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Capstone Paper
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Measuring impact while in motion: an evaluation strategy to communicate the story of the Montgomery County Food Council's efforts to build a robust, sustainable, equitable local food system in Montgomery County, Maryland

Executive Summary:

Food systems are adapting and evolving in this unique moment in history, when weather patterns are rapidly changing, some food industries are consolidating, and health disparities are more prominent than ever. But challenging times often lead to emergent change and innovation, and food policy councils (FPCs) throughout North America are at the cutting edge of this innovation as a result of their work to foster collaborative partnerships and systems-level change to ensure that communities have sustainable, resilient food systems. FPCs engage with food system issues through a blend of advocacy, policy change, and programs. Drawing upon several examples from other councils, this capstone offers an evaluation strategy for the Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC), a community based non-profit in Montgomery County, Maryland. This paper contextualizes the work of the MCFC in the current, rapidly shifting public health landscape of the DMV region; highlights the ways in which the organization is adapting to the new circumstances created by COVID-19; and proposes methods the organization can utilize to leverage existing evaluation efforts and current collection of qualitative and quantitative program data to better tell the story of organizational impact. Finally, this capstone also proposes evaluation frameworks for consideration, in an effort to present approaches that will more comprehensively capture the breadth and depth of the Montgomery County Food Council's network, and impact.

How my capstone project addressed knowledge areas I chose to strengthen during this program:

Commencing this degree, I sought to increase my knowledge of the role food systems play, in community health and wellness. Additionally, I aimed to develop strong program evaluation skills, and to find ways to leverage my communications background to develop public health communications skills. While working on this capstone, I conducted secondary research that allowed me to deepen my understanding of a range of food systems issues, in particular as a result of researching many food policy councils and reading through strategic plans, food action plans and policy briefs to better understand how these organizations tell the story of their impact. Finally, developing this capstone project including researching and proposing recommendations of specific actions and evaluation frameworks the organization can utilize to make their impact more visible. Conducting this part of the research allowed me to strengthen my program evaluation knowledge and skills. Researching best practices for communicating impact was an opportunity for me to expand my communications skills, in the context of the public health advocacy and policy change work of the Montgomery County Food Council.

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Introduction

This capstone summarizes secondary research in an effort to develop a program evaluation strategy for the Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC), a non-profit organization based in Bethesda, Maryland. Founded in 2010, this community-led organization

includes four full time staff, and 25 volunteer representatives from educational institutions, government agencies, businesses, and local non-profit organizations. These representatives, known as “Council members,” bring perspectives from across the food system, from farming and other aspects of production and retail, to distribution and hunger relief efforts, to food education and food waste issues. The organization envisions a vibrant, sustainable food system in Montgomery County, Maryland. The mission of the MCFC is to “bring together a diverse representation of stakeholders in a public and private partnership to improve the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of the County through the creation of a robust, local, sustainable food system.”¹ Such a system will support all residents by promoting healthy eating patterns, high accessibility of healthy, culturally appropriate foods, a thriving local economy, and a healthy environment. ¹ Volunteers and community partners are engaged through four working groups that convene on a monthly basis: Food Economy, Food Education, Food Recovery and Access, and Environmental Impact. The MCFC became an independent 501(c)3 organization in September 2018. ¹ This evaluation strategy aims to answer these questions:

- What is the best way for the MCFC to measure organizational impact? How do other food policy councils tell the story of their impact?
- What methods will best leverage current measurement and evaluation structures that are in use within the Montgomery County Food Council?
- What data is the MCFC collecting, and for whom?
- How is that data being communicated, when, and to whom? How are stakeholders engaged in evaluation efforts?

In 2020, the organization began to reflect on their scope of work, look for new ways to measure impact, and plan for the future. To give shape to this reflection and planning, the MCFC has been engaging a wide variety of stakeholders in the development of a strategic plan that will identify organizational priorities for the next three to five years, and thereby focus the efforts of the Council members and staff in specific ways.

Context is a critical consideration when describing the impact of the MCFC. As with all non-profit work, fundraising is on-going for the organization, and there is competition for resources among non-profit organizations throughout the county and the region. Interest in food insecurity—and the path toward increased food security for all county residents—is rising throughout the community, with significant growth in attendance at the Food Recovery and Access Working Group meetings (from 72 members of the group in 2019, to 110 in 2020 to date). Amidst growing concerns about the climate emergency, community members are increasingly active in identifying actions to mitigate climate impacts. Political shifts are occurring, too: in a county that recently elected a progressive Democrat as the County Executive,¹⁰ there is increased momentum toward a climate action-oriented approach to community planning, land management, and resource mobilization. At the instruction of County Executive Elrich, county staff recently convened stakeholders and technical experts from a variety of backgrounds to engage in a climate planning process focused on transportation solutions, clean energy options, and adaptation and mitigation strategies.⁷ And finally, two agencies are currently conducting long-term planning efforts: the department of environmental protection is engaged in comprehensive assessment and evaluation efforts to chart a path towards zero-waste procedures,⁸ and the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (responsible for park management in Montgomery County) is conducting a “Thrive

Montgomery” process to engage community members in an updated general plan that will shape planning decisions for the next 30 years.⁹ The MCFC staff and volunteers attend these meetings for these processes, when capacity allows, so that the organization can remain informed of—and supportive of—these efforts, and ensure that a food systems perspective is integrated into the planning processes.

And now, with a pandemic rapidly moving through our communities and disrupting many pathways within our food system, the MCFC’s role in the community is taking a new shape. In early March, Montgomery County government recognized a need for one entity to facilitate communication and foster collaboration between local food assistance providers during the COVID-19 outbreak. Given the existing work the MCFC has done to build a community of practice among food assistance providers, government officials requested that the MCFC serve as the primary convener for all food assistance organizations operating in Montgomery County.¹¹

The organization responded by moving the MCFC Food Recovery and Access Working Group monthly meetings to weekly calls,¹¹ with over 100 participants joining the March 23rd Zoom conference call. These weekly calls serve several functions, including connecting resources with needs that are being expressed by food assistance providers (for example, transportation has been a challenge for some organizations, so the MCFC is working to connect a trucking company willing to donate some vehicle availability and driver time with organizations that need transportation assistance); communicating information about grants and other funding opportunities to small businesses, non-profits, and farms; connecting organizations with decision makers in government agencies; and gathering food assistance information and sharing it with advocates and organizations that can spread that information out even further, into the

community.¹¹ This instance illustrates the MCFC's ability to serve as a dynamic, adaptable organization in times of great change, in order to meet shifting community needs and activate a network that can share resources, rapidly provide and exchange support, and facilitate communication across the food system.

How are other Food Policy Councils tracking and communicating their impact?

Food policy councils (FPCs) are working on issues related to food production, distribution, education and waste throughout hundreds of communities in the United States, Canada, and on native lands. According to research from the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, over 270 FPCs are active in North America.² These organizations are telling the story of their impact in a variety of ways. In Hartford, Connecticut, the Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy (HACFP) publishes an annual report summarizing policy recommendations for the year ahead, as well as a narrative update on progress made on prior policy recommendations.³ In an effort to maintain transparency and to keep the Hartford community apprised of on-going progress, the organization also publishes regular updates via a standard "Meeting Record Review" document that summarizes key decisions and discussion points, ideas carried over from previous meetings, and a record of individuals who were present and absent from the meeting.⁴ In northern Ohio, the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition (CCCFPC) has designed a logic model to articulate the organization's theory of change and identify key metrics, such as the number of stakeholders "engaged in formative work," number of educational events organized each year, quantity of working group meetings held, and new partnerships established.⁵ To move toward more detailed measurement, the CCCFPC identified data sources that could inform a process evaluation, and an outcome evaluation, and compiled these listed sources for further consideration and planning.⁵ Metrics related to outcome

evaluation included meeting notes, a tracking system for any policy changes the organization attempted to initiate, examples of media coverage focused on policy enactment (with respect to policies the CCCFPC had a role in) and changes to the food environment, Community Food Assessment documents, and interviews with members of their organization.⁵ (Please refer to Addendum 1 for a full list of metrics.) In Michigan, members of the Detroit Food Policy Council (DFPC) show the impact of their organization through their Detroit Food Metrics Report. The report provides facts about Detroit’s food environment (see Figure A), contextualizing their work while identifying key milestones and policy achievements, such as the initiation of a Community Health Assessment by the Detroit Department of Health in 2018⁶ (see Figure B). The DFPC utilizes colorful infographics to illustrate equity issues that the Council is focused on (see Figure C).

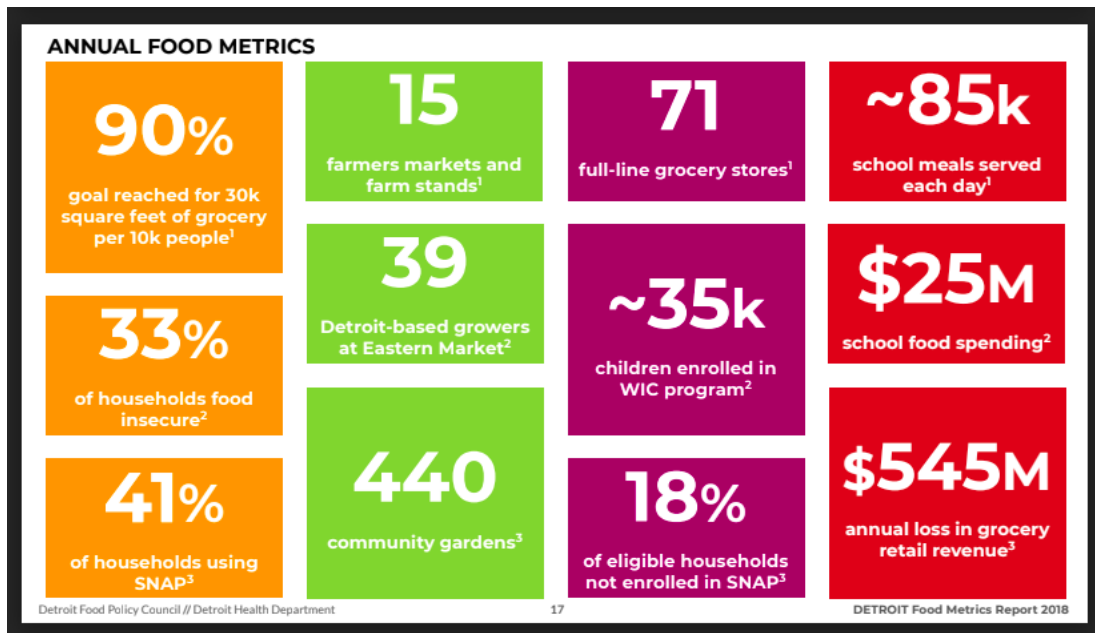


Figure A. Source: Detroit Food Metrics Report 2018.⁶

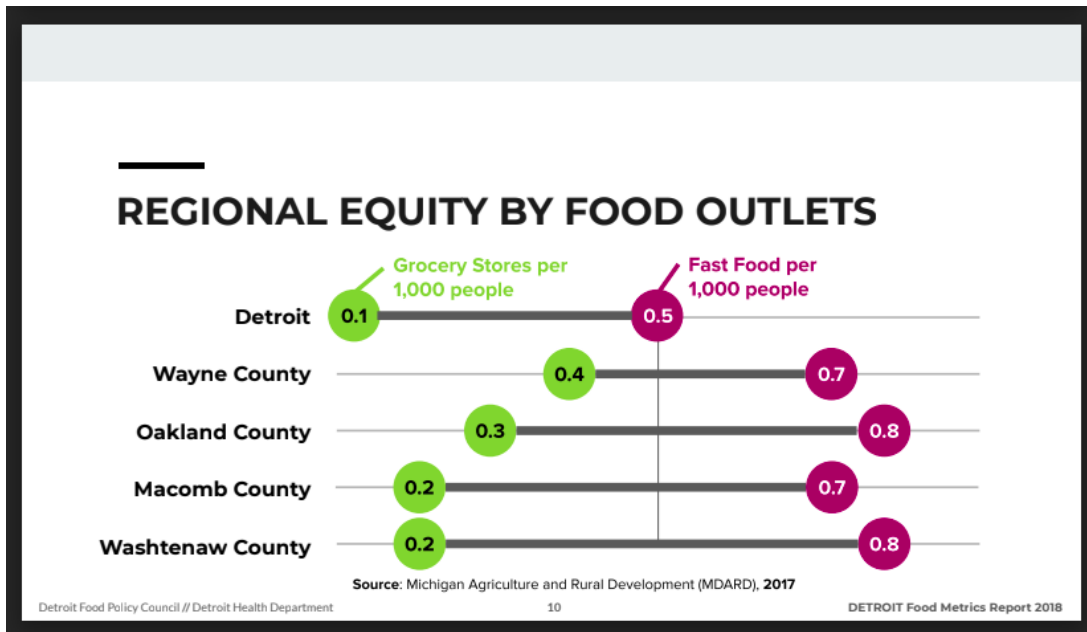


Figure B. Source: Detroit Food Metrics Report 2018.6

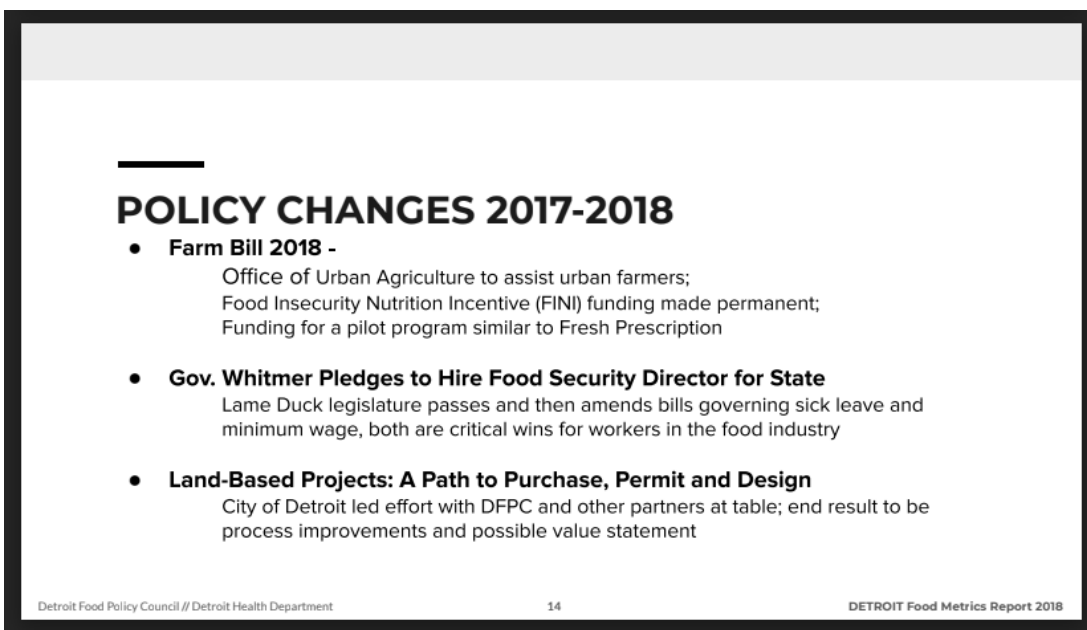


Figure C. Source: Detroit Food Metrics Report 2018.6

Monitoring efforts: what data is the Montgomery County Food Council collecting?

Current monitoring efforts are already in progress. The Montgomery County Food Council collects qualitative and quantitative data on a variety of programs. Existing qualitative

data includes Council member responses to a survey, which is issued to individuals who join the organization to volunteer for a 2-year term; Council member responses, for Council members who opt to return for a second 2-year term; and survey results from working group members including participants in the Food Recovery and Access Working Group (FRAWG) and the Environmental Impact Working Group (EIWG). Additional data is currently being collected via informal feedback gathering sessions, as part of the strategic planning process, with an emphasis on feedback regarding the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Existing quantitative data includes a wide array of metrics, which can be organized into four thematic categories: advocacy efforts, communication efforts, stakeholder engagement, and community events in which Montgomery County Food Council staff or Council members participated. Participation in these events includes partnering with another community organization to host the event; MCFC staff or Council members speaking on a panel or offering remarks; or staff or Council members attending an event.

Advocacy Efforts:

- Number of letters of support pertaining to food-related legislation, during Maryland's legislative session (#)
- # of participants on new food policy-related advocacy listserv
- # of State Delegates engaged in meetings and policy discussions

Communications Efforts:

- # of Facebook followers, engagements (such as "likes"), and Twitter followers
- # of recipients receiving quarterly e-newsletter
- # of website hits each month, and each year
- # of *Montgomery County "MoCo Made" Food and Beverage Guides* distributed
- # of copies of the *Food and Beverage Guide* distributed to local food businesses and at community events
- Communications efforts specific to food security interventions:
 - # of copies of MCFC Screen and Intervene Toolkit shared
 - # of paper copies of Food Assistance Resource Directory (FARD) distributed

Stakeholder Engagement:

Note: here “stakeholder engagement” is defined using Woodford and Preston’s framework, as “meaningful participation as that which is authentic in that stakeholder input is used to inform decision making.”¹⁹

- Number of community members regularly attending Working Group meetings (working groups include Environmental Impact, Food Economy, Food Education, Food Recovery and Access)
- # of hours volunteered each month, by Council Members
- # of roundtable discussions convened on food education priority areas
- # of businesses (food retailers, restaurants, caterers, farms) represented at monthly Food Economy Working Group meetings
- # of local food and beverage businesses that report new customers as a result of the MoCo Made Program (annual number to be provided by May 2020)
- Stakeholder engagement efforts specific to food security interventions:
 - # of community volunteers recruited and trained
 - # of new organizations engaged in FRAWG
 - # of food assistance providers at FRAWG meeting
 - # of educational presentations at FRAWG meeting
 - # of monthly policy updates provided to stakeholders, at FRAWG meetings
 - # of organizations met with, to share best practices and connect them to Food Security Plan implementation efforts
- Knowledge transfer reported, among stakeholders:
 - % of participants who report increased knowledge in post-educational event and Council Member/Working Group annual surveys (to be reported on once in 2020)
 - % of Working Group and Council Members report program enhancements or new partnerships as a result of engagement with MCFC (to be reported on once in 2020)

Community Outreach:

- # of informational or educational events hosted by the MCFC
- # of informational or educational community events attended by MCFC staff, Council members, and/or Board members
- # of community stakeholders engaged in educational outreach and network building programs in FY20
- Community outreach efforts specific to food security interventions:
 - # of presentations to new community organizations or stakeholder groups
 - # of volunteers attending SNAP trainings
 - # of encounters with seniors (SNAP program)
 - # of outreach locations (SNAP program)
 - # of new SNAP applications
 - # of SNAP change reports

- # of community locations where FARD referrals were established
- # of Screen & Intervene Toolkit Training Meetings conducted, to assess levels of food insecurity
- # of Culturally Appropriate Food Subgroup meetings held

Types of data collected are primarily determined by requirements from funders, including government grants and private foundation grants. Some data points have been identified as useful through internal monitoring and evaluation efforts. Currently, data is communicated back to the full Council by way of a written consent agenda, prepared and sent to all Council members one week prior to bi-monthly full Council meetings. Some metrics are also shared with a broader audience via the MCFC quarterly newsletter, and through social media content.

Bringing these threads together: which activities does the MCFC do most effectively, and how can the organization measure and demonstrate that impact?

As part of the organization’s strategic planning process, there were preliminary discussions in which MCFC staff identified **five key strategies**, on-going approaches to daily work that staff and Council Members consistently engage in, in order to achieve the mission. These five strategies are listed below, as well as recommended methods to assess their efficacy. The strategies can be considered for use in a logic model or program theory model that builds toward a series of goals for the food system, as defined by the MCFC.

- **Strategy 1: Increase capacity of local programs, businesses and organizations**

Measurement suggestions:

- Soliciting feedback and qualitative data from Working Group members (method: SWOT sessions and surveys). Are Working Group members learning about new grants and informational resources that build their capacity?

- Soliciting feedback businesses such as MoCo Made participating businesses, farmers attending Farmer Forums (method: survey). Are businesses listed in the MoCo Made Guide noticing benefits from the additional marketing it provides? Are farmers benefiting from the Farmer Forums and CSA promotional efforts on the MCFC website?
- Specific to the data collected on participants in the Food Recovery and Access Working Group (FRAWG), responses from FRAWG participants who report increased knowledge in post-educational event, and responses describing program enhancements or new partnerships as a result of engagement with MCFC, can be used to measure impact here.
- **Strategy 2: Grow and strengthen networks and partnerships**

Measurement suggestions:

- Solicit feedback and qualitative data from Working Group members (method: SWOT sessions). Feedback may reflect the types of partnerships that do or do not arise from MCFC full Council meetings, Working Group meetings, and events.
- Consider a Collective Impact Assessment framework. CIA is a method of measuring the impact of several activities and programs simultaneously, particularly those that have a mutually reinforcing effect.¹³ According to the Stanford Innovation Review, this approach can be useful for initiatives that seek to have an impact in highly complex systems, ¹³ making this approach applicable to food system work. However, there have been some criticisms of the CIA method (including concerns that it has been utilized in a top-down manner that is not conducive to community-driven work, and that there are some issues with the

methodology in early articles proposing this approach), so further research and adaptation is needed before trying this approach.¹⁸

- Consider a Social Network Analysis process to assess and illuminate the relationships being built through the MCFC's work. According to Peters, social network analysis involves application of network theory to social entities (e.g., people, groups, organizations), demonstrating nodes (individual actors within a network), and ties (the type of relationships) between the actors, and uses a range of tools for displaying the networks and analyzing the nature of the relationships."¹⁶
- Utilize infographics to tell the story of the breadth and depth of the network convened by the MCFC (see Addendum 2).
- **Strategy 3: Lead advocacy efforts, and drive policy and process change**

Measurement suggestions:

- Since policy and process changes often proceed in a gradual fashion, and on timelines that are influenced by many outside factors, this strategy needs an on-going monitoring approach. The Detroit Food Policy Council's model, as mentioned on page 8, can be considered as a model for how to approach this.
- In terms of measurement and metrics, it may be beneficial to place emphasis on aspects of progress that are within the Council's control, such as: number of engagements (meetings, etc.) with policy makers and elected officials, number of government officials attending Working Group meetings on a regular basis, and number of stakeholders currently engaged in the MCFC Food System Advocacy email listserv.

- Consider exploring a Program Theory evaluation approach. Program theory builds an explanatory summary of how the program works, with whom, and under what circumstances (provides more detail than a traditional logic model).¹⁷ This approach might be useful when time and circumstances allow for some reflection on the initial impacts of COVID-19 on Montgomery County, and the role the Montgomery County Food Council played in responding to rising food insecurity issues in the community.
- On a yearly basis, it will also be useful to review the policy agenda, note progress made, and consider sharing updates with the general public. Updates may include policy issues that were dropped, or approached in new ways, depending on the political and social context the organization is working within. The MCFC is considering a large-scale public engagement event to bring more stakeholders into their policy work, when conditions allow for gatherings over 10 people. Such a meeting may be an opportunity to discuss progress made, talk about strategies, and identify policy priorities for the year ahead. Progress on certain policies could be considered “outputs” in a larger program evaluation plan.
- **Strategy 4: Build knowledge and awareness of local food system issues and relevant resources**

Measurement suggestions:

- Issue surveys to working group members, Council members, and other partners. This information is currently captured through the Returning Council Member survey, but a wider array of data would be made available through surveying

participants who regularly attend working groups, and community partners who are actively engaged with MCFC programs, but not currently represented on the Council. Include questions to assess this strategy in future surveys issued to MCFC Working Group members.

- **Strategy 5: Research and communicate opportunities and challenges**

Measurement suggestions:

- Progress on the organization’s policy agenda can be reported on here.
- Track and quantify educational resources developed and utilized, such as the MCFC Food Literacy Assessment (2018) and the Food Assistance Resource Directory (updated 2019).
- When appropriate, solicit feedback from elected officials, after briefing them on a particular food system issue. This could occur via informal means, such as a conversation or an email.

One relevant example that could inform this “key strategies” approach is the work conducted by the Mendocino Food Policy Council (MFPC), whose Food Action Plan was shaped around several goals, with each goal upheld by one or more of the five principles that guide the MFPC’s work.¹²

Additional Recommendations:

1. Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Operationalize metrics tracking in a standard way, with some consistent metrics across working groups. Compare those metrics year to year.

- Data Collection Tools:
 - Epi Collector (<https://five.epicollect.net/>)
 - Functionality notes: Epi Collector is a free, web-based tool, and is compatible with Android and Apple products. Data can be collected online or offline, and can be viewed as a table. This tool also has mapping capabilities, which could be useful for network mapping and partnership node tracking.

2. Communications:

- a. Utilize quarterly newsletter to share updates on quantitative impacts, when appropriate. For example, once CSA sign-up season is complete, a MCFC newsletter could celebrate and announce the number of new CSA memberships documented by farmers county-wide, if that data is available and readily shared, as a way of demonstrating the impact of any cross-marketing efforts while continuing to shine a light on local producers.
- b. Telling the story of organizational impact more holistically, and clearly.
 - i. Adding an “Accomplishments” section to the homepage of Mocofoodcouncil.org can help illustrate the impact of the organization’s work. Such a page can highlight select policy changes that the MCFC advocated for, and other key wins from the working groups and other efforts.
 - ii. Case studies can be used to capture specific instances that illustrate the Food Council’s efficacy in enacting key strategies, in moments of community need. For example:

1. MCFC's leadership role in coordinating among Montgomery County food assistance providers throughout the rapid response to COVID-19 outbreak.
 2. A successful story of a bill that was passed, that MCFC provided a letter of support and/or testimony in support of, and organized partners to support as well.
 3. A "Get to know your Food Council Member" approach could be used to highlight a mutually beneficial partnership, through the lens of one Council member's narrative.
- c. Capture narrative responses and testimonials that illustrate the organization's value:

Data collected through the strategic planning process will provide some inputs for this communications tactic (method: SWOT analysis sessions, facilitated by Strategic Planning committee members). Debrief conversations in Working Groups on a quarterly basis may also be a good time to capture some testimonials in real time, via note taking. Those testimonials can then be shared in writing with the person who expressed that feedback, with a request for permission to share the testimonial in a Year in Review document, Annual Report, etc.

- d. Developing infographics:
- Kumu, a free online tool, is one way to create simple, colorful infographics at no cost. See Addendum 2 for an example.

In conclusion, the Montgomery County Food Council can consider utilizing a program evaluation strategy that is steered by the five key strategies identified in early 2020, with each strategy measured by a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. Case studies and infographics may be useful visual tools with which to bring the quantifiable data to life. Longer term impacts such as network activation, partnership development, and policy change will require long-term monitoring and tracking so as to continue to develop a case for organizational impact that can be integrated into an external communications strategy.

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Addenda

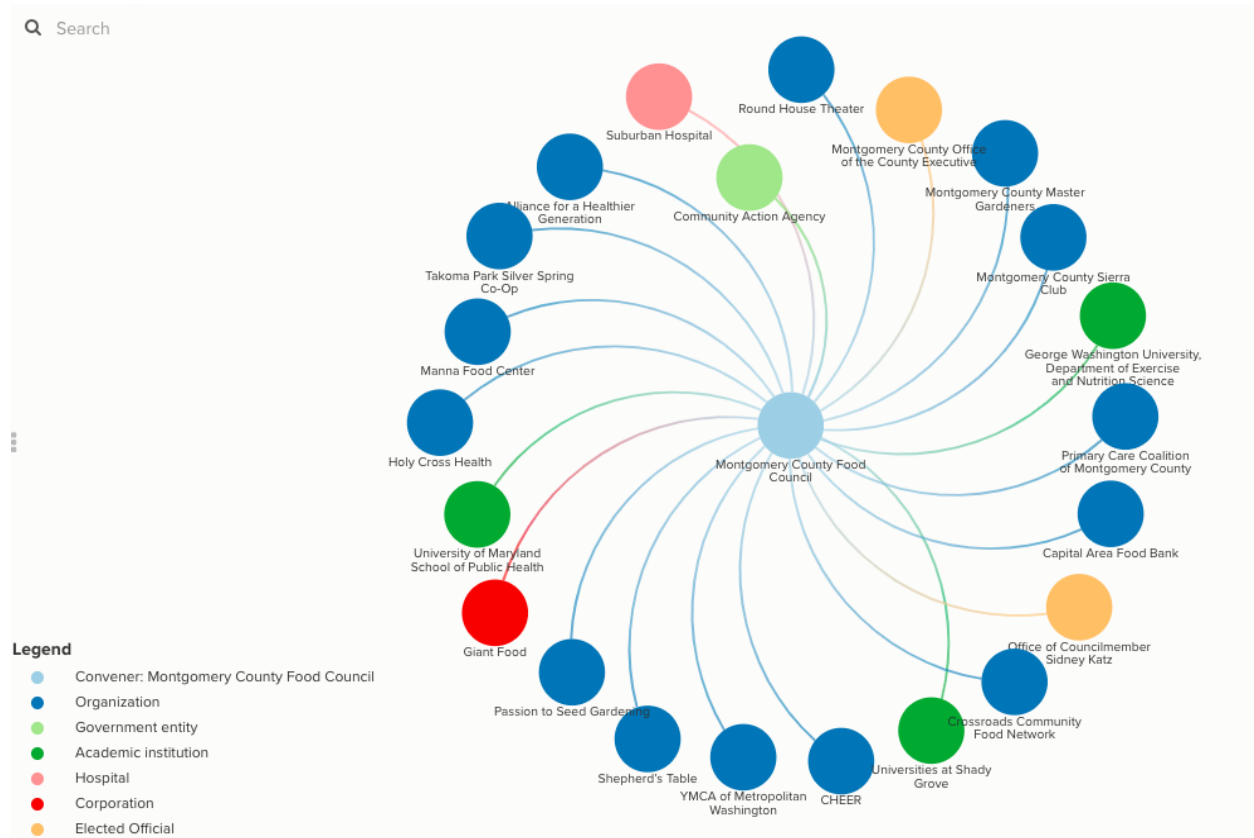
Attachments included below are added here to provide greater detail on resources mentioned above, for reference by the Montgomery County Food Council staff, Board, and Council members, as needed.

Addendum 1: Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition Center TRT Logic Model

CENTER TRT LOGIC MODEL	
Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition	
<p>Potential process evaluation data sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• List of stakeholders who have agreed to participate in Coalition• Administrative and communications documents & trackers• Coalition Trackers – These are logs that allow the Coalition/Council leadership (or some designated person) to log various aspects of the coalition's work, such as: FPC Action Plan/Working Group Work Plan development and implementation; development and dissemination of communication products; trainings/meetings/forums held; etc. These trackers are noted in the "Data Collection Method" column throughout the evaluation plan.• FPC Action Plan (drafts and final versions)• Meeting schedule, meeting notes & resulting action steps• Summary research/assessment documents• List of member organizations• Advisory Board contact sheet and Board member bios• FPC Operating Procedures• FPC Organizational Chart• FPC staffing plan/job descriptions• FPC Working Group Work Plans• Working Group meeting notes• In-depth interviews with FPC members and other stakeholders• Communication products• List of Working Groups and Working Group members• FPC Budget, Funding Awards, and fiscal documents• Annual reports	<p>Potential outcome evaluation data sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• FPC and working group meeting notes• Tracker for logging initiative of/planning for/attempts to change policies or programs• In-depth interviews with FPC members and leadership• Media stories on policy adoption/enactment• Policy documents (hardcopy policies that were passed)• Community Food Assessments• In-depth interviews with food systems stakeholders• Media stories about food environment changes

Addendum 2:

An infographic to illustrate the variety and quantity of organizations connected with the Montgomery County Food Council, via Council membership. Each dot in the outer ring represents a Council member, labeled with their affiliated organization.



Link to project:

<https://kumu.io/skornacki/mcfc-mapping-connections-as-a-tool-to-consider-impact>