



Transparency for Justice: Buffalo Institutional Suppliers *Extended Executive Summary*

Authors: Erica Hellen, Patricia Kwan, Sooyong Kwon, Zoe Novic, Avery Siler, Viola Taubmann, Abbey Warner.

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All errors and omissions are our own and those of our professor.

Cover photo provided by Erica Hellen.

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Extended Executive Summary

The *Good Food Communities* (GFC) campaign is a collaboration among the *HEAL Food Alliance* and *Food Chain Workers Alliance*, as well as other community food groups. It builds on minority- and women-owned business policies and the larger *Good Food Purchasing Program* (GFPP), which incentivizes public institutions to redirect public tax dollars toward food purchasing that is good for workers, animals, public health, environment, and local economies. Specifically, the GFC campaign seeks to create mechanisms for promoting racial and gender equity with leadership from those most directly impacted by food system injustices. These include frontline workers, who, in the United States, are predominantly people of color, immigrants, and women, with Black-Indigenous-People of Color (BIPOC) workers continuing to be disproportionately impacted by poverty wages, unsafe working conditions, and retaliation. Accordingly, GFC emphasizes base-building and worker-driven monitoring.¹ Buffalo, New York, is one city in which the GFC campaign is underway. To push Buffalo public institutions to leverage their purchasing power and make their food chains more just and sustainable, the GFC campaign must first elucidate how Buffalo public institutions' current food suppliers align with the *Good Food Purchasing Values* and additional *Good Food Communities* values. Our research and this extended executive summary seek to contribute to this end. Our research objectives were:

- 1) To better understand how existing suppliers to the Buffalo institutional food supply chain align with the GFC and GFPP values; and**
- 2) To identify additional or alternative producers that should be included in Buffalo's institutional food supply chains.**

This extended executive summary draws from the research undertaken by the *Yale School of the Environment's* Social Justice in the Global Food System Capstone Fall 2020 class, in collaboration with the GFC campaign's founding organizations, to research institutional supply chains in Buffalo. The research focused on supply chain data collection and analysis on wage and hour violations; Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) violations; New York State labor violations; supplying farms; the presence of unions; Black, Indigenous, People Of Color (BIPOC) representation in ownership and operation of suppliers; and Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) certifications. It also draws from informational interviews that we conducted with a number of stakeholders in the Buffalo food supply chain and New York statewide BIPOC farmer networks. It has a secondary aim to identify research methods that support future research on this topic.

From October 1st to November 19th, 2020 we researched the aforementioned metrics on 46 food chain suppliers from a list provided to us by *Good Food Buffalo Coalition*, *HEAL Food Alliance*, and *Food Chain Workers Alliance*. In addition, we conducted seven informational interviews during this time span. The raw data collected for the purposes of our research and the full report have been provided to the *Good Food Buffalo Coalition*, *HEAL Food Alliance*, and *Food Chain Workers Alliance* separately for internal use.

¹ Khanna, Navina and Spach, Christina, 2019. Good Food Communities Concept Paper: Building Racial and Gender Equity in Institutional Supply Chains. HEAL Food Alliance; and Food Chain Workers Alliance.

Our key findings are:

- **Most of the Buffalo institutional suppliers we researched have operations outside of New York State.** This offers two insights: labor violations can be difficult to capture by New York State labor violations databases; and the majority of Buffalo's current institutional suppliers do not support local economies. Not knowing where violations are taking place limits efforts to support frontline food workers.
- **In general, there is a lack of publicly available data on supplying farms to Buffalo's institutional suppliers and the presence of unions.**
- **Only one of the suppliers we researched (2%) had publicly available demographic information about their workforce.** More transparency is needed since this information is instrumental to building a diverse and equitable workforce, and centering the voices of frontline workers.
- **Only 17% of the suppliers that we researched have at least one known GFPP certification, while 28% have no certifications.** The rest do not have publicly available information on their certifications, or have independent and/or other third-party certifications. Most of the suppliers in Buffalo's institutional supply chain do not have GFPP certifications.
- **BIPOC farmers have more difficulty accessing institutional supply chains in Buffalo, NY than large suppliers do.** BIPOC producers have suffered from farm loan and government assistance discrimination and historical redlining, preventing them from building intergenerational wealth. This ongoing legacy of structural racism has prevented BIPOC farmers from growing operations beyond small- or medium-scale. The disparity in resource access between BIPOC producers and large-scale suppliers means large suppliers have a greater capacity to meet institutional supplier requirements.
- **BIPOC and small-scale producers in the region may be served by food hubs, aggregators, or cooperatives to pool resources and scale production capacity to better meet the needs of institutional purchasers.** With that said, a cooperative ownership structure or other collaborative business model does not guarantee that an operation aligns with GFPP and GFC values.
- **The complexity of institutional bidding processes acts as a barrier against small-scale suppliers entering Buffalo's institutional supply chain.** Acknowledging this difficulty and to hit benchmarks for local purchasing, many institutions have become more willing to procure smaller amounts of food from local producers. However, many BIPOC farmers are not networked with these institutions nor with the actors who connect local producers to these institutions. Consequently, the BIPOC farmers are left out.
- **A lack of BIPOC representation in public institutions disincentivizes BIPOC producers who are less comfortable working with majority white decision-making bodies to seek relationships in those larger markets.**

Based on our findings, we developed a set of recommendations for future work, as follows:

- 1. Transparency:** In our research, the difficulty of accessing straightforward information about Buffalo suppliers indicates a need for suppliers whose practices and policies are more transparent. Encountering a lack of information can be an important finding, as it was in our research. **More transparency about supply chains in the Buffalo food system is needed since this information is instrumental to building a diverse and equitable workforce and centering the voices of frontline workers.**
- 2. Evaluation in line with GFPP² and GFC:** More broadly, the lack of transparency and the ease of greenwashing within the agri-food industry point to both the challenge and the importance of **evaluating institutional food suppliers according to the GFPP and GFC values within the context of this national Program and national Campaign.**
- 3. Improved access to institutional supply chains:** Both the scale required to supply to institutions and the certifications required to protect health and safety mean that it is expensive to grow a business to the point where it can sell to institutions. Several interviewees in our research mentioned the obstacles to accessing current grant funding and accessing loans, and the importance of providing more targeted government assistance to BIPOC farmers, with one calling for these to be included in updated agricultural policies such as the Farm Bill or the 2020 Justice for Black Farmers Act³. **To improve access to the Buffalo supply chain, several types of initiatives may be needed, potentially including:**
 - advocacy, outreach, and financial assistance to connect current and future **Good Food Communities producers, including BIPOC producers, with purchasing institutions;**
 - **food hubs, aggregators, and cooperatives**, which are another strategy to combat some of these problems, both by pooling resources and by enabling smaller farmers to combine at a scale large enough to provide for institutional suppliers. One of the farmers interviewed in our research emphasized this, saying, “One of my goals, as we get larger, is to use the cooperative mentality to form larger partnerships, bind together, and use our collective growing power to leverage access into larger markets.” It should be noted, however, that a cooperative ownership structure or other collaborative business model does not necessarily mean an operation conforms to the values of Good Food Communities campaign; this detail should be attended to in creating such businesses.
- 4. Building trust and working relationships:** Institutional purchasers occasionally allow for smaller, more flexible contracts than policy typically dictates, but securing those contracts is an informal process that requires knowledge of and a willingness to work with individual suppliers, which in turn involves trust. As one interviewee noted, “You have to take that sense of urgency off the table and work community by community to build those relationships.” In further research and work to support BIPOC suppliers, institutional purchasers should center the importance of building trust and relationships with suppliers. As one interviewee who runs an agricultural business explained, “It is important that Black folks ‘set the table,’ otherwise the ‘menu’ is not what they want.” These relationships are important in understanding how to support GFC producers within the food system.

2 Center for Good Food Purchasing. (2021) “What We Do.” Accessed at: <https://goodfoodpurchasing.org/about-the-center/#what-we-do> on Jan. 27th, 2021.

3 Philpott, T. (2020, November 19). “Black farmers have been robbed of land. A new bill would give them a “quantum leap” toward justice.” Accessed at <https://www.motherjones.com/food/2020/11/black-farmers-have-been-robbed-of-land-a-new-bill-would-give-them-a-quantum-leap-toward-justice/> on December 1, 2020.

5. **Applied research, financial and business education centering BIPOC producers:** Interviewees in our research suggested there was value in providing support and/or education to small-scale BIPOC producers regarding grant funding and loan applications; examining the potential of cooperative business models to scale production; and clarifying the institutional bidding and certification processes. **Further research and education on these topics could help expand the access of BIPOC farmers and producers to the institutional supply chain by analyzing existing barriers, helping producers to develop skills to address them, and identifying strategies to eliminate such barriers overall.**
6. **Capital and financial resources for BIPOC farmers and producers:** More fundamentally, in our interviews, we repeatedly heard about how difficult it is for producers, especially BIPOC farmers, to access the capital required to start or scale up an agricultural venture. Interviewees pointed out the structural roots of this, with one saying “How marginalized communities can gain wealth and access to land should be the primary question we ask.” **Further research and advocacy work on access to capital and financial resources for BIPOC producers, such as that already being done by Food Chain Workers Alliance; HEAL Food Alliance; and the Good Food Buffalo Coalition, could help expand the access of BIPOC farmers and producers to the institutional supply chains by analyzing and addressing existing financial barriers, often rooted in historical and systemic racism.⁴**
7. **Continuation of Good Food Communities campaign:** Our research findings from the Buffalo food supply chain parallel patterns of injustice throughout the U.S. food system, including many suppliers with high numbers of labor violations, a lack of transparent information, and operations that are not local to New York State. **Our analysis revealed a clear need for the continued work of the Good Food Purchasing Program and Good Food Communities campaigns, and specifically that of alliances and coalitions including the Food Chain Workers Alliance, HEAL Food Alliance, and the Good Food Buffalo Coalition, in Buffalo, New York.**
8. **BIPOC communities, including frontline workers, as decision-makers:** At a fundamental level, the injustices throughout the current Buffalo supply chain that our research revealed show the importance of **prioritizing work to create Good Food Communities, but lasting change must be done carefully and with consideration for the impacts of any actions on BIPOC communities, and must position BIPOC community members, including frontline workers, as decision-makers.**

Looking forward, transforming Buffalo’s food system, as well as the United States’ food system in which it is situated, into one that is more sustainable and just requires not only an acute understanding of the current institutional food supply chain but also knowledge of alternative suppliers and the structural barriers that limit their access to these supply chains. Overall, we recommend that future research and activism focus on understanding and dismantling these barriers that affect BIPOC producers’ ability to access institutional supply chains, and ensuring a more equitable food system in which frontline workers are valued and their needs are prioritized.

4 White, M. M. (2018). *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*. University of North Carolina Press Books: Chapel Hill.

About the Authors

Erica Hellen is a Mid-Career Masters of Environmental Management student at the Yale School of the Environment. Since 2010, she has been owner/operator of a multi-species rotational livestock farm that produces pastured proteins for conscious eaters in central Virginia. She is interested in the intersection of food systems, climate change, and environmental social science.

Patricia Kwan is a Masters of Business Administration student at the Yale School of Management. Previously, she was at Cisco Systems, Inc. running the Product Analytics team. She is currently focusing on bridging her background in product analytics/ tech with the Food and Ag space.

Sooyong Kwon is a Yale College senior majoring in Ethics, Politics and Economics with a concentration on domestic food systems. Previously, he operated an educational non-profit called Illumna in his home community of Bergen County, New Jersey and worked as a Dining Associate in Berkeley Dining Hall. Upon graduating in Spring of 2021, he will join the Yale Office of Strategic Analysis as a Swensen Fellow, helping University leaders make rigorous decisions backed by data.

Zoe Novic is a Masters student at the Yale School of Public Health. Her work focuses on amplifying the connection between factory farming, climate change, chronic disease, and population health. Before studying at Yale, Zoe worked as the San Francisco Grassroots Director for The Humane League and served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Indonesia 2014- 2016.

Avery Siler is a Masters of Environmental Management student at the Yale School of the Environment, with a specialization in People, Equity, and the Environment. Previously, she worked on conservation easement acquisitions, focusing on agricultural lands, at the Delaware Highlands Conservancy and as a fundraiser at The Nature Conservancy.

Viola Taubmann is a Masters of Environmental Management student at the Yale School of the Environment specializing in sustainable agriculture and agroforestry. She is a research assistant at the Ucross High Plains Stewardship Initiative where she is assessing innovative risk and reward sharing between organic farmers and supply chain actors. Previously, she worked for the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the European Parliament on agricultural policy.

Abbey Warner is a Master of Environmental Management candidate at the Yale School of the Environment. She is specializing in Water Resource Science and Management while exploring the intersections between water and sustainable agriculture, climate resilience, environmental justice, ecosystem health, and rural development. Previously, Abbey worked at the Pacific Institute and UN Global Compact CEO Water Mandate on corporate water stewardship and access to water, sanitation, and hygiene.

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