New Haven, Connecticut’s food strategy is a unique example of progressive and integrated food policies in the region, in large part due to the work being done by its FOOD SYSTEM POLICY DIVISION (FSPD). The FSPD was established in 2016, following sustained advocacy from community food system advocates and the New Haven Food Policy Council. While the FSPD program is currently focused on emergency food relief, an integrated, system-based approach to food policy took shape with the appointment of Swamy Swamy Prabha, Director of Food System Policy in 2018. Following this appointment, a food justice framework was co-developed and maintained by the New Haven residents, staff, and community partners.

ENABLERS

KEY LEADERSHIP APPOINTMENT

Swamy Swamy, named as Director of the Food System Policy Division in 2018, is a key figure sustaining that an integrated food policy framework was established within the division. Through her previous experience in health and environmental sectors, she entered the world of urban food systems. At the national level, Swamy has demonstrated a deep understanding of food issues, and the systemic nature of structural violence in the U.S. Under her leadership, the three priorities of equitable, socially-just, and economically-just food policies were maintained within the division, with the explicit goal to ensure policies and programs are vibrant, focused, centered, integrated, and co-developed with community partners.

COALITION-BUILDING APPROACH

Swamy spent her first year as director of FSPD relationship-building, working across city departments and throughout the community. This critical outreach and coalition building is an ongoing process, and ensured that multiple city departments were engaged with and committed to food policies. By working with community partners, FSPD programs are horizontally and vertically integrated, providing direct benefits to New Haven residents, and are more effective. New Haven’s breadth of programs includes work on urban agriculture, community composting, food justice, and environmental justice. The division’s coalition-building approach, support and awareness of multiple city departments, and the division’s community-based participatory project development approach are key enablers that led to the development of this division were the key appointment of a knowledgeable and progressive leader, the division’s coalition-building approach, support and awareness of multiple city departments, and the division’s community-based participatory project development approach. The overarching objective of the FSPD is to help the community manifest its ideas about a just and sustainable food system. To realize this mission, the FSPD is building a robust monitoring and evaluation framework, drawing from multiple existing frameworks, including the INTEGRATED FOOD POLICY FACT MONITORING FRAMEWORK, POLICY CITY REGION FOOD SYSTEM FRAMEWORK, and Michigan State University’s RACIAL EQUITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK. Baseline assessments are currently being conducted, and the division is also working with a local organization on community-based participatory research methods to ensure representative community involvement.

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?

Environmental justice connects issues of discrimination and socioeconomic injustice with environmental issues. It is a recognition of the disproportionate number of environmental burdens experienced by marginalized communities and at the center of a range of voices of those most impacted by environmental harms. An environmental justice perspective brings to light how systems of structural violence lead to poverty, labor and environmental exploitation, and increased vulnerability to climate change. The historic harms that environmental movements have caused in marginalized communities. Environmental justice guarantees that all people have equal access to healthy, safe, and sustainable environments.

BARRIERS

Despite horizontal and vertical partnership building, New Haven’s FSPD still struggles with a lack of awareness and understanding of integrated food policy building. The organizational structure of the city’s food policy problem as it is housed within the Community Services Administration, foregrounding the idea that food policy is a state of food emergency, led to funding challenges throughout the city. However, the division has more recently been able to overcome these challenges through success at securing federal funds from the state, federal, and private institutions.

Many people residing in food system work are really focused on food emergency only. There isn’t broader thoughts. I am thinking of things that, widening our partnerships, and bringing systems thinking into this work.

The New Haven Food System Policy Division is a unique example of a progressive and integrated urban food policy division. The enablers that led to the development of this division were the key appointment of a knowledgeable and progressive leader, the division’s coalition-building approach, support and awareness of multiple city departments, and the division’s community-based participatory project development approach.

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**Our three thematic priorities are socioeconomic, health equity, environmental justice. The care that really focuses on developing and supporting anti-racist food, farming, and land-use policies, and helping the community manifest their ideas for a sustainable and just food system.**

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