

FULL LIVES



Greater Twin Cities
UNITED WAY

Phase 1 Final Evaluation Report

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FULL LIVES PHASE 1 FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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Executive Summary

The Full Lives initiative focuses on strengthening the regional **community food systems** to improve long-term food security. From July 2024 to December 2025, Full Lives funded partners provided services to **81,243 people** including youth, farmers, and small growers; produced **508,698 pounds** of food for the Twin Cities region; and distributed **nearly a million pounds** (976,367) of food to Twin Cities community members. The overwhelming theme heard from funded partners through evaluation of Full Lives Phase 1 was that **Full Lives served as an accelerant for innovation, program expansion, and organizational development**. Full Lives Phase 1 supported organizational development through three primary levers of change that had a positive impact:

- **Deepened and Expanded Relationships:** The focus on relationship development had numerous positive effects on funded partners, including an increase in resource sharing, increased engagement and integration in each other's organizations, and capitalizing on collective momentum.
- **Increased Capacity:** Full Lives Phase 1 accelerated necessary organizational development in the form of investment in program design, board of directors' development, business planning, strategic communications, curriculum development, and technological improvements.
- **Trust-Based Partnership:** Flexible funds and a trust-based approach to partnership were essential to success and enabled funded partners to make strategic decisions, meet community needs nimbly, and adapt to changing conditions to sustain services.

Funded partners overwhelmingly agreed that a necessary focus in Phase 2 should be on local food distribution. Full Lives Phase 2 will focus on 1) Market access and business development for emerging farmers and 2) Value chain coordination, with a focus on shared infrastructure. Overall, Full Lives Phase 1 deepened relationships, expanded capacity among Twin Cities regional community food system partners, accelerated program development, and amplified innovative approaches to improving local food production, access, and distribution.

“This grant helped us see what our full potential is—if we want to be the biggest and best, imagining our role. Full Lives was a perfect metaphor—we were able to strengthen, expand, and deepen...It took us from “what can we do with nothing” to “what’s the best world we can imagine and let’s try that out”—Full Lives Funded Partner

Full Lives Vision and Purpose

Access to fresh, nutritious food is vital for community well-being. Over 50% of food-insecure individuals in Minnesota reside in Greater Twin Cities United Way's (GTCUW) nine-county region, impacting health and community stability¹. The vision of the Full Lives initiative is a thriving and equitable Twin Cities regional food system where all communities have physical and economic access to food that meets their cultural, dietary and nutritional needs. Full Lives partners with innovative nonprofits across the Twin Cities, including food shelves, urban farms, and food incubators to strengthen community resources and collectively establish a regional food system that ensures everyone has access to the food they need to thrive.

GTCUW has long supported local emergency food agencies to meet urgent food needs through the Community Investment Program grantmaking efforts. Full Lives complements those efforts by fostering collaboration, coordination, and sustainable solutions that extend beyond immediate food needs. The purpose of the Full Lives initiative is to catalyze and support the transformation of community food systems in the Twin Cities region. By prioritizing community food security, GTCUW aims to address disparities in health and economic outcomes.

First launched in 2017, the Full Lives initiative is unique in its focus on systems change, and **community food systems** as a driver of lasting food security. The first iteration of Full Lives focused geographically on North Minneapolis and was implemented from 2017-2019. Scaling from a neighborhood-specific strategy in 2024, the next generation of Full Lives (hereafter referred to as Full Lives Phase 1) focused on the Twin Cities 9-county metro towards sustainable, just, and equitable solutions for a thriving regional food system.

Full Lives Program Design

A 2024 landscape analysis commissioned by GTCUW, completed by the Food Works Group, found that most existing local funding efforts towards food security support traditional hunger relief programs that provide emergency foods, e.g., food shelves, food banks, and meal programs. GTCUW learned from community partners, colleagues on the Holistic Grantmaking team, and community food system changemakers that **informal networks, partnerships and collaborations** are essential to improving the strength of equitable community food systems. At the same time, GTCUW also learned that these networks are often unfunded or underfunded, and may not be represented adequately by mapping service-providing organizations. Increasing the capacity of these informal collaboratives to enact change is fundamental to the Full Lives Phase 1 approach.

The Food Works Group landscape analysis identified several strategies that informed the design of Phase 1 including but not limited to:

- Coordination across multiple funders could create a bigger impact and serve as a broker of resources across communities.
- Organizations appreciated having the opportunity to network and hear from one another during our focus groups and expressed a desire for more opportunities and facilitated coordination.
- Mental health plays an important and often overlooked role in addressing food insecurity. Some food shelves cited a “scarcity” mindset among clients that resulted in micro aggressions and increased anxiety.

Full Lives Phase 1 was relaunched in July 2024 using learnings gathered through evaluation of the prior Full Lives iteration, which illuminated that food systems changemakers wanted to be able to work more closely together with others across the nine-county region and that funding for organizational development was necessary. The new, expanded phase of Full Lives Phase 1 was designed in partnership with input and feedback from the community, prior iteration initiative partners, and the Full Lives Advisory Group. The Full Lives Advisory Group includes leaders of nonprofit and government entities with personal and professional experience navigating our region’s food system. **The final Full Lives Phase 1 program design consisted of a three-prong approach combining essential components for success:**

1. Direct unrestricted funding to lead collaborations and support capacity building efforts;
2. Access to technical assistance provided by Terra Soma, Propel Nonprofits, and GTCUW staff; and
3. Facilitation of and participation in a quarterly community of practice for funded partners and collaborative members.

The Full Lives Program Officer (PO) was responsible for coordinating each of the three elements of the Full Lives Phase 1 program. While the re-launch of the initiative was spearheaded by the PO at the time, an internal shift in roles meant that a new PO was brought in to lead the work in January 2025. The Program Officer not only served as a main point of contact for each funded partner but also provided technical support to partners throughout Full Lives Phase 1. Each collaborative met with the Program Officer on a bi-monthly basis to check in on their progress, provide thought partnership and troubleshooting if needed, and stay abreast of developments in the community. Each bi-monthly meeting agenda was co-created with the Full Lives evaluator to ensure key learnings were captured. The PO also met monthly with each of the contracted technical assistance providers individually, and quarterly as a group, to share updates and strategize

on programming. Consistent communication facilitated the development of meaningful and trusting relationships between the PO and funded partners and was also an effective mechanism for the PO to provide technical assistance and offer support when challenges arose.

In Full Lives Phase 1, Communities of Practice (CoPs) were held quarterly as a space to bring partners together to learn from one another, build connections with colleagues in the field and identify strategies to leverage each other's resources in a way that would advance community food systems work in the region. The original intent of these quarterly, in-person events was to have each funded collaborative "host" one CoP as an avenue to showcase their Full Lives Phase 1 work, and to involve each partner in co-developing the agenda, activities and learning objectives. During the planning phase for the second CoP hosted by Dream of Wild Health/Indigenous Food Network (IFN) in April 2025, IFN voiced a desire for more ownership over the event. As a result, the PO took a step back from the planning process and the partners planned the entire event with minimal support from GTCUW. The event was a major success, with partners reporting that they were able to engage with IFN's work in a concrete, tangible way that left a lasting impression. This shift in ownership of the CoP's from a GTCUW-led event to a *partner-led* event was a turning point in Full Lives Phase 1, and allowed partners to be authentically centered in the planning and facilitation of the CoPs for the remainder of the grant period.

*"All of this work is feeding the community in a healthy way." –Full Lives
Funded Partner*

Full Lives Phase 1 Funded Partners

In spring 2024, GTCUW launched and managed a competitive application process to select nonprofit partners to receive Full Lives Phase 1 funding. A total of \$1.35 million was invested in 20 Twin Cities-area organizations in pursuit of the Full Lives vision to create a thriving and equitable regional food system where all communities have physical and economic access to food that meets their cultural, dietary, and nutritional needs.

Full Lives provided Phase 1 funding in two ways: to *collaboratives* comprised of multiple smaller grassroots organizations, and to individual nonprofit partners for *capacity building* purposes. Phase 1 of Full Lives directly funded four lead collaborative cohort organizations to facilitate cooperative efforts across the Twin Cities area working in all sectors of the food system from food production to distribution to waste disposal. The primary collaborative funded partner was also responsible for disbursement of funds to

cooperative partner organizations. Three additional organizations were awarded capacity building grants, which included a small amount of funding and technical assistance to help build their capacity to collaborate on food systems work.

Dream of Wild Health received a Collaborative Cohort award as the lead organization in the Indigenous Food Network (IFN). The Indigenous Food Network (IFN) is a collaboration of over twenty Native-led organizations and community members with the mission to rebuild sovereign food systems within the intertribal urban Native community through collaboration. Goals of IFN include increasing access to healthier and more culturally relevant foods for the urban Native community; improving economic opportunity among Native food producers, chefs & restaurants; cultivating community connectedness; and changing the systems and policies that lead to continuing inequities. Dream of Wild Health collaborative partners included Division of Indian Work, Indigenous Food Lab, Minneapolis American Indian Center, Native American Community Clinic, and the Native American Community Development Institute.

Metro Food Justice Network (MFJN) received a Collaborative Cohort award and led the collaborative consisting of Appetite for Change, M Health Fairview, The Food Group, The Good Acre, and Urban Roots. MFJN is a collaboration of individuals and organizations in the Twin Cities Metro Area partnering to transform the regional food system by advancing racial equity. MFJN centers communities that are most affected by systemic racism in the food system: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), through collective power and shared resources.

Northside Economic Opportunity Network (NEON) received a Collaborative Cohort award and led the collaborative consisting of 4 Access Partners (4AP) and the Minnesota African Immigrant Farmers Association (MAIFA). The collaboration between Northside Economic Opportunity Network (NEON), MN African Immigrant Farmers Association (MAIFA), and 4 Access Partners (4AP), worked together to strengthen the business practices of African immigrant farmers and BIPOC entrepreneurs, and ultimately the food supply chain and overall food system.

Sabathani Community Center received a Collaborative Cohort award and led the collaborative consisting of the Central Area Neighborhood Development Organization (CANDO) and Healthy Roots Institute & City Food Studio. The Sabathani collaborative brought together key partners across Minneapolis committed to creating a thriving, equitable food system in the urban areas that need it most. The Sabathani-led collaborative aimed to address the systemic barriers to food system sustainability and

equitable food access across the areas of food production, processing, distribution, and consumption, environmental stewardship, economic vitality, and social and nutritional well-being.

The **Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA)** received a Capacity Building award to build and maintain the community supported agriculture (CSA) program and invest in organizational development. HAFA's Farm-to-Family CSA program was developed to demonstrate how an alternative, equitable method of food distribution can successfully improve food systems in Twin Cities communities while also addressing immediate inequities within the local food economy. HAFA collaborates with anchor institutions, community organizations, and small BIPOC-women-owned businesses that have established relationships with low-income and food-insecure refugees, immigrants, and BIPOC individuals and families who would benefit from regular, convenient, and affordable access to fresh food.

The Good Acre received a Capacity Building award to enhance services provided to farmers and small growers. The Good Acre is the largest non-profit food hub in Minnesota that engages growers, makers, partners, consumers, buyers, and donors to sustain a healthier, more equitable food system. The Good Acre worked towards creating a model to connect efforts focused on strengthening local food economies, equitable production, and market access through market development, technical support, and partner network development.

Keystone Community Services received a Capacity Building award to maintain and expand food growing and distribution services. Keystone Community Services partners with Food Justice for Rice Street which seeks to create a thriving, equitable food system in the Rice Street Corridor, including Saint Paul's North End and overlapping into areas of Maplewood, Roseville and Little Canada. Keystone Community Services worked to develop a resilient community food system that provides ample, equitable and sustainable food for everyone in our neighborhood.

Two technical assistance providers were contracted to provide additional support to all Full Lives Phase 1 funded partners. **Terra Soma** is a social benefit enterprise that provides comprehensive support to clients working to transform food systems. They offer technical assistance in storytelling, strategic communications, and community food systems development; focusing on culturally relevant and impactful solutions across diverse communities. Terra Soma provided support in communications and narrative development, as well as community food systems planning. **Propel Nonprofits** is a

consulting organization dedicated to strengthening the effectiveness and sustainability of nonprofits through financial management support, capacity building, and strategic guidance. Propel Nonprofits provided organizational and leadership development support.

Evaluation Approach

The evaluation approach was primarily process-focused and formative. The primary purpose that guided the evaluation design was to capture implementation learnings, identify recommendations for improvement, and document challenges. Process evaluations are well-suited to new or relaunched programs as this approach helps interest holders to see how a program functions and what is necessary for continued success, gather recommendations to assess challenges, and capture learnings without adherence to a set of specific outcomes. The evaluation was not designed to assess generalizability or adherence to the Full Lives model. Future evaluations for Full Lives may include more rigorous evaluation methods in support of model refinement, replication, and scaling. The intended use of the evaluation report is to share learnings from Phase 1 that will inform the design and implementation of Phase 2. The audience and intended end users of the evaluation report are primarily internal GTCUW staff including the PO, Innovations Director, and the Senior Vice President of Community Impact. The evaluation report will be presented to the Full Lives Advisory group to share summarized Phase 1 learnings and support Phase 2 planning. The key questions that guided the evaluation approach included:

1. What was accomplished throughout Full Lives Phase 1?
2. What were the successes of the Full Lives Phase 1 initiative?
3. How have Full Lives partners built capacity with GTCUW funding and support?
4. What are the essential components of the Full Lives model?
5. What could have made the Full Lives partnership more beneficial?
6. What are the areas of interest, need, and momentum that could be capitalized on in Phase 2?

Data collection methodology consisted of five different tools: 1) informal bimonthly check-ins between collaborative funded partners and the Full Lives Program Officer; 2) quarterly check-ins between the TA providers and the Full Lives Program Officer; 3) attendee surveys after communities of practice; 4) a final report of quantitative measures from both collaborative cohort and capacity building funded partners ; and 5) a limited structure key informant conversation with funded partners facilitated by a GTCUW evaluation team staff member in the fall of 2025.

Bimonthly check-ins were facilitated by evaluation staff and the Full Lives PO. The evaluation staff transitioned in August 2025 from an external contracted evaluator to an internal evaluator staff member at GTCUW. Bimonthly check-ins were typically scheduled for an hour and followed a loose agenda structure. The purpose of the bi-monthly check-ins was to discuss implementation progress, problem solve challenges, and provide updates on any pertinent GTCUW and funded partner organizational changes. Informal thematic analysis was utilized to identify themes in conversations. The evaluators independently summarized the conversations using notes taken by themselves and the Full Lives PO. The evaluators checked the accuracy of summaries with the Full Lives PO and made edits to summaries as needed to effectively communicate important pieces of information.

Quarterly TA check-ins were facilitated by the contracted evaluator and the Full Lives Program Officer. At the time of evaluator transition, the remaining two quarterly TA check-in's in August and December were facilitated by the Full Lives Program Officer. The purpose of the bi-monthly check-ins was to discuss the TA services provided to funded partners in the last quarter, summarize progress, problem solve challenges, and provide updates on any pertinent GTCUW and funded partner organizational changes. Upon review of the TA provider check-in notes by the internal GTCUW evaluator, it was decided that TA provider check-in notes would not be analyzed or included in Full Lives Phase 1 evaluation as the notes often duplicated information shared by funded partners during the bi-monthly check-ins.

CoP Attendee surveys were developed primarily by operations support staff in Microsoft Forms and were provided electronically through links in follow-up emails and QR codes at each CoP. The attendee surveys used a combination of 5-item Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), single selection, and open-ended text responses. The 5-item Likert scale to respond to these questions (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither agree or disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). The April CoP attendee survey was edited to include specific questions about indigenous foodways and specific activity stations managed by Dream of Wild Health. The July and October CoPs used similar questions but were individualized to each event. There were three consistent questions asked in all CoP attendee surveys:

- “I made new connections to people involved in Community Food Systems”
- “I strengthened existing connections to people involved in Community Food Systems.”
- “I learned (or was reminded of) something I can apply in my work.

The GTCUW internal evaluation staff analyzed the three questions listed above by collapsing the Strongly Agree and Agree categories into one category. A simple count of

responses served as the numerator and the total number of survey respondents was the denominator in calculating the percentage of respondents.

The **final report** was designed in accordance with the quantitative measures included in the grant agreements with all funded partners. The grant agreements stipulated metrics that must be reported to GTCUW upon the culmination of Full Lives Phase 1 funding. A significant challenge to this evaluation was the lack of consistency in the quantitative measures in the contracts. A table is provided in [Appendix 1](#) that notes which measures were gathered by which funded partner. Quantitative measures 1.2 and 1.3 were combined to create the metric of People Served. As many of the funded partners provide services continuously and individuals could access services multiple times, the number of people is not unduplicated. There was no consistency in if funded partners counted households or individuals. The GTCUW evaluator analyzed households as equating to a single individual to not overcount and misrepresent the overall reach.

The limited structure **key informant conversation** were held virtually using Microsoft Teams in October and November 2025 facilitated by the GTCUW evaluator with the Full Lives PO attending. All Collaborative Cohort and Capacity Building funded partners completed a key informant conversation with at least one person attending; a few conversations had multiple funded partner staff members attend. The GTCUW evaluator took notes, recorded the conversations, and downloaded transcripts from Microsoft Teams software. The protocol utilized by the GTCUW evaluator is available in [Appendix 2](#). The GTCUW evaluator reviewed the notes and transcripts to identify themes using an inductive approach. The GTCUW evaluator spoke with the Full Lives PO to discuss and refine identified themes in key informant conversations. Aligned with the formative and process-oriented design of the evaluation and centered on utilization-focused evaluation principles, thematic coding and transcript cleaning were deemed not necessary. Utilization-focused evaluation directs that the methods of data collection and analysis are appropriate to generate credible findings that support the intended end use by intended users. As the primary intended use of the evaluation findings is to summarize learnings from Phase 1 and plan for Phase 2 internally among GTCUW staff and in partnership with the Full Lives Advisory Group, rigorous thematic analysis was deemed not necessary to generate a useful evaluation report.

Impact of Full Lives

From July 2024 to December 2025, Full Lives funded partners provided services to **81,243 people** including youth, farmers, and small growers. As many of the funded partners provide services continuously, the number of people is not unduplicated. In total, funded

partners produced **508,698 pounds** of food for the Twin Cities region. Full Lives funded partners also played a critical role in distributing food to the community that was donated or purchased from local growers. Full Lives partners distributed **nearly a million pounds** (976,367) of food to Twin Cities community members.

The overwhelming theme heard from funded partners through evaluation of Full Lives Phase 1 was that **Full Lives served as an accelerant for innovation, program expansion, and organizational development.** A funded partner shared that *“Full Lives has been the rocket fuel—we knew the direction we wanted to head and we had semi-clear goals, but sometimes you just don’t have the fuel to get there.”* Many partners shared through bimonthly meetings and key informant conversations that their organizations had numerous ideas for expansion and new programming to explore but they lacked the flexible resources, time for collaboration with others working in the Twin Cities regional food system, or had low financial tolerance for risk to pilot innovative work. Describing the opportunity that Full Lives provided to lean into innovation, a funded partner shared that *“We don’t want to duplicate, we want to provide something where there is an unmet need. Overwhelmingly participants were saying ‘there is nothing else like this out there’ which made us feel like we were onto something.”* **Full Lives evaluation expanded on the resounding theme that Full Lives Phase 1 supported organizational development and identified three primary levers of change that had a positive impact:**

- **Deepened and Expanded Relationships**
- **Increased Capacity**
- **Trust-Based Partnership**

Deepened and Expanded Relationships

The broad nature of the food system often necessitates the formation of coalitions or networks, many of which are under-resourced or completely un-funded. The intention of the quarterly Community of Practice (CoP) events and the initiative’s focus on a collaborative approach was to build and deepen relationships among changemakers and interest holders in the Twin Cities food system. Relationship building is a powerful lever for change and in the words of a partner, this work *“may not seem like a big sweeping policy-system-environmental change right away but it’s the foundation we need to get to those. We need to sustain and maintain those relationships.”* Surveys collected after each CoP showed that 79% of respondents affirmed making new connections; 96% reported strengthening existing connections; and 88% reported learning something new or being reminded of something to apply to their work.

The focus on relationship development had numerous positive effects on funded partners, including an increase in resource sharing, increased engagement and integration in each other’s organizations, and capitalizing on collective momentum. Resource sharing looked like sharing spaces for meetings, gardening tools, co-writing grant applications together, and spreading the word through social media or newsletters to increase service reach or event attendance. A funded partner shared that they appreciated the collaborative spirit of Full Lives as it has encouraged a shift away from a “*scarcity mindset, we are not in competition with one another for funds or donors.*” Examples of staff integration include attending working group meetings facilitated by a partner organization, joining advisory committees, or beginning a term serving on the Board of Directors. A funded partner shared that because of Full Lives collaboration “*what we could have all done individually, now its growing into something bigger than we had imagined.*” Examples of funded partners integrating their staff with other organizations include attending working group meetings facilitated by a partner organization, joining advisory committees, or beginning a term serving on the Board of Directors.

“Full Lives has given us the opportunity to go beyond certain layers and get to know each other and the cultures within our organizations. [Full Lives has] given us an opportunity to go on the journey and then call someone and say this is my friend.”—Full Lives Funded Partner

An unexpected success of intentional relationship development was the increase in community awareness and knowledge of organizations working within the Twin Cities regional food system. Funded partners facilitated events together and were provided with opportunities to collaboratively conduct outreach and engagement in public spaces such as farmers markets, the State Fair, and local festivals. A funded partner shared that as a result of Full Lives “*We are able to work with so many people we may not have had the opportunity to meet.*”

Funded partners also shared that the Community of Practice gatherings were one of the most powerful aspects of Full Lives. Each quarter, one of the funded collaborations was invited to host a CoP event (including co-creating the agenda, activities and learning objectives with Full Lives staff). While the initial intention of this format was meant to provide the cohort an opportunity to showcase their work to their peers, the events took on a different significance as the initiative unfolded. While planning the second CoP event, a funded partner expressed interest in taking greater ownership over the event and engaging the cohort in hands-on, experiential activities to facilitate connection and shared

knowledge. Based on the success of that event, subsequent CoP's were entirely designed and facilitated by funded partners with support provided as needed by GTCUW.

“The community of practice was deeply valuable. Connecting with other organizations doing work around food systems provided not only learning opportunities but also encouragement and inspiration. Hearing how others approach challenges around cultural responsiveness, and efficiency helped us bring fresh ideas to our own food shelf.”—Full Lives Funded Partner

“Capacity for me has grown in a lot of different ways—in relationships and quantity but also quality able to go deeper with. The trust is there a little bit more, my reputation has grown more, everytime I talk to someone says my name is coming up in the rooms they are in. In those relationships where you can lean on and work together more”—Full Lives Funded Partner

Increased Capacity

Many funding sources have a focus on increasing services or reaching more people. Full Lives Phase 1 was intentionally designed to have a focus on increasing capacity within the food system with a broad understanding of what built capacity could entail. Capacity building among Full Lives funded partners did include additional services and staff time, but also resulted in organizational development in the form of investment in program design, board of directors' development, business planning, strategic communications, curriculum development, and technological improvements. These are all necessary for sustainable growth and consistent high-quality service delivery; however, these activities are often difficult to resource. A funded partner shared that the combination of Full Lives flexible direct funding and technical assistance enabled additional capacity building around the *“really quiet things when we talk about being able to feed our community”* such as consulting with national experts when designing programs, editing curriculums to better speak to current needs of small growers, and developing outreach plans to reach more people.

Building capacity also looked like an increase in the ability to hire additional staff to expand services or improve on services already being provided. For example, a funded partner shared that through Full Lives they were able to partner with a culturally specific organization and embed a Karen-speaking team member at some sites to provide

interpretation and support with accessing food. The inclusion of this additional staff person *“made it more welcoming and a complete experience for people we serve. It helped staff feel like they were providing good service. We weren ’ t able to do this before.”*

The technical assistance offerings were helpful, and all funded partners had positive experiences when engaging with contracted TA providers. While Terra Soma and Propel Nonprofits had a different focus for their support with the collaboratives, both worked closely with the cohort to co-develop tools and processes that build capacity and strengthened relationships. For example, the NEON collaborative utilized Terra Soma’s technical support to establish formal partnership guidelines in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding as well as a budget template that the group could use to plan, track and manage Full Lives funds. These tools, and the facilitated process of developing them, were invaluable to the collaborative and allowed them to successfully navigate challenges that threatened their work together.

“Full Lives has truly strengthened our organization, helping us move from simply meeting needs to building long-term sustainability and dignity into how we serve our neighbors. Before this support, much of our energy was spent reacting to immediate needs. With Full Lives, we were able to step back, assess our systems, and make thoughtful improvements.” — Full Lives Funded Partner

Trust-Based Partnership

GTCUW strives to operate from a trust-based approach with all partners, interest holders, and community members. Trust-based philanthropy is an emerging approach that seeks to address the inherent power imbalances between funders and nonprofit partners⁴. GTCUW adopted this approach several years ago to support the mission-driven work to disrupt inequities. In prioritizing trusting and collaborative relationships, funders become more accountable and responsive to their grantees who are then able to better provide services to their communities and utilize their expertise to design programs that are culturally specific meet unmet needs. Trust-based philanthropy is intended to reduce administration burden on funded partners, provide resources that align with real-time needs, and empower funded partners to pivot when necessary. Two core practices of the trust-based philanthropy approach that were central to Full Lives Phase 1 success are 1) providing flexible and responsive funds and 2) providing beyond-the-dollar support through intentional connection, technical assistance, and frequent communication.

All Full Lives funded partners reflected that flexible funds were essential to their success. Providing flexible funds coupled with technical assistance and frequent communication was appreciated as evident through a funded partner sharing that they “*have never worked with someone who has had as much trust as GTCUW*” couple with another funded partner reflecting that “*entrusting community-based organizations to say ‘you guys know what’s right’ and allow us to sustain ourselves and our work in food access.*” The trust-based approach to flexible funding allowed funded partners to be nimble and meet needs as they arose, without being restricted to what was written in a work plan submitted over a year prior. For example, a funded partner stated many other sources of funding were restricted and that these “*funds tend to prescribe exactly how you’re going to use it and by so doing tends to limit creativity because you are not able to achieve other avenues of achieving the same goal. Flexible dollars let you be creative while still being fiscally responsible.*” Flexible funding and trust in funded partners empowered them to make strategic decisions that “*allowed resources to be in the space they were most impactful during a time of crunch.*”

“Full Lives has given us the freedom to not only nourish our communities but do it in a way that is relevant and appropriate for our community and not just going through the motions of doing a report.”—Full Lives Funded Partner

Recommendations for Implementation Improvement

The collaborative nature of Full Lives was new, and at times challenging, for some funded partners. While two of the funded collaboratives were more established and had been operating together for many years (Metro Food Justice Network and Indigenous Food Network), the Sabathani and NEON collaboratives were new and came together because of the Full Lives funding opportunity. To operate as a collaborative, it is necessary to develop trust which takes time, and time is often in short supply among non-profit staff. Full Lives Phase 1 focus on relationship development was at times slow-moving due to limited staff capacity. One collaborative also acknowledged that they had initial difficulties functioning as a cohesive group, including determining project roles, responsibilities, and communication across several organizations. To address this challenge in the future, funded partners have recommended having a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or memorandum of agreement (MOA) and shared work plan in place from the onset. A funded partner new to the collaborative implementation approach reflected that “*If you only have*

a hammer, you treat everything as a nail, and maybe that isn't the right tool to use. We didn't have as many other tools. We are more prepared to be better partners in the future." The initiative's focus on relationship development within the food system sector will continue to be an important feature of future phases.

Several funded partners shared that they struggled initially to determine how to utilize the technical assistance offerings. Suggestions to improve the uptake and experience of using technical assistance included providing a menu of offerings at the onset of the funding period and examples of how other funded partners are using technical assistance. An additional potential challenge that funded partners expressed concern about was the ability to maintain Full Lives efforts without continued funding. The abrupt ending to funding and potential implications for sustainability is a concern across the nonprofit ecosystem and is not specific to Full lives. Many funded partners felt that a longer period of time would have been beneficial to further embed programmatic changes. GTCUW is providing smaller continuation grants and additional technical assistance from Terra Soma and Propel Nonprofits in 2026 to all interested funded partners to provide continuity for collaborative work and maintain changes resulting from capacity building efforts.

Flexible funding provided through a trust-based philanthropic approach is emerging and remains relatively uncommon in the nonprofit ecosystem. All the Full Lives funded partners were grateful for the trust shown by GTCUW and felt this way of partnering disrupts inequities, however as this approach is so novel there were a few small challenges in understanding grant reporting and invoicing. A funded partner shared that GTCUW's approach was *"so different from the usual, not in a bad way, and a little more structure of how or what is qualified under these expenses or within the grant collaborative expenses would be helpful"* in the future. GTCUW program staff will be providing more guidance at the onset of future funding phases as to allowable expenses, payment procedures, and reporting requirements. Guidance may be provided in written form, orally in meetings with funded partners, and included in contract language as appropriate.

"Capacity for me has grown in a lot of different ways—in relationships and quantity but also quality able to go deeper with. The trust is there a little bit more, my reputation has grown more, every time I talk to someone says my name is coming up in the rooms they are in. In those relationships where you can lean on and work together more"—Full Lives Funded Partner

Future Avenues for Community Food Systems Change

Key evaluation questions during Full Lives Phase 1 were centered on what learnings and successes need to be carried forward into Phase 2, launching in summer 2026, for continued success. Utilizing evaluation findings is essential to data-driven decision making and ensures that the work GTCUW supports is informed by and aligned with community and partner needs.

Funded partners overwhelmingly agreed that a necessary focus in Phase 2 should be on local food distribution. Specifically, partners identified a need to fill gaps in infrastructure and logistics to support the Twin Cities regional food system with improved access to locally grown food, reduced environmental burden, and improved economic stability of farmers, growers, and small food businesses. Almost all partners shared the sentiment that there is not an issue with food production; rather, the limiting factors to improving access to local food and strengthening the community food systems lie in difficulties accessing markets, lack of food processing infrastructure, and limited availability of storage spaces and preservation technologies. Funded partners were generous in sharing their ideas for where to focus Phase 2 that coalesced around two primary recommendations for program design:

1. Market access and business development for emerging farmers, including land access, institutional purchasing, and revenue generation.
 - “There is always a surplus and there are farmers who don’t have access to market for their produce to be sold. We gave them this opportunity. It wasn’t a lot of money but the meaning, joy, and hope for the future was a value to them that we are excited about.”
 - “We know how to grow food and there is land but need upfront investment to get the plot started with compost and to get the soil ready. The upfront investments could spiral out in a positive way.”
 - “People need land access to be able to feel the stability of long-term collaboration. People need food processing space.”
 - “Revenue generation—not something you hear a lot of nonprofits talking about and building connection with for-profit businesses is a unique ecosystem component, something that has the potential for longer term sustainability and regeneration.”
2. Value chain coordination, with a focus on shared infrastructure (ex: aggregation and processing spaces).

- “We have a lot of momentum around the growing part and then what? Is it going to market and if it doesn’t sell at market then what? Thinking about the next steps in that ecosystem... The processing spaces are super key.”
- “People talk about food access, but also this has a lot to do with food waste. So much of our harvest if it’s not used gets wasted so we were trying to come up with other solutions like freeze drying and fermentation.”
- “Processing all these resources and nutrients so it can sustain community throughout the winter.”
- “Infrastructure is necessary otherwise it’s a teaser and we can only support for 6 months, build momentum and it stops at the end of the growing season “
- “A lot of the food waste is because at the end of the growing season, the markets are closed or you don’t have the proper infrastructure to store for a period of time “

“Logistics are so important in connecting people to smaller, local producers and making that successful in terms of a job for somebody or a family business. This makes people more financially stable, food secure, and able to help others.”—Full Lives Funded Partner

When discussing which Full Lives components are essential to carry forward in Phase 2 and beyond, funded partners felt strongly that continuation of the three-prong model of flexible direct funding, technical assistance, and regular communities of practice is necessary for success. A funded partner shared that *“getting the opportunity to consistently and predictably have networking space with folks doing the same or similar work is so needed. There is so rarely time for folks to just be together and share best practices. Often folks just want to see the product and don’t value the relationship—continuing to fund relationship development is crucial.”* The focus on relationship development was described by a partner as *“one of the most unique and beautiful things about this. You’re seeing a lot of people that you already knew but connecting dots because you’re meeting new people, strengthening the network.”*

Funded partners also identified opportunities in Phase 2 to pursue policy changes that would better support the local food ecosystem in the Twin Cities and across Minnesota. In 2026, the Full Lives Program Officer will engage with organizations active in the policy and advocacy space (ex: Partners to End Hunger Coalition) in order to better

understand the political landscape at the state level and begin to identify ways to leverage support for Full Lives work in alignment with the GTCUW Advocacy team. Full Lives Phase 2 Communities of Practice will also be utilized as a space for discussion and identification of specific policy-related action steps to strengthen local food systems and bolster support for specialty crop farmers, specifically Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers and those from immigrant communities.

Evaluation Limitations

The evaluation of Full Lives Phase 1 has a few limitations that must be considered when sharing the report. First, the transition from an external to internal evaluator required a revision of the evaluation questions and refining of metrics to be more aligned with the Full Lives program design. Prior proposed evaluation metrics were not appropriate to the size, scope, and length of time of Full Lives Phase 1 nor were the metrics included in any data collection methodology. Second, it would have been ideal to have repeated key informant conversations using a consistent protocol at multiple points throughout the funding period. This would have provided additional qualitative data and motivated a more rigorous thematic analysis approach. Third, consistency in quantitative metrics included in contracts and questions asked via attendee surveys would have improved the evaluation design through shared metrics. Lastly, as the qualitative data analysis was conducted by a single evaluator that also participated in data collection, various forms of bias such as confirmation, affinity, and anchoring bias cannot be ruled out.

Conclusion

Overall, the three-pronged Full Lives model consisting of flexible direct funding, technical assistance offerings, and facilitated connection through a regular community of practice deepened relationships, expanded capacity among Twin Cities regional community food system partners, accelerated program development, and amplified innovative approaches to improving local food production, access, and distribution. As Full Lives continues to build on the strong foundation established in Phase 1 and grow in response to evolving community need, GTCUW expects to see continued success and GTCUW echoes the words of a Full Lives funded partner that ***“the proudest moment is still ahead of us---we are building something that will have exponential impact.”***



Appendix 1: Quantitative measures in funded partner grant agreements

Funded Partner	1.1 Pounds of Food produced	1.2 Number of Households or Individuals Supported	1.3 Number of farmers engaged or partners supported	1.4 Other: pounds of food distributed	1.5 Other: educational outreach impact	1.6 Other: number of farms or food businesses started	1.7 Dollars reinvested to partners, community, or local farmers	1.8 Number and type of community engagement opportunities
Sabathani	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Minnesota Food Justice Network	X	X					X	X
Dream of Wild Health	X	X	X					X
NEON	X	X	X					
Hmong	X	X						
Good Acre			X	X			X	
Keystone	X	X						

Appendix 2: Final Full Lives Phase 1 Evaluation Conversation Protocol

Purpose: Gather information on the successes, impact, and areas for improvement to close out Phase 1 of Full Lives and plan for Phase 2. This evaluation conversation will serve as the final report for your organization and will fulfill the requirement to release the final payment.

Structure: We have a list of questions we will be asking you, however we'd like the conversation to be casual so feel free to ask us questions, take the conversation in a different direction, circle back, etc.

Use of information: This information will be anonymized and summarized using components of qualitative thematic analysis, meaning we will review the notes, and transcripts if given permission to record, for all of the Full Lives partners and see what comes up most commonly. We will be sharing this information internally at GTCUW to inform our colleagues of this work, share successes, and help colleagues in fundraising to speak about this work.

Permission to record: Ask for permission to record with verbal consent or reaction in Teams. A recording helps us to return to the conversation to improve our understanding in areas we aren't sure, ensure we heard correctly, and help us with the thematic analysis.

Questions for Collaborative lead organizations:

Ask all questions in **Bold** below. Not necessary to go in order. The *italic* questions below the bolded questions are prompting or probing questions that will be used if needed to better facilitate the conversation. Ask the questions not in bold if there is time in the conversation.

- **A primary objective of Full Lives is to build capacity through unrestricted funding, technical assistance, and the community of practice. Please describe how Full Lives allowed your organization to build capacity and what is different as a result of this increase in capacity.**
 - *What wouldn't exist without Full Lives funding?*
- **What are the components of Full Lives that were most impactful for you?**
 - *What should be the throughline for next phase? Where do we need to keep things consistent?*
- **What results/changes/growth/etc. came out of collaboration specifically?**
 - *TA provided specifically?*
- **We have heard about the value of unrestricted dollars. We'd like to learn more about how this type of funding is beneficial and to check our assumption that this is the way to continue providing funding. How were Full Lives funds filling gaps or complementary to other sources of funding?**
 - *Where do you feel the funds had the most bang for their buck?*



- *How did you use the funds--budget info?*
- *Where were the funds most impactful for you and your organization?*
 - *Staffing additions/retention*
 - *Funds for implementation*
 - *More time to collaborate*
- **The next phase of Full Lives is going to focus more on food production. What type of strategies and activities would have the most impact on improving food production and access to locally grown food?**
 - *What type of support/programming would be the most impactful to build capacity and positive change in the community food system?*
- How has Full Lives contributed to your ability to be more responsive to community needs? Support the nonprofit ecosystem changes? Promote community and cultural well-being?
 - If Full Lives hasn't, what could Full Lives have done differently that would be more helpful?

Questions for capacity building partners:

Ask all questions in **Bold** below. Not necessary to go in order. The *italic* questions below the bolded questions are prompting or probing questions that will be used if needed to better facilitate the conversation. Ask the questions not in bold if there is time in the conversation.

- **What has Full Lives changed for your organization?**
 - What has Full Lives allowed you to do differently?
- **How did Full Lives funding, technical assistance, and/or community of practice build organizational capacity? Please describe.**
 - How was technical assistance utilized? Helpful?
- **What could have been done differently to better support your organization?**
- **The next phase of Full Lives is going to focus more on food production. What type of strategies and activities would have the most impact on improving food production and access to locally grown food?**
 - *What type of support/programming would be the most impactful to build capacity and positive change in the community food system?*

Appendix 3: Definitions

Food Security¹: Food security for a household always means access by all members to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum: The ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods; assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (that is, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).

Food Insecurity²: Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

Food Access³: Access by individuals to adequate resources to acquire appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. This can include legal, political, economic, and social resources of the community in which they live.

Trust-Based Philanthropy⁴: Trust-based philanthropy advances a just and equitable society by alleviating the inherent power imbalances between funders, nonprofits, and communities.

¹Food Works Group. "Report on the State of Food Insecurity in the Greater Twin Cities United Way Region"

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/practices>