NORTHEAST IOWA FOOD AND FITNESS
2014 NARRATIVE REPORT

Project Summary
Six rural counties in the northeast corner of Iowa have a seven-year history of collaborating to improve the health and well-being of children and their families through the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative (FFI). The counties include: Allamakee, Chickasaw, Clayton, Fayette, Howard, and Winneshiek. Currently four institutional core partners provide a base for the work and are working to build sustainability for FFI: Iowa State University Extension & Outreach—Region 4, Luther College Center for Sustainable Communities, Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission, and Northeast Iowa Community College.

Poverty in our communities is neither separate and distinct nor confined to one community or neighborhood as it might be in some regions. It is pervasive and woven into the fabric of our rural communities. Farm families and farm workers share the burden of living with limited resources. Producers and processors, entrepreneurs and employees, young and old—poverty invisibly affects a majority of people living and working in northeast Iowa. On the other hand, the disparities are less obvious. Generations of rural Iowans have become accustomed to working long hours in difficult circumstances for limited financial gains. Yet our dedication to place, relationships, and rural living keeps us committed to making our schools and communities healthy places to live for ourselves and future generations. FFI is providing the structure and opportunity for people to act upon that commitment in concrete ways that make a difference.

From its inception the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative has been rooted in the value and the practice of community self-determination. The work began with broad engagement of diverse residents who were committed to creating healthy communities in the region. We invested in developing community members' thinking capacities while they designed a comprehensive systems change initiative to accomplish a future we truly care about creating. Rather than focusing on solving intractable problems, we articulated a shared vision and a practical, comprehensive plan for achieving it. Community self-determination combined with capacity building continues to be a central principle of FFI. We believe that people will support what they help to create.

We apply four key strategies designed to achieve the goals and vision for FFI.

Strategy 1. Establish school district policies and practices that support healthy living of children, families, and community members

School based wellness teams that include school personnel, youth and community members determine much of our work in schools. We work to build capacity of those teams. Each wellness team constructs an action plan that contains goals and activities for the year. One individual that stands out this past year as having significantly moved our work forward is the Superintendent from Oelwein, Steve Westerberg. He was the first to inquire about having "their own AmeriCorps" member, and helped us draft an agreement between FFI and schools to share the responsibility of the AmeriCorps members. In addition to Steve, individual champions within the wellness teams drive the work in schools. These champions are the "go getters" that make things happen. Sometimes it's the school nurse, sometimes it is a parent volunteer, and other times the after-school coordinator, a teacher or school administrator.

Strategy 2: Ensure that caregivers and parents of children from birth to 5 provide health-promoting food and active play

We have been creating a learning community to address wellness policies in early childhood care settings. We have successfully introduced Farm to Preschool in settings where our most vulnerable children receive early care. We surveyed Head Start teachers and parents. The results were so positive they will help set direction for this strategy in the future and contribute to long-term system change.

- Among teachers, 50% have asked for more F2PS training and made F2PS a goal in their classrooms
- 94 out of 125 respondents strongly agreed their child is more likely to choose or try healthy foods since participating in F2PS activities and 75 respondents strongly agreed their family has made healthier food or wellness choices since starting Head Start. And respondents commented about how their child is eating healthier foods or willing to try new foods.
- Each month we monitored compliance with Head Start Child Wellness Policy to ensure the children are physically active 60 minutes during the core day (8 a.m.-3 p.m.)

Strategy 3*:* Ensure that local, health-promoting food is available and affordable in all communities, neighborhoods and institutions

The Iowa Food Hub (IFH) is a diverse group of stakeholders collaboratively creating an economically viable, locally-managed, non-profit enterprise for food aggregation and distribution, with a focus on access of good food in communities across our region. The fiscal sponsor for the Iowa Food Hub is the non-profit Allamakee New

Beginnings. ANB was formed to sponsor projects that will address rural poverty. Job creation and business development were identified as priorities through a community-wide visioning process in 2009. Having completed all of their current projects, the non-profit was in a state of hibernation until the opportunity to sponsor our food hub gave it new purpose.

During the winter months of Jan-April 2014, new board members of ANB set priorities and goals for the food hub. They also revised fiscal policies and personnel policies, all while remaining true to their original mission. The board consists of seven members: four men, three women; five of them are farmers. The board addressed the issue of conflict of interest and embraced the ideal of making decisions that will benefit all producers.

Strategy 4: Ensure that people use the built environment for physical activity, play, and active transportation

Grassroots community members are heavily involved in the Active Living/Safe Routes to School strategy. These individuals provide strong representation on the Active Living Work Group and local SRTS Community Coalitions. The work group is a learning community of active living enthusiasts, sharing information and generating ideas for ensuring that people use the natural and built environment of Northeast Iowa for physical activity, play and active transportation. Local SRTS Community Coalitions are becoming the backbone of local efforts throughout the region. These groups identify, plan, and implement various SRTS initiatives for their local schools and communities throughout the year. The coalitions also develop ways to make routes to school and other locations safer in their communities.

Additionally, grassroots community members are what make SRTS-related activities possible. These individuals serve as the Walking School Bus volunteers, helping to get kids to school actively and safely. They also assist with Bike Rodeo safety education events, Mileage Clubs and Wellness Walks during the school day, for example.

FFI Common Vision And Goals

Our shared vision has not changed substantively since we began our work with 55 community members in 2007. The Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative brings people in northeast Iowa together to make our region a place where every day, all people have access to healthy, locally grown foods and abundant opportunities for physical activity in the places where we live, learn, work and play. We see Northeast Iowa as a unique place where all residents and guests experience celebrate and promote healthy locally grown food and engage in physical activity and play every day. We maintain alignment toward vision and goals through the genuine community ownership that is reflected in our structure and governance, as well as by using our planning tool. (See Appendix A, attached as a separate document due to the size and orientation of the table.)

FFI STRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE

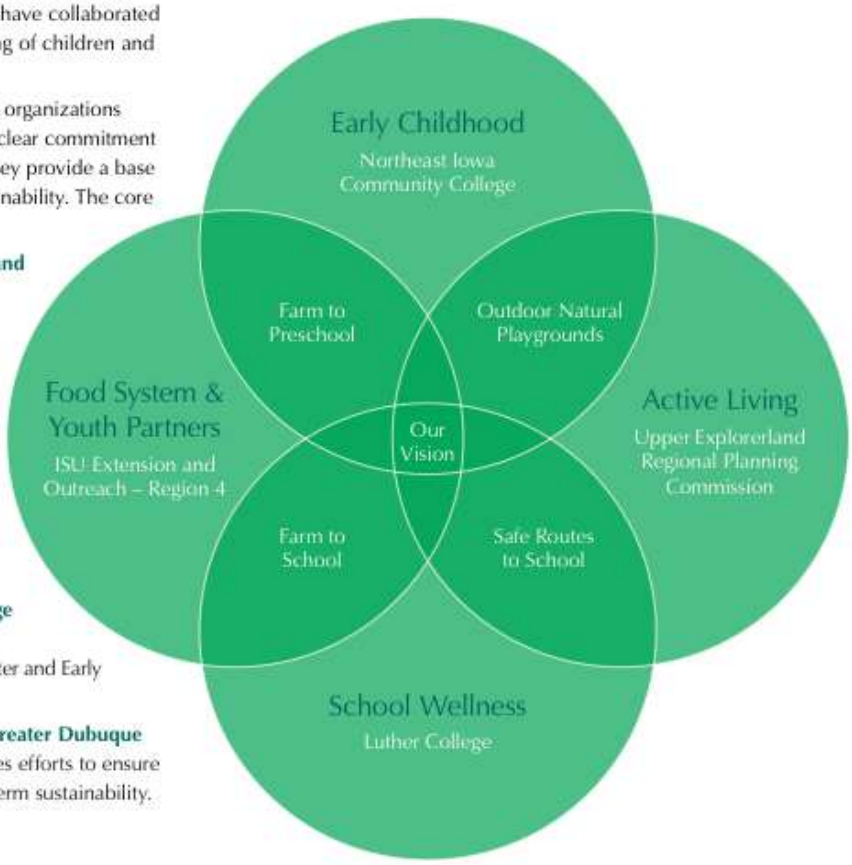
The community continues to own and direct all work of this initiative through our structure of a regional leadership council, four core institutional partners, and work groups that implement the direction established by the regional council. Alignment occurs through both the regional leadership council and regular meetings of the operations team, which includes leaders from each work group. The relationships among the core partners and work groups are depicted below. Community members are members and leaders on RLC and all work groups.

Core Partners, Community Roots

Over the past six years, six rural counties in Northeast Iowa—Allamakee, Chickasaw, Clayton, Fayette, Howard and Winneshiek—have collaborated to improve the health and well-being of children and their families through FFI.

FFI's institutional "core partners" are organizations with deep roots in the region and a clear commitment to our kids and our communities. They provide a base for FFI's work and are building sustainability. The core partners include:

- **Iowa State University Extension and Outreach – Region 4** coordinates work on food systems and youth development.
- **Luther College** oversees work in schools through its Center for Sustainable Communities.
- **Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission** supports active living by running the rural Safe Routes to School program.
- **Northeast Iowa Community College** facilitates early childhood initiatives through its Child Development Center and Early Childhood Education Department.
- **The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque** is the fiscal agent for FFI and guides efforts to ensure community investment and long-term sustainability.



ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Cross-sector Engagement. From its inception, FFI has been a multi-sector initiative. Leadership and work groups include community members from education, agriculture, health care, transportation, planning, natural resources, and other sectors who come together to lead and implement strategies and who serve on work groups. Cross-sector engagement is integral to how we do our work. Our work in partnership with schools is a prime example of cross-sector engagement. We bring together education, growers and processors of local food, health care, and active transportation. A specific example this year is the planning for regional school menus, which allowed for growing, processing, sales, and serving local food in schools across the region. Similar cross-sector engagement is critical in our work with early childcare settings.

This year we were reinforced again in our learning that we can only create and sustain systems change if we have engagement across sectors. Relationships are critical. Especially in a rural area, high quality relationships help us to leverage resources and to create policy change.

Diversity of the Collaborative. We have 3 people of color on the Regional Leadership Council members represent minorities, which is greater than the 3% of adults in NEI who are people of color. We still have work to do on youth teams. In 2013-14, 1.5% of FFI Youth 4-H Team members are Hispanic while the percent of Hispanics in FFI schools was 6.2%.
We think increased parent involvement will be the key to greater diversity long term. We learned that the idea of leadership training and participation in regional decision making was of little interest, despite multiple engagement efforts. We found a successful short-term engagement strategy for parent outreach this year. We facilitated grocery store tours with an exercise asking participants to buy and prepare healthy food on a budget for their family. This, combined with the spread of people across six counties helped us validate that we need to continue to "meet parents" where they are.

Youth Engagement. Youth have been engaged in a number of ways: as cross-aged teachers, as members of or advisers to School Wellness teams, as members of FFI youth teams, leading FEEST events, planning active living events, advocating for healthy concessions, securing grant funding, leading efforts to build greenhouses, and serving as cafeteria coaches for younger students. We worked this year to get FFI written into youth coaches' job descriptions. Schools are beginning to invest in this work and making it a part of some key staff members' jobs (for example, Central High School's Youth Coach position and Decorah School District's School Wellness Coordinator). In addition, 10 schools committed funding of more than $37,000 (combined) to support a Resource Contact in their schools. This year we also provided support for FEEST programs through a FEEST Internship and FEEST Coordinator position.

Community Partners. As stated previously, all of our leaders, whether paid or unpaid, are grassroots community members. We are farmers, educators, community organizers, parents, and grandparents. We lead small non-profits. We volunteer our time because children matter to us. The Regional Leadership Council makes all decisions about budget, requests for funding, and long-term strategies. Community members have complete transparency to how their decisions are implemented through work groups and core partners. What we know is that true decision making authority and transparency on funds and actions supports engagement and participation. Several concrete practices also increase the ability of community members to engage. Because our region is so large, we rotate the meeting place for the RLC to spread the burden of driving. We also vary the time of day of the meetings. While these may seem like small concessions, in a region the size of the state of Connecticut, these practices make a difference and show respect for community members.

Leadership. A variety of school stakeholders are emerging as leaders, including teachers, food service staff, administrators, school board members, community members all demonstrating support and leadership as evidenced by the financial commitment to support FFI school outreach service members. In Active Living, the leadership in the community-led SRTS coalitions is different in every community (diverse for our area). Leadership is emerging from food pantry efforts, with volunteers and community members seeking information and assistance with developing coupon programs through several local farmer's markets. We have especially promising emerging leadership in HeadStart classrooms with teachers taking initiative to expand programming for healthy food and physical activity. We do our work through shared leadership across the region. We routinely create collaborative, transparent processes and seek input throughout every stage of the work, keeping community self-determination in front of us at all times.

FFI CAPACITY BUILDING

This year we paid particular attention to building our evaluation capacity for embracing and using shared indicators to guide our actions, assess our progress, and refine our strategies. On evaluation calls other Food and Fitness grantees and evaluators are highly interested and somewhat overwhelmed by the fact that we have been able to get such deep commitment among community members. What we have learned is that truly engaging all of our partners in establishing the indicators, through designed conversations, results in that commitment. Using the indicators, along with strategies as the basis for our planning tool (Appendix A), has provided a structure both for continuing to focus on the indicators and for demonstrating that the work of community members is taken seriously.

PROGRESS ON IMPLEMENTING THE COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN

Improving school food

We continue to work on improving school food through three avenues, school wellness teams, the Iowa Food Hub, and FoodCorps/AmeriCorps service members' work in schools. All of our target districts in the region have a policy authorizing local food procurement. Some key outcomes this year include:

- **FFI reached 82.3% (1,126) of non-white preK-12 students** in Northeast Iowa through its work in schools and early childhood settings.
- **School purchases of local food were up by 67%** from $20,236 in Year 4 to $33,792 in year 5. Of the 13 schools reporting in both years, 9 (69%) increased purchases of local food compared to Year 4.
- FFI received a two-year Farm to School grant from the USDA. FFI will use the grant to build collaborations with farmers to scale-up production through the IFH and work with four schools to expand their Farm to School programming and double their purchases of local foods.
- **Ten schools have agreed to contribute toward the stipend of an FFI Resource Contact (RC)**, an AmeriCorps or FoodCorps service member to work in their school in 2014-15. Six schools are contributing $5,000 each for a full-time RC, and three schools are contributing $2,500 for a part-time RC, who will alternatively work two or three days per week at the school. A fourth school is working to raise $2,500 for a part-time RC. **This is a total of $37,500 invested thus far by schools.**
- A new youth program was launched in Year 5 in conjunction with the Farm to School grant. Youth in seven school districts were trained to do cafeteria coaching to provide students more social, cultural, and educational support for choosing healthy foods; three school districts chose to implement the program.
- In Year 5, a new Food Empowerment Education Sustainability Team (FEEST) internship program was implemented in Northeast Iowa. Youth interns from three schools coordinated six FEEST meals at their schools or in the community. A FEEST coordinator was also hired to oversee the interns and assist them in their work.
- Through collaboration with a local meat processor, the IFH, and the FFI's Farm to School program, local pork was made available to K-12 schools and Luther College throughout the spring of 2014. Ten hogs were processed per week and the IFH delivered the meat to schools and Luther College. The cost was kept affordable by using "seconds," hogs which have imperfections that do not affect meat quality.
- The **Farm to Preschool program expanded its reach greatly in year 5**. It was implemented at all 15 Head Start classrooms in Northeast Iowa as well as 21 preschool classrooms, reaching **approximately 667 three and four year old students.** All Head Start students are at or below the poverty line or have an individualized education plan (IEP) from the Iowa Department of Education
- Comprehensive farm to school efforts exist in all of our target school districts.

We do not track individual components of the Farm to School program in each school. We have 18 districts, and multiple schools in each district. Four of our districts have

over 50% of their students participating in free or reduced lunch programs: Allamakee, Howard-Winneshiek, Postville, and Oelwein. All of these are priority districts for our work. Two schools in our target communities have received a HealthierUS Schools Challenge Award. Central School District has received a Bronze award and Howard-Winneshiek received a Gold award.

A major lesson for us this year is that convening school food service leaders from across the region and developing a regional seasonal cycle menu for schools will result in a more effective partnership with farmers and more efficient purchasing practices for districts. The combined effort of school wellness and food systems work on the creation and implementation of the Regional Seasonal Cycle menu was a major win for schools and local food procurement. We have seen the greatest rise in the purchase of local food this fall as a result of the planning and work on the menu last year. In addition, we have seen a steady growth in our other school-based initiatives including providing more nutrition education, more integration of the school garden into the school curriculum, and more active classrooms. While each of these things by themselves are individual activities, together they create a comprehensive systemic focus on wellness for students throughout the school.

We are also learning, through stories from the School Resource Contacts, that their work directly with children and young people is critical to change—both in the school and in the demand created in the community. This excerpt from a story by one RC demonstrates that principle:

> My first nutrition class with the K-3rd graders (about 400 students) focused on "taking a brave first bite". I spoke to the students about "teaching our tongues" to like the healthy flavors in fruits and vegetables. I commiserated with the kiddos explaining, "I had such a tough time liking tomatoes when I was in elementary school. I would pick a tomato fresh from the vine of my parent's backyard garden. I would smell the tomato and its scent was delicious to me; but then I would then try the tomato and it was not my favorite." Truly, I thought tomatoes were disgusting, yucky, [insert a seven year old making a rude, grossed-out face], but I told my students that "tomatoes were not my favorite" because in my nutrition classes rule number two is that we do not say 'Yuck' or make faces. Rule one is that we practice trying new foods politely and rule three is that we wait to eat until everyone is served. Moral of the yucky tomato story is that by the time I was twenty, I had tried tomatoes over and over again until one day my tongue LEARNED to love the flavor of those healthy, August heirlooms. I taught my tongue to like tomatoes!
>
> At the end of each nutrition class, the students get to try a fruit or vegetable that we learned about in that lesson. October's super, special, mystery, vegetable was jicama. Now, if you are sitting there thinking, "Uh, what is jicama?" That is a standard reaction. Jicama can be found in the produce section of your grocery store, most likely next to the potatoes. Like potatoes, jicama grows underground. I think it tastes kind of like a raw potato but also

kind of like an apple, crunch and juicy. Once I had passed the jicama slices out to each student in the class, I would count down, "3…2…1!", and with that we would take one brave bite. I think 390 of the 400 students actually took the brave first bite and many of those gave a polite thumbs-up to let their class know that they liked the jicama.

I had one of those warm fuzzy moments every time the students took a brave bite and gave me the thumbs up, but more notable than those warm fuzzies was the fill my heart with an almost painful amount of joy and satisfaction and hope moments I experienced when I heard that the local grocery store sold out of jicama. They rarely move a half case of these strange, underground vegetables, but after my lessons they sold three cases and had customers asking for more.

Because the grocery store was sold out and would not be getting another shipment until the next month, I ordered some pre-cut jicama sticks through my foodservice director to pass out during lunch at the elementary schools. I arrived at the first grade lunch hour with my jicama sticks in tow. All 100 first graders were noisily eating their sloppy joes with sweet potato fries. For a brief moment, I doubted the power of those jicama sticks. I thought the kids would not want a semi-slimy, white stick of vegetable when they had crispy fries on their tray. I quietly walked over to the table nearest the door and asked students to raise their hand if they would like some jicama. Tiny little hands from bodies with tiny smiles of excitement shot into the air. I heard a few kids yell, "Miss Molly! Miss Molly, I want some jicama" from the table next to me. Before I could make it to the third of ten tables in the lunchroom, it started as a faint, slow whisper, "Jicama! Jicama! Jicama! Jicama!" 100 first grade students were cheering for vegetables. I had incited a small, vegetable anarchy in the lunchroom!

Transforming community food environments

The new federal school food regulations provided a significant leverage point. Food Service Directors were very receptive to receiving help with their menus and with implementing the new requirements. In October 2013, we conducted a Farm to School pilot project where we sat down with school food service directors and identified places where local food could be incorporated in their menus. We took food "orders" and found producers who had product available for schools (aka "Benevolent broker"). In the 5 weeks of the pilot, FFI/IFH worked to connect eight school districts to 8000 pounds of local food from eight farms. Schools purchased over $5000 of food in that one month. The success of this pilot project affirmed our path for the future. Shortly after, we received a USDA F2S grant and Leopold Center grant to scale-up that project for October 2014. Local food purchases by schools in August and Sept 2014 was over $18,000. To compare, the total local food purchases by schools in 2012-13 was $33,000.

Much of our food system work this year was focused on continuing to develop the Iowa Food Hub. This is a key approach for achieving our local food system goals. The **Iowa Food Hub** (IFH), is now a non-profit food hub. It emerged out of the NIFF Coalition and FF. IFH continues to support the aggregation and distribution of foods produced in Northeast Iowa, lessening the effects of poverty through increased access to healthy food and economic development. IFH accomplishments this year include:

- **Acquiring a refrigerated truck** using a USDA Rural Business Enterprise Grant to coordinate delivery of local foods.
- Hiring a full-time food hub intern, who later transitioned into the **position of full-time food hub coordinator**.
- **Grossing $30,000 in sales per month** by summer 2014.

The Allamakee New Beginnings Board, the host organization of the IFH, added new goals to its mission directly related to creating markets for farmers and increasing access to local food for vulnerable populations. It also **created a grower handbook and approved new personnel and fiscal policies.**

The IFH was one of eight food hubs **selected to participate in a pilot Group GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) program supported by the USDA and Wallace Center.** The program allows food hubs and other organizations to cooperatively manage the implementation of GAP standards across all of their source farms at once, increasing the level of market-based internal support that producers receive, thereby ensuring the highest possible level of compliance while remaining scale-appropriate.

Other key food system outcomes this year include:

- **Eighteen more full-time jobs were created in the local food system this year, three jobs were expanded, and 15 new food producers/food enterprises were established.** This makes a total of 80 new jobs, 12 expanded jobs, and 63 new local food producers/food enterprises over the past five years.
- **Tracked food sales by farmers increased by more than a million dollars** from 2012 to 2013. Sales of local food in 2013 were $8.6 million, up from $7.3 million in 2012. Of the 19 farmers reporting in both years, 12 (63%) increased or maintained their level of local food sales compared to 2012.
- The **total value of local foods purchased by non-school markets was up by 20%**, from $1,160,978 (n=17) in 2012 to $1,398,962 (n=9) in 2013, despite the fact that the number of institutions reporting was only about half as many in 2013. Of the six non-school respondents reporting in both years, half (3) increased local food purchases and half (3) decreased local food purchases.

A significant learning this year is that the collaboration among schools, other purchasers, and farmers through IFH has significant, immediate economic impact, as well as increasing the quantity of local health-promoting food served in cafeterias. It became very clear to us that aggregation was the key to increased food use by schools

in addition to offering a quality, affordable product with excellent customer service. Having a person who contacts schools to ask for orders is critical to achieving the sales numbers we have.

Increasing food access through SNAP use remains a challenge for us. It appears that our best opportunity is to continue to work toward making local food available in grocery stores. EBT incentives and coupons at farmers markets have had moderate success. . This is no surprise given that more people patronize grocery stores than farmer's markets. A forthcoming report by our evaluators at the Leopold Center shows that grocery stores are the largest buyers of local food in Iowa, purchasing at least $9 million in 2013. Some of the reasons for low EBT participation at farmer's markets include the distance from many communities to farmers markets in a rural area and the lack of local transportation. The programs do not appear to be the solution to connect rural low-income families with local food.

After looking for a new location for the food hub for almost a year, the IFH has finally found a new home at a feed and food store in West Union, Iowa. After a fire in Nov 2013, this business has a new building with commercial space and loading dock available for rent. They are also expanding their Unionland Market to include fresh, local foods in a retail setting. We are excited about this partnership because it will allow the IFH to continue to focus on wholesale market development while giving them an outlet store next door to try additional marketing strategies. The location represents an opportunity to significantly increase access to healthy food in two counties where poverty and health disparities are among the highest in our region.

Creating safe environments for physical activity

Northeast Iowa has an abundance of public parks and trails available for active living. This year we conducted a count of trail users and a survey. The goal was to develop an understanding of who/when/where people are using the natural and built environment for physical activity, play and active transportation. Over time we will see where we lack connectivity among trails, whether usage is increasing or decreasing, and what users need or want that would increase use.

We also focused on developing and supporting local SRTS Community Coalitions. Local stakeholders and SRTS champions come together to build SRTS efforts and make routes in their communities safer and more accessible for all. These coalitions meet on a regular basis with the Regional Safe Routes to School Coordinator to promote physical activity among youth and brainstorm pedestrian and bicycle safety opportunities in their communities.

We integrated bike rodeos into the school day. This demonstrates school commitment to SRTS and student safety. This tactic allows us to reach the most students possible, compared to an optional Saturday morning event. This is also a more effective use of

resources since it streamlines set-up for FFI service members, creating opportunities for more events at more schools

Finally, we supported nine communities that implemented walking school buses this school year. Six new routes were added in four new communities, resulting in the most communities engaged in Walking School Buses to date. Increasingly families, schools and community members are realizing the benefits of active school travel. Beyond the benefit to student and volunteer health, academic achievement and the environment, Walking School Buses also provide students and adults alike a unique opportunity for social skill building.

Significant outcomes this year include:

- **A total of 19 walking school buses operated in 9 communities in year 5, up from 17 buses in year 4.** The buses involved 275 students and 50 adult volunteers, including about 35 parents.
- **Ten Bike Rodeos were held in year 5, reaching 650 students.**
- **Safe Routes to Schools community coalitions have formed in five communities.** These groups of community stakeholders work with FFI's safe routes to school liaison to organize walking school buses and bike rodeos.
- **90 youth leaders participated in planning, advocating, and implementing active transportation activities in year 5, up from 48 in year 4.**
- **A total of 39 parent outreach events were held** with a FFI component (healthy food and/or physical activity) in early childhood and K-12 school settings in year 5, up from 26 in year 4.

Community involvement and input is vital to sustainable SRTS efforts. SRTS programs are strongest and most productive in communities where a coalition has been formed.

Spending a full day at a school to run a Bike Rodeo workshop for each grade level is hard work and exhausting. However, it is also incredibly rewarding to reach 300 kids in one day with knowledge and skills that may very well help mold them into lifelong bike riders and could one day even save their life.

Walking School Buses are a very visible way to promote safety and activity within a community. They are not sustainable due to the heavy reliance on volunteers, aging out of students, and the intensive effort needed to organize and implement them in a rural setting, but they are useful to begin a focus on active transportation and active living.

With rapidly increasing interest in SRTS (more schools and communities on board), we will be challenged to find ways to support each school with our limited resources. Having one staff person and declining grant resources at a time of increased demand is a significant issue. We will be reach out to coalitions and the School Outreach Team for extra support. We are beginning to develop strategies for funding this work.

OPPORTUNITIES/CIRCUMSTANCES IN THE WIDER ENVIRONMENT

The food system work advancing throughout the state of Iowa and the Driftless three-state region is gaining momentum. The state and regional work have become mutually reinforcing. We see a significant increase in state and regional conversations around the idea of an "ecosystem" to sustain multiple dimensions of healthy communities, including economic, environmental, health, etc.

Linkages. The work of the Iowa Food Hub has formed important linkages. IFH works with the Wallace Center on Group GAP that can potentially influence USDA and its creation of a Group GAP certification option and creation of group audit standards and use manual by the USDA's Specialty Crops Inspection Division. Further potential policy impact of Group GAP involvement includes possibly influencing the USDA's Marketing and Transportation Division's written content regarding the scale appropriateness of food safety standards.

The Iowa Food Hub is growing and lessons learned by the hub and its partners are being shared throughout the state and nation. Northeast Iowa serves as a model for other regional food groups around the state and is helping develop publicly disseminated toolkits for use by others. The Leopold Center at Iowa State University in conjunction with ISUEO is creating a series of toolkits based on lessons learned by the Iowa Food Hub. The first toolkit, *Developing a Worksite Food Box Program*, was released in June, 2014.

FFI's ISUEO partner received a two-year USDA Farm to School grant. The grant is allowing the Iowa Food Hub and schools to continue testing strategies for bringing local foods to schools.

ISU Extension and Outreach's Vice President funded the Iowa Food Systems Working Group (IFSWG), a strategic initiative within ISUEO to involve field and campus Extension staff working in food systems to convene across program areas, colleges, and geography. FFI's ISUEO Core Partner is actively involved in and influences this group. In addition, since part of her time is bought out by ISUEO at the statewide level so she can disseminate information learned from FFI statewide, she is providing local and regional food systems development assistance to other ISUEO staff and partners across the state.

FFI's ISUEO Core Partner has been highly influential in developing a statewide process of evaluating the economic impact of local foods in Iowa. That work is receiving much attention by the Iowa press. Two years of data have been released, garnering media attention from legislators, Iowa Public radio, regional radio news groups, the Des Moines Register, local newspapers, and others, including nationally based activist press (http://www.takepart.com/article/2014/12/05/local-food-iowa-industrial-ag).

Harvest Media developed a three-part series called The Local Food Challenge as a result of this report, relying heavily on sharing stories from NEI (see

http://harvestpublicmedia.org/article/public-private-partners-key-local-food-success; http://harvestpublicmedia.org/article/local-farmers-try-tap-bigger-markets, and http://harvestpublicmedia.org/article/integrated-local-food-system-can-grow-market). Although the media attention has not yet led to public policy change, an increasing spate of legislators are inquiring about the results and working to create legislation that supports local food development in Iowa.

The Active Living-Safe Routes to School work group has expanded partnerships and linkages to state-wide efforts with planned future financial support from the Iowa Bicycle Coalition collaboration.

Factors in the Immediate Environment. Embedding this work and reaching a level of "saturation" to achieve tipping points will require long term effort. For example, we are experiencing the advancement of the FFI work in schools, but we know there is much work yet to do. Every day, we face examples of unhealthy policies and environments that are perpetuated despite best efforts. We are beginning to create ways to recognize teachers and classrooms for *sustained* policy and environmental changes, in an effort to acknowledge and recognize long term commitment. We intend to leverage this recognition throughout the region and give others an example to see.

Key Lessons Learned. We have a greater understanding of the power of collaborative funding and partner support. This points directly to our core theory of change where we can more readily "access" the space for emerging opportunities and innovation. We have evidence of this happening in the food system/food hub work, in schools where there is more ownership of the local vision, and in early childhood settings with established networks such as HeadStart.

Leveraging Opportunities for Scale-Up and Sustainability. We are actively seeking to understand what is needed for additional support (from communities) in these areas and finding it. We are working toward additional partners, funds, technical assistance, recognition and exploring ways to share the examples across the region. We see this in very strategy.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Food System Work. Several events this year have been critical: USDA funding to purchase refrigerated truck, USDA Farm to School funding to pilot school food distribution, and Wallace Center technical assistance.

Schools Wellness. Adoption of FFI school outreach model resulted in "ownership" by the schools and funding for the service member positions.

Active Living – SRTS. Multiple levels of partnership are emerging locally, regionally and state-wide with high level of interest in NE Iowa model.

Early Childhood. Securing the community partnership with regional HeadStart has advanced our early childhood work significantly.

Other. Declining funding by our most significant funder has shifted conversations to defining what we need to sustain this work beyond Kellogg Foundation.

COMMUNICATION

We continue to implement our communication plan to disseminate information and engage people in the region, across the state, and nationally. We distribute Weekly Bits and a quarterly newsletter electronically. We update our website regularly. We write blogs. Regularly scheduled meetings and minutes of work groups, core partner, and the RLC further serve as significant communication methods.

Presentations by FFI Members:

Early Childhood

- WKKF Food & Community Gathering – May 2014
- Iowa Association Education of Young Children Fall Institute in – Sept. 2014
- Interview with Debra Landwehr Engel for the Iowa Hunger in the Heartland Conference and book regarding grocery store tours as parent outreach tool - Nov 2014.

Active Living-Safe Routes to School

- Iowa Bicycle Summit and Expo in Des Moines, IA- Jan. 2014
- Statewide SRTS Meeting in Des Moines, IA- Jan. 2014
- Pro Walk/Pro Bike/Pro Place Conference in Pittsburgh- Sept. 2014
- FFI's SRTS work featured in report published by the US Department of Transportation in May 2014 "Statewide Transportation Planning for Healthy Communities"

Food Systems 2014

- Smart Growth Conference, Denver, CO. Food System Innovations – Feb. 14
- NE Iowa visit by Dan Christensen, USDA – March 6
- State Local Food Meeting on Food Hub Development, Ames - April 8
- National Farm to Cafeteria Conference, Poster presentation – April 14-18
- Iowa Nutrition Network on Farm to School, Ames - Oct. 1-2
- Wisconsin Farmers Market vendors, Gays Mills, WI. – Dec. 3
- Regional Dietician group, Decorah, Dec. 5
- Networking - 2014
    - National Food Hub Conference, North Carolina – March 25-28
    - Group GAP Face to Face, Viroqua, WI – April 22-24
    - Food Hub Networking, Traverse City, MI – Sept. 1-5
    - State (Iowa) working group for food hub development, Oct. 16
    - Group GAP Face to Face, Salinas, CA – Oct. 20-23

School Outreach

- AmeriCorps State of Iowa 4 - H Outreach – Oct. 2014

Evaluator

- Corry Bregendahl co-authored an article in the journal Community Development, "Relationship building: the art, craft, and context for mobilizing the social capital necessary for systems change" featuring the collaborative work of NE Iowa FFI. She presented an overview of the article to the state-wide Regional Food Systems Working Group in 2014.

SUCCESS

Two achievements in particular have had significant impact on our work and on the potential for the future:

- the Iowa Food Hub and its impact on the food system (large increases in purchases of local food, for example)
- greater commitment from schools in the region (support for Resource Contacts, walking school buses, and purchases of local food)

ADDITIONAL LESSONS LEARNED

You must take the time to build relationships and lay the foundation before you realize significant results. We see this with IFH. FFI staff and farmer-leaders have been working on this for years and we are now seeing the results of this approach. Time and relationship building were critical to schools being willing to financially commit to this work.

Unanticipated Outcomes. The school financial commitment was something we had hoped for, but we were uncertain whether they were ready to contribute to the service member stipend. Their enthusiasm was a pleasant "surprise".

We also did not expect the "readiness" in early childhood that we discovered. Early Childhood work has taken off much more rapidly than we anticipated.

Recommendations for Others. Continue to support long-term efforts to achieve collective impact. Major systems change requires significant investments of resources over years. Both the members of the collaborative and funders need to be willing to make that commitment.

Closing Comment

One of our FoodCorps service member young leaders, Molly Schintler, recently wrote a blog thanking everyone for their part in her work. Her comments are the perfect way to summarize what we have learned and how we do the Food and Fitness work in Northeast Iowa. We will let her words be the last for this year.

> Last New Years, I made a resolution to "TURN IT AROUND"! For me, "turning it around" is a commitment to finding, and even sometimes forcing into existence, the positivity in all situations. So, here I sit in my office meditating on the words "turn it around". This holiday season I will not be overtaken by the bee-buzz in my brain. With every word I type, may the buzz be ever gone from my being.

Instead of giving into December's grey skies and holiday blues, I am choosing to refocus my thoughts and energy on a few words that a friend brought to my attention recently: "i can't i without we" (intentionally lowercase 'i'). These words make me want to throw out my hands and wave sparkle fingers. These words quiet that buzz in my brain. These words bring a warm smile to my frost-chilled bones and rewrap my spirit around the sentiment of gratitude. Without so many others, the work I do would be nothing more than a pesky bee-buzz. As such, I would like to take this time to thank the ever-growing list of extraordinary human beings that make my work…work. These people inhabit the entire spectrum. On a national level, there are 182 FoodCorps service people like myself, 16 FoodCorps fellows, and a huge national staff that hustle each and every day in the name of healthier kids. This hustle inspires me to hustle harder. These people doing this work alongside me (in spirit) remind me that I am not carrying the weight of change alone. My momma always told me that 'many hands makes the load lighter' and never have those words rang more true than in this work. This work is so heavy. When I see children that do not eat at home, farmers who cannot turn a profit, and community pushback to embrace tough change, I remember that I am not going to shift the systems alone. i can't i without we! Thank you, FoodCorps, for giving me the platform to do this necessary work.

At a state level, the National Center for Appropriated Technology (NCAT) Midwest deserves the next shout-out. The work I do would not happen without NCAT. As the regions' lead agent for the National Farm to School Network, NCAT hosts FoodCorps in the state of Iowa. Thank you, thank you, thank you, for hosting me and the eight other FoodCorps service members along with Marlie, our fearless FoodCorps fellow. More locally, I am supported by the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative. Here, we need to take a moment of pause. Last night, I felt privileged to sit in on Food and Fitness's Regional Leadership Meeting. The room was full of stakeholders from every corner of the healthy living, sustainable food systems conversation: farmers, teachers, superintendents, professors, grant writers, grocery store managers, nutritionists and more. We were all welcomed into the conversation about the past, present, and future work of Food and Fitness. I am so thankful to be working for an organization that invites everyone equitably into the conversation about systems change. I am so thankful to work for an organization with a patient vision because this work is slow (but fiercely intentional). Thank you, Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative, for working to make northeast Iowa a region where all people have access to a healthy, happy life filled with local produce.

This blog post is getting a little lengthy. We might need to take an intermission (is that allowed?) because I still have quite a few rock star humans to thank. I work in five schools, Knd-12th, in the Oelwein Community School District. If you blink while driving down Iowa Highway 150, you might miss Oelwein, population 6,000. Take my advice. Don't blink. At school, I work most closely

with the elementary school counselor, Barb Schmitz. I could devote an entire blog post to Barb Schmitz. I could start crying thinking about her support for me, my programs, and the students and staff of the schools; however, I cried multiple times during my last post so I will spare you my happy, thankful tears. THANK YOU, BARB SCHMITZ! Frank Stammameyer, the Food Service Director, says "yes" with a smile to all the crazy ideas I ask him to help me with. "Can we serve local foods during National Farm to School Month?" was met with a "Sure thing!" Frank loves the students and works tirelessly to continually improve the school lunch program. The teachers, students, secretaries, nurses, superintendent, para-educators, food service workers… there are so many names to name. Each name deserves a thank you because each name contributes to the "we" that makes my job possible. i can't i without we.

Because the interconnected complexity of this work is hard to grasp from the list of organizations and names I have thrown at you, I will drive home this idea with a brief example. I worked to get one local item per week on the school lunch menu for October's National Farm to School Month. This would have never been possible without Frank saying, "Sure thing!". Frank would have never been able to say "Sure thing!" if Superintendent Steve Westerberg did not support the school district's commitment to health. The local food would have never been served if the food service staff had been unwilling to take the extra time to prepare it. There would have never been any local food to serve if the farmers did not grow it and furthermore, without the Iowa Food Hub's commitment to distributing partially processed, local food (cubed squash, shredded cabbage, husked corn), the Oelwein Food Service team may have been unable to make it work. On top of all of this, I would not be in Oelwein without Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness, NCAT, or FoodCorps. Without me, local apples, corn, cabbage, and squash would not have made it onto 1,000 lunchroom trays, but I was the smallest factor in this very long equation. This work I do is more than necessary. It is intrinsic. It is fundamental. This work has to happen!

For me to do this work, an army of people have to support it. I stand on the shoulders of giants each and every day as I pass out kale chips, teach nutrition lessons, or bring students out to the school garden. The students are incredibly polite and sweet and often shower me with praise such as, "These are the best carrots I have ever had!", "Cooking, like with real food from farms, is so cool!", and "Thanks for cooking class, Miss Molly. This broccoli and cheese soup is yummy." I get to hear these thankful words every day, and it is not fair when so many people enable me to do this job. I wish all of you could experience the "Thank you!" of a first grade voice with spinach between her teeth, because that "Thank you", although directed at me, is not merely for me. That "Thank you" is for my boss, Emily Neal and her director, Ann Mansfield and all of my co-workers and Iowa State Extension and Luther College and the Iowa Food Hub and the WK Kellogg Foundation and NCAT and FoodCorps and every person contributing to a more sustainable food system. i can't i without we.