



CULTIVATING CONVENIENCE EQUITY

**LESSONS FROM THE VEGGI FARMERS
COOPERATIVE FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY-
DRIVEN FOOD SYSTEMS**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
1. The VEGGI Story	5
2. The Model: Design & Components	6
3. The Model at a Glance	7
4. Centering the Participant Experience	8
5. Partners & Roles	9
6. Operations	10
7. Costs & Sustainability	11
Startup costs	11
Infrastructure investments	11
Ongoing operations	11
8. Best Practices & Lessons Learned	13
Listen first, and define the access problem	13
Build the coalition before building the calendar	13
Design a comprehensive participant journey	13
Build payment and compliance capacity early	13
Pilot small, learn deliberately—then scale	14
Keep quality control and customer communication central	14
Build a solid foundation	14
9. Adapting the Model	16
Conclusion	17
Acknowledgements	17



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sông Community Development Corporation's VEGGI Farmers Cooperative model is a community infrastructure model in New Orleans East, Louisiana, designed to advance food access, family well-being, and local economic resilience simultaneously. While its characteristic fresh food box is the most visible component, the true strength of the model lies in the interconnected system beneath it: trusted farmer relationships, culturally responsive community engagement, SNAP/EBT technology integration, delivery and pickup logistics, educational supports, and cross-sector partnerships that help families access healthy food in ways that are practical, dignified, and rooted in community realities.

This report is designed as a practical resource for organizations interested in adapting similar approaches, funders seeking to understand the conditions that make community food systems successful, and local leaders working to connect food access, economic mobility, and community power into a unified strategy.

At its core, the VEGGI model responds to a growing challenge facing many families: healthy food is often available, but not conveniently

accessible. Parents work hard to provide nutritious meals for their children, yet transportation barriers, long travel distances, limited grocery options, and inconsistent access to affordable fresh produce can make healthy eating difficult to sustain. The VEGGI model addresses what Share Our Strength defines as convenience equity — the idea that every family, regardless of zip code, should be able to access groceries in ways that align with their daily lives, schedules, budgets, and responsibilities.

Convenience equity recognizes that food access is not only about proximity to food, but also about time, transportation, reliability, affordability, and dignity. In many communities, families must navigate multiple bus routes, long commutes, or limited retail options to purchase fresh food. These barriers create difficult trade-offs between food quality, quantity, work obligations, childcare responsibilities, and other household needs. By combining online ordering, SNAP/EBT usability, community-based distribution, local food sourcing, and flexible delivery models, the Sông CDC / VEGGI approach reduces these burdens and helps make healthy food a predictable and manageable part of family life.

The importance of this work extends beyond food distribution alone. When healthy food is easier to access, children are more likely to consistently receive nutritious meals, parents can shop more efficiently, and families are better positioned to focus on employment, education, financial stability, and quality time together. Convenience equity strengthens not only nutrition outcomes, but also family stability and economic mobility.

This approach also aligns closely with the broader role of organizations such as No Kid Hungry, which support community-designed grocery access solutions that are affordable, practical, and shaped by family needs. Through partnerships with local organizations, co-ops, mobile markets, and community-based distribution systems, these efforts help scale innovative food access strategies while strengthening local economies and community leadership.

The model emerged through disruption, adaptation, and long-term relationship building. VEGGI's roots trace back to recovery efforts following the 2010 BP oil spill, when support for Vietnamese fishermen and shrimpers evolved into broader workforce development and local food initiatives, including aquaponics, community farming, chef partnerships, farmers markets, and eventually a CSA- and produce box model. During the COVID-19 pandemic, increased demand for grocery delivery accelerated the evolution of the model into a more comprehensive food access system. What began as a mechanism for distributing local produce became an effective strategy for addressing transportation barriers, increasing SNAP utilization, and expanding access to fresh food for families facing uneven retail access.

Three core design commitments continue to anchor the model:

- 1. COMMUNITY-DEFINED SOLUTIONS:** The model begins with listening to families and designing around real community experiences rather than applying a fixed service template.
- 2. FARMER AND PRODUCER SUSTAINABILITY:** Local farmers and small food producers are treated as economic partners whose livelihoods and long-term viability are essential to the success of the system.
- 3. ACCESSIBLE AND DIGNIFIED FOOD PURCHASING:** SNAP/EBT integration and user-friendly technology are leveraged as practical access tools that reduce stigma, increase convenience, and simplify healthy food purchasing.

This model is replicable—but it is not plug-and-play. Successful adaptation requires preserving the model's underlying logic: building trust-based relationships, aggregating local food supply, making SNAP and incentive programs easy to use, solving transportation and convenience barriers, investing in often invisible operational systems, and continuously adapting based on the lived experiences of families, farmers, and community partners.

Ultimately, the VEGGI model demonstrates that food access solutions are most effective when they are designed not simply to distribute food, but also to build enduring systems of community care, economic participation, and equitable access.



1. THE VEGGI STORY

After the 2010 BP oil spill, Vietnamese fishermen and shrimpers in greater New Orleans faced economic hardship. Early on, Sông CDC's response supported workforce development and food production, eventually including aquaponics systems, community farming, and sales relationships with chefs. Over time, what started as recovery work became a broader local food system strategy.

The model also reflects New Orleans East's history of community-led rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina. Urban farming emerged within the Vietnamese community, building on agricultural knowledge and cultural ties to food production. As the work evolved, VEGGI moved into multiple roles: grower, convener, market-builder, distributor, educator, and food access partner. The organization sold produce to chefs and markets, supported small food producers, worked with Vietnamese-American women food entrepreneurs, built relationships with other local organizations, and developed a Community Supported Agriculture model. During COVID-19, demand for delivery and home-based access increased sharply. The CSA and produce box model grew to serve more than 100 boxes weekly during that period, proving that households wanted fresh local food when it was accessible, convenient, and reliable.

Sông continued to adapt the model after COVID-19. Free and subsidized boxes responded to acute needs after Hurricane Ida and other disruptions. The organization expanded community pickup locations, added home delivery, pursued SNAP online certification, and worked with partners serving families experiencing housing insecurity and other access barriers. The result is a food access system that carries the imprint of every adaptation made along the way: disaster response, community farming, mutual aid, direct marketing, technology integration, and partnership-based distribution.

The The Village De L'Est community in New Orleans East population is approximately 10,000 residents, with the current initiative intentionally targeting and prioritizing service to roughly 2,000 residents through direct food access, delivery, community partnerships, and outreach strategies.

The current data points already tell a story of growth and partner-enabled reach. **Between February and October 2025, delivery volume more than doubled**, with growth attributed to two new community partners serving Latino and African American communities.



2. THE MODEL: DESIGN & COMPONENTS

At its core, the VEGGI model is effecting systemic change. It is doing so by creating a direct market channel for local farmers and producers, and by building an operational backbone that can aggregate, pack, communicate, deliver, and learn week after week.

At the same time, it is lowering access barriers for families who may face transportation, time, cost, or stigma barriers, and is using SNAP/EBT technology to make local food purchasable in a modern, flexible way. And most crucially, it is using trusted community partners to extend reach and credibility. In short the key question VEGGI is asking is “How do we build a local food access system that families can actually use and farmers can actually benefit from?” That question then

centers critical but less visible elements such as ordering windows, customer communication, seasonal crop planning, payment processing, SNAP compliance, pickup site readiness, cold storage, route planning, partner communication, recipe education, data tracking, and fundraising.

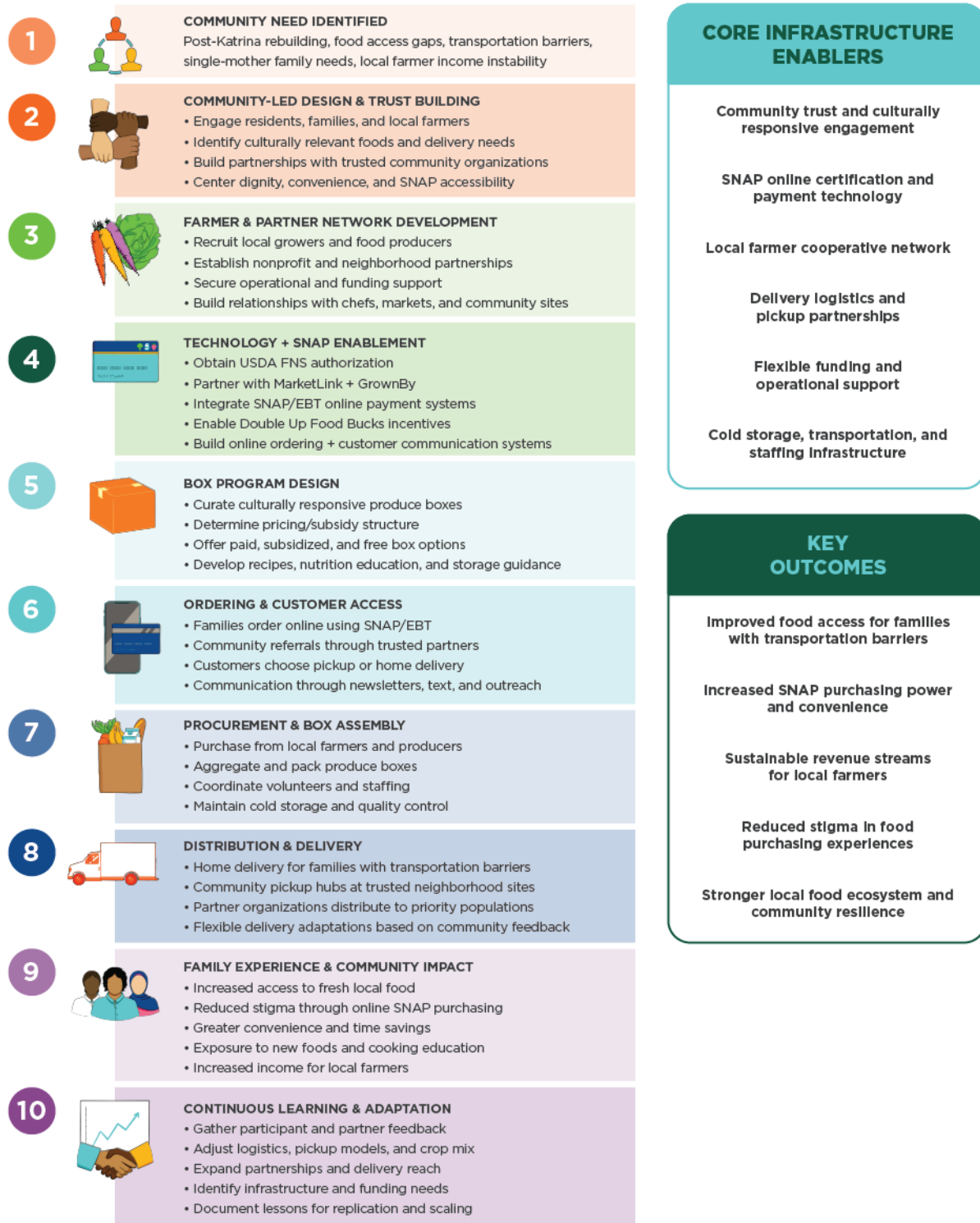
The model is also intentionally dual-purpose. It aims to improve food access while strengthening local farmer income. It also seeks to maximize farmer earnings through sales to restaurants and markets while simultaneously addressing food access through subsidized and free boxes, SNAP purchasing, and partnerships. This unique and intentional combination of objectives is the economic logic that distinguishes the model from a conventional food pantry or one-way distribution program.

The VEGGI box model is built five pillars:

ELEMENT	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE	KEY CONSIDERATIONS
Food access	SNAP-enabled boxes, pickup sites, home delivery, subsidized/free boxes, recipes and storage guidance.	Design around real barriers: transportation, benefit usability, time, stigma, and unfamiliar foods.
Farmer income	Direct purchasing, aggregated demand, sales to markets/restaurants, inclusion of small producers.	Protect farmer value; do not build access by squeezing producers.
Community trust	Partnerships with housing, family-serving, cultural, and neighborhood organizations.	Distribution is relational infrastructure, not just a logistics map.
Technology access	Online ordering, SNAP/EBT processing	Budget time and staff capacity for certification, testing, troubleshooting, and customer support.
Learning system	Interviews, feedback, operational adjustments, partner debriefs, and measurement.	Adaptation is part of the model; build feedback loops from the start.

3. THE MODEL AT A GLANCE

Community-Centered Food Access Process Map



4. CENTERING THE PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE

The participant experience is where the model's values are put to the biggest test, so it is critical to center these elements when designing the program. For families to adopt the VEGGI model, the order process cannot be confusing, SNAP needs to work smoothly, and the food needs to arrive when promised, and with items they can use. They also need to feel respected in order for the program to fit into the rhythms of their daily life.

Sông's experience with VEGGI showed that intentional design that centered the user experience and paid close attention to small details was critical to attracting and retaining customers. For example, online payment can reduce stigma and delivery can reduce transportation burdens, recipes and educational supports can build comfort with unfamiliar ingredients, and flexible pickup can protect convenience while reducing delivery burden. Small personal touches can build loyalty and trust.

No aspect of the VEGGI model reflects its participant-centered design than SNAP-enabled purchasing, because it moves fresh local food into the payment systems families already use. The technology required constitutes critical infrastructure, and the platform, processor, authorization pathway, staff training, customer support, and compliance requirements all have to work together.

Sông CDC's SNAP online certification process was lengthy but transformative. The process involved engaging Grown By as a key platform partner, signing on MarketLink as a technical assistance partner, securing an FNS number from USDA, and conducting a rigorous testing process. In-person SNAP authorization for farmers and farmers' markets may take roughly one to three months, while online authorization can take up to six months and is currently processed in farmer batches. This process was supported through the use of card-reader equipment and relationships with vendors such as Grown By and Worldplay.

Based on Sông's experience, the technology pathway is best started early. Teams should identify whether they are pursuing in-person SNAP, online SNAP, or both; whether they qualify as direct marketing farmers or another eligible entity; what documentation is needed; which platform will support ordering; which processor will support EBT transactions; who will manage testing; and who will help customers when payments fail. The following table breaks down the key elements of incorporating SNAP, and the key decisions and considerations associated with it.

ISSUE/DECISION	KEY QUESTIONS	COMMON RISK	RECOMMENDED PRACTICE
Eligibility	What entity will apply? Does it meet relevant SNAP requirements?	Assuming a market, cooperative, or online model is eligible without verification.	Confirm eligibility and documentation before announcing launch dates.
Platform	Which ordering platform will handle product listings, order windows, and customer accounts?	Choosing a tool that does not support EBT workflow needs.	Map customer journey and backend workflow before selection.
Processing	What payment processor and EBT tools are required?	Underestimating testing and troubleshooting.	Assign a staff owner for payment setup and issue resolution.
Customer support	Who helps participants place orders and resolve failed transactions?	Technology access becomes a new barrier.	Offer human support, clear instructions, and simple communications.
Timeline	How long will authorization, testing, and certification take?	Building an unrealistic launch calendar.	Treat SNAP authorization as a critical path dependency.



5. PARTNERS & ROLES

Partnerships are essential to the success and sustainability of the model. Community organizations extend trust, identify families, host pickup, receive boxes, share feedback, and help the program remain responsive to lived realities. In the VEGGI model, partners have included organizations serving recently unhoused families, single mothers, Latin families, African American communities, and households facing transportation barriers.

The partnership with Hager's House illustrates the value of a community distribution relationship. Hager's House, a local nonprofit, serves individuals and families experiencing housing insecurity and manages food support with a limited weekly grocery budget. Free weekly produce boxes from VEGGI supplemented

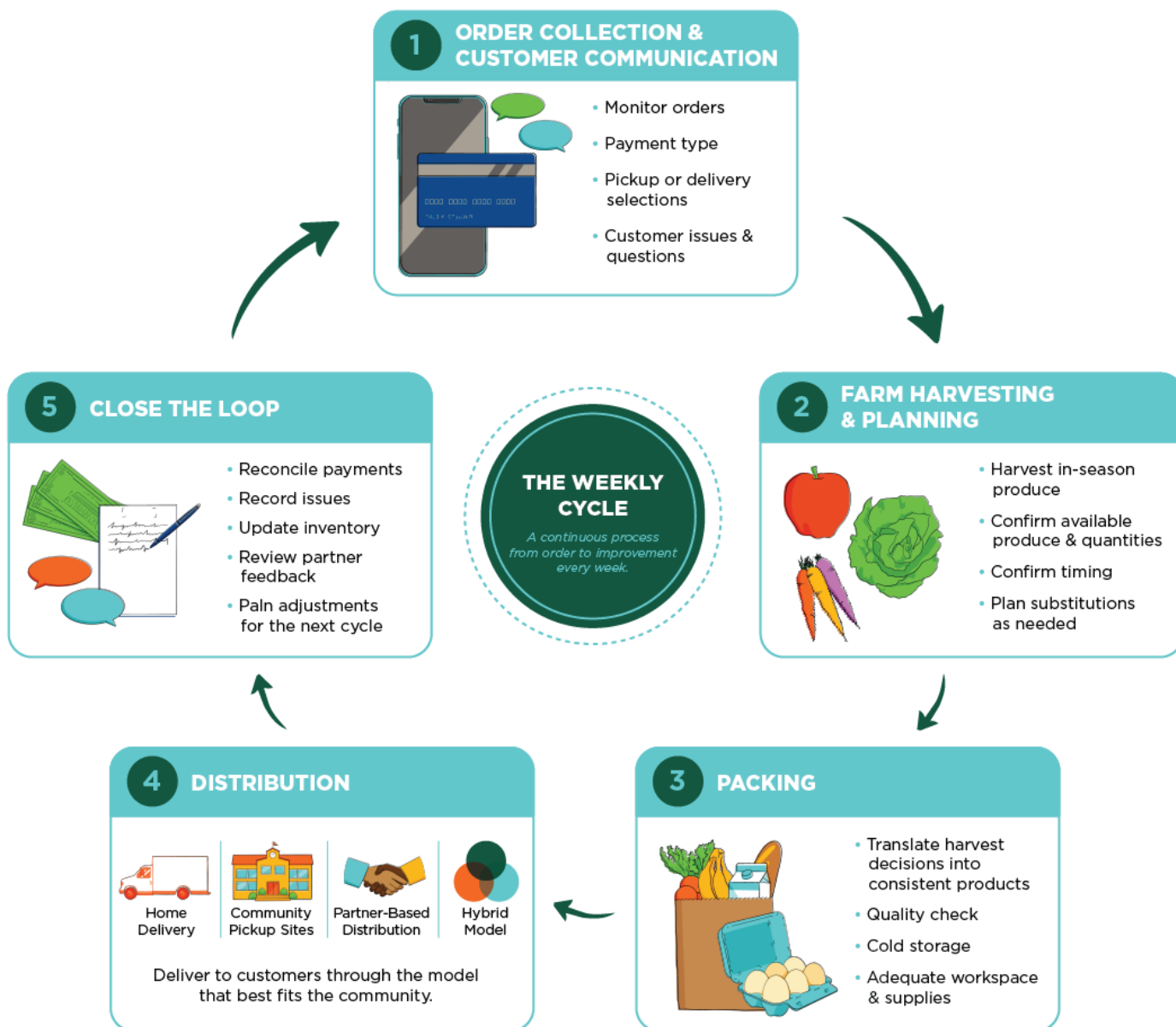
that budget, exposed residents to fresh local foods, and created opportunities for conversations about where food comes from. And for the Hager's House team, incorporating VEGGI boxes was smooth and seamless.

Clearly-defined roles are especially important when it comes to partnerships. Some partners may provide outreach and trust. Some may host pickup. Some may offer storage or refrigeration. Some may help with translation or culturally relevant food selection. Some may connect residents to SNAP enrollment or other supports. Some may fund boxes. The more precise the role, the easier it is to prevent confusion.

6. OPERATIONS

The success of the VEGGI box model depends on a consistent weekly operating rhythm. Families need reliability. Farmers need predictable demand and clear purchasing expectations. Partners need communication before the truck arrives, not after.

Staff need a workflow that does not depend on heroic improvisation every week. The box may feel simple to the participant, but it requires a carefully sequenced operating system behind the scenes.



KEY PRINCIPLES

- Clear communication
- Seasonal & fresh produce
- Keep it cold, keep it fresh
- Strong partnerships
- Continuous Improvement

7. COSTS & SUSTAINABILITY

Building and sustaining the VEGGI model requires investment across three distinct phases: initial startup, ongoing infrastructure improvements, and recurring operations. Understanding these cost layers is important for any organization considering a similar approach.

Startup costs

Initial farm and program infrastructure — incurred over the first year of operation — totaled approximately \$167,000. This covered farm buildout, a packing facility, water connection, a delivery vehicle, permits, and first-year staffing for 2.5 full-time positions.

Infrastructure investments

Infrastructure investments do not end at launch. Over the past three years, Sông CDC has invested an additional \$53,000 in capital improvements,

including cold storage, refrigeration, updated point-of-sale systems, and solar power — much of which was partially or fully covered through in-kind support and donated equipment. Cold storage in particular has been a high-impact investment, meaningfully improving produce quality and extending the selling season.

Ongoing operations

Annual operating costs run approximately \$255,500, of which roughly \$75,500 covers non-personnel expenses such as fuel, vehicle maintenance, packaging, utilities, insurance, and market fees. Farmer and producer payouts — treated as cost of goods sold — total approximately \$180,000 annually. Staffing costs are covered almost entirely by grant funding; non-personnel operational costs are largely covered through earned revenue from CSA box sales, farmers market sales, and restaurant relationships.

COST CATEGORY	ESTIMATED COST	NOTES
Farm and facility startup	~\$167,000	One-time; includes farm buildout, packing house, water connection, delivery vehicle, permits, and first-year staffing
Infrastructure improvements	~\$53,000	Capital investments over past 3 years; includes cold storage, refrigeration, and point-of-sale systems; some costs offset by donations
Annual operations (non-personnel)	~\$75,500/year	Fuel, vehicle maintenance, packaging, utilities, insurance, and market fees; largely covered by earned revenue
Annual staffing	~\$80,000/year	Fully grant-funded for one full time and one part time staff member doing deliveries and logistics
Farmer and producer payouts	~\$180,000/year	Treated as cost of goods sold; covered by sales revenue from CSA boxes, farmers markets, and restaurant relationships

SNAP setup and technology costs were minimal — effectively zero in direct expense — because the organization accessed free technical assistance through MarketLink and benefited from SNAP match subsidies through Market Umbrella's Greaux the Good program. This is a meaningful replication insight: **the right technical assistance partners can dramatically reduce what might otherwise be a significant barrier.**

The revenue model reflects an intentional design principle: earned revenue from paid customers and restaurant and market sales should cover operational costs, while grants fund staffing and major infrastructure. Free and subsidized boxes are supported by dedicated grant funding and direct donations. The model asks farmers to contribute 25% of revenues toward operating costs — enough to sustain core functions while ensuring farmers

retain the majority of their earnings. Regardless of revenue mix, the model requires discipline around pricing and procurement. If boxes are subsidized, the subsidy should protect the customer without underpaying the farmer. If free boxes are distributed through partners, the cost should be transparent. If paid customers help cross-subsidize access, the model should be clear about what portion of operations earned revenue can realistically cover. The long-term goal is not charity dressed as local food; it is a resilient market channel with access supports built in.

The most persistent financial pressure is staffing. Grant dependence for personnel costs creates real vulnerability, and the organization is actively working to diversify its funding base. Capital equipment — particularly delivery vehicles — will require replacement over the next three to five years. Strong community relationships have helped manage costs along the way: for years, VEGGI used shared cold storage with other farms, deferring a significant capital expense until grant funding made it feasible.



8. BEST PRACTICES & LESSONS LEARNED

Interviews with VEGGI staff, partners and customers revealed a number of key insights that can help those interested in adopting the model.

Listen first, and define the access problem

Before selecting technology or designing the produce box, it is essential to first clarify who the model is for and what specific barrier(s) it is seeking to address. For some families, the barrier may be transportation. For others, it may be the stigma or inconvenience of using SNAP in certain settings. For others, it may be limited familiarity with seasonal vegetables, lack of time, or the absence of fresh food vendors nearby. The Sôg CDC process evaluation framed this kind of learning as central to the work: the goal was to understand how the model functions on the ground, what adaptations have been made, where families and partners experience value, and what operational, policy, or technology barriers limit scale.



Build the coalition before building the calendar

The model involves farmers, producers, community partners, technology partners, funders, staff, volunteers, and customer-facing support. If those roles are unclear, the weekly rhythm will expose the gaps quickly. The team should identify who will source produce, who will aggregate and pack, who will manage ordering, who will handle payment questions, who will host pickup, who will deliver, who will communicate with families, and who will monitor data. This is also the moment to decide what work must be paid. Volunteers can be powerful, but a model cannot rely on volunteer labor for every recurring operational function and still expect to scale reliably.

Design a comprehensive participant journey

A strong box program is not only about what is inside the box. It is about the full journey: becoming aware of the program, understanding eligibility and/or cost, placing an order, using SNAP or another payment method, choosing pickup or delivery, receiving reminders, getting the food, knowing how to store and cook unfamiliar items, and having a way to ask questions. Participant experience should be designed intentionally before launch and revisited after every pilot cycle.

Build payment and compliance capacity early

As noted earlier, SNAP integration is one of the model's most powerful features and one of its most complex.

[MarketLink](#) is a program of the Farmers Food Assistance Bureau (FFAB) that helps farmers and farmers markets modernize and streamline acceptance of federal nutrition benefits, including SNAP/EBT, through technology, payment solutions, and technical assistance.

MarketLink described the distinction between in-person and online SNAP authorization,



the documents and approvals required, and the reality that online authorization can take months. SNAP authorization is not a late-stage administrative task, but rather a key building block that shapes launch timing, staffing, technology selection, and customer communication, and impacts overall success.

Pilot small, learn deliberately — then scale

A pilot should be large enough to stress the workflow but small enough to protect the team and participants from preventable failure. During the pilot, track where confusion happens, how long packing takes, whether box contents match family preferences, whether delivery routes are sustainable, whether SNAP transactions process smoothly, and whether partners have the information they need. Scaling before these questions are answered usually shifts the burden onto staff, volunteers, and families.

The SôngCDC team described delivery logistics as labor-intensive and addressed the burden by adding community pickup locations and volunteers. The team has also explored ways to reserve home delivery for households facing transportation barriers while shifting paid customers toward pickup locations to make operations more sustainable.

Keep quality control and customer communication central

Quality control includes more than producing freshness. It includes whether the box contents match what was promised, whether substitutions are explained, whether pickup sites are ready, whether drivers have accurate routes, whether customers know when to expect delivery, and whether recipes or storage tips are included when produce may be unfamiliar. The educational component is not fluff. It is part of uptake and satisfaction, especially for families who want to use more vegetables but may not know how to prepare seasonal items.

Build a solid foundation

The VEGGI model is complex and heavily reliant on a wide range of infrastructure. It is therefore essential to anticipate and address them early, and to monitor and adapt as the program grows and changes. Key issues include cold storage, electricity access/cost, packing space, delivery vehicles, security, data systems. Adequate staffing is equally critical (especially following the pilot). At minimum, the model requires leadership capacity, logistics coordination, customer support, community outreach, farmer/vendor coordination, and data/payment administration.

9. ADAPTING THE MODEL

A replication site should begin by clearly identifying the priority population it hopes to serve and the specific barriers that make food access difficult for those households, whether that includes transportation, affordability, technology access, or time constraints. Successful implementation depends on understanding which trusted community organizations already have strong relationships with residents and can support outreach, enrollment, and distribution efforts. Sites must also determine which farmers and local producers can realistically participate in the model and what conditions—such as reliable purchasing commitments, fair pricing, or infrastructure support—will make participation financially worthwhile.

Early operational planning should address which payment methods will be accepted from the start, including the timeline and requirements for obtaining SNAP authorization and online EBT integration. Replication efforts must also define how delivery will function, including whether home delivery will be universally available or reserved for households facing the greatest transportation barriers, and identify how those costs will be

covered. Additional planning considerations include where food will be stored, packed, staged, and distributed; what staffing structure is required to operate the program consistently and safely; and which responsibilities require dedicated paid staff rather than volunteers alone.

Equally important is establishing data systems that can measure reach, participant experience, operational performance, farmer income, and overall food access outcomes. Because earned revenue alone rarely covers the true cost of equitable food access, sites must also identify sustainable funding sources to close operational gaps. Finally, successful replication requires ongoing feedback loops that ensure participants, farmers, and community partners continue shaping how the model evolves over time so that the program remains responsive, trusted, and community-centered.

In order to succeed, adapting the VEGGI box model to other communities must preserve its defining elements, some of which are negotiable, but others not. The following table breaks these down.

KEY ELEMENT	NEGOTIABLE?	WHAT	WHY
Community trust	No	The program must be rooted in authentic relationships with the community, built through consistency, transparency, and responsiveness to family needs.	Trust drives participation, retention, and word-of-mouth growth. Without it, even well-designed systems fail to engage families.
Farmer inclusion	No	Local farmers must remain central to the model through fair purchasing, economic opportunity, and long-term partnership.	The model is designed not only to improve food access but also to strengthen local food economies and farmer sustainability.
SNAP accessibility	No	Families must be able to use SNAP/EBT benefits easily, including through online purchasing where possible.	SNAP integration removes financial and logistical barriers, making healthy food more accessible and reducing stigma.
Dignified participant experience	No	Families should experience the program as respectful, convenient, and empowering rather than charity-based.	A dignified experience increases engagement and helps families feel ownership and pride in participation.

KEY ELEMENT	NEGOTIABLE?	WHAT	WHY
Operational reliability	No	Deliveries, pickups, communication, and payment systems must work consistently and predictably.	Families depend on the program for regular food access; inconsistency quickly erodes trust and participation.
Continuous learning	No	The model must continuously adapt based on participant feedback, operational lessons, and changing community needs.	Flexibility and learning allow the program to improve over time and remain relevant in different contexts.
Box size	Yes	The quantity of food included in each box can vary depending on funding, family size, or local supply.	Communities may require different pricing structures or household-serving sizes.
Pickup vs. delivery mix	Yes	Programs can offer home delivery, community pickup sites, or a combination of both.	Different communities have different transportation realities, staffing capacities, and cost constraints.
Partner structure	Yes	Organizations may collaborate with nonprofits, faith groups, schools, businesses, or housing organizations in different ways.	Partnerships should reflect local relationships, assets, and operational needs.
Crop mix	Yes	The types of produce included can vary based on local farming conditions, seasons, and cultural preferences.	Local adaptation helps ensure relevance, freshness, and community acceptance.
Branding	Yes	Program names, visuals, messaging, and outreach strategies can differ by community.	Strong local identity can improve engagement and cultural resonance.
Customer segments	Yes	Programs may prioritize single mothers, seniors, immigrant communities, unhoused families, or broader populations.	Different communities face different barriers and may require targeted outreach.
Volunteer roles	Yes	Volunteer involvement may vary across delivery support, packing, outreach, or education activities.	Staffing models depend on local capacity and resources.
Technology platform	Yes	Different software, payment systems, or ordering platforms may be used to manage operations and SNAP transactions.	Communities may choose technology solutions that fit their budget, staffing, and technical capacity.

CONCLUSION

The VEGGI model started with a crisis — fishermen losing their livelihoods after the BP oil spill — and evolved through years of improvisation, disaster response, and community-led problem-solving. **What emerged is a food system that a community actually trusts and uses.**

That origin matters for replication. Organizations drawn to this model because of its outputs — the produce boxes, the SNAP integration, the delivery logistics — should understand that those outputs rest on a foundation that took over a decade to build. The technology is replicable. The operational rhythm is replicable. The trust has to be earned in each new context, with the communities and farmers who will actually make the model work.

What the VEGGI experience demonstrates is that food access done well involves relationship-building, technology, financing, and design — all at once, and all requiring serious investment. The organizations most likely to succeed with a similar approach are those willing to treat all of those dimensions as core work, rather than treating the produce box as the product and everything else as overhead.

The model also carries an argument worth stating plainly: local farmers and low-income families can be genuine partners in a food system, given the right infrastructure — reliable purchasing, accessible payment, trusted distribution, and honest subsidy. That combination produces something more durable than either a food pantry or a conventional grocery relationship.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To everyone who contributed to this work: thank you. Your experiences, lessons learned, and commitment to food justice have helped create a resource that we hope will support communities across the country in building stronger, more equitable food access systems.