

We had the chance to speak with Kathryn Ardoin, a value-chain coordinator with East Denver Food Hub. Kathryn shares with us the story of East Denver Food Hub, our partner for the Healthy Choice Food Box delivery program, and the importance of local and sustainable food systems.

Denver Food Rescue gets food for our Healthy Choice Food Box delivery program from East Denver Food Hub. The Healthy Choice Food Box program was created in 2021, with the support of the Healthy Food for Denver's Kids initiative, to support families in Denver facing transportation barriers. Denver Food Rescue changed food distributors after some months in the program to align with their vision to support and grow equitable food systems. East Denver Food Hub, a long-time supporter and food systems advocate, was the perfect partner for this new program.

Founded in 2020, East Denver Food Hub works to connect local farmers and producers with consumers. The founders, David Demerling and Roberto Meza are also co-founders at Emerald Gardens. During the pandemic, they noticed a gap in the community's connection to local farmers. With many restaurants working to overcome Covid barriers, David and Roberto started connecting with non-profits to meet the needs of their communities. "[The pandemic] really pulled back the thin veil of the problems in our food system," says Kathryn, whose focus is on building community partnerships.

In the beginning, East Denver Food Hub ran its operations out of the barn on their farm. Farming is a full-time job, in addition to managing the logistics of a business. East Denver Food Hub works to support farmers by supporting logistical business needs. As they expanded, they increased their staff and operational resources. Now, they're running their operations out of a warehouse.

East Denver Food Hub is a social enterprise that cares about the community and works to ensure that its values are woven into its supply chain. This means that their financial bottom line is not their only consideration when making business decisions. As Kathryn says, "We also care for the environment, care for people and labor, care for animals, especially through agricultural processes. . . . We measure success in more than just profits. We measure success in impact to all of our stakeholders, certainly our farmers, certainly our communities, especially those served by the nonprofits we work with, and we also aim to very intentionally build and create good paying jobs with opportunities for professional development and creative exploration on the staff, as well."

East Denver Food Hub works with nonprofits to increase the amount of locally grown food that is available to communities in need. Denver's short growing season and geographical landscape make it challenging for large-scale food production, meaning that most of the food in Denver comes from out of state or outside of the US entirely; a lot of food is imported from Mexico using cheap and exploited labor. That is why it is so important to connect the community with local farmers, including many across the state in places like the San Luis Valley, Pueblo, Hotchkiss, Paonia, and Palisade. By consuming food closer to its source, the food maintains more nutritional value. Also, buying from local farmers supports economic growth for the community and the state.

East Denver Food Hub has a vision for food sovereignty. Their values are woven into the work they do. They partner with several communities to strengthen collaborative efforts. They donate to local nonprofits

and work together to advocate for increased health equity. By promoting access to healthy food and produce, East Denver Food Hub works to improve community health through nutrition.

East Denver Food Hub's goals include promoting food sovereignty for all of its communities, and they recognize that this will look different for each community. Solutions for food access must come from the community and not from the top-down. East Denver Food Hub hopes that each community has access to culturally appropriate food and to good-paying jobs through the food system. They're hoping to see a food system that no longer exploits animals, the environment, or its laborers: "An entirely different economic model, one that redistributes the wealth that has been stolen through a history and a legacy of exploited land and stolen labor," says Kathryn.

Spirit of the Sun, an An Indigenous womxn-led nonprofit, and Frontline Farming, a nonprofit organization lead by people of color and womxn who are farmers, advocates, and educators, work with East Denver Food Hub to create partnerships that work to improve food sovereignty.

East Denver Food Hub also works with grassroots organizations on food policy advocacy. "Individual choices can only have so much influence, so it is necessary to lean into collective action, to get more unions involved, to get larger coalitions of nonprofits and other advocacy groups [all working together] and to really push our policy makers . . . to come up with policies, laws, legal infrastructure, that intentionally supports local food," says Kathryn. Roberto Meza engages the food sovereignty community by participating in several food-focused coalitions, including the Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council, Colorado Ag Commission, and several farmers' unions including the Mile High Farmers Union. In addition to community advocacy, East Denver Food Hub emphasizes value in education and values-based marketing.

When asked about what messages were more important, Kathryn talks about how we need to grow the demand for these local and sustainable food systems. It's important to collaborate with all community stakeholders, to work together on their shared goals, advocating for food justice and more equitable food systems. The current framework is not equitable. Large-scale commodity crops are more affordable for some, creating barriers to accessing local food. Subsidizing local food production through policy efforts would benefit our communities. Additionally, food sovereignty can be supported through philanthropy efforts. For those who have the option, local food is known to have a more nutritionally dense value. Also, when money is spent on local food, it helps the local economy and creates jobs. The benefits to buying locally grown food are both immediate and long-term.