

The Blueprint:

Building a Business Assistance Network
for Farm and Food Businesses



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Executive Summary

The Blueprint's goal is to increase the number of successful farm and food businesses in New England and New York's Hudson Valley. Economic viability is crucial to the success of such enterprises. The Blueprint's focus is on commercial farm and food businesses that contribute to local and regional economies, and provide an alternative to the dominant global food system. These businesses face many obstacles inherent to a sector in transition. Our aim is to give these entrepreneurs — who are the foundation of local and regional food systems and rural economies — the tools, resources, and know-how they need to flourish. Their successes will allow them to contribute both to the transformation of the food and agriculture system by meeting consumer demand, and to state and regional goals to develop local food systems.

Most farms and many food entrepreneurs in The Blueprint region are located in rural communities that are within a day's drive of the largest and most-diversified consumer markets in the United States. Opportunities abound for creating and sustaining both commodity and niche markets. Farm and food entrepreneurs' capacities to take advantage of these opportunities are inadequate, due to a complex mix of challenges related to access to land, pricing, and the creation and management of viable business models to meet the demands of 21st century markets. These opportunities can be even harder to access for historically socially disadvantaged populations.

There is no unifying mechanism in place to increase the number of economically viable farm and food businesses, in rural or urban areas, yet states have identified multiple social and economic goals premised on the growth of the sector. We identified the need for a holistic, tailored approach to providing business development assistance, focused on long-term economic viability, to increasing numbers of farm and food businesses. The Blueprint calls for the creation of a network of organizations, programs, and services to bridge service gaps, reach underserved populations, increase total funding for the sector, and facilitate effective collaboration among the organizations and individuals providing business technical assistance.

The Blueprint is the result of a collaboration between the Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corporation, the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program, The Carrot Project, The Joyce and Irving Goldman Family Foundation, The John Merck Fund, and more than 50 organizations that came together to create The Blueprint for New England and New York's Hudson Valley.

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Background and Introduction

The Blueprint to Build a Network

This document, The Blueprint, is an aspirational guide for a network of organizations and individuals that provide one-on-one business technical assistance to farm and food businesses. The network is diverse and open to interested parties that could benefit from participation. It includes private consultants and representatives from non-profits, extension services, universities, state departments of agriculture, and capital providers. Business advisors not working specifically in agriculture, but interested in doing so, are welcome to participate. The focus is the provision of services that will enable increasing numbers of economically viable farm and food businesses that serve primarily local and regional markets.

This budding network is the result of a collaboration among three practitioner organizations and two foundations: The Carrot Project, Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corporation (HVADC), the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program based at the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB), The Joyce and Irving Goldman Family Foundation, and The John Merck Fund. The Blueprint is the result of two convenings in 2017, which included more than 50 participating organizations that met to reach agreement on goals, objectives, and strategies.

The Blueprint was envisioned in 2016 by the lead authors and funders as a process through which to engage a broad group of stakeholders. Their mission is to lay out a strategy, to change the current landscape for business assistance programs, so that they target farmers across all phases of operation, from production to packaging and distribution. A variety of such programs already exists across the region in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. However, in many cases there are critical service gaps — based on geography or stage of business — that are detrimental to the growth of the sector. The Blueprint focuses on strategies that increase the impact of farm and food business assistance programs by promoting metrics and standards, network development, collaboration to document and share best practices, training and professional development services, and enhanced resources.

Successful farm and food businesses are the foundation of strong and diverse local economies, ensure secure food sources, and often have beneficial economic, health, and environmental outcomes.¹ The Blueprint is designed to enhance the success of food and farm businesses by providing a platform for a robust, effective, and collaborative network of business assistance programs geared directly toward farm and food businesses. **Our goal is to increase the number of successful farm and food businesses in the Hudson Valley region of New York State and in New England.** However, we acknowledge that implementing The Blueprint calls for broad geographic and organizational commitment. This may range from activities at the state level to coordination within our core regions, and collaborating with mission-aligned national organizations.

Participating Organizations

Leading the development of The Blueprint are Executive Committee members Todd Erling, Executive Director of the Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corporation, Ela Chapin, Program Director of the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program (based at the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board), and Dorothy Suput, Executive Director of The Carrot Project.

Todd Erling is the founding Executive Director of HVADC, the first regional entity to focus on farms and local food businesses as drivers of economic development. The HVADC Incubator Without Walls has serviced 200+ client businesses with more than 30 technical services providers, and has assisted a variety of projects in accessing more than \$35 million in funding. HVADC was the co-host of the 2017 National Farm Viability Conference.

Ela Chapin has been the Director of the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program at the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board since 2006. She has been instrumental in expanding the program, growing and creating new partnerships, and driving significant quality improvement, including organizing dozens of trainings and networking events, and designing and implementing the National Farm Viability Conference in 2008 and 2013, as well as in collaboration with HVADC in 2017.

Dorothy Suput is the founder and Executive Director of The Carrot Project, a non-profit organization that facilitates access to financing and business support so that today's small farm and food businesses can grow into thriving, enduring enterprises. The Carrot Project's work focuses on New England and New York's Hudson Valley, and reaches hundreds of farms and food processors each year. It partners with organizations around the region on research, program development, and delivery.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the following organizations that have contributed their time and effort to the development of The Blueprint thus far:

ACDS, LLC	Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources
Alden Services	Maine Farmland Trust
American Farmland Trust	Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation
Berkshire Agricultural Ventures	Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
Business Opportunities Management Consulting	New Entry Sustainable Farming Project
Cascade Strategies	New Hampshire Community Loan Fund
Cornell Cooperative Extension, Capital Area and Saratoga County	Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont
Coastal Enterprises, Inc.	National Young Farmers Coalition
Center for an Agricultural Economy	New York Farm Viability Institute
Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA)	New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets
Cornell Small Farms Program	Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA)
Dandelion Design, Inc.	Practical Farmers of Iowa
Doris Duke Charitable Foundation	Propel Capital
Fair Food Fund	PVGrows Investment Fund
Farm Aid	Rhode Island Agricultural Partnership
Franklin County CDC	Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management
Farm to Institution New England (FINE)	The Sandy River Charitable Foundation
Glynwood	Social Enterprise Greenhouse
GrowNYC	Office of Senator Patrick Leahy (VT)
Hudson Valley Farm Hub	Southside Community Land Trust
Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corp. (HVADC)	Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture
The John Merck Fund	Tactix, Inc.
The Joyce and Irving Goldman Family Foundation	The Carrot Project
Kitchen Table Advisors	UConn Extension
Kitchen Table Consultants	UVM Extension
Land for Good	Vermont Community Loan Fund
Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture	Vermont Housing & Conservation Board
Leverage Points Consulting	Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program
Local Economies Project	Wallace Center at Winrock International

Special thanks to Eric DeLuca of Leverage Points Consulting and Jon Haber of Cascade Strategies for their efforts in coordinating and advising in the creation of The Blueprint.

Terms

The following words or phrases are found throughout this document. Because definitions may vary with different contexts, terms are described and/or explained as they are used herein.

beneficiaries: Beneficiaries of this work are owners/operators of farm and food businesses in New England and New York's Hudson Valley that serve primarily local and regional markets.

business technical assistance: "Business assistance" or "business technical assistance" can include a wide range of services on business topics, from educational programming (such as workshops or trainings) to short- or long-term, one-on-one coaching or advising. It may also include providing access to business planning tools, making referrals, or subsidizing the cost of business consultants. In this document, the term "wrap-around business assistance" or "business assistance" is meant to include one-on-one coaching or advising, and can be tailored to work for a range of businesses along the continuum of business stage, scale, or type. Coaching or advising may be on business-related topics ranging from recordkeeping and financial analysis to marketing and sales, human resources, business planning, estate planning, and/or succession planning.

farm: An enterprise that grows crops or raises animals qualifies as a farm. That said, please note that some organizations that provide business assistance to farms have mission-based eligibility requirements that may include some, but not all, farms. For example, requirements might mandate focusing services on small businesses, start-up businesses, businesses selling into local/regional markets, or businesses that focus on environmental sustainability or reaching underserved populations. A farm may or may not be land-based.

food business: An enterprise that makes food or beverage products or provides certain services to farmers is regarded as a food business. Examples could include a food manufacturer, a slaughter facility, or a food processing co-packer. A food business may or may not be a land-based business. NOTE: Many organizations that provide business assistance to food businesses have mission-based eligibility requirements that may include some, but not all, food businesses, such as those that source from or provide services to local or regional farms or whose markets are, or are predominantly, local or regional.

geography: The focus of The Blueprint is New England and New York's Hudson Valley; it is also referred to as "the region." How The Blueprint's work is related to other geographies is discussed in the Proposed Solution section.

local and regional: For the purposes of this document, the terms "local" and "regional" are used to describe alternatives to food systems based on the global, industrial system that came to dominate how humans access food in the 20th century. Many Blueprint participants and stakeholders are working toward the development of more-local and -regional food systems. Improving the viability and success of small and growing food businesses is a key foundation for food systems change. Stakeholders may use different geographic boundaries or distances to define "local" and "regional."

socially disadvantaged populations: This term is used to describe those whose identity in a group has subjected them to racial, ethnic, or other prejudice without regard to their individual identity, and who face substantial barriers to participation as owner/operators in the farm and food economy. It includes women, racial and ethnic minorities, and low-to-moderate-income business owners or prospective business owners.

viability: The Blueprint's goal is to support commercially viable and successful farm and food enterprises. Economic

viability allows for a triple bottom line impact, including an array of social and environmental factors. These enterprises tend to be the sole, or an important, contributor to the owners'/operators' family income once past the start-up stage, and they must be profitable in order to do so.

Owners/operators of viable enterprises understand and can articulate their mission and vision, know in what direction they want to take their businesses, and are successful in meeting their goals, even if those goals shift over time with changing markets, competition, family situations, etc. This definition does not exclude non-profit-owned enterprises. Such enterprises must still cover their costs in order to be viable, but the non-profit may bring in funds to subsidize educational activities or other mission-based programming that complements the farm or food enterprise. We understand that various stakeholders may define viability a bit differently, but we believe the above description represents a fairly core understanding across many programs and organizations working in this sphere, regionally and nationally.

Problem Statement

Overview

Agriculture is vital to almost every aspect of our lives and livelihood. Yet, the industry is in the midst of a structural transition in response to aging farmers, dwindling farmland, decreases in sector contributions to GDP (gross domestic product) and employment, and persistent concerns about the negative environmental and social impacts of the global food system.² The United Nations, the U.S., and state governments are calling for changes to our food system. Consumers are bolstering governmental calls to action as locally produced food is one of the fastest growing sectors — a trend across all income levels.³ Young people are showing increasing interest in starting farm and food businesses. For only the second time in the last century, the number of farmers under 35 years old is increasing, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) latest Census of Agriculture.⁴ There is growing interest in ensuring that people who have historically lacked the means to start, build, and profit from their own farm or food businesses have the opportunities to do so.⁵ The continuation and growth of these positive trends and our ability to address them will require increasing the number of successful, economically viable farms and food businesses.

The structural transition is evident across a wide range of statistical measures in New England and New York. Perhaps the most dramatic is age of the farm operator. The average age of the principal farm operator in the region has been steadily increasing, from 54 in 1997 to 58 in 2012.⁶ In 2012, the average age of new entrants was 49, which is on par with the national average for farms but higher than the national average age of 40 for most start-up founders.⁷ More young farmers are needed to reverse this trend. The situation is exacerbated by gaps between the costs of production and the prices buyers are willing to pay. Trends in farmland acreage are also negatively affecting the viability of the agricultural sector. Farm acreage is in a long-term decline despite active land conservation programs. For instance, between 1997 and 2012 there was an average decrease of 4% in acres of harvested cropland in the region.⁸ This is consistent with a national trend of declining farmland acreage in which increased development plays a significant role. The region saw a 45% increase in developed land between 1982 and 2012, and 23% of that land — equivalent to about 2,100 football fields — was converted from cropland and pasture.⁹ This trend is exacerbated by a large number of retiring farmers who do not have a plan to transition their farms to other farmers. A study conducted by American Farmland Trust and Land for Good found that nearly 30% of New England's farmers are likely to exit farming in the next 10+ years, and nine out of 10 are farming without a young farmer alongside them.¹⁰

Farm contributions to employment and GDP are also in decline in the region. Although the contribution of farming to GDP has increased in absolute terms, the contribution as a percentage shrank from 0.2% in 1998 to 0.1% in 2015.¹¹ This means that farming is growing more slowly than the rest of the economy. Direct on-farm employment declined by 2%

from 1998 to 2016, and in 2016 represented 0.5% of total employment.¹² Currently, direct agricultural employment represents 0.7% of total employment in New York and New England.¹³ However, farming represents only one facet of the agricultural and food sector. In 2016, 2.1 million full- and part-time jobs were related to the sector — 9.4% of total employment in the region.¹⁴ The total contribution of agriculture, and its related industries, to the GDP of the region remained at approximately 3% for the period between 1998 and 2015.

In New England and New York, socially disadvantaged populations make up 71% of the population, including 51% women, but only 28% of farm operators.¹⁵ The difference is greatest for racial minorities, who comprise 20% of the general population but 2% of owner operators.¹⁶ There is evidence that, nationally, the beginning farmer population is less diverse than the existing farm population.¹⁷ The region fares better for women than in regard to minorities: 51% of the population is female and 26% of farm operators are female.¹⁸ This situation is due to long-standing structural and cultural barriers, as well as individual biases.¹⁹ Though women and minorities are lumped together as socially disadvantaged populations, the approaches to working with the different populations vary based on the specific barriers they face.

Positive Trends

Structural transitions are difficult and disruptive, but also provide opportunity as new markets develop and farmers begin to respond. For only the second time in the last century, the number of farmers under 35 years old is increasing, according to USDA's latest Census of Agriculture.²⁰ These new farmers are more likely to use organic or sustainable production practices and many did not grow up on farms.²¹ Interest in supporting socially disadvantaged farmers is growing. For example, the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan recommends that the state “target resources to people of color, immigrants, former prisoners, veterans, women, and others from traditionally disadvantaged groups interested in owning and operating a food processing business.”²²

The 8,268 farmers' markets that operated in 2014 — 180% more than reported for 2006 — indicate burgeoning consumer interest in local foods and indirectly supporting the local economy.²³ Almost all categories of food service, from fine dining (92%) to quick-service operators (35%), plan to add a locally sourced item to their menus.²⁴ There has been a significant increase in sales for the specialty food and beverage industry, rising 15% between 2014 and 2016 to a total of \$127 billion in 2016. During that same period, all food sales at retail locations grew by just 2.3%.²⁵ Specialty foods may include local foods, and demand shows that consumers are willing to pay more for certain types of foods. There is also a positive relation between direct-to-consumer agricultural sales and increases at restaurants.²⁶ The sustained and growing consumer interest in local food stems from a variety of factors, including shifting attitudes about dietary choices, evolving shopping habits, renewed interest in participating in local and regional economies, and a desire for the opportunity to combine economic activity with social values.²⁷ Interest in local food sourcing is further influenced by environmental factors, such as extreme weather events and the impacts of our concentrated agriculture system.²⁸

Relationship to Food and Agriculture System Development

Economically viable farm and food businesses are a critical component of reaching broader food system goals, as called for by the United Nations,²⁹ and federal³⁰ and many state plans, such as those in New England. States recognize the importance of these goals through creation of state Farm Viability Programs. Each plan or program is a little different, but all speak to some combination of the following goals:

- **Build stronger local and regional communities and economies** in which farm and food businesses are profitable, provide incomes for their owners and employees, and are integrated with other businesses in both urban and rural areas, and across communities with differing median incomes.

- **Encourage the broad use of sustainable and ecological production practices**, made possible by their financial capacity, to help mitigate climate change and other environmental impacts. Further support business operators' understanding of how to employ market differentiation and value-added price premiums related to the use of ecologically sound practices.
- **Increase food system resiliency** by creating a Northeast food system that both fosters the growth of diverse and numerous agricultural businesses able to withstand predictable market fluctuations, and supports the Food Solutions New England "New England Food Vision" goal — that by 2060, 50% of food consumed in New England will be produced in the region.
- **Facilitate equitable food access**, in support of greater food security and improved health and nutrition, by increasing the availability of locally grown food.
- **Increase wealth for socially disadvantaged populations** through community members' working for and owning farm and food businesses.

A diverse and significantly larger (than at present) cadre of economically viable farm and food businesses is the foundation of a more-localized food supply. It is the multitude of businesses, in the aggregate, that constitute ownership and operation of these businesses, and shape how and where production takes place. Different business models are required to meet these diverse goals; it is the successes of many individual entrepreneurs that will realize these goals.

The Business Environment

Skilled managers are essential to meeting the challenges facing today's agricultural businesses, and to building a robust local and regional food economy. Entrepreneurs need diverse business management skills in order to launch and grow their businesses, and to position them for success in the face of a dynamic and challenging business environment. Entrepreneurs need the ability to adapt to the following factors:

- the emergence of new technology and equipment
- changing markets and consumer preferences
- climate change
- high costs of entry
- changes in food safety regulations
- labor shortages
- relatively high costs of production compared to price

Agricultural business development programs are crucial to building these capacities. Research and impact data from organizers of The Blueprint and various studies, such as from the Association of Enterprise Opportunity,³¹ substantiate the value of business technical assistance in mitigating risk and leveraging investment capital. Such data also demonstrate a correlation between access to business technical assistance and increased viability due to higher revenues and more FTEs (full time employees), as compared with businesses who have not accessed technical assistance. Business assistance programs tailored to the specific needs of farmers have been successful, demonstrating profound and consistent impact.

- The Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program, for example, found that two years of business planning, for businesses with at least three years in production, generates a 62% increase in net income and significant improvements in entrepreneur business skills.³²

- The Carrot Project’s research shows similar results, with two years of business advising increasing net income by more than 50% for start-up and early-stage farms; in addition, the research shows increased confidence in financial management — an important determinant of meeting business goals.³³
- In a two-year period (2016–2017), 44% of businesses receiving technical assistance from HVADC were able to access \$4M+ in capital (in the aggregate) from loan and grant resources.

Business development services are diverse, and may include financial management, human resources, succession planning, enterprise development, scenario planning, access to pilot-scale processing facilities, marketing support, product development assistance, packing and labelling consulting, process design, food safety training, product testing, access to capital, and more. Effective business assistance is not “one size fits all.”

Business assistance is most effective when tailored to factors such as industry sector, position in the supply chain, and stage of development. For example, the skills an entrepreneur needs to succeed at start-up or in the early stages of running a business are different from those essential for a growing or mature farm or food business. A start-up or early-stage enterprise will benefit from training in record keeping, marketing, and financial and business management, while growing or more-mature enterprises may need more in-depth training on any of those topics, as well as assistance in feasibility analysis, employment and labor issues, capitalization of the business, and later on, succession planning.

Unfortunately, there are insufficient resources — at both the programmatic and individual practitioner levels — focused on the development of business skills that give farm and food entrepreneurs the tools they need to survive and thrive. The business assistance resources that do exist are often inconsistently available, inadequate, or ill-suited to meet specific needs. Gaps in services often leave operators underprepared to sustain their operations.

The gaps in services vary for different sectors and stages of business. For example, there are many programs geared toward helping beginning farmers learn to farm and plan for their businesses. Beginning farmer training and apprenticeship programs generally last one year, which often leaves new farmers without access to, and advice from, experienced professionals as they move into their critical growth years. Beginning farmer programs are funded predominantly through one competitive source, USDA-BFRGP (Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program). The single source aspect of support for such programs makes them difficult to maintain over time — affecting their availability, ability to train and keep knowledgeable staff, and maintain relationships necessary for effective program delivery.

Service gaps are compounded for socially disadvantaged populations facing structural and individual biases, and for populations facing cultural and language barriers or low literacy and numeracy, such as some immigrant or refugee populations. The particulars of service gaps across different types and stages of businesses leave the sector ill prepared to meet the ambitious goals set by federal and state plans.

There is also a shortage of skilled business development advisors. Program managers don’t have a pipeline for new advisors.³⁴ One practitioner from Massachusetts wrote, “We have more requests for business assistance than we can provide. We have brought in business advisors, usually with experience in a specific sector such as grass-fed beef, from other states and are interviewing business advisors from as far away as Florida.”³⁵ The experiences of The Blueprint participants also speak to the need for regional collaboration and referrals. One Vermont practitioner wrote, “As we have advanced maple business projects, I have multiple requests for consultation coming from New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and New York that demonstrate the inevitability and need for multi-state programs/vision.”³⁶

All of these factors — from farmer demographics, to threats to farmland, to the opportunities inherent in developing markets, to the region’s limited ability to meet the ambitious growth called for in many state development plans — point to the need for a coherent regional solution to address business development. The region needs a solution that will build on the opportunities present and increase the number of viable, successful farm and food businesses in New England and the Hudson Valley.

Proposed Solution

The Blueprint’s implementation will change the dynamics described above, and allow for an increase the number of viable, successful farm and food businesses in New England and the Hudson Valley. The Blueprint — when funded and fully implemented — will lead to a robust, effective, and collaborative network of business assistance programs that: is equipped to support an increase in the number of farm and food businesses in New England and the Hudson Valley; will ensure those businesses are viable; and can contribute to the growth of the regional food system.

The Blueprint aims to create a coordinated, skilled, effective, and adequately resourced business development sector for entrepreneurs in the farm and food sector. As the sector grows, mechanisms will be in place to enable the success of a new generation of farmers and food business operators and consequently, the success of the food system as a whole. The emphasis of The Blueprint is support of new and existing business owners, primarily through business assistance.

In order to reach The Blueprint’s goal, the way we provide and pay for this critical form of support needs to change. We need to transition from a patchwork of rudimentary, uncoordinated, and irregular services to a system that can meet the need for services arising from both the anticipated growth of consumer demand for locally grown foods, and state government calls to develop local food systems. A robust and effective business assistance system will:

- support entrepreneurs’ desire to meet growing market demand and their ability to access farmland
- be designed to support long-term economic viability
- provide sufficient one-on-one business technical assistance to build on and complement online and group instruction
- include professional farm and food business advisors, farmer-to-farmer mentoring, and business advisors from other sectors
- offer business development services appropriate for varying business stages, scales, and sectors
- provide for sufficient numbers of skilled business advisors
- promote regional collaboration for professional development, referrals, and the development of beneficial policies
- meet the needs of, and be relevant to, socially disadvantaged populations, enabling them to become, and thrive as, farm and food entrepreneurs
- share metrics reflecting the varied needs of farmers and other food businesses
- be collaborative with other entities with shared objectives, including those focused on food hubs, market development, farmland access, and general business development, as well as other agricultural service providers not primarily focused on developing local and regional farm and food economies

The Blueprint team has identified a crucial need for a comprehensive approach to providing business development technical assistance to farm and food businesses in order to ensure long-term economic viability. The solution is the creation of a network of organizations, expanded resources, programs, and services to provide one-on-one business technical assistance to increasing numbers of farm and food businesses in the Northeast region of the U.S. We have established three primary objectives.

- **Objective 1:** Develop tools, events, and trainings to cultivate a pipeline of business advisors who will deliver best-in-class advising to today's agricultural entrepreneurs, across all business stages, scales, and types, and populations.
- **Objective 2:** Develop a strong interstate network of organizations that provide one-on-one business technical assistance, and provide professional development, networking, and advocacy activities for agricultural business assistance programs.
- **Objective 3:** Secure sufficient funding and other resources to ensure access to one-on-one business technical assistance across the New England and Hudson Valley regions.

Geographic Scope of The Blueprint

The Blueprint is focused on the northeastern U.S., particularly New England and the Hudson Valley region of New York. We will prioritize our work to serve the goals of this region. However, in order to meet these goals, it will be important to connect with entities outside the region, and in some cases nationally. For example, the network described in The Blueprint would welcome the opportunity to work with other regional networks toward mutually held goals, such as networking, professional development, peer learning, or understanding of federal policy implications.

Socially Disadvantaged Populations

It is critical that we determine the best way for The Blueprint's work to be relevant to, serve, and include socially disadvantaged (SDA) populations. This was identified as a priority topic by participants at the October 2017 Convening. A number of The Blueprint's participating organizations, such as GrowNYC, MOFGA (Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association), and New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, work with SDA populations. We turn to them to help us engage other organizations working with SDA populations, and to ensure that the work of The Blueprint benefits historically disadvantaged groups. We will specifically consider SDA populations as we develop our business model.

Metrics and Measuring Success

It will be beneficial for many stakeholders involved with The Blueprint to have shared metrics and ways to measure our collective impact across state lines. Measurements may include the following population- and program-level metrics (below). To aggregate metrics and understand collective, region-wide impact, members of the network delivering business assistance may track certain metrics pre- and post-participation. Other metrics may be captured from post-participation data and evaluation tools for farm and food businesses. The network's approach will be developed as part of implementation.

Population-level indicators (trends or data at the state, regional, or national level)

- change in total number of businesses
 - We will consider excluding farm businesses that gross under a certain income threshold in order to exclude landowners maintaining open space and the majority of hobbyists or non-commercial operations; we may use a lower gross income threshold for beginning farmers.
- change in net income
- number of jobs directly created or saved
- number of jobs indirectly created or saved
- changes in volume of local foods sold

Program-level metrics

- change in sales and new market opportunities
- change in gross and net incomes
- percentage and total dollars of investment secured
- percentage of individual business goals reached
- change in management skills of operators (various skill areas may be measured, such as strategic planning, marketing and sales, recordkeeping, or financial analysis)
- change in number of available business advisors
- change in advising skills of business advisors
- changes in number of employees

Social and environmental impacts will be considered for the population- and program-level metrics.

Implementation Strategies

Objective 1: Develop tools, events, and trainings to cultivate a pipeline of business advisors who will deliver best-in-class advising to today's agricultural entrepreneurs, across all business stages, scales, and types, and populations.

Providing in-depth, one-on-one business assistance for agricultural and food businesses requires an unusual and complex set of hard and soft skills, ranging from financial analysis, to a grasp of food safety laws and related legislation, to interpersonal communication skills, creativity, and managing group dynamics. Depending on the population, practitioners may also need skills for addressing low literacy and numeracy, as well as the cultural competence to work with various populations. Few, if any, educational or degree programs teach all of these skills and produce professionals ready to step into agricultural business advising.

Where there are robust, agriculturally focused business development services delivered, and the need for such professionals is strong, program managers often have difficulty finding adequate staff and consultants to provide in-depth, high-quality advising. Because the food and farm business sector is constantly changing, advisors need to keep up to date in areas such as structuring financial capital, regulations, and marketing. This challenge has been the driving force behind the three National Farm Viability Conferences, organized by those leading The Blueprint and held in the Northeast over the past decade, as well as other professional development trainings that have been designed especially for this emerging sector.

Several key audiences could benefit from the professional development and networking activities and services proposed. Some examples follow.

1. Pre-career students in higher education who intend to enter the field of food and agriculture will benefit from all types of training.
2. Farmers positioned to advise, mentor, and assist others will benefit from educational programs related to workforce development.
3. Consultants, business advisors, program managers, and program designers would benefit from engagement with current trends, policy changes, and regulatory standards.
4. Business consultants or advisors who don't typically work with farm and food businesses would benefit from training and mentorship in order to work with this sector.

The following strategies will guide professional development efforts for these key audiences.

Strategies and Timeline

A. Organize training and networking opportunities for existing advisors.

Training and networking opportunities are important at the regional level as well as at the national level. Given that leaders from the Northeast organized the first three National Farm Viability Conferences (NFVCs), The Blueprint includes planning for the fourth. At this time, the NFVC does not have an institutional home of its own; however, in time it may develop its own trajectory, separate from The Blueprint network. The Northeast may ultimately consider a regionally focused conference as well as seek opportunities to connect with peers from around the country. As it stands, the NFVC is the only conference of its kind — with an emphasis on developing local and regional agricultural economies — geared to professionals in the fields of farm and food business planning, financial planning, agricultural financing, farmland conservation, agricultural market development, and food hub management. Attendees have the opportunity to network and learn from industry leaders and other professionals in their fields, develop new knowledge and skills, and tour nearby farm operations and value-added processing facilities. The Northeast network is committed to helping organize the 2019 National Farm Viability Conference, and encourages that it be held every two years, in various regions of the country so as to highlight different farm and food business assistance programs and networks.

A Community of Practice (CoP) for business assistance service providers and program staff will facilitate ongoing learning at a peer-to-peer level and encourage collective learning. A CoP is a powerful way to identify and provide training for current agricultural business advisors, aspiring advisors, and skilled business advisors new to the food and agricultural sectors. For example, the CoP might include organized meet-ups for peer-to-peer learning at a regional level, and webinar series that can reach a broader audience about specific topics.

Other regular and replicable regional trainings for service providers will facilitate continuing education and support networking across state lines. Trainings may target audiences such as aspiring business advisors, skilled business advisors new to food and agriculture, or those wanting to move from group training to one-on-one assistance. These trainings will further ensure that participants can receive quality, topical advice from skilled professionals who have a deep understanding of the food system. Initial models for these trainings might come from Access to Capital three-day training modules that were developed in 2015 and held in locations in northern New England for early-stage and aspiring business agricultural advisors.

2018: develop NFVC Conference and Workforce Development Working groups; survey network members/participants and identify priorities for peer-to-peer learning and trainings; plan next national conference led by previous conference hosts; set location, announce date and location, set planning committee in motion

2019: hold National Farm Viability Conference outside New England/New York; plan and initiate CoP activities; design new regional trainings

2020: secure location and planning committee for 2021 NFVC Conference; continue to implement CoP activities and regional trainings

B. Develop a pipeline of new advisors.

It is critical to cultivate a pipeline of new qualified service providers to maintain the workforce in the region, meet the needs of SDA populations, and address the expanding needs of stakeholders as we grow the programming available in the region. A Workforce Development Working Group (WDWG) will explore strategies and models for leveraging and supporting networks of non-agricultural professionals to tap their expertise as advisors and trainers where appropriate. The WDWG may also work with higher education institutions to develop training programs. We will identify and define the core competencies for business advisors and explore the need for, and feasibility of, a certificate program that would

provide training in a spectrum of farm and food business assistance skills. We will learn from established programs developed to train service providers to work with women and populations facing other cultural barriers.

The WDWG study will determine expected outcomes of training, target audiences, a learning development process for curriculum design, and the costs associated with implementing a program of this nature. There may be opportunities to partner with feeder programs, such as university programs, technical colleges, and culinary schools, and untapped resources, such as retired industry and farming professionals. Such collaborations might include offering tours, shadowing, or work-study opportunities for students during higher education, and internship and apprenticeship programs. Kitchen Table Advisors in California is currently implementing a fellowship program to train new advisors, and The Carrot Project piloted a program to train farmers as business advisors. There are also excellent models from the Midwest from organizations like Angelica Organics.

2018: develop Workforce Development Working Group; survey network members/participants and identify highest priority networks for engagement; develop core competencies draft and circulate for feedback to stakeholders; identify feeder programs and explore curriculum ideas; document and share models for shadowing or fellowship programs

2019: finalize core competencies; develop and implement new curriculum and training programs in partnership with existing educational institutions; initiate connections with priority networks

2020: implement new training programs

Objective 2: Develop a strong interstate network of organizations that provide one-on-one business technical assistance, and provide professional development, networking, and advocacy activities for agricultural business assistance programs.

As stated above, the pool of agricultural business advisors and consultants that specialize in this sector is not large. There are a limited number of organizations and individuals that provide these services, and there are limited capacity and opportunity to communicate and work across state lines on advocacy, professional development, and/or program development. Because there is no existing network or established opportunity to gather (outside of National Farm Viability Conferences), it is difficult for practitioners to identify and connect with colleagues and peers in other states. Providing opportunities for staff from agricultural business assistance programs to interact with one another will facilitate a better-connected network of skilled advisors and allow for knowledge exchange — all to the benefit of farm and food businesses.

There are many networks of non-profits and educational organizations that intersect with farm and food processor business development programs. These may have significant overlap in audience and potential participation in the network of professionals The Blueprint strives to create. Networks focusing regionally or nationally on, for example, farm incubator programs, farmland access, Black urban farmers, beginning farmer education, food hubs, and sustainable local food systems engage a subset of agricultural business assistance practitioners that would be welcomed as part of our network of advisors. In the formative convenings of The Blueprint's network there were participants from the Midwest, Northern California, and Hawaii. These participants, though not from the Hudson Valley or New England, have expressed interest in forming similar networks in their regions. There is potential for mutually beneficial linkages with other networks.

This new, regional network of agricultural business assistance programs in New England and the Hudson Valley will be based on common values and goals, such as sharing information, establishing best practices, developing peer

relationships, and building resources for the benefit of network members. The network will result in new and sustained relationships among practitioners, programs, funders, and other stakeholders. We anticipate that this work will drive the development of new organizations and expanded capacity in existing organizations. The collaboration among programs will also enable the network as a whole to generate needed resources and achieve outcomes that individual organizations could not do alone.

If applied more broadly, this virtual community of practice at the national scale can build on the goodwill and accomplishments at the regional level to deepen critical conversations and widen the net for connecting with skilled practitioners.

Strategies and Timeline

A. Develop a formal structure for the network.

The development of a formalized network of business advising programs and stakeholder organizations is an essential aspect of The Blueprint and achievement of its three objectives. The details of the structure of this network will be determined during the first year of the project by a larger leadership team, through additional engagement with key stakeholders. Consideration of SDA populations as this structure is developed is key.

2018: identify and explore network design and structure options; expand The Blueprint leadership

2019: formalize business assistance group and initiate membership

2020: expand The Blueprint network, deepen its purview, and mobilize the network

B. Continue to develop a case statement that articulates the need for, and value of, the network, as well as the return on investment (ROI) of in-depth business assistance.

Key to the success of The Blueprint's implementation is a clear case statement that can work (or be easily modified) for various audiences, whether funders and investors, non-profit partners considering joining the network or building business assistance programming, universities and higher education entities that might partner in training activities, etc. A communications plan (in the Phase 1 of The Blueprint Implementation section, below) addresses the continued development of this case statement, articulation of the value and ROI of in-depth business assistance, and the network's value to the development of these services across the region.

2018: create a Communications Working Group; finalize a communications plan; further develop case statement; begin implementation of communications plan

2019–2020: implement communications plan

C. Develop communication structure and tools to enhance opportunities for information sharing within and across states.

Tools such as moderated listservs will be explored, and may be useful for segments of the network, such as one focused on the needs of business advisors or program managers.

2018: finalize and initiate implementation of the communications plan

2019–2020: implement the communications plan

Objective 3: Secure sufficient funding and other resources to ensure access to one-on-one business technical assistance across the New England and Hudson Valley region.

Meeting the goals of The Blueprint requires expanding the resources available for one-on-one business technical assistance. Expanded resources are needed to respond to increasing demand for services, and to support the training and development of existing and new business advisors who are prepared to address the business development goals of today's farm and food businesses. An array of resources that includes philanthropy, federal and state funding, investment capital providers, and corporations, as well as fees for services will be needed to meet The Blueprint's objectives. The revenue mix is likely to vary by geography, the stage of implementation of the network, and changing state and regional needs. For example, given the relative flexibility of philanthropy versus other funding sources, that resource could support long-term research to leverage private and governmental sources. Development activities and emphases on sources may vary state by state. For example, in Massachusetts, economic development agencies are not invested heavily in farm and food businesses. The work of The Blueprint will be to map and understand the resource landscape, match resources and strategies with objectives, and, if necessary, design ways to secure or develop new resources.

Philanthropic Funding

Private philanthropy has invested significantly in local and regional food system development over the past several decades. Philanthropic support is — and will remain — a necessary complement to any public funding that may be secured for farm and/or food business assistance. Because philanthropic funders are relatively patient and typically prioritize non-financial returns on investments, foundations can take greater risks than other sources of capital typically do. This means that philanthropy can support the long-term research and development necessary to identify and foster new business models, invest in professional development and training, leverage private and governmental resources, and fill financing gaps left by less-flexible financial resources.

Given this profile, philanthropic resources could, for example, support the convening, research, and education necessary to support the innovation and pilot use of experimental programs such as social investment bonds. They might also match private investment to support business assistance or loan loss reserves, or invest in developing the human capital required to support the growth and development of many farm and food businesses. Using philanthropic dollars, Program Related Investments (PRIs) and Mission Related Investments (MRIs)³⁷ might be made as complements to grants and private or public investments.

Philanthropic sources are not monolithic. Each individual, family, or private foundation has its own mission and priorities, but there has been growth in resources devoted to the development of “local/regional food systems” — mirroring the growth of consumer interest. However, relatively few philanthropic dollars have been devoted to growing the food system through business assistance programs because of Internal Revenue Code restrictions. The role of philanthropies in direct support of emerging business clusters must be clearly articulated.

Engaging additional charitable resources will be critical to moving The Blueprint agenda forward. Two crucial goals of The Blueprint are to deepen engagement with existing philanthropic partners, and to attract new ones by showing how support of farm and food business assistance will further their particular missions and programmatic goals.

Federal Funding

New and existing federal funding is relevant in all regions. New funding may occur through traditional routes, like the Federal Farm Bill and USDA agencies, as well as within other federal agencies, such as the Economic Development Administration (EDA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Agricultural business assistance programs were authorized in the 2002 and 2008 U.S. Farm Bills under the conservation title, but funding was not appropriated, and the line item was removed in the most recent (2014) Farm Bill. A number of Northeast legislators and national organizations are advocating for funding for agricultural business assistance programs in the 2018 Farm Bill, which would enable some states to sustain and expand business assistance programs, and help other states establish programs where little or no business assistance exists. Federal funding may be pursued, within a national context and with consideration of regional priorities.

State Funding

There is a range of funding for farm and food businesses within New England and the Hudson Valley. Several states fund individual Farm Viability Programs that vary in scope but represent significant levels of state investment. Some states (such as Vermont) and municipalities have focused on building their agricultural capacity, while others focus on different priorities. State investment in farm and food businesses may be housed solely within a department of agriculture or shared with economic development agencies or county governments. The Blueprint will consider how to increase and enhance these resources.

It is also important to explore public-private partnerships to leverage funding sources. This may be particularly important at the state level, where relationships with potential private partners is strongest. For example, state agencies may well have a preference for working with businesses located in and/or serving a particular state. Unlike state agencies, private capital providers may more readily consider the core geographic focus of The Blueprint or larger portions of it.

Capital Providers

A growing number of capital providers in New England and the Hudson Valley are working in or exploring the farm and food sector. They include long-standing entities, such as Farm Credit East, Yankee Farm Credit, commercial banks, mission-based lenders such as CDFIs (Community Development Financial Institutions) and community loan funds, a variety of other funds and loan programs, such as The Carrot Project, and private investors. These organizations and individuals provide capital along a continuum that includes debt, royalty, and equity financing. The work of the Farm Credit System associations, commercial banks, and mission-based lenders is well documented and well known. Many of these entities rely on private investment as a source of capital.

Private investors can be active, public, and well known, or can work solely behind the scenes. They come to the sector with a tremendous variety of backgrounds and worldviews. Some are seeking to reshape food and agriculture as part of a broader effort to make economies more local, and some are transferring an investment framework from the larger economy or Wall Street. Some are seeking market rate returns, and so, return on capital is their highest priority. A growing number are interested in financial return on their capital in combination with other kinds of return that can vary from environmental or social impacts to community economic development. The Blueprint's objective — greater numbers of viable farms and food businesses — is complementary to deploying greater amounts of capital of all sorts, and helping entrepreneurs become investment ready.

Agribusiness

Perhaps no grouping of corporate interests is more interested in the long-term success of farming in the northeastern U.S. than the agricultural service and supply businesses in our communities. In New York and New England, more than 24,500 businesses, employing an estimated 206,000 employees, make servicing the agricultural industry their primary business focus. These businesses range from large to small and cover an enormous array of commercial activities, such as equipment sales, blacksmithing, tractor repair, milk product transportation, crop conditioning, feed milling, auctioneering, livestock brokerage, crop production services, and many more. Most of these businesses operate within a small geographic range and, along with agriculture, form the core of healthy local economies.

With such a strong vested interest in the success of local agriculture, these businesses should be counted among the strongest partners in the work of The Blueprint. These businesses can serve as vital links to local agricultural economies, provide valuable market intelligence, and financially support initiatives that offer collaborative benefit. The northeastern U.S. already has models of such collaboration, one example being the Northeast Agribusiness and Feed Alliance, an industry association comprised of feed and grain dealers, which provided approximately \$500,000 in financial support for livestock extension activities. The mutual benefit of such investments is clear to most in the industry, given the obvious outcomes if farm and food businesses fail.

Strategies

A. Identify the most critical resource gaps and develop promising funding strategies.

This strategy includes:

- mapping business service programs in the region
- mapping the sources and potential sources of program support
- developing a five-year resource development plan
- seeking opportunities, as a network or a collective of network partners, to fund gaps in, and expand existing, business assistance programs

The purpose of this mapping is to support strategic decision making and implementation of The Blueprint. It will help us identify strengths, see where the greatest resources are needed, locate gaps in programs and services, prioritize best bets for short-term action, and strategize steps to realize longer-term goals. It may be helpful to examine models for how various types of funding — philanthropic, government, and investment — can work together to achieve The Blueprint’s intended outcomes, using best practices from the healthcare, public housing, food access, and public health sectors.

The participating organizations will be the core of the program service map. Mapping may include documenting: (1) who is doing the work, (2) what services are provided, (3) how much it costs, (4) what percentage of farmers and food businesses are being served, (5) what gaps in service remain, and (6) what it would cost to fill those gaps. This mapping exercise will entail reaching out to potential new network members working with SDA populations in order to include as many relevant organizations as possible.

The resource map and resulting plan will: (1) evaluate federal and state programs that are resources or potential resources, including probable avenues for engagement; (2) set goals and strategies for identifying and engaging new philanthropic partners; and (3) consider the role of capital providers and corporations in supporting The Blueprint’s goals.

2018: develop Expanding Resources Working Group; begin documenting business assistance programs and funding resources; identify priority gaps and begin development of philanthropic support; seek opportunities for a collective/ collaborative funding request to support the network and delivery of business assistance services (leadership team executes)

2019: articulate a five-year Resources Development Plan to achieve The Blueprint’s objectives and support a robust network; submit requests for regional funding for the network

2020: secure funding for full five-year implementation of the network; submit funding requests for regional funding for the network

B. Develop and implement an actionable strategy for federal policy initiatives that will identify opportunities to educate public officials about the importance of farm and food business viability.

This strategy recognizes that there may be opportunities to engage in federal policy discussions while also drafting a robust, long-term resource development plan. It would be a missed opportunity not to lay the groundwork for future activities.

2018: develop Federal Funding Working Group; develop materials to educate policy makers; provide materials to policy makers; provide materials to network members who are advocating for funding for business assistance programs

2019–2020: continue to educate policy makers and provide educational materials as needed

Phase 1 of The Blueprint Implementation: Actions and Milestones

This section describes the first 12 months as The Blueprint’s stakeholders transition from planning to implementation, and develop the tools and structure to realize goals. The four interrelated actions for Phase 1 (the first year of implementation — roughly April 2018–March 2019) are:

- 1. Build the Network:** design the structure, expand the leadership, and fill key roles
- 2. Expand Resources:** develop and begin implementing a resource development plan
- 3. Initiate a Communications Plan:** complete a communications plan that defines an external case for support that both is accessible to diverse audiences, and can be adapted for different audiences.
- 4. Provide Professional Development Opportunities:** initiate workforce and professional development opportunities to cultivate a strong network of business advisors and programs

Build the Network: Structure and Key Roles

In early 2018, an initial leadership structure will be put in place to serve the network and support implementation. A leadership team expanded beyond the Executive Committee (which has led the project to this stage) will be important to network development, including ensuring that SDA populations are included from the beginning. Early implementation of the strategies set out in The Blueprint requires a broad set of skills, knowledge, and energy, and a more-diverse set of leaders will strengthen the plan, improve the outcomes, and increase the relevance of the network for a broad set of stakeholders.

Ample individuals are ready to engage in the leadership and implementation of the network, and the existing leadership team remains committed. Current consultants are interested in continued engagement, and many stakeholders and participants in the process to date have expressed interest in playing a larger role once a more detailed plan is developed.

The initial leadership structure will include a Steering Committee with an Executive Committee, an Advisory Board, and Working Groups. The Steering Committee will be established in 2018 to vet options for the design and structure of the network. Considerations include whether the network will be membership based, and whether it will be a stand-alone organization or hosted by an existing entity. By the end of this first phase of implementation, a network structure will be selected.

The Steering Committee will select an Advisory Board and set up Working Groups to advance priority strategies and move forward the work plan. This leadership structure is designed to manifest the network while implementing The Blueprint’s priorities, including identifying next phases of implementation, determining milestones, and moving The Blueprint forward.

Key Roles

- **Steering Committee:** The role of the Steering Committee is to guide the effort from planning to implementation in Phase 1. It will have a bird's-eye view on all activities to ensure progress on The Blueprint priorities and coordination, manage the budget, and set priorities for the Working Groups. The Steering Committee will include Dorothy (Suput), Todd (Erling), and Ela (Chapin), and others will be invited to participate. An Executive Committee, including Dorothy, Todd, and Ela, will exist for management purposes once a larger Steering Committee is established. The resources required for the Steering Committee are funding for its members and support staffing.
- **Advisory Board:** A group of skilled stakeholders and beneficiaries will be selected to advise the Steering Committee. Inclusion of beneficiaries will broaden the credibility of The Blueprint and engage audiences critical to implementation of the plan. The Advisory Board will be kept apprised of The Blueprint activities through quarterly reports and twice-a-year calls or meetings. The resources required for the Advisory Board to operate effectively are an engaged Steering Committee and staffing.
- **Working Groups:** The Working Groups will act as a brain trust to develop and plan to meet specific short- and long-term objectives. Each Working Group will have a chair, include at least one person from the leadership team, be staffed, and be tasked to meet specific outcomes. If a Working Group operates for longer than a year, its charter will be reviewed. The resources required for the Working Groups to operate effectively are an engaged Steering Committee, leadership for each Working Group, beneficiary participation, and sufficient staffing to support program development and delivery.

Working Groups

- **Workforce Development:** address professional and workforce development strategies in The Blueprint; assess options and determine priorities for professional development trainings; develop a shared understanding of core competencies; reach out to potential feeder programs and networks; design regional trainings for business advisors for 2019–2020
- **Resource Development:** develop the resources needed to fund the implementation of The Blueprint for 3–5 years; craft a resource development plan; introduce The Blueprint to additional funders; coordinate with the Communications Working Group on communications materials as needed
- **Communications:** finalize a communications plan for The Blueprint and oversee implementation
- **National Farm Viability Conference:** spearhead a fourth conference in the mid-Atlantic region in 2019
- **State and Federal Policy:** educate network members, funders, policy makers, and other stakeholders on the value of business assistance programs, interconnections between state and federal programs and funding opportunities, and policy opportunities to support further such services

Milestones and Next Steps

- 2018: raise \$170,000 to implement Phase 1
- March 2018: develop detailed work plan and timeline for 2018–2019
- March–April 2018: hire communications consultant, policy consultant, and coordinator
- April 2018: re-engage facilitation consultant
- May 2018: set up Steering Committee and start setting up Working Groups
- June 2018: identify Advisory Board members
- October 2018: hold first Advisory Board meeting
- November 2018: The Blueprint gathering

Expand Resources

All financial support to date has come from The Joyce and Irving Goldman Family Foundation and The John Merck Fund. We are determining the best strategy with which to raise the remaining portion of the budget, which may total up to \$80,000. One strategy we are vetting is to obtain a matching grant and ask network participants to contribute to that match. A number of foundations and federal agencies are part of The Blueprint network.

The Resource Development Working Group will work collectively to support greater philanthropic engagement; develop a plan to cultivate philanthropic support and then leverage longer-term investments from state and federal sources; coordinate action on the inclusion of farm viability language in the 2018 Farm Bill; and make connections with capital providers and private investors. There are both short-term goals for raising funds for the Phase 1 implementation of The Blueprint, and a longer-term strategy to support the expansion of in-depth business assistance services in the region.

Developing a feasible plan of near- and long-term goals and growing the number of sources to support The Blueprint and its member organizations are key to the initiative's success. There is a significant opportunity to expand resources for business services, but it must not be at the expense of existing funding for network partners. In the short term, one approach is to engage federal policy makers in understanding the importance of farm and food business viability to rural economic development. In the long term, there are numerous opportunities that will be vetted in the Resource Development Working Group. Engaging network organizations in this effort will be critical to ensuring that total funding increases and network members are not in competition with one another.

This Resource Development Working Group may act as a philanthropic "thought partnership" that will deepen engagement of existing philanthropic partners, and guide the development of frameworks, tools, and strategies for attracting new philanthropic partners, including those who may make long-term commitments to attaining The Blueprint's objectives. The Working Group will, in coordination with communication plan efforts, identify opportunities to reach potential funders.

Expand Resources: Milestones and Next Steps

- April 2018: set up Resource Development Working Group
- April–September 2018: map the network of funding resources
- June–December 2018: draft Resource Development Plan to reach long-term funding goals, in coordination with communications plan
- July–December 2018: map the network of business assistance programs' reach and funding resources
- September 2018: hire federal policy strategy consultant
- October 2018: establish a Federal and State Policy Working Group
- December 2018: develop materials, in coordination with communication planning efforts, to educate policy makers
- January 2019: provide materials to network members
- January 2019: begin educating policy makers

Provide Professional Development Opportunities

Two Working Groups, one focused on workforce development and one dedicated to carrying out the next National Farm Viability Conference in 2019, will engage the network in identifying needs for professional development, training, and peer-to-peer learning. These needs will be met through a community of practice, curriculum development for workforce training coordination, local and regional trainings, and a National Farm Viability Conference held every two years.

Moving forward, it would be beneficial to schedule the National Farm Viability Conference in the off years of the Wallace Center's National Good Food Network Food Hub Conference, and to coordinate and complement schedules and content

focus with other national events, such as the American Farmland Trust’s national conference, the NFRBMEA (National Farm and Ranch Business Management Education Association) annual conference, the Land for Good Changing Hands, Changing Lands conference on farm and ranch tenure, and the NESAWG (Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group) It Takes a Region conference. Coordinating content, sharing information, collaborating with other potential support providers, and including all possible audiences that could benefit from the proposed network ensures the maximum effectiveness of the proposed program.

Expand Resources: Milestones and Next Steps

- May 2018–April 2019: plan conference
- June 2018: establish a National Conference Working Group
- July–December 2018: identify priorities for peer-to-peer learning and training for service providers
- March 2019: begin drafting plan to initiate community of practice
- September 2018: establish Workforce Development Working Group
- December 2018–March 2019: draft five-year plan to initiate workforce development activities

Communications Plan

Realizing The Blueprint’s objectives and long-term goal will require a concerted and well-coordinated communications effort to develop and expand resources. Its strategies and products will also support network development. The following purposes and considerations are important guidance for the communications plan. The communications consultant will work with the Executive Committee and Steering Committee, and the chair of the Resource Development Working Group. The communications plan will need to integrate the following purposes.

Purposes

- support all three objectives of The Blueprint, including external and internal communications
- provide a framework for attracting and engaging both existing and diverse new stakeholders, and connecting to new audiences
- clarify case for support in lay language
- connect business assistance outcomes to priority topics, which may include: nutrition and health, economic development, rural development, land preservation, environment and conservation, effective production practices, hunger, social justice, food systems development, food insecurity, climate change, and homeland security
- provide a framework for communicating how different funding sources can work together
- outline purpose of and cost for website and other communications tools
- provide actionable steps for network leadership, working groups, funders, and participants
- define attainable and measurable goals
- create one-page summary of The Blueprint and its value
- describe communications tools to enhance opportunities for information sharing between network members, e.g., a website and listserv

Milestones and Next Steps

- March–April 2018: share The Blueprint draft with a broad audience to engage new stakeholders
- March 2018: establish Communications Working Group
- March 2018: hire a communications consultant
- March–July 2018: develop communications plan
- August 2018 and ongoing: begin plan implementation

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