A Central Food Processing Facility for the District of Columbia

A solution at the intersection of human health & environmental sustainability

Food insecurity, diet-related disease, and climate change are three of the most significant public health threats facing District residents. These interconnected threats exacerbate each other,[1] with the most devastating impacts felt by low-income households and communities of color. During the COVID-19 public health emergency, food insecurity rates nearly doubled to 21.1%, with Black households 13.5 times more likely to report sometimes not having enough food to eat compared to white households. In 2021, while overall food insecurity rates have returned to nearly pre-pandemic rates, Black and Latinx households, households with children, and seniors in the District continue to face high food insufficiency.[2] At the same time, 4 of the 5 leading causes of death in the District are diet-related illnesses,[3] and many residents do not have meaningful access to healthy, nutritious foods. Compounding these issues are the impending effects of climate change, which will affect our food supply due to rising waters, more severe weather events, and extremes in seasonal temperatures.[4]

Aggressive, timely action will be necessary to address these intersecting threats to public and environmental health. A report published by the DC Office of Planning[5] found that a **Central Food Processing Facility** (CFPF) represents a triple-duty solution to address food insecurity, prevent and treat diet-related disease, and build food system resiliency in the face of climate change.

What is a central food processing facility?

A central food processing facility, or “centralized kitchen," is a facility that conducts food production and processing for meal preparation, and provides aggregation, cold and dry storage, and co-manufacturing space. In addition to serving as an anchor food processing facility for the District government’s food services, a CFPF can act as a food hub for local businesses, regional farms, and food access organizations by building and strengthening critical infrastructure that is currently limited or unavailable in the District.

What are the benefits of a central food processing facility?

Improve the nutritional quality of institutional foods. A CFPF will improve the nutritional quality of institutional foods served to thousands of District students, seniors, and residents by increasing the availability of minimally-processed foods and reducing reliance on ultra-processed foods. These improvements to institutional foods will particularly benefit individuals with lower incomes, who are more likely to participate in government nutrition programs and face higher rates of diet-related disease and nutrition and food insecurity.[6]

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Reduce reliance on major food service contracts. A CFPF will support the ability of District agencies such as D.C. Public Schools to shift from external food service management to self-operations, reducing reliance on large food service contracts. Other jurisdictions that have moved to self-operated systems have realized improvements to food quality and nutrition, increased use of local foods, decreased ultra-processed food consumption, increased program participation, and reduced overall cost. [5]

Strengthen the local food supply chain. By creating a food hub in the District for storage, aggregation, and processing, a CFPF will bring the regional food supply closer to consumers, reducing the District's reliance on transportation nodes and national supply chains. This will make the local food system more resilient in the face of future supply chain disruptions, provide infrastructure support for local businesses, regional farms, and food access organizations, and increase year-round availability of local, nutritious foods.

Fortify the District's emergency food preparedness response. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the District, particularly smaller, community-based emergency food organizations, experienced challenges in establishing distribution facilities from which to aggregate, store, and distribute food support to vulnerable residents. A CFPF can serve as critical food preparedness infrastructure to sort, process, pack, and distribute food aid to residents in the event of future emergencies.

Support the local food economy. A CFPF has the potential to serve as a major job creation and workforce development facility by providing workforce training and job opportunities in food processing and preparation. A CFPF can also support local food business incubation through shared commercial kitchen space, storage, and processing infrastructure. By creating affordable pathways for entrepreneurs to scale their businesses, this facility would particularly benefit women and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) food entrepreneurs. These functions would also generate tax revenue for the District through increased sales and the rental of commercial kitchen and food storage space.

Reduce the carbon footprint of the District's food system. Globally, food production accounts for over a third of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, with the majority of these emissions deriving from agriculture and food waste. The District can reduce its food-related GHG emissions by increasing consumption of plant-rich diets, which generally have much lower climate impact.[7,8] A CFPF could promote the consumption of plant-rich diets by strengthening the District's access to, and institutional procurement of, regional produce. A CFPF could also reduce the District's food waste, another significant source of GHG emissions,[9] through composting initiatives, reusing foods that are aggregated by local producers for feeding efforts, and recovering food from businesses to be used in food production.

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What's next?

The report published by the DC Office of Planning evaluates the potential impact of a CFPF on the region, operational best practices, and facility infrastructure by looking to other jurisdictions that have established such a facility. To realize the benefits of a CFPF, the next step for the District is to conduct a **feasibility and siting study** to assess the cost, return on investment, and revenue generation potential, and identify a suitable site for the facility that meets its needs. To maximize the facility's impact, this study should also assess the possibility of co-locating composting and other waste management practices.

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