



# State Uses of Federal COVID-19 Pandemic Relief for Local and Regional Food Systems

## Innovation Brief

### Issue

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic and supply chain disruptions highlighted vulnerabilities in food systems around the world. The United States experienced supply chain bottlenecks, COVID-19 outbreaks in meat processing facilities, and higher rates of food insecurity. The pandemic revealed long-standing issues of concentration, consolidation, low pay, and inflexibility in food systems, and the need for more resilient and diversified food systems.

### Innovation

Through Section 5001: Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and Section 9901: Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, the federal government granted states, U.S. territories, and tribal and local governments financial assistance and discretion to cover a broad range of COVID-19 pandemic-related expenses in their jurisdiction. This innovation brief focuses on states’ use of COVID-19 pandemic-era investments to develop new programs to aid and support local and regional food systems.

### Outcome

Since 2021, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) and the NASDA Foundation identified 45 programs in 22 states using COVID-19 pandemic relief (i.e., CRF and SLFRF) to support local and regional food systems (LRFS). These programs covered an array of initiatives developed to improve food system resiliency through farm to school, direct grants to producers, meat and poultry processing, farmers’ markets and food hubs, and related efforts.

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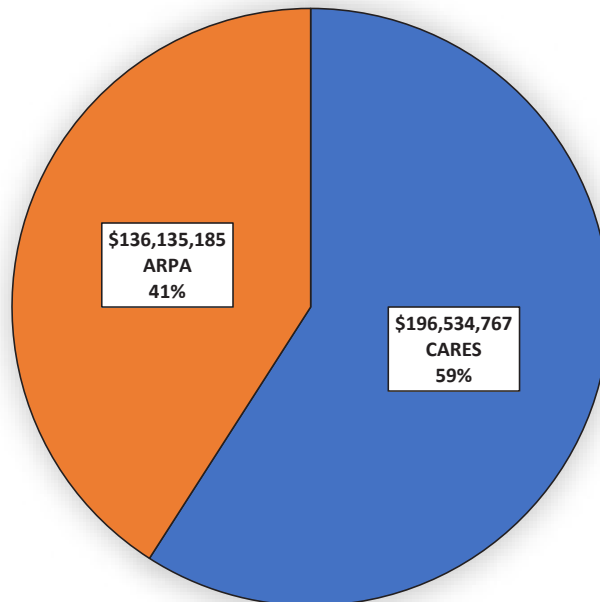
# Introduction

This innovation brief highlights state governments’ use of COVID-19 pandemic relief investments in local and regional food systems. These investments were largely funded through Section 5001: Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) of the CARES Act and Section 9901: Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program of the ARP Act. The CARES and ARP Acts were passed in March 2020 and 2021, respectively. Congress provided a total of up to \$500 billion directly to state, local, tribal, and territory governments by means of the U.S. Department of the Treasury (Treasury) to help the country respond to and recover economically from the COVID-19 pandemic.

States, tribes, and local governments were granted significant discretion with CRF and SLFRF to stand up COVID-19 pandemic-related programs. Through CRF these entities were allocated \$150 billion to help cover costs related to the public health emergency incurred between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021 (Driessen, 2021). SLFRF also provided these same entities an additional \$350 billion to support families and businesses dealing with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, support public services, and make investments that support recovery. The majority of the funds, \$219.8 billion, were reserved for states, tribal and territorial governments, and \$130.2 billion was allocated to local governments (Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, 2022).

Many state governments directed a portion of federal COVID-19 pandemic relief funds toward local and regional food system (LRFS) development. The USDA, National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA), and the NASDA Foundation partnered to gather more information on these efforts. Between February 16, 2022, and September 9, 2022, NASDA and the NASDA Foundation, with support from USDA, administered a voluntary survey to state departments of agriculture to collect program information. Nine departments responded, sharing information on 29 programs. The USDA reviewed the survey results for programs specific to LRFS. Those findings were combined with program information collected from multiple state interviews, news articles and internet searches on LRFS and state developed LRFS programs dating back to October 2020. Overall, USDA, NASDA, and the NASDA Foundation identified 45 local and regional food systems-oriented programs in 22 states, valued at \$326 million. The results of these findings, including several state spotlights or mini case studies, are highlighted in this innovation brief.

**Chart 1. Estimated Federal Funding Source for LRFS Programs**



## Study Limitations

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This innovation brief is a selective snapshot of LRFS-related programming executed by state governments around the country using federal COVID-19 pandemic relief funds administered by Treasury. It is not a comprehensive overview of how state governments utilized CRF and SLFRF more broadly or LRFS-related programs. The USDA, NASDA, and the NASDA Foundation made efforts to capture the widest number of LRFS programs possible, but additional state-level LRFS-related programs funded by federal COVID-19 pandemic relief may exist. In addition, this brief does not include CRF and SLFRF food and agriculture programming that was developed by tribes, territories, or local governments. Due to the large number of local, tribal, and territorial governments in partnership with NASDA and the NASDA Foundation, the information presented in this brief is limited to state programs to provide an achievable and relevant scope of work. Examples of information on municipal programming supported through these funds, is accessible through the National League of Cities [COVID-19: Local Action Tracker](#) (COVID-19: Local Action Tracker - National League of Cities, 2022).

Some states, like Nebraska and Rhode Island, used federal COVID-19 pandemic relief to aid small businesses, which may have included farms, restaurants, and other local food establishments. Other states funded food insecurity and nutrition programs using these funds. Those programs were not reported in this study due to difficulties differentiating between programs that targeted local foods and those focused on all types of foods and food products. These programs were included in situations where clear distinctions were made. Some states, such as Illinois, Massachusetts, and Minnesota, used state funds instead of federal COVID-19 pandemic relief funds to support LRFS throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These programs were not included because this brief focuses specifically on programs established with CRF and SLFRF.

This document looks closely at the characteristics of these state-run LRFS-related programs, rather than program outcomes. Additional research is necessary to demonstrate the past and future impact of these programs on local and regional economies and food systems.

## Key Themes and Program Highlights

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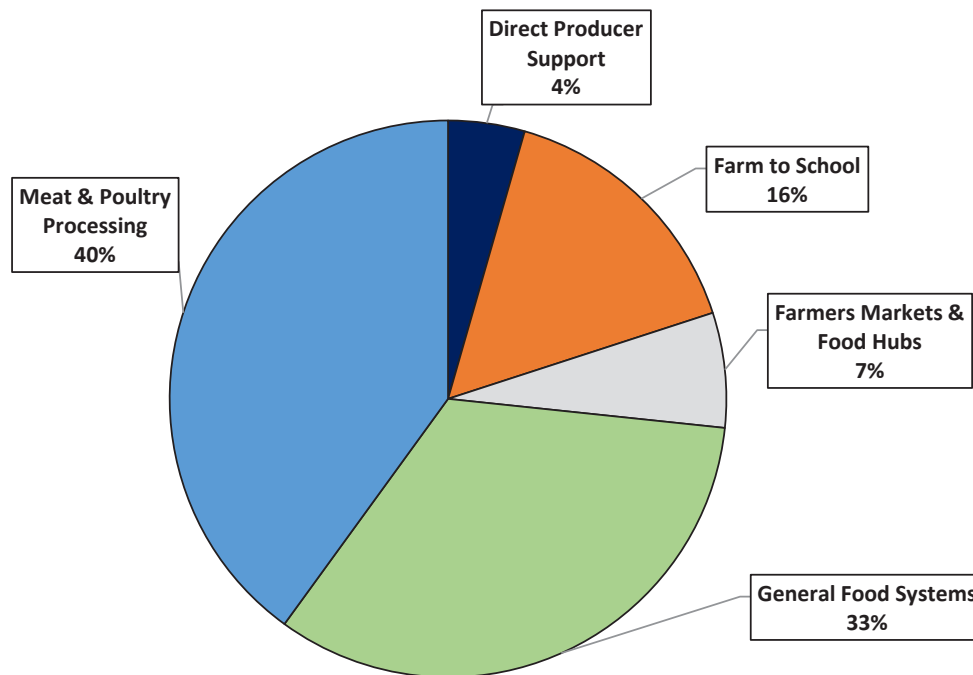
Many state governments took intentional action to direct COVID-19 pandemic relief to departments and programs tasked with delivering food to their community members who needed it the most. In at least one state, programs were developed in response to long-standing recommendations by food systems stakeholders that were addressing challenges further highlighted by the pandemic. State departments of agriculture recommendations and emerging sectoral needs also informed the expansion of existing programs and the development of new ones. Based on the data available at the time of this study, nearly half of US states chose to fund programming related to agriculture and food systems. In many cases, these programs were in departments of agriculture, while others were carried out by departments of economic development and commerce.

USDA reviewed state programs using federal COVID-19 pandemic relief collected through the voluntary survey to state departments of agriculture conducted by NASDA and NASDA Foundation, newspaper articles, and internet searches. These programs were grouped according to common themes and program focus, and, ultimately, categorized into five main program types. These program types include Direct Producer Support; Farm to School; Farmers Markets and Food Hubs; General Food Systems; and Meat and Poultry Processing. The following sections provide a brief description and examples of each program type.

### State Programs Aiding Small Businesses May also Contribute to Local and Regional Food Systems

Multiple states established small business programs with federal relief funding. These programs often directly and indirectly aided local and regional food systems. For example, in response to restaurant closures, Hope & Main, a nonprofit food incubator in Rhode Island, received a Federal CARES Act grant from Rhode Island Commerce Corporation to launch [DishUp Rhode Island](#), which helped 32 restaurants develop products made with locally sourced ingredients. Hope & Main partnered with a local grocery chain to sell these products in stores throughout the state to help stabilize restaurant sales during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many Rhode Island restaurants continue to sell value-added products through this retailer. For information on more projects supported by Hope & Main, see the [USDA Ag Marketing Service and Colorado State University's Hope & Main Kitchen: a Case Study](#).

**Chart 2. Proportion of LRFS Programs by Program Type**



## Direct Producer Support

Two programs in Iowa and Minnesota used federal COVID-19 pandemic relief to provide direct support to small and local agricultural producers and businesses. Direct producer support programs comprise 4% of the total count of federal COVID-19 pandemic relief programs identified in this study. These programs made available small allotments of funding to targeted individuals, often supporting a greater number of recipients than general food systems and meat and poultry processing-focused programs, which tended to fund fewer recipients at greater dollar amounts. For example, the Iowa Beginning Farmer Debt Relief Fund provided 1,564 beginning farmers up to \$10,000 to cover long-term debt relief (Iowa Economic Development Authority. Iowa Beginning Farmer Debt Relief Fund Awards., n.d.). In contrast, meat and poultry processing and general food systems programs identified through this study mainly distributed larger awards, in some cases with maximum funding levels reaching over one million dollars per recipient, to fewer entities to cover operational costs or expansion and to support market development and new initiatives. This small allotment of funds to a large group of recipients was also evident in other state-level, federal COVID-19 pandemic relief direct support programs targeting producers and agri-businesses that were excluded from this brief due to the programs' lack of focus on small, beginning, and direct marketing producers. This variance in program structure highlights how states could achieve different goals with the flexibilities provided through federal COVID-19 pandemic relief. This flexibility allowed states to shape programs based on their respective community's needs and priorities.

## Farm to School

Five states were identified as having used funds to support farm to school programs. These programs included reimbursement programs to purchase local food, equipment grants for producers and food services, and funding for hands-on educational experiences for students to grow their own food in school gardens or visit farms. Many grants were made available to child-care facilities, as well as schools. State interviewees highlighted the critical nature of food processing equipment in expanding the local food options in schools and early childcare facilities. Light processing, for example, cutting up carrots into smaller pieces or dicing vegetables to put into a pasta sauce, can make foods more appealing and acceptable to children and easier for cafeteria staff to utilize.

## Farmers Markets and Food Hubs

Three states established programs aimed at strengthening farmers' markets and food hubs. Funding for identified programs totaled nearly \$3.9 million. Vermont established the Farmers' Market Relief program, which provided up to \$2,000 for farmers' markets with less than \$10,000 in annual gross sales (Vermont COVID-19 Agriculture Assistance Program | Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, n.d.). Like the relief provided to Vermont farmers' markets, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture administered the COVID-19 Emergency Aid for Farmers Market Operators and Local Food Hubs using CARES Act funds. North Carolina allocated a total of \$750,000 for farmers' market operators and local food enterprises to aid necessary market adaptations, including personal protective equipment (PPE), technology improvements, and labor (Harman, 2020). The Nevada Rural Food Hub Grant provided one \$3,000,000 grant award to establish a food storage and distribution center in a rural area of the state lacking fresh fruit and vegetable access and holding capacity (Nevada Department of Agriculture, n.d.). These interventions highlight a range of emergency management measures, from immediate mitigation and response to future preparedness and prevention. They also mirror trends toward [online platforms](#) observed among farmers' markets and other local food outlets during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## General Food Systems

Approximately 32% of the programs examined in this study were categorized as general local and regional food systems support. This category included a broad swath of programs that allocated funding to many facets of the food system, including food hubs, multiuse kitchens, small producers, and more. In addition to the variety of activities funded, there were also several common subtypes described below.

Nearly half of these programs focused on reimbursement or support for market adaptations producers made in response to changes in consumer demand during the pandemic or implementation of COVID-19 safety measures. Many others facilitated technology upgrades and software procurement, supporting producers and local food businesses as they shifted to online sales during the pandemic. In one instance, a grant program in Maine was dedicated entirely to reimbursement of producers for e-commerce adaptations, such as websites, online commerce platforms, and inventory management software (Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, & Forestry, 2020).

More than a third of the programs in this category focused on developing supply chain resilience, local and regional food systems infrastructure or market adaptations. Washington, Nevada, Maine, and Delaware emphasized the development of local and regional food systems infrastructure with grant programs targeting infrastructure, distribution systems, processing, and other "middle of the supply chain" enhancements. Kansas' Securing Local Food Systems Grant set aside nearly \$11.7 million in CARES Act funding to strengthen the local food system at different points along the supply chain. This included funds for meat processing facilities, food banks,

### Vermont Everyone Eats

The Vermont Everyone Eats program, administered by Southeastern Vermont Community Action, was designed to ease three problems simultaneously. First, the program helped restaurants recover costs from periods in the pandemic when customers weren't dining out due to concerns about social distancing. The program paid restaurants \$10 per meal to prepare food for anyone who self-identified as food insecure. Second, it provided an outlet for farmers to send their local produce – restaurants were required to source at least 10% of the food locally. Finally, it helped those hungry during a time of increased economic stress and food insecurity (Vermont Everyone Eats!, n.d.). In addition, the program linked organizations or "community hubs" with restaurants to serve as program coordinators, identify community needs, and develop distribution systems. Combining the coordination support with the meal preparation capabilities of restaurants led to efficient use of funds, and multiple business types were able to receive needed financial support. Vermont allocated \$49 million in FEMA (\$47.5 million) and State (\$1.3 million) funding to the program. However, due to its multi-faceted design, the program is estimated to have a \$78 million multiplier effect, including 400 full-time jobs directly maintained or established because of the program. The State legislature initially allocated \$5 million in CARES Act funding to the Vermont Everyone Eats program but later shifted reimbursement for the program to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's public assistance funding for COVID-19 response activities. See the [Vermont Everyone Eats' Economic Analysis](#) to learn more about the program and its impacts (Schuster & Klieger, 2023).



direct to consumer producers, and retail stores that sell local food products. Apart from the flexibility in the kinds of entities eligible for funding in Kansas, grant recipients could also use the funds for a variety of expenses, including safety and sanitation supplies, as well as the rental of additional buildings or equipment to expand space to promote social distancing (Securing Local Food Systems Grant, n.d.).

Three programs in the General Food Systems category focused on increasing access to locally grown products through emergency food networks. In Pennsylvania, this included directing pandemic relief funds to the existing Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS). PASS covers the cost of production, processing, and transportation for products grown or raised by Pennsylvania farmers that would otherwise go to waste (Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, n.d.). The product is then distributed to food banks throughout the State. Wisconsin developed similar programs focused on purchasing product from Wisconsin farmers and food producers to distribute to food banks within the state.

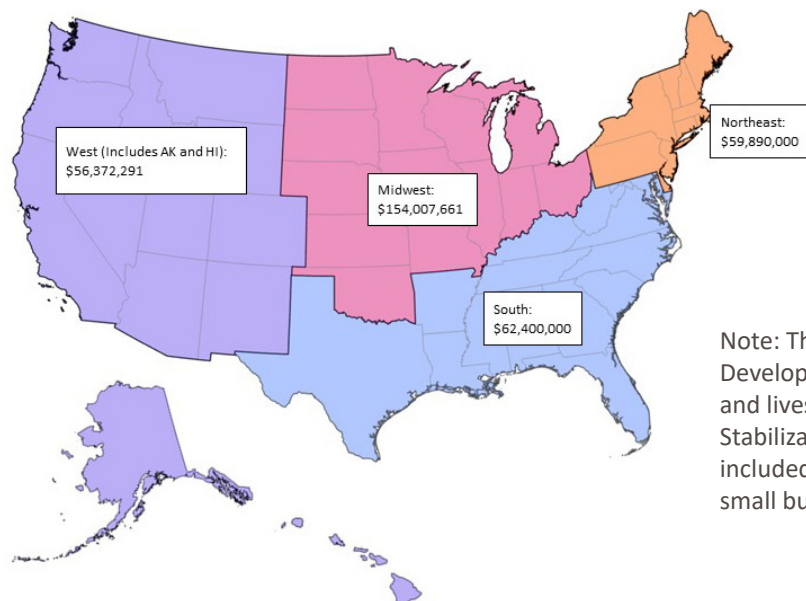
Several general food systems programs supported more than one objective. These connections focused primarily on market adaptations and supply chain resilience or producer support and charitable food networks. Similarly, food and agricultural waste reduction was often one of multiple program objectives. In some cases, programs were designed to simultaneously advance multiple social and economic objectives, while other programs had one primary objective but were able to expand beyond that initial objective.

## Meat and Poultry Processing

Meat and poultry processing make up the largest number of the COVID-19 relief funded programs, with 15 states setting up 18 programs. These programs tended to include financial assistance for promoting worker safety during COVID-19. They also provided financial assistance for the expansion or development of new processing operations, including equipment and certifications, to help address supply chain disruptions when farmers could not secure processing dates for livestock and poultry. In a couple instances, these programs also made investments in workforce development and transitioning producers to direct markets. In an interview with the Iowa State Department of Agriculture, a staff representative noted the importance of processor education to the long-term success of these programs in their State. The experience highlighted the need to teach processors how to market their products as a local, value-added product, and at the same time educate customers that while local meat may cost more, the possible increase in costs for local meat may return a larger portion of the food dollar to the local economy, including neighboring small businesses. (Interview with Representatives from the Iowa State Department of Agriculture, personal communication, July 1, 2022).

\*The Nebraska Department of Economic Development set aside \$330 million for small businesses and livestock producers through its Small Business Stabilization grant program. The program was not included in the graphic below since the program funded small business operations beyond food and agriculture, but generally supports local food producers and potentially other food operations.

**Chart 3. Dollar Value of State LRFS Programs Funded through Federal COVID-19 Pandemic Relief by NASDA Region**



Note: The Nebraska Department of Economic Development set aside \$330 million for small businesses and livestock producers through its Small Business Stabilization grant program. The program was not included in the graphic above since the program funded small business operations beyond food and agriculture.

## Regional Trends

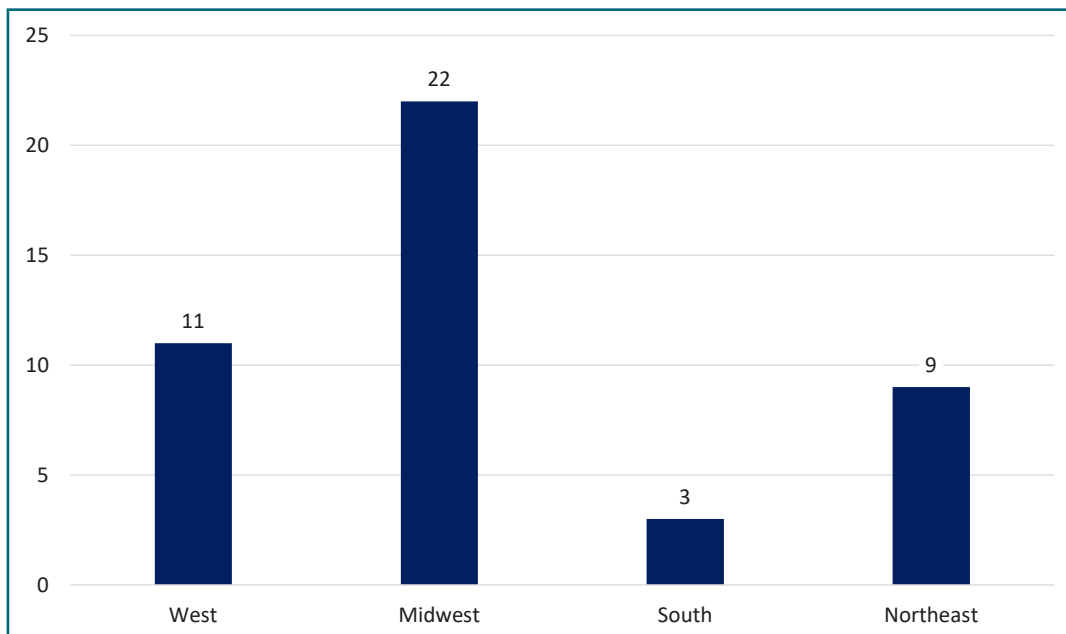
While this innovation brief is focused on the state level, the research also identified several regional patterns. Chart 3 shows the amount of funds utilized by each region organized based on NASDA's regional division map. This map shows large differences relating to the amount of funds utilized by a region. This project also identified regional differences in the types of projects that were funded. For example, the map in Chart 6 shows states that have developed a meat and poultry processing program utilizing federal pandemic relief funding. The meat and poultry processing map shows these programs are mostly concentrated in the Midwest, followed by fewer programs in the West.

Charts 4 and 5 show that this trend in program proliferation extends beyond meat and poultry processing. Half of the programs found through this study were in the Midwest. The figures also show smaller investments in the South. This finding aligns roughly with a similar grouping of states' share of direct farm sales in the 2020 Local Food Marketing Practices survey (National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2022). This could indicate a correlation between state investments in local food systems and direct farm sales. However, further research is needed to understand factors beneath these data points (i.e., a growing recognition from State governments and consumers of the importance of local and regional markets on regional economies, cultural shifts, or the establishment of new communication networks among actors involved in program development).

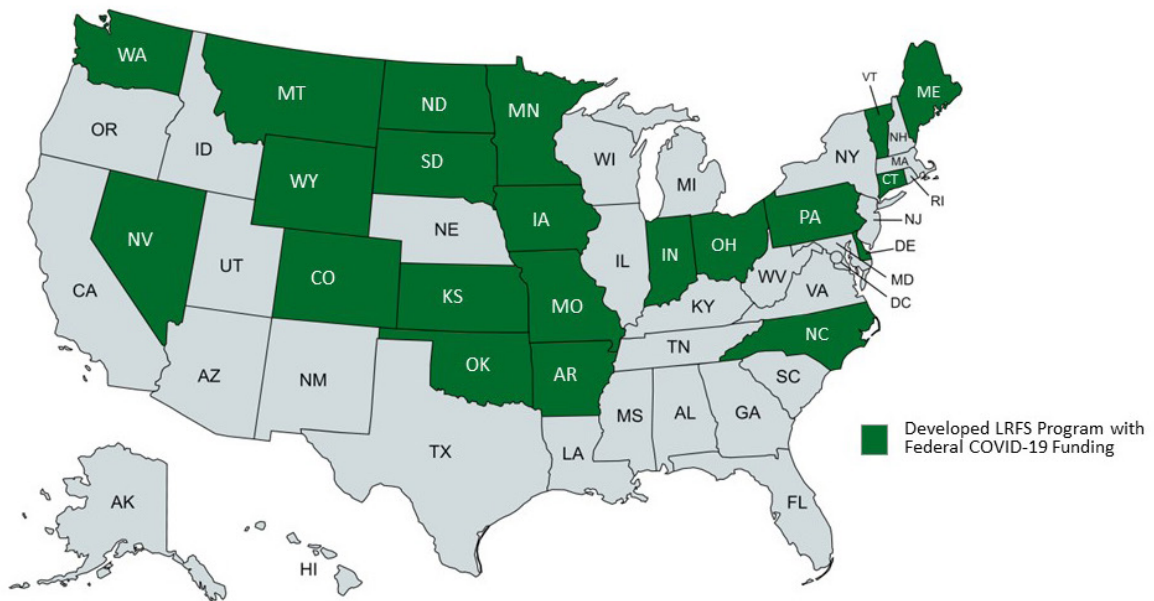
Future research could also examine regions more thoroughly to determine:

- What programs were not captured in this data scan?
- What other funding sources did states utilize to support program development in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What is the demand and capacity for local and regional food systems by state or region?
- What additional types of support for local and regional food system development would be beneficial?

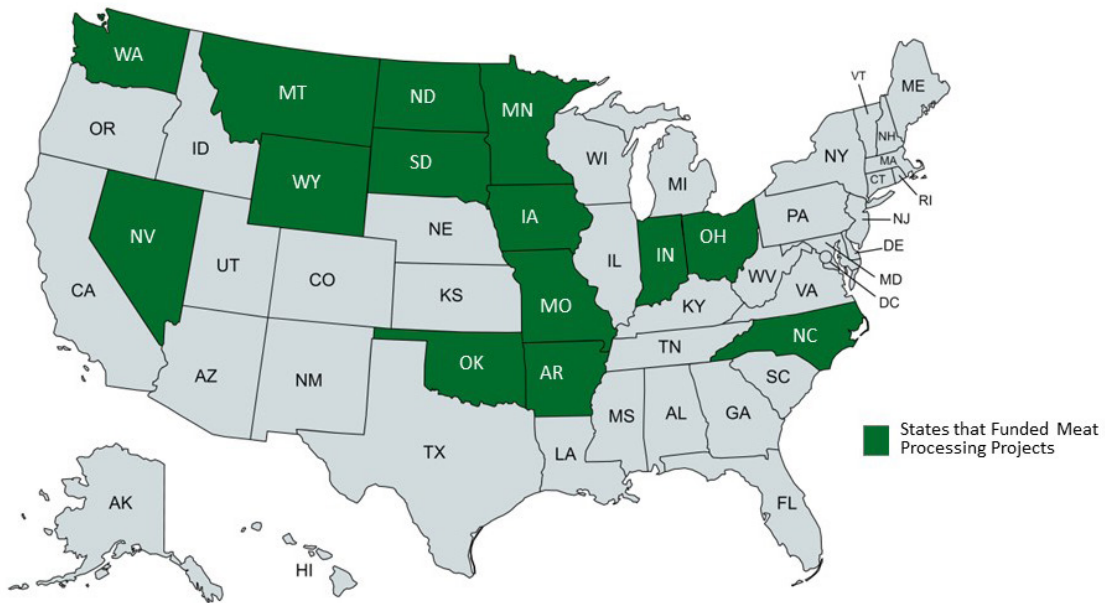
**Chart 4. Count of State LRFS Programs Funded through Federal COVID-19 Pandemic Relief by NASDA Region**



**Chart 5. States with State-level LRFS Programs Funded by Federal COVID-19 Pandemic Relief**



**Chart 6. States with State-level Meat and Poultry Processing Programs Funded by Federal COVID-19 Pandemic Relief**



## Program Reflections and Future Plans

During in-depth interviews, several states shared how the programs built upon pre-existing local and regional food networks, expertise, and infrastructure, and that the additional federal funding allowed them to establish programming that would not have been otherwise possible. State representatives that were interviewed through this work were keenly aware of the needs of their communities. According to one interviewee, the flexibility to design programs based on their state-level expertise was a “game-changer” (Interview with Representatives from the Iowa State Department of Agriculture, personal communication, July 1, 2022). This flexibility allowed states to design programs with more adaptations to local needs, therefore setting stakeholders up for success. Additional states discussed the potential



uses of continued program funding at either the federal or state level, even after the CRF and SLFRF are no longer available. Continued community and federal interest and investment in transforming local and regional food systems may help states build on existing local-level knowledge and newly implemented pandemic investments. It would also fill programming and infrastructure gaps and foster a symbiotic relationship between federal and state investments.

As mentioned earlier, this brief focuses on the existence and characteristics of state-level, LRFS-related programs developed with federal COVID-19 pandemic relief funding rather than program impacts. This brief also does not examine the program development process or catalysts beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the authors have identified several opportunities for future research, including those described in the Regional Trends section, that could add to the understanding of these programs and the growing body of LRFS literature. Additional opportunities include but are not limited to:

- Factors of influence in the development of state designed LRFS programs, such as state LRFS demand and capacity, neighboring states' effects on development of programs, and role of agriculture in culture and community identity.
- Legislative measures taken by states catalyzed by the development of state designed LRFS programs.
- Direct impacts of state-level LRFS programs, such as those described in a [report](#) by the Iowa Food Hub Managers Working Group on the Impacts of the Local Produce and Protein Program, [Securing Local Food Systems: Building a more resilient food supply system for the future of Kansas](#), and [Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act Funding Report: Funds Administered by the Nevada Department of Agriculture](#).

## Conclusion

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The CRF and SLFRF provided states with a historic opportunity to develop, shape, and fund programs to address existing and future needs that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost half of the nation's states used these funds to establish or expand existing LRFS-related programs. These programs covered many areas, from direct producer support to meat and poultry processing and farm to school. Using federal COVID-19 pandemic relief for LRFS programming by states marks a new era for LRFS. There is growing acknowledgment and interest in LRFS by state and federal governments alike to support food systems resiliency and economic development. Further research on creating and implementing these programs and maintaining their impacts could provide valuable information on LRFS and the next steps for states and federal entities in their shared development.

## State Spotlights

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### Connecticut

CT Grown for CT Kids is a statewide grant program run through the Connecticut Department of Agriculture that used a total of \$750,000 in ARPA funding to help establish and further farm to school opportunities in Connecticut schools. Despite Connecticut being a small state, it has 208 school districts, some that even overlap towns. Food procurement restrictions in the State vary widely and can be difficult for communities to navigate alongside already tight school lunch budgets.

In 2021, CT Grown for CT Kids received 59 applications requesting a total of \$962,000 in funding for Year 1. From this, 13 grants were awarded to public school districts, early childcare providers, and nonprofits (Eddy, 2022). Schools used the funding to support a variety of farm to school activities. One example of district programming is a school in Naugatuck, that used grant funding to support experiential learning. The school purchased hydroponic towers for the classroom integrating innovative production into their curriculum. They also conducted a school trip to Freund's Farm, a Connecticut dairy farm (Connecticut Commissioner of Agriculture, personal communication, June 22, 2022).

## Iowa

Iowa set up eight programs using CARES Act funding, including the Iowa Livestock Producer Relief Fund, which allocated \$60 million in direct aid to over 6,000 producers (COVID-19 Agriculture Relief Programs, 2022), and the \$7,000 Meat Processing Expansion and Development Program: Tuition Grant, which awarded seven meat processing career and technical education scholarships (Interview with Representatives from the Iowa State Department of Agriculture, personal communication, July 1, 2022). As shown in Chart 7, the Iowa State Department of Agriculture assisted with the flexible federal funding, established two innovative three-pronged programs that allowed grants to be used for many different initiatives under the same umbrella of strengthening local food systems.

A recent report by the Iowa Food Hub Managers Working Group outlined the impacts of the Local Produce and Protein Program on the local food system. Schools in over half of Iowa's 99 counties participated in the program and schools in almost half of these counties used food hubs to purchase local food (Koether & Enderton, 2021). Those schools that had purchased local foods in the past bought even more with the help of the Local Produce and Protein Program. Research has shown that past farm to school experiences have led to increased participation in farm to school programs, and the program showed the ability to build expertise in schools that participated in farm to school for the first time through the Local Produce and Protein Program to support their participation in the future.

Iowa's programs, which assisted farmers, schools, food hubs, and processing facilities demonstrates the different ways that COVID-19 relief funding can be used strategically at different steps in the supply chain.

**Chart 7. Iowa CARES Act-Funded LRFS Programs**

Program Name	CARES Act Funding Amount
Iowa Livestock Producer Relief Fund*	\$60,000,000
Iowa Beginning Farmer Debt Relief Fund	\$6,000,000
Meat Processing Expansion and Development Program: Business Improvement Grant	\$3,880,000
Meat Processing Expansion and Development Program: Direct Marketing Grant	\$144,000
Meat Processing Expansion and Development Program: Tuition Grant	\$7,000
Local Produce and Protein Program: Equipment Grant for K-12 Schools	\$101,525
Local Produce and Protein Program: Local Food Grant for All Iowa Schools	\$217,918
Local Produce and Protein Program: Equipment Grant for Producers and Food Hubs	\$276,525
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$70,626,968</b>

\*Program is not included outside of this snapshot as it does not target small or local producers.

## Nevada

Nevada faces challenges of high food insecurity (The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020, 2020), low population density in much of the State, and the need for easier access to in-state meat processing facilities (Delaney, 2022). A recent report (Nevada's Population Change: A Review of Population Growth and Decline in the State of Nevada, 2021) found that 98% of Nevada residents live on 5% of the land, much of it far from the more rural areas where crops are grown and animals are raised. These combined factors make it difficult to transport food the great distance from where it is grown to where most Nevadans live, which is primarily in urban areas near Carson City and Las Vegas.

The Nevada Department of Agriculture used federal COVID-19 funding to help overcome these difficulties. Among other pandemic recovery initiatives, Nevada established three main LRFS programs with federal funding:

- Agriculture Adaptability and Recovery Program, with \$351,224.78 in CARES Act funding
- Inventory and Distribution System for Nevada Agricultural Produce and Products (IDSNAPP) grant, with \$690,000 in ARPA funding
- State Meat and Poultry Inspection Program, with \$330,000 in ARPA funding.

These programs directly helped producers adapt to the financial and logistical difficulties of COVID-19, by providing capacity building assistance to food hubs and meat processors, and support for producers to use food hubs to transport products across the State. These meat processing programs will include innovations like mobile slaughter facilities which will help cut down the distance farmers, primarily cow-calf operators, need to travel to transport their livestock for processing (Nevada Department of Agriculture, personal communication, July 11, 2022). They are also expected to help to establish new local markets as the State previously had very limited existing meat processing infrastructure.

## Washington

The Washington Department of Agriculture established two programs: the Washington Farm to School Purchasing Grants (Farm to School Purchasing Grants, n.d.) and the Washington Local Food System Infrastructure Grants (Infrastructure Grant | Washington State Department of Agriculture, 2022), with \$5 million and \$17 million in ARPA funding, respectively. Program development was significantly influenced by the Washington State Food Policy Forum ([Forum](#)), a legislatively mandated cross-sectoral advisory committee of food systems stakeholders tasked with developing recommendations to improve Washington’s food system. The Forum’s 2019 recommendations identified funding for local food purchases within schools and “appropriately scaled” infrastructure for small and medium-sized farms as key priorities. The “ready-to-go” recommendations allowed the State to move quickly, when the pandemic heightened these needs, and relief funding became available.

As a result of these grant programs, 52 schools and childcare facilities purchased local food—including local lamb, mussels, huckleberries, and pluots (very popular with kids because they look like big purple dragon eggs) through the Washington Farm to School Purchasing Grants program. According to representatives from the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA), schools have reported that they wouldn’t have been able to procure many of the local foods without the grant program (Washington State Department of Agriculture, personal communication, July 19, 2022).

Due to geographic barriers (e.g. the Cascade Mountains running down the center of the state) and other supply chain challenges, Washington State faces difficulties transporting food, particularly to the rural communities in eastern Washington (Washington State Department of Agriculture, personal communication, July 19, 2022). The Washington Local Food System Infrastructure Grant, which awards nonprofits, small businesses, or agricultural entities funds to strengthen the food system by transporting, producing, storing, or creating value-added Washington food products, aims to address this problem. The program also set aside \$8 million for minority, women, and small farm and food business operators (Infrastructure Grant | Washington State Department of Agriculture, 2022).

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