voices need to be heard and solutions need to be whole system [focused].”

Representative Quotes: Desire for communication and coordination opportunities

Participant 1: “I think that there's a better way to coordinate, to do coordinated care around food, and hopefully groups like yours will help us all to come together to learn about how we can make the fragmented system whole.”

Participant 2: “So, I think that's another way that entrepreneurship and business could look in the future. How do we collaborate and help each other versus compete...”

Likert Scale of Homegrown Hillsborough Interest: 4.38/5

Participants held a common perception, and desire, that Homegrown Hillsborough would promote collaboration between organizations (n=34, 34.7%), provide communication and coordination opportunities (n=23, 23.5%), and facilitate logistical support (e.g., databases/directories of businesses, where to source food for their business) that would promote their organization’s operations (n=19, 19.4%). When asked to rate on a scale of 1-through-5 (1 being “very low interest” and 5 being “very high interest”) their level of interest in Homegrown Hillsborough, the mean response was 4.38/5, meaning there is a high degree of current interest.

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

Partnership Desires	#	%
Shared Goals	26	51
Long-term Engagement	7	13.7
Knowledgeable	5	9.8
Education-focused	4	7.8
“Not picky”	4	7.8
Other	5	9.8

Representative Quote: Shared Goals

Participant 1: “To me, the value that we have is in the partnerships that we make... Partners that are adding value, you know, so where each one is doing what they can do best. And those partnerships where, you know, it's a win-win situation for both organizations. That's what we really look for in partnerships.”

When asked to express traits or qualities participants and their organizations desire in partnerships, having shared and aligned goals overwhelmingly was the response (n=26, 51%). Other cited reasons included partners that involved themselves in long-term engagement with the communities they serve (n=7, 13.7%) and who are knowledgeable about the work they intend to accomplish (n=5, 9.8%). A few participants also mentioned a desire to work with other organizations that also were focused on education (n=4, 7.8%), while others expressed that they were not particularly “picky” with the organizations that they work with (n=4, 7.8%) more so desiring opportunities to collaborate when possible.

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 interviews collected by paid Hillsborough interns (District Ambassadors) after receiving ethics and research training from the CAFSHC evaluation team. This evaluation was performed in 2023, which culminated in multiple presentations of both preliminary and final findings to Hillsborough County and its partners at the University of Florida (UF) IFAS Extension office during December 2023, and February 2024. This report is the final product of that Year 1 evaluation.

As discussed throughout this report, participants representing their respective organizations shared many commonalities in their interview responses. This is most apparent concerning the salient themes that developed over time, especially that the majority of respondents are involved, or are interested in, education and outreach initiatives to various degrees. Seeing as most participants identified as belonging to a leadership position amongst their organization, this desire and focus on education likely permeates other aspects of their responses, evidenced by education repeatedly arriving as a common theme or desire. However, other interests are also represented here, including nutrition promotion, affording more public space and resources towards greenspaces including local farm and urban growing centers, as well as an interest in furthering their food entrepreneurial pursuits, depending on the organization.

Additionally, multiple challenges were identified as pressing issues to be addressed in Hillsborough including tackling income and food inequality, local growers and food businesses needing more municipal and private support, and segments of Hillsborough County residents struggling with diet related chronic diseases amongst a prevalence of fast-food options.

Homegrown Hillsborough is uniquely positioned as an initiative that seeks to connect these sometimes overlapping and diverging organizations through a shared network, with the potential of offering avenues to address these concerns when moving into the future, if desired.

Overall, organizations are interested in Homegrown Hillsborough (4.38/5 on a Likert-scale measuring likelihood of interest, for reference) for multiple underlying reasons including the potential for increased collaboration opportunities, knowledge of likeminded programs, logistical support options and interconnected communication channels between partners. A question that the evaluation team would raise could be how to best turn the information gathered from Year 1 of this evaluation into forward momentum when looking into Year 2 and beyond.

Future Directions

CAFSHC continues to serve as evaluators for Homegrown Hillsborough into Year 2 of this initiative. After the evaluation team presented these findings and through multiple collaborative discussions with Monica Petrella, Hillsborough County's Food System Program Coordinator, it was determined that most organizational missions involve education to some degree and there is a strong perception amongst organizations that education needs to be further promoted to increase food security, health and wellness, and also commercial interests. It is our recommendation that, given this information, this focus is specific enough to be beneficial to those that are concerned with education while also being broad enough to be of use to organizations not explicitly involved or overly interested in this topic. Exploring what educational materials and outreach deliverables could be developed, would be a useful means to link similar organizations in this area together and cross-pollinate resources or information between- and outside of these organizations.

Outside of education, and in alignment with the stated goals of Homegrown Hillsborough, finding additional ways to link like-minded organizations together would benefit this initiative in the long term especially through word of mouth and continued networking, maintaining momentum around this new initiative is key in order to promote long term growth over time. However, with the most prevalent concern amongst participants being the potential for overly taxing additional time commitments, Hillsborough organizers may want to find methods and avenues to assuage those reservations. Given participants were approached for interviews with the intention of gauging interest in this initiative prior to enrollment and hearing much about the program, it would also be beneficial to gauge interest and the level of knowledge participating organizations have about Homegrown Hillsborough after receiving the post-interview informational packets and being invited to the online network.

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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 clientele?

Thanks! You've been invited to participate in this interview because we have identified that your organization has been involved in food system work, or possibly might in the future.

5. When I say the term "food system," what comes to mind?
 - a. *[Probe]* How would you define the food system?
 - b. *[Probe, if participant is unsure]* You can think of the food system as comprising all aspects of food production, processing, distribution and marketing, consumption and access, as well as resource management. This perspective looks at all levels from the local to the national. Our project specifically is concerned with the Hillsborough County food system.
6. How does or how would your organization work within, or support work within, the food system?
 - a. *[Probe, if needed]* What aspects of the food system is your organization involved?
7. Considering your organization's goals, how does your work supporting the food system meet those goals?
 - a. *[Probe, if needed]* What motivates your organization to participate in food system work?

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 organization’s goals.

12. Let’s imagine for a moment that money, time, training, etc. wasn’t an issue and you could enact a solution to a single problem you believe exists in the food system. What would you propose?
 - a. *[Probe, if needed]* Can you please explain your answer?

13. Homegrown Hillsborough is the name of the forthcoming network of food system partners in Hillsborough County. Homegrown Hillsborough is going to focus on three main aspects of the food system. They are agricultural production, community nutrition, and food entrepreneurship. I’m going to present each one of the topics and ask you to respond.
 - 13a. When I say agricultural production in the context of Hillsborough County’s food system, what does that mean to you?
 - a. What does agricultural production look like to you?

- 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 community nutrition. 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, food entrepreneurship. 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 you explain your answer?
- c. [*Probe, if not pressed for time*] Why would you say that is your goal?

15. Anything else you’d like to say regarding goals and priorities in the Hillsborough County food system?

This last portion of this interview is to learn more about the resources you might need to be successful in implementing food system work and how Homegrown Hillsborough could help.

16. If you wanted to start a food system project tomorrow, where would you go as a starting point?

- a. What resources would you seek or need?

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 1-5 (5 being very interested) how likely do you think your organization will join the network?

23. Any final thoughts or questions you might have about this interview or the project?

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions and share your perspective. We really appreciate your involvement in this portion of the process as it will help us create a program plan that fits the needs of food system stakeholders.

Your time as been appreciated, before I leave here are some additional materials that better describe the program.