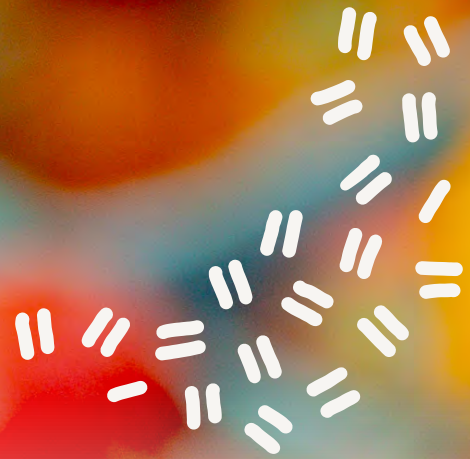




Indie Grocery Stores Have the Recipe for a Better Food System

America's relationship with groceries is strained, but innovative grocers offer a path forward.

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Introduction

Grocery stores are where nearly half of all food is purchased in the US. That's an immense footprint on our food system. With so many consumer dollars flowing through, it's hard to overstate their influence. Grocery stores set the stage for the vitality and wellbeing of whole towns and neighborhoods, the foods farms choose to grow and which farms thrive, and which families can access and afford to put nutritious food on their tables.

For more and more Americans, the weekly routine of grocery shopping has become a minefield of sticker shock and financial stress. Prices remain stubbornly high, yet many farmers aren't earning more, and grocery workers often struggle to make ends meet. Independent grocers are squeezed by rising costs while the nation's biggest chains achieve ever-larger economies of scale. Still too many neighborhoods and towns lack convenient places to buy basics like fruits and vegetables.

How did a mainstay of everyday life become so broken? And more importantly, is there a better way forward?

Innovative Models

Reimagining the neighborhood grocery store



As prices rise and trust in mainstream grocery stores declines, space has opened for experimentation and innovation. In communities across the country, residents and local entrepreneurs have started taking matters into their own hands. Community-rooted “indie” grocers are launching new business models and revamping multigenerational stores. They aim to balance affordability, access, fairness, and local economic impact while staying financially viable. In doing so, they are rethinking how the food system can work, starting at the local level.

Through Fair Food Network’s 17 years of on-the-ground experience across the country, we have seen entrepreneurs making grocery stores work better in communities of all shapes and sizes. Many of these indie grocers are carving out replicable models. Others have taken risks and failed but still offer lessons for other retailers. We have learned from their creativity, courage, and experimentation, and from esteemed peers in the field. This paper shares a sampling of the models taking root across the country.

Indie grocers tend to innovate along two connected dimensions: **how they are owned** and **what mission they are built to serve**. Ownership structure matters because it shapes how a store raises capital, makes decisions, shares risk, remains accountable to community needs, and sustains itself over time. Mission focus matters because it determines the problem the store is primarily trying to solve — whether affordability, access, farm viability, good jobs, or some combination of these goals.



There is no one-size-fits-all model. Different ownership structures create different opportunities and tradeoffs:

NP Nonprofit stores raise grants, donations, and philanthropic support to serve communities where conventional grocery financing may not work. Nonprofits can center community benefit more explicitly, but they still need strong retail operations and a viable business model to survive.

C Cooperative stores give shoppers, workers, farmers, or community members a direct stake in ownership and decision-making. Membership shares help raise capital. Co-ops can build trust, accountability, and local wealth, but also require strong governance, sustained member engagement, and experienced grocery leadership.

P Public stores treat food as civic infrastructure and provide groceries where the market falls short. Publicly owned land and buildings can be paired with flexible financing from bonds, tax incentives, and other targeted policies. A government may run a store itself or work with seasoned private operators. This model depends on political will, consistent public funding, and local operational capacity.

FP For-profit stores are the most familiar and scalable store model. They may be better positioned to access traditional financing and move quickly, but their community impact depends heavily on the values and decisions of owners, operators, or investors. For larger chains especially, communities that depend on the stores have little say in their food options or whether a store closes. Neighborhoods and small towns without many grocery options are especially vulnerable to owners' changing priorities or retirement. Speaking to these concerns, within the for-profit structure there are many variations, like employee ownership (ESOP) structure, **benefit corporation structures** like low-profit limited liability companies (L3Cs), and governance practices like **open books management** that can ground a store in a mission focus.

At the same time, indie grocers differ in their primary mission focus. Some lead with affordability. Others are designed to expand access in underserved neighborhoods or rural communities. Some prioritize local farms and regional supply chains. Others focus on good jobs, employee ownership, or keeping wealth rooted locally. Many do more than one, but most lead with a primary purpose.

The examples that follow show how ownership structure and mission focus intersect. A nonprofit, cooperative, public, or for-profit store can all address affordability, access, local farms, or good jobs — but each structure brings different tools, constraints, and sustainability questions. The table below offers a snapshot of how indie grocery innovation is taking shape across the country. It is not an exhaustive list, but helps demonstrate the diversity of models and approaches to meeting different communities' needs.

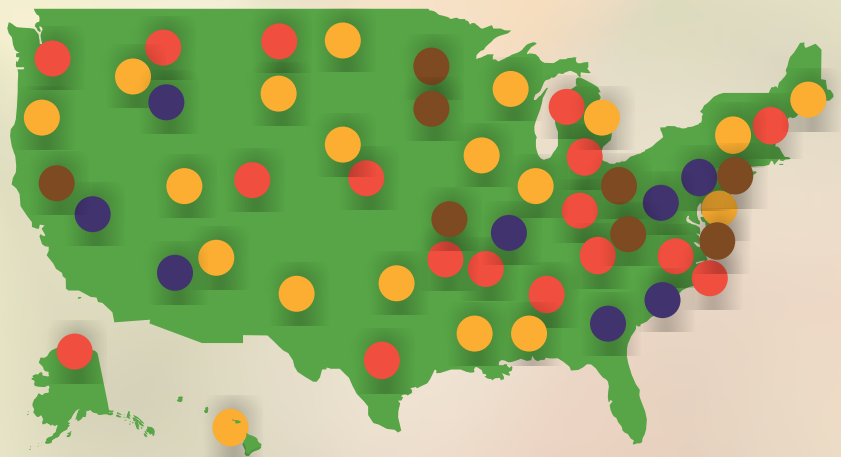


Indie Grocers: Mission & Ownership Intersect

	 Affordability	 Access	 Local Farmers	 Good Jobs and Local Wealth
 Nonprofit	Food Clubs (MI) Rolling Grocer (NY) Daily Table (MA)	Rolling Roots (HI) and other mobile markets Market on the Green (OH) The Common Good (OK) DMG Foods (MD) Fare and Square (PA)	Spoon Flower Grocer (TX) The Station in (CO) Sweet Beet Market (NH) Roots & Harvest Market (MO)	—
 Cooperative	Weaver's Way Co-op (PA) River Valley Co-op (MA) Weaver Street Market (NC) Littleton Food Coop (NH) Park Slope Food Coop (NY)	Detroit People's Food Co-op (MI) Post 60 Market (NE) Uproot Market (MI) Dorchester Food Coop (MA) Medford Cooperative (WI) Walsh Community Grocery (CO)	The Wedge (MN) and Coop Warehouse Partners Network Local Roots Wooster (OH)	Burnt Cove Market (ME) Rainbow Grocery (CA) —
 Public	Defense Commissary Agency Soulard Market (MO) N.Y.C. Groceries (NY)	St. Paul Supermarket (KS) Azalea Fresh Market (GA)	Flint Farmers Market (MI) and other public markets	
 For-Profit	Farm Store 99 By Agric Organics (MA)	Forty Acres Fresh Market (IL) Wright's Market (AL) Buche Foods (SD) Main Street Market (MN) Whittier Bodega (MI) Oasis Fresh Market (OK) Brown's Super Stores (PA)	Argus Farm Stop (MI) and other farm stops Chemicum Corner Farmstand (WA) and other farmstand-turned-grocery HmongTown Market and Hmong Village (MN) Ballis Food Stores (MO)	Woodman's Markets (WI) Hy-Vee (IA) Harps (AR) and other employee-owned stores

Indie Grocers Show What's Possible

Affordability, access, farm viability, and good jobs are interconnected challenges for the grocery sector. High grocery prices strain families, industry consolidation limits food access and local sourcing, farmers struggle to reach retail markets, and grocery jobs often fail to create stable economic opportunity. Indie grocers cannot solve these issues alone, but they offer practical, community-rooted ways to test new solutions.



Affordability

Keeping groceries within financial reach



Even in communities well served by grocery stores, food costs remain high.

Many families were already struggling to put food on the table, and between April 2025 and April 2026, **food costs rose another 3.2%**, while **fresh produce prices climbed 6.1%** on top of years of elevated inflation. The cost of many grocery staples has also increased due to livestock diseases, tariffs, war and oil prices, drought, and other climate-related agricultural disruptions. Even when some crises ease, prices rarely fall back. Many families, whether eligible for assistance or not, struggle to afford basic groceries.



● Public Defense Commissaries in majority of states

Indie grocers are responding by stitching together creative supply chains, bulk purchasing, different staffing models, public support, cooperative models, and government- or philanthropy-funded discount programs. Most grocers accept the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or **SNAP**, which remains the most significant food support for Americans, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or **WIC**. But the average benefit is only about \$6 per person per day, and many people who struggle with food costs are not eligible. Programs like **Double Up Food Bucks** can help by matching SNAP purchases of fruits and vegetables at participating food retailers and farmers markets.



Affordability

Examples of innovative grocery models focused on affordability include:

Food Clubs ^{NP} are grassroots grocery stores where customers pay a monthly membership fee that gives them points to shop for food. The stores fundraise to offer a wide variety of healthy food at prices that are more affordable than most other stores. Located in Michigan, the number of independent food clubs has quickly grown to four, in Holland, Ludington, Grand Rapids, and Saginaw.



Rolling Grocer ^{NP} operates an upstate New York store where a customer can opt into a discount on groceries based on self-reported income and household size criteria, all based on the area's living wage. The store also offers free delivery within its county and has extensive partnerships with local farms. **Farm Store 99** ^{FP}, with its roots as an urban farm in Massachusetts, sells local-focused groceries at affordable prices in its store or through delivery to urban neighborhoods. Customers can also use SNAP matching discounts on produce.



Weaver's Way Co-op ^C in Pennsylvania, **River Valley Co-op** ^C in Massachusetts, and **Weaver's Street Market** ^C in North Carolina all offer Food for All programs that discount groceries by 10-20% depending on the store. Participation in a government benefits program or a statement of need determines eligibility at most stores. **Littleton Food Co-op** ^C in New Hampshire offers both these discounts and a SNAP matching program for produce purchases.



Park Slope Food Co-op ^C in New York is a store with strict rules that customers work shifts in order to shop at the store, which is unusual. This approach enables the store to minimize labor costs and offers shoppers a wide variety of local and organic foods at price points they can't find elsewhere in an expensive city.



Affordability

Defense Commissary Agency ^P operates over 200 grocery stores on US military bases.

The stores use their purchasing power to negotiate with [food distributors](#) and offer items at a roughly 25% discount compared to other grocers. The Department of Defense considers this affordability to be critical to military families and access to the commissaries is seen as part of the benefits package for military and US Department of Defense families.

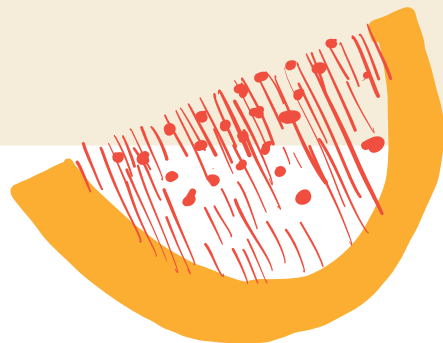


Soulard Market ^P in St. Louis is home to dozens of food businesses, including many produce wholesalers and a few farmers who sell in a city-owned building. Thousands of residents flock for good deals, and the market benefits from its proximity to the city's major [wholesale produce terminal](#).



N.Y.C. Groceries. ^P A key issue during the 2025 New York City mayoral election was accessibility and affordability of groceries. The city is planning to move forward with public grocery stores to rein in food prices. How it rolls out is still being determined and the possibility has sparked energetic conversation about what the initiative could look like. The city has a land bank that could be repurposed for stores and already purchases large volumes of food for schools that could drive down costs. These stores might also apply competitive pressure on other nearby grocers to lower prices on grocery staples and so have a ripple effect. Other cities are considering public grocery stores too, and **Azalea Fresh Market** ^P opened in Atlanta as a public-private partnership.

Daily Table ^{NP}, a former five-location grocer in the Boston area, offered a limited variety of produce and non-perishable, lightly processed foods at bargain prices. The store used Double Up Food Bucks to offer SNAP customers a further 50% discount off already low produce prices. The stores were popular but struggled with a multi-store expansion and higher costs coming out of the pandemic. They shut down in 2025. Despite closing, their affordability-focused model challenged conventional wisdom about how to operate a store.

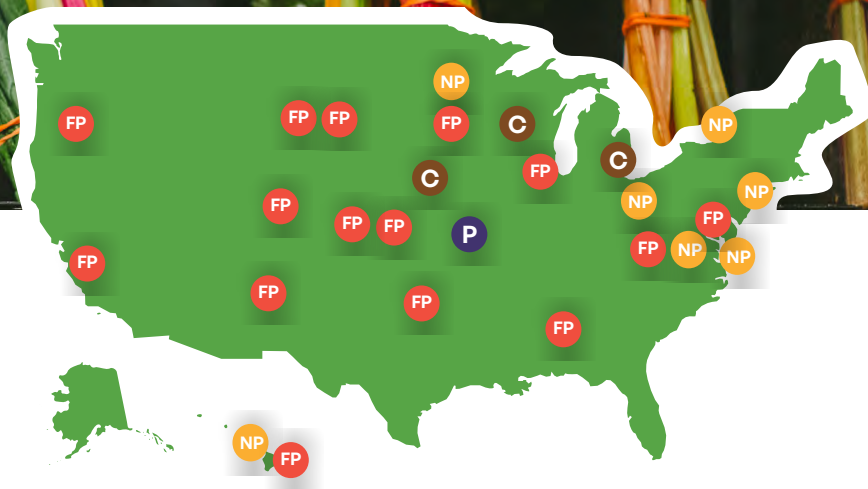


Access

Convenient groceries in every community



In most of the country, the grocery industry is dominated by a few large companies, which has driven consolidation across distribution and food processing. Independent stores often pay higher wholesale prices and don't receive the same level of delivery service, making it hard to compete. The result is fewer local grocers and more communities without convenient access to fresh food.



New stores, mobile markets, and small-format shops can fill gaps in underserved areas where traditional grocers do not operate. These stores are usually motivated by community pride, economic vitality, or health disparities related to lack of grocery access. Since starting a new store is difficult, an independent and locally rooted store may be the only way to bring back convenient access to groceries. Any new store operator needs to be connected, committed, and able to win over customers, especially in communities where chain grocers or dollar stores have already driven a local grocer out of business.



Examples of innovative grocery models focused on access include:

Independent supermarkets are the unsung heroes of many neighborhoods and small towns. **Forty Acres Fresh Market** ^{FP} in Illinois, **Wright's Market** ^{FP} in Alabama, **Buche Foods** ^{FP} in South Dakota, and so many more — each one has a story specific to its place and people, but they all want to provide better food options for their community. Together their sales are immense. Independent grocers make up nearly 40% of US retail food sales.

In some regions, independent retailers have joined together to form retailer-owned distributors, giving them greater control over supply chains and pricing, helping them better compete with national chains. They also serve towns that other distributors wouldn't deliver to. Some of those distributors have become quite large and successful, and others are still being formed to address unmet distribution needs. For example, the **Rural Access Distribution (RAD) Cooperative** in North Dakota bundles orders from small stores and schools to meet a large distributor's minimums, and then manages a truck route to get products to each member store and school. The structure also allows the RAD Cooperative to efficiently aggregate and distribute products from local farmers to its members.



Mobile Markets have opened in recent years as many food banks and health systems retrofitted buses and vans to operate grocery stores on wheels. They offer a limited selection of affordable groceries via a weekly route of pop-up locations in communities that lack nearby options or have a high number of residents with limited mobility. (This is in contrast or complement to grocery delivery services like Instacart that may address access but often come with extra cost.) A few examples include **Curbside Market** ^{NP} in Rochester, NY, **Twin Cities Mobile Market** ^{NP}, and **Rolling Roots Market** ^{NP} in Honolulu. The regional grocer **Giant Eagle** ^{FP} operates a mobile market in underserved Pittsburgh neighborhoods. It's possible that a future grocery store could begin as a mobile market — though few have, as the gulf between operating a mobile market and opening a store is large.

Market on the Green ^{NP} began when the main healthcare system in Northwest Ohio addressed a lack of healthy food staples in the neighborhood around its Toledo downtown campus by starting and operating a grocery store. Operations were later transferred to a seasoned entrepreneur who owns other Toledo food businesses.

Access

Detroit People's Food Co-op ^C grew out of urban farming and food sovereignty efforts within Detroit that identified the need for a Black-led and community-owned store for residents to better access healthy, fresh, and local food. There were many years of community organizing around the development of the store, and the efforts highlight how who owns the store matters in a community having a greater say over its food.



Medford Cooperative ^C is a farmer-owned cooperative that started over a century ago to ensure groceries and other basics were available to local residents. It operates three grocery stores in rural Wisconsin. A more recent effort, **Post 60 Market** ^C in Nebraska, opened when residents co-invested in the new store four years after their town's only grocery store shuttered.



Main Street Market ^{FP} in Evansville, Minnesota is a 24/7 self-serve grocery store in a town of 600 people. There are minimal staffed hours and residents become members to gain access to shop and self-checkout at any hour of the day. The model has now spread and there are a growing number of self-serve stores in rural towns in the region.



St. Paul Supermarket ^P opened in 2008 to help residents in St. Paul, Kansas avoid a lengthy drive to the next nearest store. The store was financed, built, and owned by the city but initially operated by a local couple. When they retired, the city took over operations too. Employees are now city employees and are offered the same benefits.

DMG Foods ^{NP} was a grocery store in Baltimore that closed after the COVID pandemic. It was started by the Salvation Army, which typically operates free food pantries but expanded to purchase and sell a consistent selection of healthy food beyond the donated foods that the pantries give away for free. Another example, **Fair and Square** ^{NP}, was started by a food bank in Pennsylvania but also later closed (though another grocer took over its operations and the store is still open). Food sales can feel at odds with mission for many food pantries and can be seen as competition from the stores they rely upon for donations. Still, some see opportunities to use their supply chain expertise to get quality foods at low costs to more families than they can reach with donated food alone. These stores may not have survived but still offer a window into how charitable food organizations might operate grocery stores themselves.

Local Farms

Boosting a region's local food economy



Despite high retail prices, many farmers are not benefiting because their products rarely make it onto major grocers' shelves.

Large grocers rely on national supply chains that often exclude small and mid-sized farms. Without reliable retail channels, these farmers depend on critical but limited direct sales outlets like farmers markets, which account for less than 0.5% of consumer grocery spending. If communities want locally grown food to reach more people, independent grocery stores with more flexible purchasing are essential infrastructure.



Farm-focused grocers connect consumers directly to regional producers, offering fresher food and better margins for farmers. One way of scaling up is for a weekly farmers market or informal farmstand to expand into brick-and-mortar operations, extending shopping hours and grocery offerings. Privately run “farm stops” prioritize local food, often as an outgrowth of a successful outdoor farmers market. These stores aggregate food from many local producers, offer a fuller variety of groceries than any one farmer could provide, operate seven days a week, and are often located on commercial main streets rather than farms.



Local Farms

Examples of innovative grocery models focused on local farms include:

Argus Farm Stop ^{FP} is a Michigan store started to help customers get products from local farmers but at regular grocery store hours instead of just once a week at the farmers' market. All food in the store is locally grown and/or processed. Farmers set their own prices and sell on consignment. The store is set up as an L3C benefit company and uses open books management practices. The farm stop model is being tried in an increasing number of communities — so much so that there is a yearly conference and other ownership examples like **Roots and Harvest** ^{NP} in Missouri and **Local Roots** ^C in Ohio, too. Similar to farm stops, some stores like **Sweet Beet Market** ^{NP} in New Hampshire and **Gaining Ground** ^{NP} in Tennessee sell products from dozens of farms but not on consignment.



Farmstands Turned Grocers: **Chimacum Corner Farmstand** ^{FP} in Washington, **Ken's Farm Market** ^{FP} in Michigan, **Heirloom Foods** ^{FP} in Minnesota, **Jordan's Farm Stand** ^{FP} in Maine, **Farmers Grocery** ^{FP} in North Dakota, **Jon Henry General Store** ^{FP} in Virginia, and **Russell Farms** ^{FP} in Pennsylvania are all rural stores that grew out of simple farmstands and are now open daily with regular hours and a wide variety of grocery staples in addition to local produce.



HmongTown Marketplace ^{FP} and **Hmong Village** ^{FP} serve the Twin Cities' thriving Hmong community, offering a daily marketplace where Hmong growers can sell to customers looking for culturally connected foods. They're located adjacent to a multi-vendor market offering a range of other groceries, prepared foods, and household items.

Farmacy Marketplace ^{NP} was started to give farmers in the Mississippi Delta a local sales outlet for their food, while also providing food access to communities that lack grocery stores. The nonprofit provides training programs for farmers to ready their harvest for grocery store shelves.



Local Farms

Spoon Flower Grocery ^{NP} is the retail grocery store connected to the Desert Spoon food hub in El Paso, Texas. The store is an extension of the food hub's mission to help regional farmers sell more, and is focused on making their fresh local food affordable to the neighborhood through programs like Double Up Food Bucks. The store carries a wide variety of food coming directly from Southwest farmers thanks to truck meetups with a New Mexico food hub. There are others exploring this model too: Farm Runners, a food hub, opened **The Station** ^{FP} grocery store adjacent to its rural Colorado distribution warehouse to reduce food waste and provide food access.



The Wedge Co-op ^C in Minnesota set up its own distributor to make it easier for itself and other grocers to source more local food that distributors wouldn't carry. The distributor now delivers to seven states. (One of its customers, **Manna Food Co-op** ^C, itself grew out of a farmers market.) A related example: **Balls Food Stores** ^{FP} set up its own central warehouse to better distribute local farms' products to its 25 stores plus 30 others in the Kansas City area.



Public Markets ^P ^{NP}, where a grocery store's worth of farmers and food makers sell food directly to residents, and wholesalers daily were once common place in US cities. **Fulton Street Market** and **Muskegon Farmers Market**, both in Michigan, began a century ago to help farmers and to address food affordability. Today, cities often own buildings and land but market operations have been outsourced. Kansas City's **City Market**, Detroit's **Eastern Market**, and the **Flint Farmers Market** have all seen these transitions of governance. Nonprofits or private companies manage vendors and tenants, which include small grocers, and in some cases have also added additional buildings.



Good Jobs and Local Wealth

Giving workers greater ownership and opportunity



Grocery jobs, especially at large chains, are often low-wage with limited benefits and unstable hours, and workers frequently face employers that are hostile to unionization efforts. Many grocery employees, even at the nation's most profitable retailers, earn so little that they face food insecurity and qualify for public assistance. Meanwhile, profits generated in local communities often flow to distant shareholders rather than circulating back into local economies.

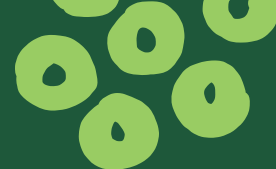


When stores are owned locally, more salaries and profits get spent in the same community. There are downstream benefits for a community's social infrastructure too. Things like community sports teams and community celebrations often rely on donations from local grocery stores, but that can only happen if there is a local grocer to form a relationship with.

Providing good jobs remains challenging in a low-margin industry like grocery retail. Labor costs can make or break the small margins many stores operate on, and very few indie grocers have opened specifically to create better job opportunities. Higher labor costs may also conflict with affordable pricing. Still, some indie grocers prioritize living wages, stable schedules, and employee ownership, which can give them a competitive edge in attracting and retaining talent. Unions have played an important role in many corporate and independent stores, and some regional chains use employee-ownership structures that allow for profit sharing. Some stores also prioritize hiring from socially disadvantaged groups, including people in recovery or reentry.



Good Jobs and Local Wealth



Examples of innovative grocery models focused on good jobs and local wealth include:

Burnt Cove Market ^C is a grocery store in Stonington, Maine. When its original owners wanted to retire, employees formed a worker-owned cooperative to buy the store. That allowed its former owners to get retirement savings, and for the employees to keep their jobs and become owners themselves.



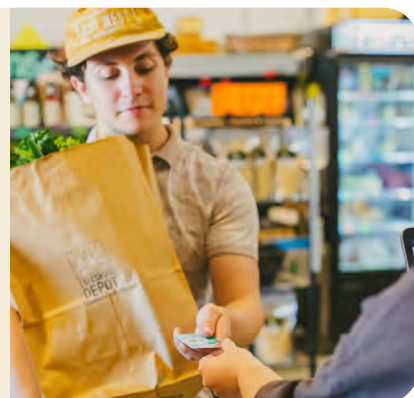
Rainbow Grocery ^C is a San Francisco store structured as a worker-owned cooperative that has been thriving for decades.



Woodman's Market ^{FP} is employee-owned with 20 locations in Wisconsin and Illinois. Staff receive same day pay, can pick their hours, and after 3 years become vested in company stock.



Employee ownership, also known as an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP), is a benefit at other successful independent regional chains too. **Hy-Vee** ^{FP} with nearly 300 stores across the Midwest, gives stock to not just its leadership but also has a mechanism that has allowed 40,000 store employees to buy in as stockholders. Similar at **Coborn's** ^{FP} with 70 stores across the upper Midwest. **Harps** ^{FP} based in Arkansas and with over 100 stores, used an employee stock ownership plan to buy out the stock of the founding family.



What Indie Grocers Need to Succeed

Communities differ, and so must the models that serve them. Room for creativity and for local food within the grocery industry is needed, as is an ecosystem that supports entrepreneurs trying new models. That's why Fair Food Network is interested in indie grocers. Since our start in 2009, we've been fortunate to work on projects with colleagues dedicated to supporting grocery innovation around access, affordability, farmers, and good jobs: [The Food Trust](#), [The Reinvestment Fund](#), [Red Tomato](#), [National Grocers Association Foundation](#), [Rural Grocery Initiative](#), and all of our food lending partners at the [Michigan Good Food Fund](#) and peers at the [Food Lenders Network](#).

In the years ahead, Fair Food Network is committing to more initiatives and collaborations to further support these community-driven entrepreneurs. Based on what we have learned, indie grocers need several kinds of support to succeed.

Connect indie grocers with each other and with dedicated support

Starting up a store with ideals is not enough. More indie grocers will be successful at building viable businesses by connecting them to seasoned grocery store operators and small business professionals so they don't have to figure out the finances and business plan alone. These grocers also need sources of low-cost capital so they have a chance to get the store on its feet without becoming underwater with debt. Supporting grocers also means building more relationships with local governments to develop tax incentives and other tools to lower grocers' startup costs.

Provide affordable and flexible capital for grocers to start up and grow

Large chains can finance new stores using internal resources or debt markets, but indie grocers don't attract capital as readily. Philanthropic grants and low-interest loans can de-risk and help indie grocers attract additional capital. Federal funding for [Healthy Food Financing Initiative \(HFFI\) loans and grants](#) is very limited and oversubscribed. The program finances new grocery stores, mobile markets, and food hubs, and also renovations or expansions of existing stores in low-income urban, rural, and tribal areas.

In addition to advocating for increased federal funding, more states should add their own HFFI-adjacent grant, loan, and tax credit programs. Some states are also targeting capital-to-distribution businesses that can better serve and bring down costs for small grocers and farm-to-grocery distribution that make food more affordable and local. Examples include [Michigan](#), [Colorado](#), [Illinois](#), [Pennsylvania](#), and [North Dakota](#).

Support distributors that help local farms sell to local grocers

Grocers can better merchandise and plan for the seasonal variation of local food. Farmers can better grade and pack with the produce aisle in mind. But there is a limit to how many fresh tomatoes a store can sell. More local processing can open the door to a wider number of locally grown items represented across the store. Most distribution has been optimized for national and global supply. More local-oriented distributors are needed to play a critical role in planning truck routes and refrigeration that efficiently get products from farms to where people shop.



Incentivize customers to buy local from grocers

Paired with a strong SNAP program, nutrition incentives can further boost the buying power of low-income households purchasing produce from stores that buy from local farmers. Nutrition incentive programs like Double Up Food Bucks use federal, state, and philanthropic funding to get dollars flowing so indie grocers can be profitable, farmers can build supply chains to the grocery industry, and customers can access affordable and fresh local foods. Everybody wins.

But **recent changes to SNAP** in the federal budget bill weaken this safety net and add new hardship for millions of Americans already struggling with high food costs. And despite widespread national interest, federal farm bill funding for the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program is currently too limited for every community to participate. In addition to increasing federal funding, more states should add funding support to spread nutrition incentives to a wider number of communities not currently served.

Create fairer policy and market conditions

Some of what indie grocers need sits beyond any one store or support organization. Public policy and market rules shape whether independent grocers can compete, whether communities can reuse grocery sites, and whether smaller stores can access fair prices.

Enforce anti-trust laws. Anti-trust laws like the **Robinson-Patman Act** are designed to ensure big businesses can't use their size to get unfair pricing advantages from suppliers. Recent years of non-enforcement coincided with consolidation within the grocery industry, making it hard for indie grocers to compete on price. Large chains have been documented taking advantage of the complicated rules to make better deals that are not offered to other grocers. There are many opportunities for large grocers to **abuse their market power** and get unfair pricing. Enforcing the Robinson-Patman Act would allow indie grocery stores to compete.

Disallow restrictive deeds and property tax dodging. In some states, chain supermarkets use restrictive deeds that disallow other grocery stores from taking over a location should the current supermarket close. The result is empty big box stores and gaps in food access **in some communities**. At the same time, many of these same big box chains **successfully advocate** to pay next to nothing on property taxes based on the **argument** that no other business can move in and so the property values are nearly worthless. This tax gap is not only a **burden on the host community** but also means indie grocers launching in a small, neighborhood location are likely to pay higher taxes than the big box stores located on the edge of town.

Together, these needs point to a broader ecosystem of support: business assistance, flexible capital, stronger supply chains, customer demand, and public policies that allow independent grocers to compete. Fair Food Network is already helping build several pieces of that ecosystem.





How Fair Food Network Is Helping

Building a stronger food system means investing in the people, businesses, and infrastructure that keep food dollars circulating locally and communities resilient. Fair Food Network is working toward a future where families can afford healthy food, farmers earn sustainable incomes, retailers source more local products, and more economic value stays in communities. To help make these outcomes possible, the organization is directing capital, technical assistance, and other resources to innovative grocery models that strengthen local food economies.

Business assistance, startup grants, and financing

In partnership with [Michigan Good Food Fund](#) lenders and America's Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), Fair Food Network invests in Michigan indie grocers like [Uproot Market](#), [Detroit People's Food Co-op](#), [Whittier Bodega](#), and [Argus Farm Stop](#) by providing favorable financing and custom business assistance. In addition to supporting grocers directly, Fair Food Network prioritizes investments to distributors, processors, and other critical food system infrastructure that help move more locally grown food from farms to grocery shelves, strengthening local supply chains and expanding market opportunities for farmers.

Peer learning and support for emerging models

Fair Food Network works with partners to convene cohorts of indie grocers and other food businesses in Michigan facing similar challenges, creating opportunities for peer learning, problem-solving, and business growth. National cohorts focused on strengthening farm-to-grocery supply chains are being developed. By bringing together businesses within a region or leaders across the food value chain, these cohorts help participants share best practices, strengthen relationships, and overcome common hurdles related to financing, operations, sourcing, and expansion. Examples include a bodega bootcamp for startup grocers in 2016, a multiday local sourcing training in 2020 for 13 Michigan grocery store operators in partnership with

Argus Farm Stop, and a 2026 grocer cohort led in partnership with ProsperUs in Detroit.

Increasing demand for produce at grocery stores

Fair Food Network introduced [Double Up Food Bucks](#) in Michigan farmer's markets in 2009. In 2013, the program was expanded beyond farmers markets to three independent grocers in Detroit. Since then, Double Up has spread to more than 200 stores and farmers markets in Michigan and operates in nearly 30 states across the country. Independent grocers remain a focal point for Fair Food Network in Michigan and other states, in part because of their wide reach into towns and neighborhoods that go overlooked by large chains, and their deep commitment to the communities they operate in.

Most indie grocers in the US have the potential to accept SNAP and Double Up to help their customers afford more healthy foods and add a new revenue stream that strengthens their business. Fair Food Network works with retailers to increase participation in these programs and to help grocers serve as anchors in their local food economies by strengthening connections to local farmers, producers, and communities.

Strengthening grocers nationally

Fair Food Network also supports nutrition incentive programs nationwide through its role as the Capacity Building and Innovation Lead for the [Nutrition Incentive Hub](#), a national partnership led by the [Center for Nutrition and Health Impact](#) and including the [University of California San Francisco](#), [The Food Trust](#), and [National Grocers Association Foundation](#). Through this work, we help organizations recruit and support retailers, expand access to nutrition incentives, and identify strategies that make nutrition incentives more effective and widely available.

Fair Food Network and partners provide technical assistance, resources, and peer-to-peer learning opportunities that help grocers increase local sourcing, share best practices, and strengthen regional food systems. These efforts improve healthy food access while creating new market opportunities for farmers and locally owned food businesses.

Conclusion



Grocery stores are where the impacts of the current food system becomes visible: which foods families can afford, which neighborhoods have access to groceries, which farms get their products on store shelves, and whether food dollars stay in the local economy. For too many communities, the current grocery store options are not delivering what people need.

By trying new ownership and governance models paired with mission focus, indie grocers offer a practical and promising path forward. They are testing what is possible when you reorient stores around local needs and control. They are showing that grocery stores can do more than sell food: they can strengthen neighborhoods, support farmers, create better jobs, and keep more wealth circulating locally.

No single model will work everywhere, and no single organization can provide every solution, and these models cannot succeed on vision alone. The opportunity now is to build the ecosystem of support these grocers need to survive, grow, and share what they are learning. They need peer networks, flexible capital, practical business assistance, better farm-to-grocery supply chains, tools to keep healthy food affordable, and policy environments that allow them to compete.

Fair Food Network is committed to helping build that ecosystem alongside grocers, farmers, lenders, policymakers, and many local and national peers engaged in this work. Grocery stores are too important to ignore. Hundreds of indie grocers are innovating new models and making it work against the odds in communities big and small. If we want a food system that grows the health and wealth of communities, indie grocers deserve more than recognition. They deserve the investment, infrastructure, and partnership to make their promise real.

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Additional Resources

Independent stores do better when they organize as a group. Here are some networks and initiatives that provide best practices and support for:

- Independent stores: [National Grocers Association](#) and [IGA](#)
- Cooperative stores: [National Co-op Grocers](#) and [Food Co-op Initiative](#)
- Natural food stores: [INFRA](#)
- Rural Stores: [Rural Grocery Initiative](#) (national) and local versions like in [IA](#), [NE](#), [IL](#), [MN](#), [ND](#), [VT](#), [WV](#)
- Farm Stops: [Farm Stop Network](#)
- Mobile Markets: [Mobile Market Coalition](#)
- Federal Funding: [Healthy Food Financing Initiative](#) (national) and [local versions in over 20 states](#)