

# Farm to Family Strategy: An Integrated Systems Approach to Improve Food Access in Delaware

The Delaware Council on Farm & Food Policy proudly presents the Farm to Family Strategy to Governor Meyer and the 153rd General Assembly spotlighting a critical issue: while agriculture remains Delaware's leading industry, nearly 30% of residents across all counties have experienced some level of food insecurity in the past year. The impact of food insecurity is far reaching with effects on health, education, economic development and overall well-being.

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June 1, 2025



# Acknowledgements

**Delaware Council  
on Farm and Food Policy**



Many thanks to Candace Young, for her dedication and support of the data collection and manuscript preparation. She was invaluable. We would like to thank the members of the Delaware Council on Food and Farm Policy and the many individuals who contributed their time and thoughts to this Assessment and Strategy Effort including Madison Walter, Michelle Axe, Chad Robinson and Sarah Lester. While the work of many went into the report, we want to particularly thank Lauren Butscher for her willingness to share ideas, integrate additional questions into her roundtable work, and support data interpretation in the context of this food access plan. We also are grateful to the work of Nicole Minni and the team at the UD, Institute for Public Administration for their ongoing and dedicated work to mapping food access in Delaware. We also thank Sarah Everhart, Esq. and her students Genna Cicchetti and Anas Mahmoud at the Widener University Delaware Law School for their efforts in reviewing and presenting models of similar policies in states across the US.

# Executive Summary

The present report responds to the call for a Delaware food assessment and state strategy as described in Senate Bill 254 (2024) and overseen by the Delaware Council on Farm & Food Policy. Delaware's food system faces mounting pressures including rising food prices, shrinking local farms, federal policy shifts, uncertain funding for nutrition programs, and limited grocery access (61% of Delawareans live in census tracts without a grocery store). About 36.5% of Delaware adults are obese, and nearly 13% live with diabetes, conditions linked to nutrition and food access. Approximately 43% of Delaware public school students qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

In response, after rounds of community conversations, convenings, and review of statewide data, the following statewide 5-point strategy recommends approaches to:

1. Reduce Barriers to Food Access – Expand community healthy retail, create flexible food access points, address transportation challenges
2. Strengthen Food System Infrastructure – Develop statewide information platforms connecting producers with buyers, establish regional food hubs
3. Enhance Economic Accessibility – Expand consumer incentive programs, establish local procurement targets for state institutions
4. Build Knowledge and Skills – Integrate comprehensive food education, expand garden-based learning opportunities
5. Foster Collaboration and Funding – Establish dedicated food security funding streams, develop cross-sector collaborations



# The Opportunity: Sustaining Food Security Amid Agricultural and Access Pressures

Delaware's agricultural sector is the state's leading industry, yet nearly 30% of residents across all counties report experiencing some level of food insecurity within the past year. This crisis affects urban, suburban, and rural communities alike, with children, seniors, and low-income households bearing a disproportionate burden. The situation is further exacerbated in areas where geographic and economic barriers severely limit access to affordable, nutritious food.

At the forefront of statewide action, the Delaware Council on Farm & Food Policy plays a central role in advising the Governor on food access, production, distribution, supply chain, and local sourcing. The Council serves as a resource to food system partners throughout the state and, as directed by Senate Bill 254, was charged with developing this Food Access Strategy.



Senate Bill 254 created the Delaware Grocery Initiative, a three-year statewide pilot program focused on eliminating food deserts and expanding access to healthy foods through financial assistance, strategic investment, and collaborative planning. The Council's mandate includes collecting input from farmers, retailers, distributors, and other food supply experts to recommend investments and reforms that ensure nutrient-rich foods reach areas without grocery stores or those at risk of losing their limited options.

# Compounding Effects of Recent Federal Actions

Recent federal policy changes have intensified these challenges. Cuts to key nutrition assistance programs such as SNAP, increased work requirements, and reduced funding for food banks and emergency food programs have directly restricted food access for Delaware's most vulnerable residents. The impact is immediate and severe: in 2025 alone, the USDA canceled 19 planned deliveries to the Food Bank of Delaware, eliminating nearly 900,000 meals that local families depended on.

Additionally, the freeze in federal funding has affected grants that enabled schools, nonprofits, and food pantries to purchase food from local farms, further straining the emergency food system and undermining local efforts to address food insecurity. These federal actions have forced food banks and community organizations to rely more heavily on local donations and resources all as demand continues to rise and food prices remain high.

# Methods: Data Collection and Engagement Process

In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the most critical food access issues in Delaware, and to situate recommendations in the context of current activities, a series of data gathering efforts were undertaken, and inform this report.





# Food Insecurity in Delaware: A Systemic Issue

The 2024 Delaware State Health Assessment highlights the pervasive nature of food insecurity across the state, with nearly 30% of residents reporting that they "worried whether food would run out before getting money to buy more." This reality is further reflected in Feeding America's 2022 data, which found that 125,370 Delawareans, about one in eight people, were food insecure, including 40,620 children, or one in five. Food insecurity in Delaware extends far beyond hunger; it is a critical social determinant of health, contributing to poorer educational outcomes, increased risk of chronic disease, and negative impacts on mental health and our state's economy.

County	Often True	Sometimes True	Never True
New Castle	9.8%	19.4%	70.8%
Kent	12.6%	21.2%	66.2%
Sussex	10.7%	20.3%	69.0%

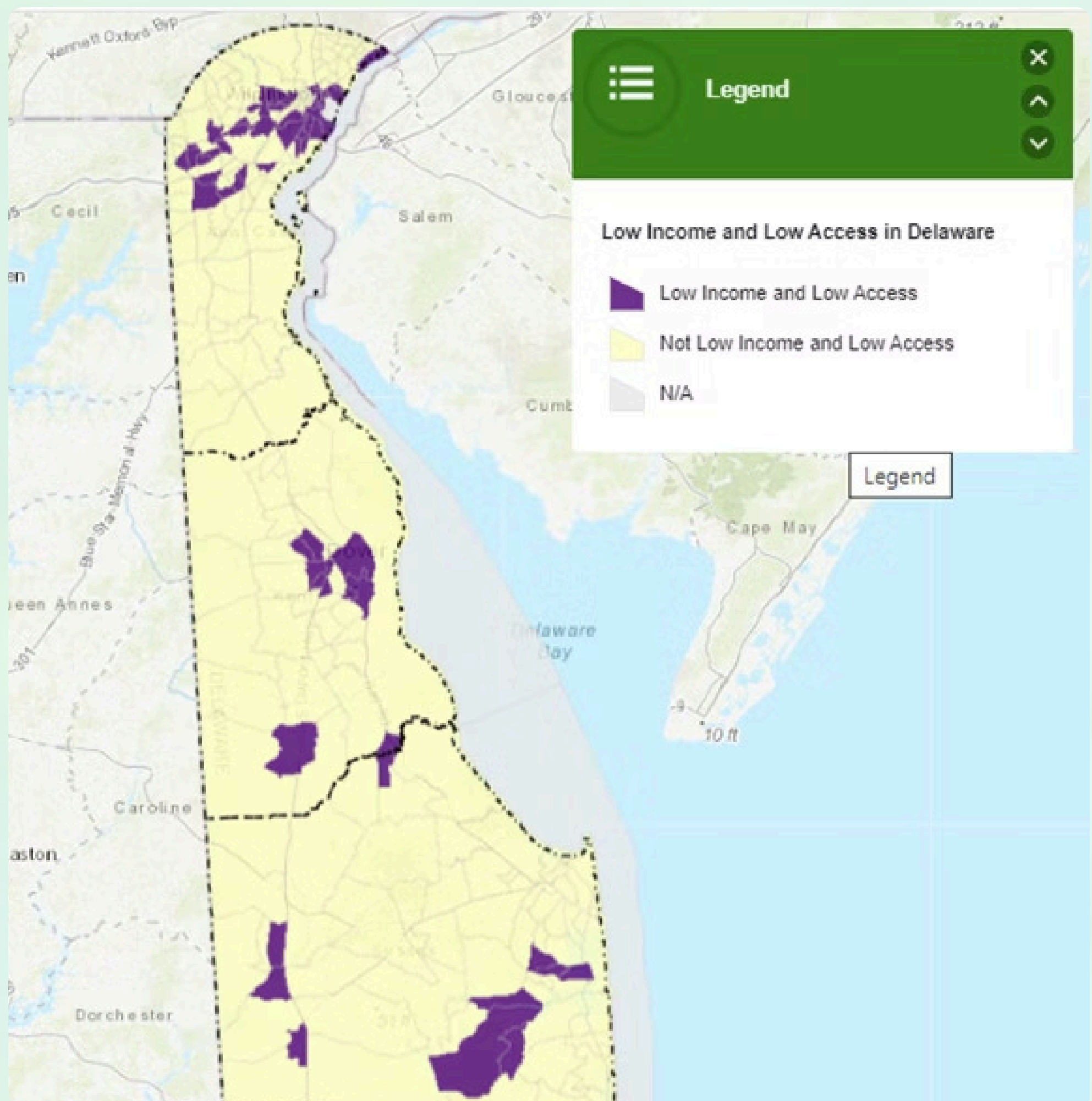
Source: Delaware State Health Assessment, 2022-2023

The recent Delaware State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) further identifies food security as a key indicator for "Basic Needs for Health and Safety for Delaware." People of all backgrounds face food insecurity, and even those with jobs are affected, and increasingly so as food prices continue to rise.

# Mapping Food Insecurity and Access

More than 120,000 Delawareans have experienced food insecurity, whether due to insufficient food, lack of access to nutrient-dense options, or uncertainty about their next meal. These challenges are directly linked to increased risks for chronic diseases, compromised immune function, and poor mental health. Children in food-insecure households are especially vulnerable, facing risks to their physical development, academic performance, and long-term health.

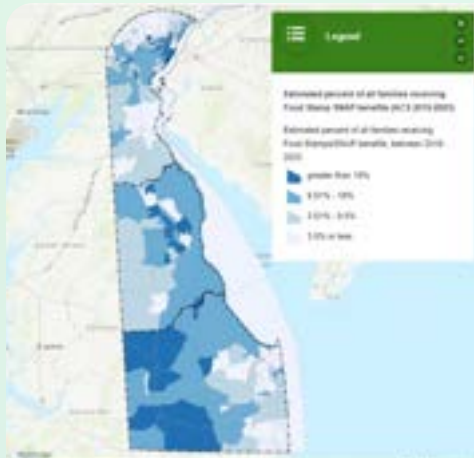
To better understand and address these challenges, the Delaware Food System Map provides a powerful visual tool. It highlights areas of low income and low food access, tracks SNAP participation, and identifies regions of deep poverty. These publicly available maps offer critical insights into where food resources are being implemented and where the greatest needs remain, supporting more targeted and effective interventions across the state.



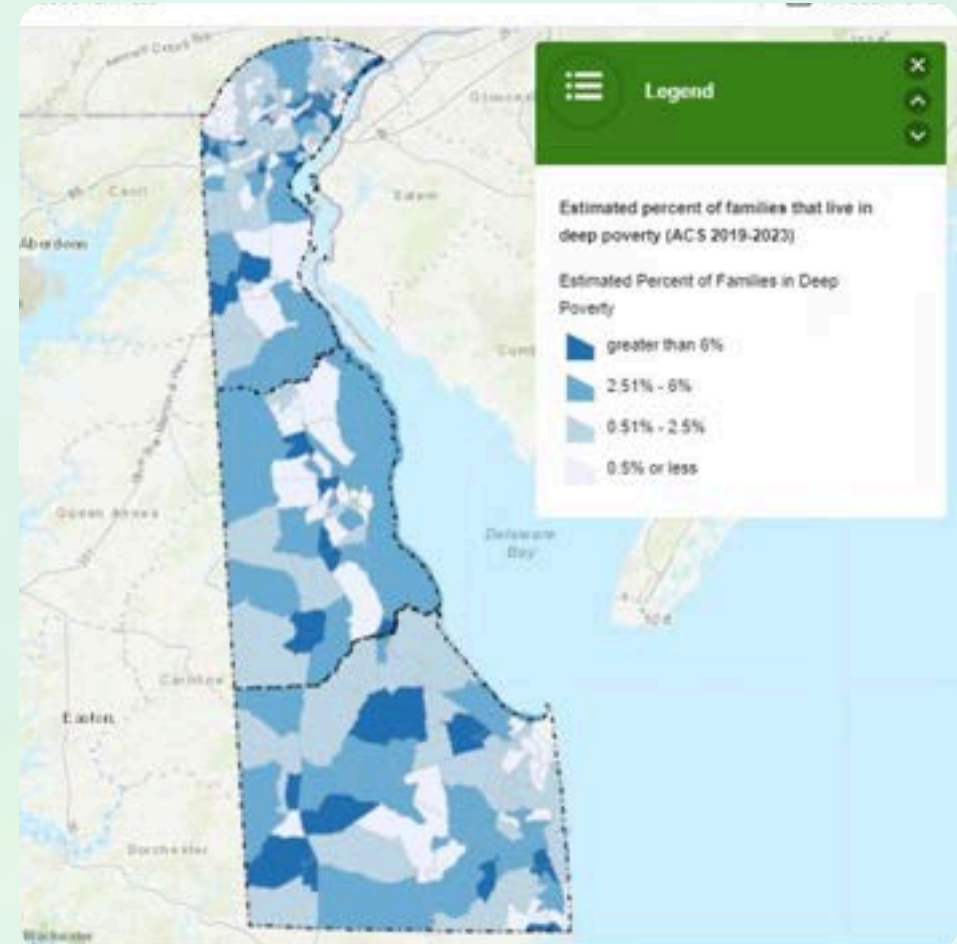
Map 1. Low Income and Low Access Areas



# SNAP Participation and Deep Poverty in Delaware



Map 2. Percent of Families Receiving SNAP (ACS 2019-2023)



Map 3. Percent of Families in Deep Poverty (ACS 2019-2023)

These maps illustrate the geographic distribution of SNAP participation and deep poverty across Delaware, highlighting areas where food insecurity is most concentrated. The patterns reveal important correlations between economic hardship and food access challenges, providing essential data for targeted interventions.

# Barriers to Food Access

Extensive community engagement and roundtable discussions reveal a complex web of barriers that Delawareans face in accessing food:

- Many residents lack reliable transportation to reach food pantries or grocery stores
- Even working families often struggle to afford fresh, healthy foods
- Strict program documentation requirements can instill fear in residents including those from other countries and those without stable housing
- Food pantry hours may not align with the schedules of working families
- Cultural and social barriers including stigma, fear, and a lack of culturally appropriate foods deter eligible families from seeking assistance



Community organizations also report challenges in securing flexible funding needed for comprehensive food security programs. Meanwhile, local producers face persistent system gaps in distribution and market access, as documented in applications to the First State Food System Grant Program.

# Grocery Access and Emergency Food Systems



## Limited Retail Distribution

Approximately 61% of Delawareans live in census tracts with no grocery store, while 27% live in areas with only one grocery store. This limited access is particularly pronounced in western and southern Delaware, where rural communities face additional transportation barriers.



## Emergency Food Network

Food pantries play a crucial role in Delaware's emergency food network. Most rely on food funded by federal sources, including TFAP food that moves through the DE Food Distribution Program.



## Delaware Food Distribution Program

This program serves as the state's aggregation hub for USDA commodity foods, administering distribution to eligible schools, child nutrition programs, elderly feeding programs, and emergency feeding organizations.

These organizations will likely see increased demands with changes in federal benefit program guidelines, such as those proposed to limit SNAP eligibility, magnified by parallel reductions in "bonus" TFAP provisions - a cornerstone of emergency food supply in Delaware.



# System-Wide Pressures and Agricultural Trends

## Inflation and Rising Costs

Inflation continues to drive up grocery costs, making it more difficult for families to afford nutritious foods.

## Shrinking Agricultural Base and Aging Farmers

Delaware's agricultural base is shrinking, with the number of farms decreasing by 6% since 2017. Just over 2,150 farms remain, covering more than 522,000 acres. With an average farmer age of nearly 59, concerns about long-term sustainability of local food production are mounting.

## Competing Land Use Pressures

Agricultural lands face increasing pressure from residential and commercial development, contributing to farmland loss and higher land values that create barriers for new farmers entering the industry.

## Distribution Challenges

Distribution bottlenecks, inconsistent production, and limited access to new markets make it difficult to get local products onto tables.

Despite these obstacles, there are bright spots: Demand for Delaware Grown produce is high. Delaware's farmers markets are seeing record-breaking sales, while initiatives like the Farm to Community Pilot and Farm to School programs continue to connect local producers with community outlets. Further, many local restaurants are regularly purchasing from local farms and would like to see the local Delaware farm and fish/oyster market expand with stronger infrastructure.

# School Food and Food Is Medicine Initiatives

## School Feeding Programs

Currently there are about 138,000 students enrolled in Delaware, and school feeding programs are a critical first defense against childhood hunger. The Delaware Department of Education administers several types of nutrition initiatives, including:

- School Nutrition Programs (School Breakfast, Lunch, and Afterschool Snack/Twilight Meals)
- Child and Adult Care Food Program
- Summer Food Service Program
- Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program offering free produce to students at eligible elementary schools
- Farm to School

These programs are a critical safety net for 43% of Delaware children who rely on schools and school feeding programs to provide nutritious meals to children throughout the year, with special initiatives to ensure consistent access to healthy food in the summer and afterschool. Approximately 129 Delaware schools participate in the federal Community Eligibility Provision, which provides broad access to free school meals, although federal legislative changes to increase eligibility thresholds have been proposed.

## Food Is Medicine (FIM) Programs



Delaware is committed to advancing FIM as evidenced by the Lt. Governors recent launch of the Delaware Food Is Medicine Committee and the state's efforts to establish a Medicaid 1115 Waiver. The states' ongoing efforts to connect patients in Delaware with nutritious and local food include:

- Westside Community Health's "Feeding Families" program
- Christiana Care's portfolio of targeted Food Is Medicine and produce Rx programs
- Beebe Healthcare's Food Prescription Program delivering weekly boxes of healthy food

# Delaware's 5-Point Strategy for Advancing Food Security

The Farm to Family Strategy responds directly to these challenges by building on existing assets, addressing critical gaps, and coordinating efforts across sectors and communities. This approach is designed to create a more connected, resilient, and equitable food system for Delaware.



## Reduce Barriers to Food Access

Expand community healthy retail in low access areas, create flexible, low-barrier food access points, address transportation challenges, increase cultural relevance of food programs, and reduce documentation barriers



## Strengthen Food System Infrastructure and Connectivity

Develop an integrated statewide information platform connecting producers with buyers, establish regional food hubs, create transportation incentives for farmers, and expand year-round growing capacity



## Enhance Economic Accessibility and Market Development

Expand consumer incentive programs like "Double Up Bucks," establish local procurement targets for state institutions, support diversified production models, and address workforce needs



## Build Knowledge and Skills for Nutritious Food Choices

Integrate comprehensive food education, expand garden-based learning opportunities, develop education about true food costs, and create pathways for food system careers



## Foster Collaboration and Sustainable Funding

Establish dedicated food security funding streams, develop cross-sector collaborations, including in Food Is Medicine efforts, create shared evaluation systems, and integrate food access with broader community needs



# Strategy 1: Reduce Barriers to Food Access

Expanded efforts are needed to increase food resources for the more than 120,000 Delawareans who experience food insecurity. Our strategy focuses on three key approaches:



## Expand Community Healthy Retail

Expansion of the Delaware Healthy Food Retail Initiative will enhance local food environments so families can source healthy food within their own immediate neighborhood or community.



## Address Transportation Barriers

Strategies include expanded home delivery services, permitting proxy pick up, and improved public transportation options including rideshare services and volunteer systems to connect communities with grocery stores and food distribution sites.



## Create Flexible, Low-Barrier Access Points

Support "no questions asked" outdoor food pantries, 24/7 community refrigerators, and mobile pantries that provide immediate, stigma-free access to healthy foods without restrictive eligibility requirements for both documented and undocumented individuals. Continue to support school meals programs that reach children across the state.

# Strategy 2: Strengthen Food System Infrastructure and Connectivity

## Establish more effective and accessible ways for buyers and sellers to connect

Several approaches are recommended, including pre-season planning with matchmaking sessions between producers and restaurants or other buyers, simple texting or app systems where a farmer can post what they have and buyers can reply with an order, and/or creating a comprehensive digital platform to transform how food moves throughout Delaware by connecting producers, distributors, retailers, and consumers.

## Establish regional food hubs and processing centers

Physical food hubs strategically located throughout the state could facilitate aggregation, processing, and distribution of local products. These hubs would help smaller farms collaborate to meet volume requirements for larger institutional buyers while reducing transportation barriers.

## Create transportation solutions

Implementing tax incentives or direct subsidies for farmers who transport products to local buyers could significantly improve the feasibility of farm-to-table relationships. Community organizations also emphasized the need for home delivery services to reach individuals who cannot physically access food pantries due to transportation barriers, illness, or other challenges.

## Incentivize farmers to consider expanded year-round growing capacity

Investing in climate-controlled growing infrastructure, such as greenhouses and high tunnels, could extend Delaware's growing season and increase year-round availability of fresh produce.

# Strategy 3: Enhance Economic Accessibility and Market Development



## Revitalize incentive programs for consumers and producers

Statewide availability of "Double Up Bucks" and similar programs could make healthy food more affordable for families using nutrition assistance benefits. These programs could be implemented in corner stores and grocery retail outlets throughout Delaware, increasing the purchasing power of SNAP recipients while supporting local agriculture.



## Establish state procurement policies that accommodate local food purchases

The State of Delaware should develop food procurement policies and procedures for state agencies and institutions that prioritize ways to connect Delaware farms with the supply chain. This includes assessing existing state procurement procedures to better understand how existing policies create barriers for local agriculture producers.



## Support local marketing efforts with novel and targeted messaging

Delaware should invest in coordinated branding campaigns, digital platforms, and strategic partnerships to boost the visibility of Delaware-grown products, connect producers directly with consumers, and foster a strong culture of buying local.



## Address workforce needs across the food system

Both volunteers and paid staff are essential to sustaining food security initiatives. Improving working conditions and benefits for farm workers and food service workers could strengthen the overall food system.



# Strategy 4: Build Knowledge and Skills for Nutritious Food Choices



While education alone does not change behavior it is necessary as a foundation for advancing nutrition and health. Education about nutrition, cooking, and food systems is a core effort of agencies across the state and funding for these efforts are of ongoing concern given discussions about reductions in SNAP-Ed and related programs.

## Key Recommendations:

1. Integrate comprehensive food and nutrition education in communities and schools, including school-based curriculum, intergenerational cooking classes, and culturally responsive food preparation training
2. Expand hands-on learning opportunities through school and community gardens across the state to improve food education and nutrition awareness through experiential learning
3. Create pathways for food system careers by developing training programs for the next generation of farmers, food service professionals, and food system leaders to address workforce gaps while creating economic opportunities

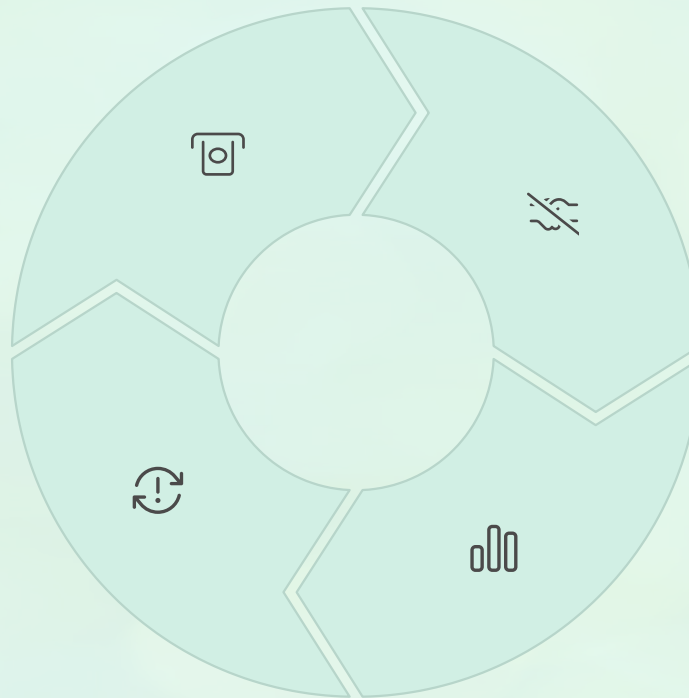
# Strategy 5: Foster Collaboration and Sustainable Funding

## Establish dedicated food security funding

Create a dedicated food security fund accessible to both established and grassroots organizations, with grant criteria that explicitly allow for a broad range of food-related expenses

## Integrate with broader community needs

Connect food security efforts with housing, healthcare, and economic stability initiatives for holistic approaches



## Develop cross-sector collaborations

Adopt a holistic approach that integrates food access initiatives with broader efforts to improve housing stability, healthcare access, and economic opportunity

## Create shared evaluation and data systems

Develop robust, shared data and evaluation systems that facilitate collaboration and accountability across the food security sector

Collaboration and sustainable funding are the cornerstones of a resilient, equitable food system. Across the nation and in Delaware, community-based organizations, public agencies, and private partners recognize that no single entity can solve food insecurity alone.

# Progress Monitoring and Evaluation



## Establish clear metrics

Develop measurable indicators for each strategic priority



## Food Access At A Glance, Create centralized dashboard

Track progress on federal program participation and eligibility and locally grown food through regularly updated data and visualizations



## Conduct annual reviews

Assess progress toward goals and identify emerging challenges



## Maintain community feedback

Ensure continuous input from those most affected by food insecurity

It is recommended that Delaware's Farm to Family Strategy incorporate a comprehensive approach to progress monitoring and ongoing evaluation to ensure accountability, transparency, and continuous improvement. The Council on Farm & Food Policy should provide regular legislative updates to the Governor, General Assembly, and relevant committees, with biannual briefings summarizing key accomplishments, challenges, and resource needs.



# Appendix and Resources

Delaware Food Resource Map

<https://farm-and-food-delaware.hub.arcgis.com/pages/data-analysis-and-tools>

University of Delaware Institute for Public Administration

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Farm to Community Story Map

Connecting Farm Fresh Fruit and Produce to Community-Based Organizations

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/a49a618a8c154d958df53c5f8f17e451>

Statewide Farm to Community Routes

<https://farm-and-food-delaware.hub.arcgis.com/pages/programs-and-projects>

- Delaware SNAP-Ed Landscape Analysis
- [State Health Improvement Plan/State Health Assessment](#)
- [Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan \(SCORP\)](#)
- Physical Activity, Nutrition, and Obesity Prevention Strategic Plan 2025-2028
- [Blue Zones Report](#)
- [Delaware Health Literacy Report](#)
- Health System CHNAs
  - [Nemours](#)
  - [Saint Francis](#)
  - [Bayhealth](#)
  - [ChristianaCare](#)
  - [Beebe](#)
  - [Tidal Health](#)
- [Delaware Safe Routes Scorecard 2024](#)
- [Delaware Municipal Comprehensive Plans](#)
- [The Impact of Diabetes in Delaware 2023](#)
- [2024 Burden of Chronic Disease Report](#)
- [Delaware Cancer Consortium Five-Year Plan 2022-2026](#)
- Cancer Incidence and Mortality Report

## Appendix 1. Resources

Delaware Food Resource Map

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- [Delaware Cancer Consortium Five-Year Plan 2022-2026](#)
- [Cancer Incidence and Mortality Report](#)

### Other Reports

- Delaware State Food Access Plan
- Local Food Procurement in Delaware Status Report (June 30, 2024)

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