

FAITH Frozen Produce Project in Partnership with the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana

Project Lead: Families Anchored in
Total Harmony, Inc. (FAITH CDC)

Reporting Period: October 2022 – September 2024

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Executive Summary

This report assesses the FAITH Frozen Produce project for the first two years of the initiative. The following are key findings:

Successful Kitchen Development - The FAITH Frozen Produce kitchen was fully renovated to create a highly functional space for receiving, prepping, freezing, and storing local produce, as well as to support program expansion, including cooking of soups and other frozen products.

Initiation of Produce Procurement - Produce was procured from three local farms and local farms were educated on the opportunity to sell produce to FAITH Frozen Produce. The program presents an opportunity for farms to produce items in bulk as freezing eliminates the risk of food waste.

Extensive Research and Development - Extensive testing was undertaken to identify best practices relating to produce preparation specific to each food, blanching needs and methods, size of frozen food packages, and frozen food taste and appearance after several months of storage.

Successful Frozen Produce Production and Distribution - A total of 245 pounds of local vegetables and fruits were prepped, frozen, packaged, with all items provided to the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana for distribution to approximately 20 local families, with recipients reporting high satisfaction with the foods.

Development of Educational Materials - Educational handouts and recipes were developed and posted on the FAITH CDC website. Topics include benefits of frozen foods, how to use and prepare frozen foods, and resources highlighting 24 different locally grown vegetables and fruits.

Planning of Community Engagement - The educational materials will be leveraged during upcoming community engagement events, with food demos and nutrition learning opportunities being planned to occur in Q4 2024 and Q1 2025. Connection has also been made with local organizations for future frozen produce product vending.



Background

FAITH Farms & Orchard (F&O), led by Families Anchored in Total Harmony, Inc. (FAITH CDC), produces over 40,000 pounds of fresh, locally grown produce that is distributed to residents of Gary. This is a great benefit to Gary and the surrounding area, as it is well established that regular consumption of produce offers numerous health benefits. Eating fruits and vegetables provides high amounts of health promoting vitamins and minerals, assists in weight management, protects against various diseases – such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes – and can boost mental health. Locally grown produce can be particularly nutritious, as it is harvested when ripe and enjoyed soon after, offering maximum nutrients. Furthermore, the availability of local fresh produce is especially significant in Gary, as the poverty rate is 33.1%, twice that of Lake County (15.8%) and nearly three times that of Indiana (11.6%), and the region has significant food security challenges, with approximately 50 USDA designated food deserts in Northwest Indiana.

Produce from FF&O is harvested and enjoyed fresh throughout the year, as hoop houses allow for year-round production. However, given that fresh produce must be consumed within days or weeks, the inability to store produce for later consumption is a barrier to expanded production. This gap between produce grown and produce production potential leads to decreased opportunities for health-promoting fruits and vegetables to be enjoyed by Northwest Indiana residents.

The FAITH Frozen Produce project, in partnership with the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana, addresses these issues, providing Gary residents with the tools and resources to consume both fresh and frozen local produce throughout the year. The FAITH Frozen Produce project involves prepping and freezing local produce, with 20% of the frozen product donated to the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana, and the remaining sold locally to residents, hospital systems, schools, or other organizations. The project allows FF&O to expand growing capacity, limit produce waste, and make available a wide variety of locally grown produce year-round. Additionally, local produce is procured from other local producers, providing market opportunities and expanding growing capacity. Furthermore, the project includes development of educational resources and community education events to teach residents about the benefits of eating fresh vegetables and fruit and how to prepare and use frozen produce.

Timeline and Achievements

Phase I: Planning and Education Development

November 2022 – March 2023

- On-boarding of Project Director, Chef Lucero Martinez-Donato
- Kitchen planning and preparation
- Nutrition education and recipe development, including flyers highlighting benefits and uses
- Launch of FAITH Frozen Produce page on website



Achievements

- Build out of a FAITH Frozen Produce Community Kitchen
- 245 pounds of frozen produce donated to the Food Bank of NW IN for distribution
- Procurement of produce from 3 local farms
- Development of 26 educational flyers
- Extensive Research and Development supporting future production

Phase 2: Kitchen Development

April 2023 – March 2024

- Building improvements and equipment installation
- Blast chiller for efficient freezing
- Walk-in freezer for storage prior to distribution
- Workstations for washing, chopping, prepping, and freezing (total of 4)
- Initiation of Research & Development
- Marketing of project with Ribbon Cutting event held March 21st, 2024

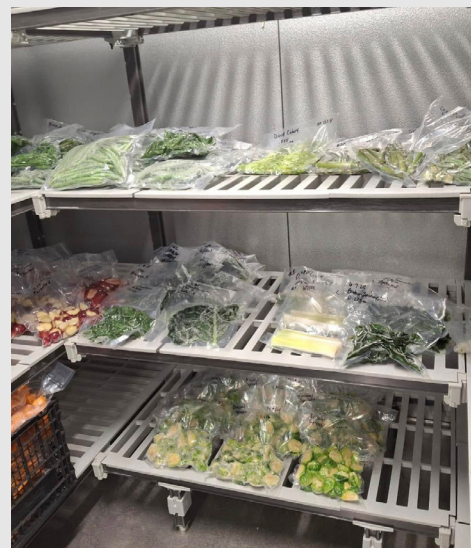


Timeline (Cont'd)

Phase 3: Research and Development

April 2024 – September 2024

- Procurement from 3 local organizations, including FAITH Farms & Orchard, Region Roots, and Johnson's Farm
- Prepping and freezing of local produce, with all products donated to the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana
- Process development, determining foods requiring blanching, size of frozen food portions, size of prepped frozen food (i.e., chopped vs. whole spinach)
- Hosting of taste tests, demonstrating that produce maintains quality several months after freezing
- Frozen food recipes development (i.e., cinnamon apples)
- Next Urban Ag Generation (NUAG) interns completing rotations in the kitchen



Phase 4: Production and Community Engagement (In-Progress)

October 2024 – December 2024

- Continued frozen food production, with donation of at least 20% to Food Bank of Northwest Indiana
- Upcoming: A frozen collard greens dish will be provided to the Food Bank for distribution and feedback
- Upcoming: A frozen cauliflower soup and butternut squash is being developed and tested
- Collaboration with local hospital and other organizations to incorporate frozen products, such as soup, into menu
- Make products available to community through retail sales
- Community education, including preparation using frozen produce, strategies to incorporate frozen produce into healthy and culturally appropriate meal plans, and food demonstrations
- Utilization of developed nutrition education flyers and recipes to support education initiatives
- Maximize use of kitchen and team through expansion of frozen produce production for program sustainability



Food Bank of Northwest Indiana: Experience and Feedback

Distribution

The Food Bank of Northwest Indiana distributed the donated frozen produce to approximately 20 families during a mobile market.

Feedback

Clients reported high satisfaction with the products:

- Foods tasted great and cooked well.
- The packaging looked nice and was of the preferred size. Limited frozen products have been distributed previously, with most in larger packages, though clients prefer smaller packages that can be used in 1-2 meals.
- Frozen produce was welcome, as it didn't need to be used immediately. Fresh produce is often nearing expiration and therefore clients must use it immediately.
- Many vegetables and fruits are canned, so clients were excited to receive local frozen produce.

Opportunities

- The Food Bank plans to utilize an agency for future frozen produce distribution, as this will facilitate a more accurate count of families served and aid in collecting feedback from clients.
- The opportunity exists to provide recipes and/or cooking instructions with future frozen foods to educate clients on product uses.
- Chef Lucero is exploring custom labeling options to add nutrition information and instructions, such as how to reheat a frozen soup in boiling water. This information can support Food Bank clients in using the frozen products.
- In support of product sourcing, a challenge that has been realized by the FAITH Frozen Produce team, there is opportunity to collaborate with the Food Bank given their extensive sourcing experience.



Opportunities

The program activities, achievements, and learnings to date support the following recommendations to increase FAITH Frozen Produce impact through expanded growing capacity, limited produce waste, and availability of locally grown food in Northwest Indiana.

Collaborate with Local Producers – Educate local producers about the opportunity to provide a portion of their harvest to FAITH Frozen Produce to expand growing capacity through new market opportunities. Encourage production of a high yield of dedicated crops, increasing grower and program efficiencies.

Identify Additional Producers – Identify additional produce procurement opportunities to utilize all workstations and freezer space, maximizing local produce available to the community.

Promote Production of Desired Produce – Encourage local growers to produce quantities of produce that freezes well and is highly accepted by the community, such as green beans, strawberries, bell peppers, carrots, and corn.

Plan Community Engagement Events – Plan and host small cooking demonstrations in the FAITH Frozen Produce kitchen to educate the community on using frozen produce, cooking techniques, and nutrition basics. Partner with the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana to host larger community education events.

Collaborate with the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana – Facilitate on-going process and product improvement through communication with the Food Bank to collect consumer feedback and preferences.

Identify Local Customers – Identify local organizations, such as hospitals, schools, and other organizations, to be reliable customers, creating a market supporting program sustainability.





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