



**Food:Land:Opportunity**  
Localizing the Chicago Foodshed

**Ten Years Of Supporting The Chicago Region's Food System**





2024 was the 10th Anniversary of Food:Land:Opportunity: Localizing the Chicago Foodshed (FLO), which focuses on creating a resilient local food economy in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas across the greater Chicago region. Funded through the Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust as a collaboration between Kinship Foundation and The Chicago Community Trust, FLO has disbursed over \$42,153,500 in grant funds since 2014. During this period FLO grantees have made great strides in the creation of a resilient local food economy.

An anniversary is a time to look back on accomplishments and activities, evaluate the impact of the work, understand what FLO has learned, and look forward to what FLO should do next.



## UNDERSTANDING FOOD:LAND:OPPORTUNITY'S IMPACT: Ten Years Of Supporting The Chicago Region's Food System

In the summer of 2024, FLO hosted three day-long conversations, each around one of FLO's core strategies. In addition to learning and discussion, each event included either a farm tour or panel discussion of experts and a locally sourced or prepared lunch. Together, they provided an invaluable perspective on the food system in 2024 and how it can grow in the future.



The **Land Access** engagement on July 24 started with a tour and a description of the successful land access story at Garlic eScape Farm in Woodstock as facilitated by The Land Conservancy of McHenry County and The Conservation Fund. The group then convened at the Center for Agrarian Learning at McHenry County College to discuss what has propelled land access forward, which conditions have held back progress, and what future strategies might be.



The **Strengthening Food Business Skills** event on August 14 began with a tour of the Roosevelt Square Farm, operated by Urban Growers Collective (UGC) in Chicago. The convening took place at Good Food Catalyst, where discussions centered on the need to deliver effective and efficient educational opportunities and mentoring for all scales of farmers and food business operators.



The **Access to Capital** engagement on September 4 began with a panel on impact investment highlighting the work of Proofing Station. Discussions held at the College of Lake County Student Center in Waukegan centered on understanding impact investment opportunities, building relationships with funders in related areas, and facilitating access to government sources of capital.





**In addition to the engagements, the FLO team gathered data, perspectives, and stories through:**

- Analyzing data from a decade’s worth of grant reports, which led to a deeper understanding of FLO’s key successes:
  - The importance of targeted outreach and engagement
  - The importance of building the infrastructure for a strong and resilient food system
  - The value of partnership to achieve goals
- Holding stakeholder focus groups on four key topics:
  - Food system funders
  - Capital and investment
  - Policy and government programs
  - Regenerative agriculture
- Conducting long-form interviews to collect the unique perspectives of key members of the food system, which provided diverse insight on the system’s current state.



## FOOD:LAND:OPPORTUNITY GATHERING FOR THE FUTURE

FLO’s 10th Anniversary culminated in the FLO Gathering for the Future event in March 2025. Attendees learned about the findings of the FLO 10th Anniversary engagement process and what implications they might have for the initiative’s future. They also discussed how FLO’s strategies might come to life in their individual work and in the food system as a whole.





## Impact: Support for a Maturing Food System

Over the past ten years, the Chicago region's food system has matured. No longer working in "start-up" mode, the people who make up the system understand challenges, solutions, and where to experiment next. Overall, the food system is in a middle stage of development and needs new strategies for support.

Similarly, organizations and businesses have matured, shifting to fill niches when necessary, stepping back when others are ready to step in. Individuals, too, have taken leadership roles, forged new and fruitful connections, and participated in a web of mentorships and support roles.

**"Urban agriculture has always been a part of NeighborSpace's work, but the scale, profile and intensity have all shifted. Garden and farm sites we acquire have skewed larger (4-5 lots rather than 1-2). Infrastructure needs have changed with more farmers wanting year round water, electricity and cold storage."**

—Ben Helphand, NeighborSpace





## Impact: Collaborative Approaches

Just as the food system itself has grown more collaborative over the past decade, so too has the approach of philanthropic support. FLO works closely with other funders and impact investors through its membership and leadership in organizations such as Fresh Taste, to strategically pool funding and create a flow of support dollars that is broader, strategic, and more efficient.

Responding to the severe disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chicago Region Food System Fund (CRFSF) builds on the strong structural support of Fresh Taste. Both, FLO and CRFSF, are national models.

**“Pooled and collaborative funding creates an amazing opportunity for funders to learn from each other while actually doing the work together in a trusted space.”**

—Vanessa Reese, Fresh Taste





## Impact: Innovative Solutions

FLO is unafraid of risk and experimentation, which provides space to support evolving needs within the food system.

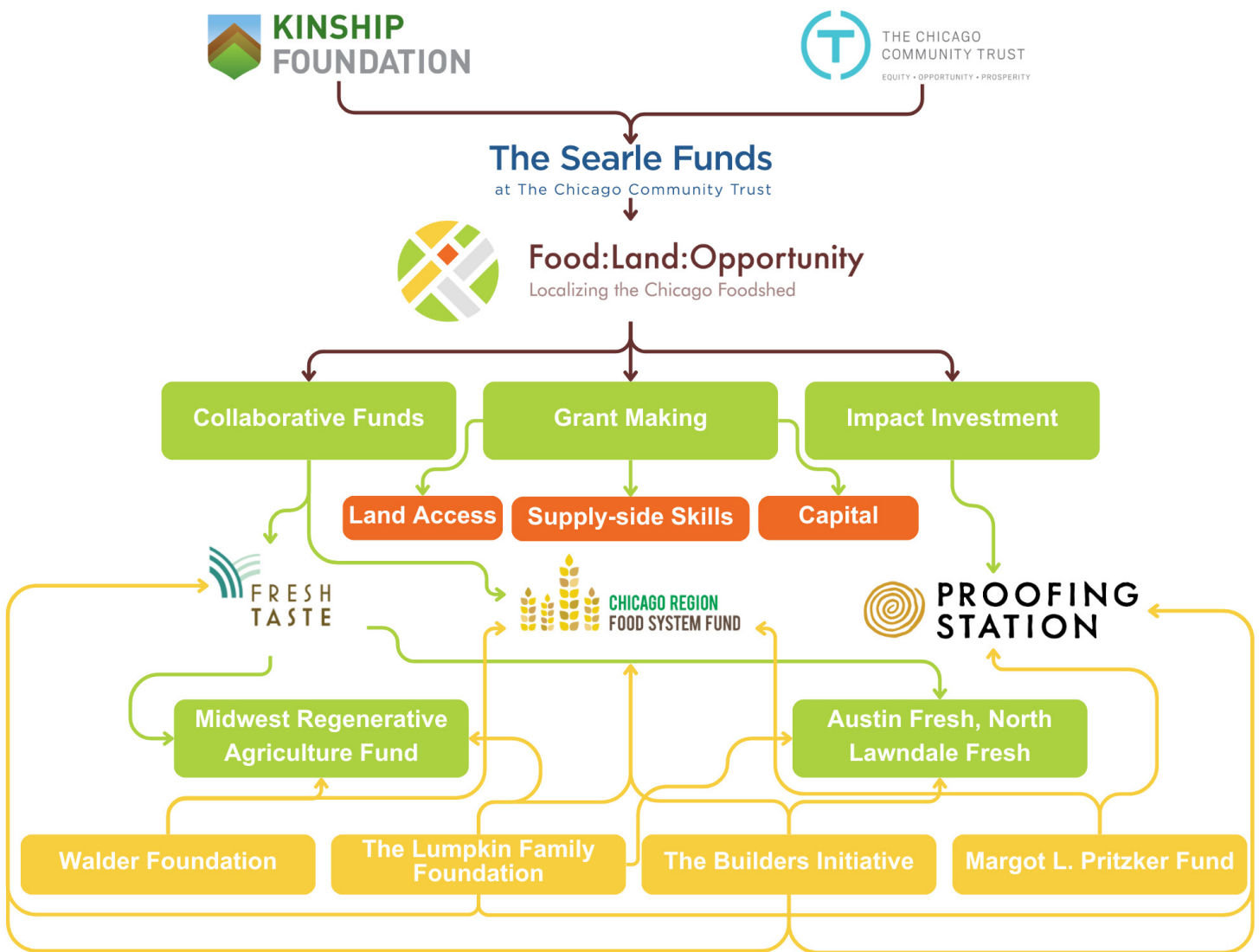
When it was clear that access to capital for food and farm businesses was a major need within the system, FLO researched and developed a new model of impact investing, which became Proofing Station. With Proofing Station, FLO's reach extends to new parts of the larger food system.

**“Being that catalytic investment, that early investor, helps leverage other philanthropic organizations and attract them to the work that you know is being done in the ecosystem. FLO did a really unique thing. We don't see it happen often. No one wants to be the first in, especially for a new organization that has not yet proved itself.”**

—Erica King, Proofing Station



## FLO'S POSITION WITHIN CHICAGO REGION FOOD SYSTEM FUNDING







**“By ensuring that those directly impacted have a voice in decision-making, we drive practical, lasting change that supports sustainable agriculture, vibrant local economies, and healthy communities for generations to come.”**

—Liz Moran Stelk, Illinois Stewardship Alliance

## FUTURE STRATEGIES

In 2014, Food:Land:Opportunity (FLO) identified three primary strategies for building and supporting the Chicago region’s foodshed: land access, supply-side skills, and access to capital. In 2025, FLO is recommitting to these three primary strategies. The food system has evolved in many incredible ways over the past decade, but these strategies remain important points where FLO can invest to support the system as it exists now and will grow in the future.



**“Land access is a multi-disciplinary challenge that no one group or profession can solve on their own.”**

—Emy Brawley, The Conservation Fund

### LAND ACCESS

FLO supports innovative models for accessing land for growing food in both urban and peri-urban areas. These projects provide viable pathways to land ownership and incorporate conservation values and protection of natural resources as well as building wealth in communities.

#### *Recommended Focus Areas*

**Incubation of new/future farmland owners:** Create intentional programming and pathways to prepare farmers to be future landowners. These may include a variety of models of preservation, land access, and succession planning.

**Incentivize farmland preservation:** Create incentives and tools to preserve farmland and generational farms to incorporate sustainable food growing into the metropolitan landscape.





**“Growers are looking for hands-on learning opportunities that are grounded in the unique realities of leading a food business in their respective community. With that in mind, we offer thorough and consistent technical support to growers within a 3-5 mile radius of our farms, and that support is rooted in strong relationships and an experiential knowledge of designing, building, and managing growing spaces in the same community area.”**

—Sean Ruane, Just Roots



**“One of the most helpful aspects of FLO’s funding has been its long-term outlook, like it’s not necessarily looking for a result from your efforts that year... Sometimes it can take three years for just one farmer to find land.”**

—Nathan Aaberg, The Land Connection

### SUPPLY-SIDE SKILLS

FLO grant recipients provide training, education, and support to address market innovation, skillbuilding in regenerative farming, financial management, peer collaboration, and network building.

#### *Recommended Focus Areas*

**Holistic supply-side skill building:** Support skill building that encourages market development and supply chain coordination. Potential investments and activities include:

- Skill building for climate resilience
- Assembling a group of experts to serve as peer educators and referral sources
- Developing mid-stage businesses and supply chain entrepreneurs
- Providing equitable access to skill-building resources to disinvested communities and populations

**Shared services for farmers and organizations:** Strengthen farmer and organizational capacity within the food system by funding shared or collaborative services within critical operations to increase management capacity, such as legal, accounting and finance, and human resources.

### ACCESS TO CAPITAL

The parameters of traditional, debt, equity, and financing structures do not fit the needs of local food producers and businesses, and they are not often accessible to diverse entrepreneurs in the food system. FLO supports organizations providing short-term financing for working capital needs and longer-term financing for land, infrastructure, and sustainable cultivation.

#### *Recommended Focus Areas*

**Financial fluency:** Developing financial literacy across the foodshed ecosystem represents a strategic investment opportunity. By helping foodshed participants better understand their financial requirements and available financing options, they may be empowered to access capital beyond FLO's resources. Potential programmatic support may include:

- Technical assistance to those who want to become eligible for financing
- Encouraging integrated capital (financial capital, grants, technical assistance, and strategic advice) for innovative food system projects
- Building community wealth by intentionally connecting investment in the local food system to climate change and racial equity

**Pooled funding resources:** Create deeper pooled funding opportunities for grantmaking by working collaboratively with other funders to leverage resources. FLO has been a leader in this space and can continue to build on this model with projects such as the Chicago Region Food System Fund and other subject matter or place-based collective approaches.





**“It is a comprehensive proposition. You can't fund only farmers. You can't fund only skills development. You can't fund only land. If you actually want to build the physical and financial infrastructure required for a local food economy, you have to look at all of it.”**

—Michael Davidson, Openlands  
(formerly with The Chicago Community Trust)

### CROSS-CUTTING STRATEGIES

In addition to the three strategies outlined above, FLO understands that the way it approaches supporting the food system and the dynamics inherent in such a far-reaching, collaborative system are important strategic considerations.

#### *Recommended Focus Areas*

**Phased funding that supports the current maturation level of the food system:** Develop a process of staged investment in innovation, scale, and sustainable activities and promote interaction of FLO with cohorts of grantees at specific stages of development. This approach acknowledges and addresses the need for investments tailored to organizations and businesses operating at a range of stages working within a system that is itself evolving. Different stages require different competencies. Potential levels of phased funding include:

- Innovative, experimental, or high-risk activities
- Proven catalytic projects that need to scale up or down
- Established, strong programs and activities, which are “bedrock” to the food system, that need to become long-term sustainable

**Rapid response funding pool:** A pool of funding with a streamlined process can quickly identify and fill specific gaps and be responsive to emergent/emergency ideas. This funding pool may:

- Fill specific gaps/needs
- Demonstrate trust-based philanthropy
- Be responsive to uncertainty

**Reducing fragmentation:** To reduce fragmentation across the local food system and support values-driven collaboration, FLO should continue to support projects that facilitate networks, peer-to-peer learning, and exchange, and that grow the voice and visibility of the local food movement. These projects build on existing community assets and foster resiliency for people, organizations, and the environment. Example activities include:

- Host an annual system-wide gathering that brings together grantees and other stakeholders for a valuable exchange of experiences and lessons learned, and to cultivate a culture of knowledge-sharing across the foodshed
- Develop and support networks and collaborations
- Address policy issues by educating decision makers and building coalitions of food system stakeholders



**“There's a lot to be said of the ways in which we are perceiving our relationship to land and environment. I have seen a dramatic shift in how we want to connect, whether it's to the land itself or to ancestral practices around land work and a re-emergence of people embracing that. A localized food system used to just be what you did. In many ways, it seems like there's a return that has to happen.”**

—Viviana Okakpu, Advocates for Urban Agriculture



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## LOOKING FORWARD

As FLO embarks on its next 10 years, FLO does so with a deepened understanding of both the challenges and opportunities within the Chicago foodshed. The initiative remains committed to our three core goals while adapting our approaches to meet evolving needs. By continuing to foster relationships, build capacity, and catalyze innovation, Food:Land:Opportunity is well-positioned to lead the transformation toward a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient local food system in the future.