

ARE MICHIGAN'S FOOD COUNCILS CHANGING POLICY OR PREPARED TO DO SO?

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Synergy
Identifying overlapping
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of shared me

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References

Palmer, A. & Larissa C. (2017). *Get it Together: Assessing Your Food Council's Ability to Do Policy*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future.

Bassarab, K., Santo, R. & Palmer, A. (2019). *Food Policy Council Report 2018*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future.

ARE MICHIGAN'S FOOD COUNCILS CHANGING POLICY OR PREPARED TO DO SO?

INTRODUCTION

The following report is based on the results of the Johns Hopkins Food Policy Networks project's survey *Get it Toolgether: Assessing Your Food Council's Ability to Do Policy Work*. Fifteen Michigan local food councils completed the survey between October 18 and December 7, 2018. The survey was carried out by Michigan State University's Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS), in collaboration with an external evaluation team from the University of Michigan.

The goal was to support CRFS efforts to:

- learn more about how Michigan food councils are working on (or aspire to work on) institutional or government food policy change,
- gauge councils' policy advocacy efforts and impact in communities across Michigan, and
- anticipate training needs and future meeting content for the Michigan Local Food Council Network (MLFCN).

A total of 53 people completed the *Toolgether* survey, representing 15 Michigan local food councils.

Five of these survey takers were the only members of their councils to complete the survey. Other councils had between two and 11 council members complete the survey. The largest group of survey respondents indicated that they are "members" of their councils (23; 43%). Just over a quarter indicated that they are (or were) the council chair, co-chair, facilitator, or organizer (15; 28%). A smaller number are on the advisory board (3; 6%), council staff (3; 6%), a council committee chair (3; 6%), or a council committee member (3; 6%).

A note on analysis

When more than one member of a council responded to the survey, answers often varied. To account for these variations, we calculated council membership and participation estimates and years in operation (See Part I. Council characteristics) by first calculating an average for each council if more than one person responded, and then averaging across councils; we also analyzed the range of answers that existed across and within councils. Views on council structures and budgets were the same across council members who answered these questions, unless noted.

Council priorities and scales of work (Part II), as well as policy activities (Part III) and policy accomplishments (Part IV) are displayed in two ways: one shows responses that incorporate all participant answers (e.g., if only one person out of seven respondents from a particular council said that their council carried out a particular policy activity, the activity is counted) and the other displays answers based on a threshold, when 40% or more of the survey takers from the same council responded similarly. **The first way of displaying findings acknowledges that there may be fragmented knowledge about a council, while the second approach errs on the side of caution to only report activities and accomplishments that many council members agree on.**

Finally, results of the self-assessment about a council's preparation and capacity to engage in policy advocacy (Part V) were calculated by first taking the average of answers offered by participants from each council, then calculating the averages across councils; here too, we analyzed the range of answers within and across councils. **Where data is comparable, the findings below are compared to trends among food councils across the United States and Canada** reported in a 2018 survey conducted by Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (Bassarab et al. 2019), where the Food Policy Networks project is housed.

I. Council characteristics

Eleven of the 15 councils that completed the *Together* survey reported an average of 22 formal members, ranging from as few as seven to as many as 65; four councils reported having no "formal" membership. While respondents from some councils estimated similar ranges of formal members (10 vs. 13; 18 vs. 21) other estimates were more varied (40 vs. 65; 10 vs. 30; 7 vs. 20).

Approximately 40% of respondents from four of the councils were also unsure and did not answer this question. When asked about the number of people that are active in regular meetings, respondents indicated 16 people on average across all the councils, from as few as six to as many as 40. Here again, people from the same council sometimes estimated similar numbers (8 vs. 13; 9 vs. 13), but many offered very different estimates of the same council (20 vs. 40; 7 vs. 25; 7 vs. 23; 12 vs. 40).

On average, councils that participated in the survey have existed for 4.2 years, ranging from five councils that have been in operation for a year or less and one estimated to be between 10 and 12 years old. Estimates of the length of time councils have been operating tended to be similar among members of the same council, varying by only a year in most cases.

The structure of councils in this survey is similarly diverse to councils across the United States, with one exception. Four of the Michigan councils are informal associations without tax exempt status, four are housed in an existing nonprofit, and three are part of local government. Only one Michigan council noted that it is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit, which is

Michigan's food councils are varied

Number of **FORMAL** members:

7 to 65

Number of **ACTIVE** members:

6 to 40

COUNCIL AGE RANGES

Some have been operating for under one year and one is over 10 years old.

COUNCIL STRUCTURES

Some are informal associations, others are part of local government or housed in another nonprofit, and one has 501(c)(3) nonprofit status.

OPERATING BUDGETS

Some councils have no funding, most have less than \$10,000, and one has over \$100,000.

\$0 to \$100,000

somewhat lower than would be expected compared to other councils in the United States and Canada, 13% of which are nonprofits (Bassarab et al., 2019). One respondent was not sure about their council's structure. And in two cases, members of the same council reported different structures. Members of one council reported that it was a 501(c)(3), part of another nonprofit and part of government, while members of second council said that it was an informal association and part of another nonprofit.

Many respondents (21; 39.6%) do not know their council's budget. Based on available responses, **a majority of the councils appear to operate on less than \$10,000 annually (8; 53.3%) or have no funding (2; 13.3%).** This is similar to the financial situation of councils across the United States and Canada, 68% of which have budgets of less than

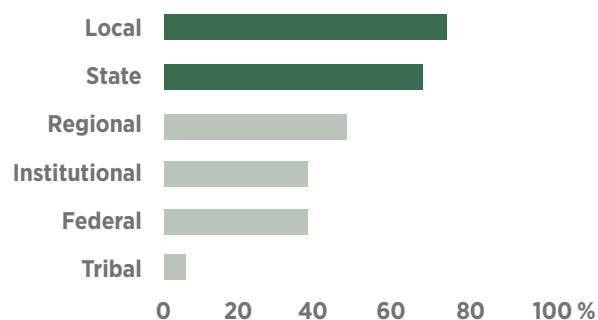
\$10,000 (Bassarab et al., 2019). One Michigan council, however, reported an annual budget of \$25,000 to \$100,000 and one reported over \$100,000. In one case, two people from the same council noted different amounts; one said less than \$10,000 and one said \$10,000 to \$25,000.

II. Scales of work and council priorities

The majority of councils in the survey focus their work at the local level (12; 80%) and/or the state level (11; 73.3%) (see Figure 1). Just over half also work at the regional level (multi-state or multi-county) (8; 53.3%), and 40.0% (6) at the federal and institutional level (e.g., public or private agencies, schools, hospitals, universities, prisons). One council also cited work in tribal communities. In three cases, respondents noted that their councils are too new to report the scale of their work.

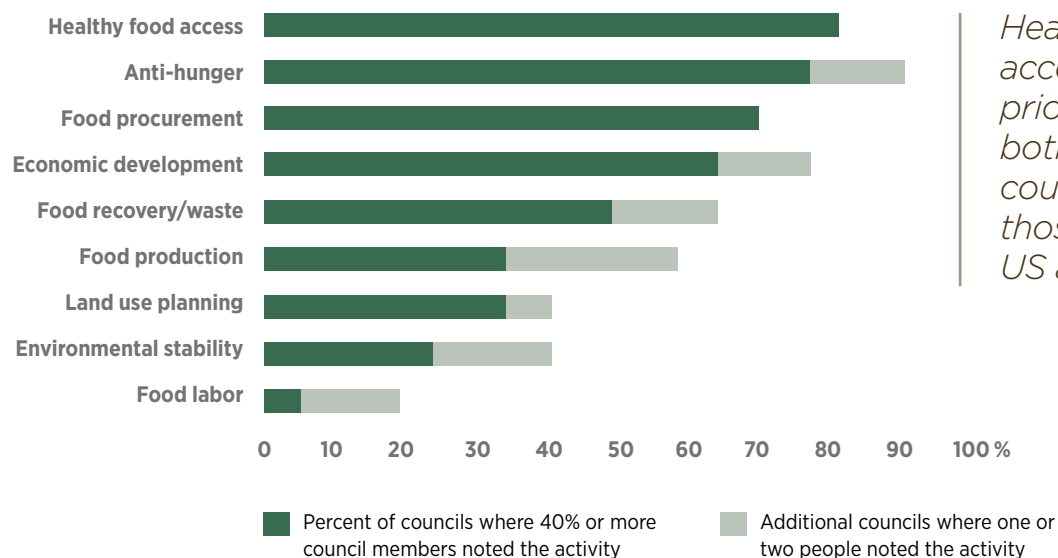
The most common priorities — noted by two thirds or more of all councils — include **healthy food access, anti-hunger issues, food procurement, and economic development** (see Figure 2). Food recovery/waste was also identified as an important priority, a focus for 47% to 67% of councils.

FIGURE 1.
Where councils **focus** their work



Healthy food access is also a top priority for food policy councils in North America, noted by two thirds of councils in the United States and Canada (Bassarab et al., 2019). Michigan councils, however, focus on economic development, anti-hunger issues, food procurement, and food waste/recovery more than councils in North America; while half to three-quarters of the Michigan councils focus on these issues, just over a third of councils in the United States and Canada focus on economic development, anti-hunger issues, and food procurement issues and only 20% on food waste/recovery.

FIGURE 2. Topics councils prioritize



Healthy food access is a top priority for both Michigan councils and those across the US and Canada.

Between 25% and 40% of the Michigan councils also noted a focus on environmental issues, a policy priority reported by less than 5% of councils across the United States and Canada. The low priority Michigan councils place on food labor (between 7% and 20%) is similarly a low priority for councils in North America (approximately 3%) (Bassarab et al., 2019). However, food labor, food production, food recovery, and environmental sustainability were all areas where council members in Michigan differed in their reporting, suggesting differences of opinion among members of the same council. Most councils had only one or two people identify these as priority areas compared to councils where 40% or more of the survey takers mentioned the same priorities. One person additionally chose “other,” noting that their council also works on “cultural aspects of food systems.”

III. Policy activities

Among the many policy activities councils have engaged in, or as the survey describes “issues that a council may have worked on, regardless if any policy change resulted from that action,” five activities were most common (see Figure 3), including efforts to:

- support **school wellness** policies, food education or school gardens;
- improve **access to and quality of emergency food providers** such as food pantries and meal centers;

- **promote the consumption of healthy, fair, humane, sustainable, or local food** through campaigns, food guides, and other outreach efforts;
- **improve access to local/regional food**; and
- **incentivize healthy food purchases** at farmers markets.

These activities were in the top five for all respondents, whether reported by more or less than 40% of survey takers from each council. Three issues where no council met the 40% threshold, but where one or two people mentioned the activity, were efforts to improve labor conditions (two councils), efforts to develop more open space such as acquiring land for recreational spaces (two councils), and living wages (one council).

IV. Policy achievements

When asked if their council is “in the early stages of working on policy,” answers varied widely. In one council, six people said “yes,” but four said “no,” and one person did not know. Differing perspectives were also apparent in five other councils. Based on the most common answers provided, however, the majority of councils (9; 60%) indicated “yes.” Nearly half (7; 46.7%) also noted that their council has already facilitated the passage or enactment of at least one policy or regulation (Figure 4).

FIGURE 3. Top five policy activities

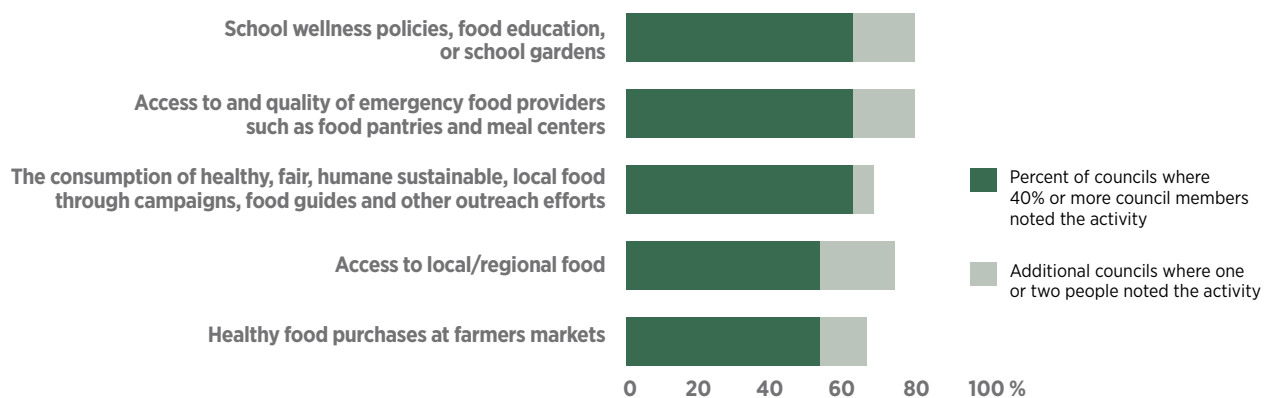
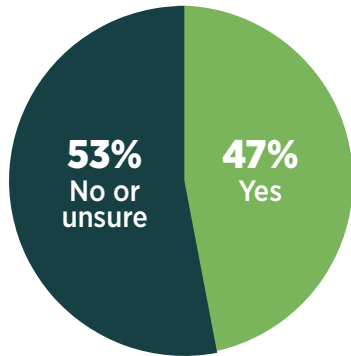


FIGURE 4. Nearly half of the councils indicated that they had **facilitated the passage or enactment of at least one policy or regulation**



Among the policy achievements reported — where survey takers believe their councils have been able to accomplish policy change (Figure 5) — four changes were most common, related to increasing:

- The ability of low-income families to **access** affordable, healthful food;
- The number of **farmers markets, CSAs** (community supported agriculture) or other **direct-to-consumer** efforts;
- The number of **families who are food secure**; and

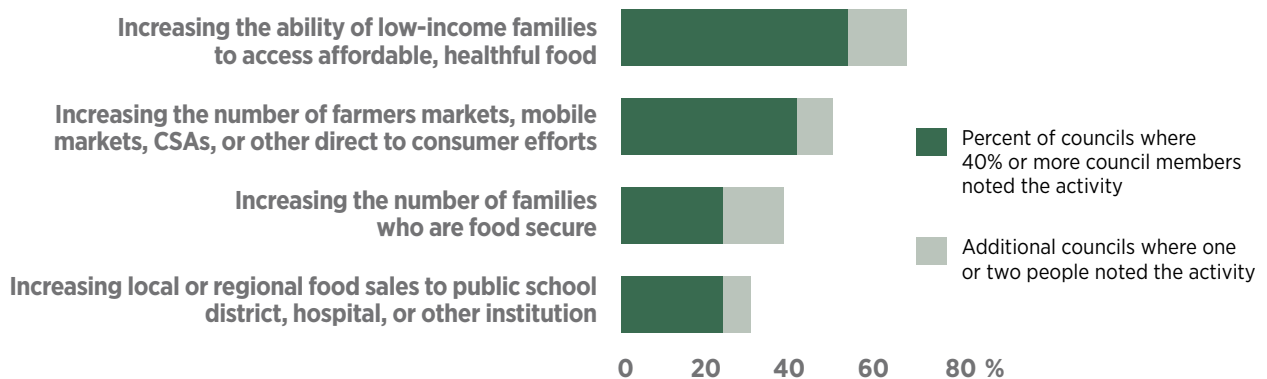
- The **food service sales** of food that has been raised, produced, and processed in the locality or region of the public school district, hospital, or other institution.

These four policy impacts were reported by a quarter to half of councils among those where 40% or more of the survey takers from the same council noted the achievement, and a third to two thirds of councils where at least one person cited the impact.

Six issues where no council met the 40% threshold, but where one or two people mentioned the accomplishments related to increasing:

- The number of locally-owned food-related businesses (noted by at least 1 person in 5 councils; 33% of all councils);
- The amount of government resources dedicated to a food system analyst, food policy director, or similar position (4; 27%);
- The food service sales of food that has been raised, produced, and processed with sustainable, fair, and/or humane practices (3; 20%);
- The wages of food system workers (1; 7%);
- The improvement in the state of working and living conditions for food or agriculture workers (1; 7%); and
- The number of producers who utilize sustainable or humane production methods (1; 7%).

FIGURE 5. Top four policy achievements



V. Preparation and capacity to engage in food policy advocacy

In a final section of the Food Policy Networks *Together* survey, points were assigned to individual indicators to measure councils' preparation and capacity to engage in policy advocacy (Table 3).

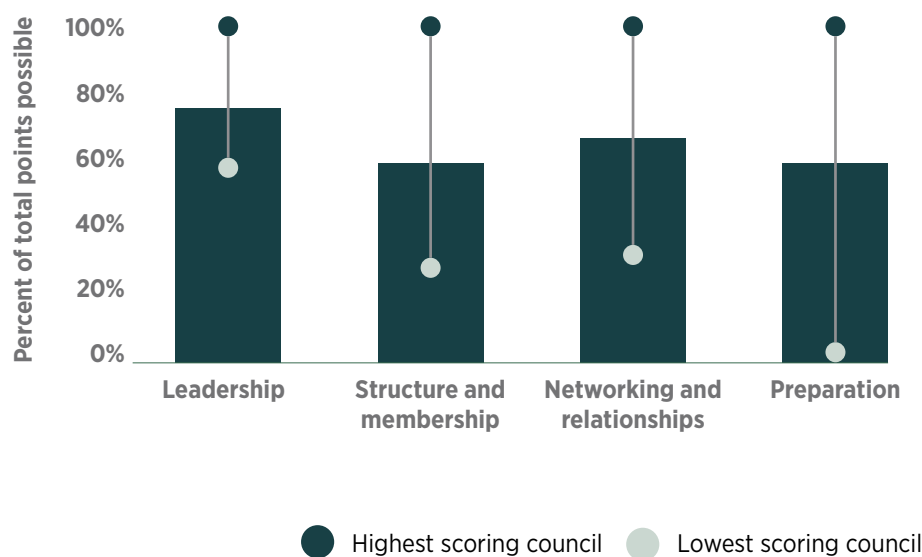
On average, Michigan councils earned 76% of the points associated with organizational leadership, 73% of those related to the value they see in the networking and relationships that are built among council members, and 61% for an indicator that examines how the group is structured, how it functions, and how membership is recruited. The 15 councils combined also ranked high in terms of their advocacy preparation, or having goals, plans, and strategies for engaging in policy advocacy (63%).

The average scores for these top four indicators, however, mask the range of scores individual councils received (Figure 6). The lowest score councils received for organizational leadership, for instance,

was 55%, and 25% for structure and membership, 33% for networking and relationships, and 0% for preparation. At the same time, one council received 100% of the points possible for each of these indicators. However, in each of the cases where a council earned 100%, only one person completed the survey for that council (the next top score for each of these four indicators among councils where there were two or more respondents was 87%, 79%, 84%, and 86%, respectively).

Based on member perceptions, most councils are weakest in terms of their fiscal management and sustainability, or indicators that assess the council's fiscal management practices specific to advocacy (on average, councils earned a score of 19%; ranging from 0% to 50% across individual council scores); policy formulation and enactment, or the extent to which the council has helped to pass or enact a policy (23%; ranging from 0% to 52%); and plans, strategies and adaptability, or indicators that address the importance of developing a flexible plan to carry out policy priorities (24%; ranging from 0% to 50%).

FIGURE 6. Top four policy advocacy indicators



Michigan councils scored lowest on fiscal management, policy formulation and enactment, and policy plans and strategy.

Much of the experience needed to deepen policy impact may already exist within Michigan's local food councils.

Conclusion

These findings raise a number of insights about Michigan's local food councils and should act as a discussion starter to consider the direction councils could take individually or as part of the Michigan Local Food Council Network.

The array of reported policy activities and achievements demonstrate that considerable food policy work is already occurring, while areas where there is less activity could offer a roadmap for new directions. The self-assessment about the preparation and capacity to engage in food policy advocacy also indicates that even more could be done to keep the momentum moving forward, such as strengthening councils' fiscal management.

Much of the experience needed to deepen policy impact may already exist within Michigan's local food councils, so that a mentoring or peer-to-peer training system could be established. Indeed, Johns Hopkins Food Policy Networks' 2018 survey of U.S. and Canadian food councils shows that the longer a policy council has operated, the more capacity it builds to engage in food policy advocacy (Bassarab et al., 2019).

The Food Policy Networks' *Toolgether* survey also offers links to a variety of resources available to support skill building associated with particular indicators covered by the survey. Speakers could also be invited to talk to the Network about particular areas where councils have so far attempted little work, such as living wages or food labor.

The divergent answers that often emerged when more than one person from the same council completed the survey also suggests that councils may need stronger deliberation and communication strategies.

The variations in answers suggests that councils could work more intentionally to communicate the historical memory of past activities and accomplishments. Institutional memory and views of a council's achievements or priorities may differ based on how long members have been part of a council, the varying roles people play, how actively they participate in regular meetings, and the separate work of subcommittees. Keeping each other up to date about subcommittee work, membership status, participation rates, budgets, and having regular conversations about the councils' priorities and accomplishments (and the evaluation evidence available or needed to support those claims) may play a powerful role in increasing cohesion and shared understanding among council members.

Table 1
Policy Activities

For the following, respondents were asked to identify the policy issues that their policy council may have worked on, regardless if any policy change resulted from that action. Respondents marked yes, no, or don't know to statements that all started with "The organization has worked on policies that..." or "The organization works to..." The number of councils where 40% or more of the survey respondents from the same council all said "yes" is listed in the left column. The number of councils where at least one person said "yes" is listed in the right column.

Areas of policy activity	Councils where 40% or more people cited the activity	Councils where at least one person cited the activity
School wellness policies, food education, or school gardens	9 (60%)	12 (80%)
Access to and quality of emergency food providers such as food pantries and meal centers	9 (60%)	12 (80%)
The consumption of healthy, fair, humane, sustainable, local food through campaigns, food guides, and other outreach efforts	9 (60%)	10 (67%)
Access to local/regional food	8 (53%)	11 (73%)
Healthy food purchases at farmers markets	8 (53%)	10 (67%)
Food access in low income neighborhoods	7 (47%)	10 (67%)
Institutional or public procurement policy changes such as farm to school or farm to institution	5 (33%)	8 (53%)
Local and regional food infrastructure such as processing, wholesale businesses, or distribution networks	5 (33%)	8 (53%)
Composting at homes or businesses	5 (33%)	7 (47%)
School food programs such as universal breakfast or the community eligibility provision	4 (27%)	8 (53%)
Zoning or development regulations that support community gardens, mobile markets, urban farms or farmers markets	4 (27%)	8 (53%)
Reduction or diversion of wasted food	4 (27%)	7 (47%)
Supporting organizations that are working on policies that address economic or housing development and food access simultaneously	4 (27%)	7 (47%)
Implementation of federal nutrition program rules and regulations to decrease food insecurity	3 (20%)	6 (40%)
Discouraging, taxing, or prohibiting the sale or marketing of unhealthy food or beverages	3 (20%)	5 (33%)
Pollinators, promote biodiversity, or similar environmental measures	2 (13%)	5 (33%)
Preserving farmland	2 (13%)	4 (27%)
Sustainable farming practices	1 (7%)	4 (27%)

Table 1
Policy Activities (continued)

Areas of policy activity	Councils where 40% or more people cited the activity	Councils where at least one person cited the activity
Financing or credit for people who would otherwise not have access to loans, grants, or financial mechanisms to own businesses or start food-related entrepreneurial enterprises	1 (7%)	3 (20%)
Reduced use of plastics in food related products	1 (7%)	3 (20%)
Reduced water usage, or addressing water or mineral rights	1 (7%)	2 (13%)
Mitigating climate change such as campaigns that encourage people to reduce meat consumption	1 (7%)	2 (13%)
Labor conditions	0	2 (13%)
Open space such as acquiring land for recreational purposes	0	2 (13%)
Living wages	0	1 (7%)

Table 2
Policy Achievements

For the following, respondents were asked to check any of the following policy outcomes towards which their food policy council had contributed, completing the sentence “Policies have contributed to an increase in...” The number of councils where 40% or more of the survey respondents from the same council all said “yes” is listed in the left column. The number of councils where at least one person said “yes” is listed in the right column.

Policies have contributed to an increase in...	Councils where 40% or more people cited the achievement	Councils where at least one person cited the achievement
The ability of low-income families to access affordable, healthful food	8 (53%)	10 (67%)
The number of farmers markets, mobile markets CSAs, or other direct-to-consumer efforts	6 (40%)	7 (47%)
The number of families who are food secure	4 (27%)	6 (40%)
The food service sales of food that has been raised, produced, and processed in the locality or region of the public-school district, hospital, or another institution	4 (27%)	5 (33%)
The number of community gardens (def: food produced is not sold)	3 (20%)	7 (47%)
The proportion of eligible children who are participating in a federal nutrition program	2 (13%)	6 (40%)
The number of urban farms (def: food produced is sold)	2 (13%)	6 (40%)
The appropriation of funds that were linked to a passed policy	2 (13%)	4 (27%)
The amount of government resources dedicated to food system-related issues	1 (7%)	5 (33%)
The percent of residents within one quarter mile of a retail outlet that offers healthy options for urban areas or within 10 miles for rural areas	1 (7%)	4 (27%)
The sale of local, regional, sustainable, fair, or humane food in the jurisdiction/state/locale	1 (7%)	4 (27%)
The amount of farmland preserved	1 (7%)	4 (27%)
Economic capital for infrastructure for small and medium size producers	1 (7%)	4 (27%)
The amount of public, private, or foundation resources that are allocated for food system related programs	1 (7%)	1 (7%)
The number of locally-owned food-related businesses	0	5 (33%)
The amount of government resources dedicated to food system analyst, food policy director, or similar position	0	4 (27%)
The food service sales of food that has been raised, produced, and processed with sustainable, fair, and/or humane practices	0	3 (20%)
The wages of food system workers	0	1 (7%)
The improvement in the state of working and living conditions for food or agricultural workers	0	1 (7%)
The number of producers who utilize sustainable or humane production methods	0	1 (7%)

Table 3
Preparation and Capacity to Engage in Policy Advocacy

	Points possible	Average points received across councils	Average % of possible points across councils	Range of % of possible points across councils	Number of councils responding
1. Organizational assessment					
1.1 Leadership	21	15.9	76%	55% to 100%	14
1.2 Structure and membership	24	14.7	61%	25% to 100%	14
1.3 Networking and relationships	12	8.7	73%	33% to 100%	13
TOTAL	57	38.2	67%	47% to 82%	13
2. Advocacy goals, plans, & strategies					
2.1 Preparation	12	7.6	63%	0% to 100%	13
2.2 Food Policy Agenda	15	7.1	47%	0% to 100%	13
2.3 Plans, Strategies, and Adaptability	12	2.9	24%	0% to 50%	13
TOTAL	39	17.5	45%	0% to 85%	13
3. Conducting advocacy					
3.1 Research and Analysis	24	9.9	41%	4% to 96%	12
3.2 Capacity Building	15	4.9	33%	0% to 80%	13
3.3 Advocacy Partners and Coalitions	18	7.9	44%	17% to 72%	12
3.4 Communication Strategy	12	5.2	43%	0% to 100%	13
3.5 Media Relations	18	6.0	33%	6% to 68%	12
3.6 Influencing Decision-Makers	15	4.4	29%	7% to 56%	11
TOTAL	102	39.2	38%	9% to 66%	11
4. Advocacy avenues					
4.1 Administrative and Institutional	15	4.3	29%	0% to 67%	11
4.2 Legislative	15	5.4	36%	20% to 64%	12
TOTAL	30	9.8	33%	10% to 56%	11
5. Organizational operations to sustain advocacy					
5.1 Organizational Commitment	15	5.2	35%	13% to 58%	12
5.2 Funding Advocacy	18	5.5	32%	0% to 89%	13
5.3 Fiscal Management and Sustainability	6	1.1	19%	0% to 50%	8

Table 3*Preparation and Capacity to Engage in Policy Advocacy (continued)*

	Points possible	Average points received across councils	Average % of possible points across councils	Range of % of possible points across councils	Number of councils responding
TOTAL	39	10.6	27%	13% to 58%	8
6. Policy implementation					
6.1 Policy Formulation and Enactment	21	4.8	23%	0% to 52%	11
6.2 Policy Education and Awareness	12	5.0	42%	0% to 100%	13
TOTAL	33	9.1	27%	0% to 55%	11

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