



Free and Fresh Evaluation

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PREPARED FOR

Charleston County Public Library

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Executive Summary

One in eight Charleston County residents is food insecure, and thousands more live in neighborhoods with limited access to affordable, fresh produce. The [Free & Fresh](#) program places community refrigerators stocked with fresh produce inside Charleston County Public Library branches, offering fresh produce to anyone who needs it. By locating the fridges in a trusted, welcoming space people already visit, and foregoing any registration or sign-up process, the program meets people where they are and removes the stigma and paperwork that keep many families from other food assistance.

The Charleston County Public Library partnered with [McClam Consulting](#) and the [Joseph P. Riley Jr. Center for Livable Communities](#) at the College of Charleston to conduct a mixed methods evaluation of Free & Fresh with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The evaluation combined community focus groups, a Ripple Effect Mapping session with partners, and a Value on Investment (VOI) analysis to document impact.

In FY2025 alone, Free & Fresh **distributed 58,470 pounds of produce across 21,740 fridge visits**, reaching a user base where 78% are food insecure and nearly half are older adults (60 years and over) on fixed incomes. The Free & Fresh program demonstrates that **a no-barrier, library-embedded model of fresh produce access can generate substantial and measurable value for the community it serves.**

What is Means for Community Members

The program addresses a community need, providing reliable access to quality fresh produce for individuals and families who might otherwise go without. Its benefits extend well beyond food access, touching on financial relief, improved health and nutrition, and a strengthened sense of community connection and mutual support. One community member said, ***“[Healthy food] is untouchable to a lot of people. And that's their health and wellness. I think that this program is crucial to the health and wellness of this community.”***

The Return

An independent Value on Investment analysis found that Free & Fresh delivers **\$2.87 in community benefit for every \$1 invested**, nearly **tripling the value of every dollar spent**. Benefits include improved diets and health outcomes, reduced healthcare costs, real savings for households, time saved, and less food waste. Community members and partners identified 19 additional benefits beyond what could be assigned a dollar value, from reduced stigma to stronger neighborhood connections.

The Ripple Effect

Free & Fresh has strengthened a network of mission-aligned partners and inspired similar library-based fridge programs. Community members often take produce home not only for themselves but for elderly and homebound neighbors, extending the program's reach in ways no formal service could.

Free & Fresh demonstrates that a library-embedded model of fresh produce access can generate substantial and measurable value for the community it serves. With continued support, the program can expand supply to meet needed demand, save dollars to the health care system through investment in preventative programming, and strengthen the fabric of Charleston County's collective impact towards reducing food insecurity.



Community Focus Groups

Summary Report

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

1

Community Members Value and Appreciate the Free & Fresh Program, Saying it Makes a Difference in their Lives - “It’s a Blessing for Us”

2

Free & Fresh Provides High Quality Produce, Not Easily Accessible to Many Charleston County Residents

3

Free & Fresh Reduces the Financial Burden on Community Members in Need, Including the Elderly

4

Community Members Reported Eating Healthier, Feeling Better, and Consuming More Fruits and Vegetables Because of Free & Fresh

5

Free & Fresh is Easy to Access (No Barriers), Conveniently Located for the Community, and Facilitates Community Connection/Support Among Residents

Overview

Free & Fresh offers community members low barrier access to free, fresh produce through fridges strategically placed in Charleston County Public Libraries. Supported by a variety of partners, the program aims to combat food insecurity and promote healthier eating. Since launching in 2021, the program has distributed tens of thousands of pounds of food.

The Charleston County Public Library is collaborating with McClam Consulting to complete an evaluation of the Free & Fresh program. This report summarizes key themes from two community focus groups conducted in April 2026 aimed at understanding the impact of the program. Most participants identified as **female** (94%), **Black/African American** (59%), and were **over 50 years old** (94%). Overall, participants were resoundingly positive about Free & Fresh, affirming that the program makes a meaningful and lasting difference in the lives of those it serves.

DATA SPOTLIGHT

2

Community Focus Groups

St. Paul’s Hollywood Library in
Hollywood Otranto Road Library in
North Charleston

94%

Reported that Free & Fresh was
Extremely Important to their Ability to
Eat Healthy

“[Healthy food] is untouchable to a lot of people. And that’s their health and wellness. I think that this program is crucial to the health and wellness of this community.”

Background

The Charleston County Public Library is collaborating with McClam Consulting to complete an evaluation of the Free & Fresh program. Free & Fresh offers community members low barrier access to fresh produce through fridges strategically placed in Charleston County Public Libraries. The Free & Fresh evaluation aims to document the impact and value of the program while centering community members lived experiences, perceived benefits, and observed community changes stemming from the initiative. Additionally, the evaluation seeks to inform program improvement by identifying strengths, challenges, and opportunities for future growth. A key evaluation activity was gathering public perspectives through community focus groups.

This report summarizes key themes from two focus groups with community members who have been served by Free & Fresh. The overall purpose of the focus group was to learn how Free & Fresh has impacted the community and to provide patrons an opportunity to share opportunities to strengthen program implementation.

Evaluation Methods

We conducted **two community focus groups** at two branches of Charleston County Public Library; April 7th, 2026 at **St. Paul's Hollywood Library in Hollywood** and April 14th, 2026 at **Otranto Road Library in North Charleston**. Both library locations are implementing the Free and Fresh program. A semi-structured discussion guide was used to lead the conversation (Appendix A). In addition, participants were engaged in a prioritization process to identify which ways the program has impacted them that matter the most (Appendix B). Demographic data was gathered from each participant through a brief survey (Appendix C).

We used a purposeful sampling approach, collaborating with CCPL front desk staff to recruit participants directly and to put a recruitment flyer directly on the fridge. Focus groups lasted about an hour and a half and participants were given lunch and a \$30 visa gift card as an honorarium for their time. We obtained informed verbal consent prior to beginning the focus group and all sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Two research team members independently took notes during both sessions. We used an inductive approach to analyze discussion data wherein emergent themes were identified. We conducted iterative reviews of the data to allow key themes or ideas to emerge and then used qualitative data analysis software (Dedoose) to code data and organize the analysis. Demographic data was summarized using descriptive statistics.

Findings

Table 1 describes demographic characteristics of community focus group participants. A total of 16 people participated in the sessions (11 at St. Paul's Hollywood and six at Otranto Road). Most participants identified as **female** (94%), **Black/African American** (59%), and were **over 50 years old** (94%). Most participants reported driving a car to get to the focus group (n=14, 82%) and had been using Free & Fresh for nine months or longer (n=11, 65%). Almost all participants (n=15, 94%) reported Free & Fresh as being **"Extremely Important" to their ability to eat healthy**. Community members recalled that they first found out about Free & Fresh through CCPL's

front desk staff pointing it out to them, by seeing the fridge in the library during a regular visit, or through another community member telling them about it.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Community Focus Group Participants

Characteristic	St. Paul's Hollywood Library Hollywood	Otranto Road Library North Charleston	Total
	<i>n=11</i>	<i>n=6</i>	<i>n=16</i>
Race*			
Black/African American	8 (73%)	2 (29%)	10 (59%)
White	2 (18%)	2 (29%)	4 (24%)
Hispanic or Latinx	1 (9%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
Asian	0 (0%)	2 (29%)	2 (12%)
Native American	0 (0%)	1 (14%)	1 (6%)
Age			
26-29	1 (9%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
50+	10 (91%)	6 (100%)	16 (94%)
Sex			
Female	10 (91%)	6 (100%)	16 (94%)
Male	1 (9%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
How did you travel here today?			
I drove a car	11 (100%)	3 (50%)	14 (82%)
I rode in a car driven by a family member or friend	0 (0%)	2 (33%)	2 (12%)
I walked	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I took the bus	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (17%)	1 (6%)
About how long have you been using the Free & Fresh program?			
Less than a month	2 (18%)	1 (17%)	3 (18%)
1-3 months	2 (18%)	0 (0%)	2 (12%)
4-9 months	1 (9%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
9 months or longer	6 (55%)	5 (83%)	11 (65%)
How important is the Free & Fresh program (i.e. the fridge) to your ability to eat healthy?			
Extremely important	11 (100%)	5 (83%)	16 (94%)
Somewhat important	0 (0%)	1 (17%)	1 (6%)
Slightly important	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Not important	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
*Race was select all that apply. One participant selected Black/African American and Native American.			

Community Members Value and Appreciate the Free & Fresh Program, saying it Makes a Difference in their Lives - *“it’s a blessing for us” “it is such a joy”*

Community members who participated in the focus group expressed profound appreciation for the Free & Fresh program, describing it as a meaningful and tangible resource in their daily lives. Participants spoke with genuine warmth about the program's impact, conveying that access to fresh food has provided not only nutritional support, but also a sense of care from their community. The depth of gratitude expressed made clear that Free & Fresh is more than a supplemental service; it is a program individuals have come to rely on, and one that resonates deeply with those it serves. For participants, Free & Fresh embodies what community investment looks like at its best: **accessible, impactful, and deeply needed**. One participant elaborated on what the program means to the community: *“you can't even count how beneficial it is. There's no numbers that can be applied to it because it has to do with health and wellness of this community. We have grocery stores not close by, and if they are, sometimes the produce is not up to par. And the expense of food now is astronomical. Everyone knows that. It is untouchable to a lot of people. And that's their health and wellness. And I think that this program is crucial to the health and wellness of this community.”* Reflecting the group's collective sentiment, one participant voiced a direct appeal for the program's continued funding: *“It's a wonderful program. And I pray that you will continue to keep this program going, that we will continue to provide funding it for this area.”*

Free & Fresh Provides High Quality Produce, Not Easily Accessible to the Community

Focus group participants also highlighted the exceptional quality of the produce available through Free & Fresh, with many noting that it consistently surpasses what they are able to find at their local grocery stores. For community members who may face barriers to accessing fresh, high-quality fruits and vegetables due to cost, transportation, or limited retail options in their area, Free & Fresh fills a critical gap. The program does not simply provide food; it provides *good* food, and participants made clear that this distinction matters deeply to them and their families. One participant said, *“the collards I got one time, it was so fresh. It's the best collards I ever had. That's one that the farmers never have.”*

“The quality of the food, it’s always fresh food.”

Free & Fresh Reduces Financial Burden on Community Members in Need

Participants also spoke candidly about the financial relief that Free & Fresh provides, sharing that the **cost of fresh fruits and vegetables at the grocery store is often simply out of reach**. For many participants, the program directly reduces the strain of stretching a limited budget to meet basic nutritional needs. By providing consistent access to fresh produce at no cost, Free & Fresh allows families to allocate their limited resources elsewhere (e.g. electric bills), easing a burden that for many is a persistent and stressful reality. One participant spoke directly to the financial reality many face: *“the program is very much needed because a lot of times people can't even afford to get these things that is given to them because it's so high. Everything is high. Nothing's cheap no more. And your income is not going up and everything else is going up but your income is staying the*

same place.” Another participant agreed saying, “I would look at all the grocery store ads and see where the sales were to find the cheapest head of lettuce or whatever I wanted. It’s getting harder and harder to find anything reasonable. The prices, they’re ridiculous.... Like you mentioned, the prices are going up but our incomes are staying the same.... This program is really helpful. I appreciate it.”

Some participants expressed that **before Free & Fresh, they simply went without fresh produce**: “I would have never spent the money in a grocery store.” Others described the difficult choices they faced when trying to incorporate produce into their diet on a limited budget: “Well, you had to decide when you go in the grocery store which one you were going to get because they were so expensive. But you could come here and get everything you need and it’s free and fresh.” One participant poignantly shared that despite being employed at a grocery store, the cost of fresh produce remained out of reach: “Even though I work at Publix, I can’t afford to shop at Publix. So, the fact that she told me there was sweet potatoes, I was like “Oh, I should get some. Bring me some.” She brought me some. It was a relief because I can’t really afford to buy it.”

“[Before Free & Fresh], I just did without a lot of times. Did without the healthy produce because I couldn’t afford the prices. And now it’s always available here. And it’s free.”

Participants also described feeling more **financially secure** as a result of being able to rely on the program. One participant noted measurable weekly savings: “I feel better because financially I’m much better off because I save at least \$5.00 to \$15.00 in produce bills every week from what I can grab.” Another emphasized that the program allows their household to direct limited funds toward other essential expenses: “it lets us pay more for other things because we can count on always something being here that we can use ”

Free & Fresh Spurs Healthier Eating, Increasing Fruit and Vegetable Consumption and Improving Health

Beyond financial relief, participants spoke to the meaningful ways Free & Fresh has shaped their eating habits and overall health. Access to consistent, high-quality produce has encouraged community members to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into their diets, with several noting tangible improvements in how they feel day to day. Two participants specifically mentioned having more energy, and one added, “you sleep better too.” One participant also noted the program’s impact on managing a chronic condition, sharing that increased access to fresh produce has helped with blood sugar levels for those living with diabetes. A community member elaborated on how eating healthy is expensive, “the stuff that we would need, like apples and oranges and stuff, we really can’t afford it... it improves your health because you have healthy fruits and veggies. And everybody just can’t buy all the veggies and fruits that you need. Everybody is not on the same income guideline. And it’s especially helpful for a house with several children, a single-parent home.”

“It's easy to not starve but it's not easy to eat healthy food. So, if you're talking about long-term health and wellness, it makes a difference. It costs a lot of money to eat healthy.”

Participants also described a shift in how they approach meal planning, sharing that they now build their meals around what is available in the Free & Fresh refrigerator, a habit that reflects both a growing reliance on the program and a genuine embrace of healthier eating patterns. One participant captured it simply: *“I can plan my meals around what I brought home and that is always very helpful.”*

“Almost every meal, there is something from the Fridge here”

Community Members Reported Trying New Types of Produce

Participants shared that Free & Fresh has broadened their exposure to a wider variety of fruits and vegetables, with many trying produce they had never purchased or prepared before. Because the program offers whatever fresh produce is available, community members found themselves bringing home new and unfamiliar items. Participants said, *“I like the way they introduce different vegetables”* and that the program *“opens your way to new vegetables.”* This variety is significant because a diverse diet rich in different fruits and vegetables is widely recognized as a cornerstone of good nutrition and long-term wellness. For many participants, Free & Fresh has not only improved access to produce quantity, but it has also expanded the range and quality of what they eat.

Free & Fresh is Easy to Access and Conveniently Located

Participants also highlighted the convenience and reliability of Free & Fresh as a key part of its value to the community. Being located within the Charleston County Public Libraries means that fresh produce is accessible during library hours, without requiring a special trip or long drive. For individuals with limited transportation, this accessibility makes a meaningful difference. Participants in Hollywood said that it is *“An hour-plus commute into town. At least that's to go to Walmart, Costco, any of those, the others that have halfway decent produce.”* Participants consistently described the program as dependable and *“reliable”*, bringing peace of mind to those who need extra support. One participant shared that she and her daughter are able to check out books and pick up vegetables in the same visit, a simple but powerful illustration of how Free & Fresh meets the community where it already is: *“For me as a mom, it's easy just to make a one stop – sometimes if you have family that's working you don't have necessarily a community, a big community, it's good to just be able to go to the library and check out a book with my daughter and also get something from the Fridge.”*

Free & Fresh Facilitates Community Connection and Support

A notable finding from the focus group was the way Free & Fresh has sparked a spirit of generosity and connection among participants. Many community members do not simply take produce home for themselves;

they think of others. Several participants described regularly bringing fresh fruits and vegetables to neighbors and community members who are unable to leave their homes, including elderly individuals and those who are homebound. One participant shared, *“there was a neighbor that lived a couple of buildings down from me that was blind, so I used to take her stuff.... I like sharing with people. I'll make a meal with the stuff that I get and give it to others. I've made sweet potato pies... I made eggplant parmesan. I brought some to the library to the staff.”* Another participant said, Free & Fresh *“had soup already made in a jar and I was delivering that to people who weren't able to get out of their home. They were sick on the island. And they loved it.”* Free & Fresh has become not just a resource, but a catalyst for the kind of neighborly connection and mutual support that strengthens communities from within.

Areas for Program Improvement

While focus group participants were overwhelmingly positive about Free & Fresh, they also offered constructive feedback and suggestions for how the program could grow to better serve the community:

- **Address high demand and limited supply.** The group note that the program's supply doesn't fulfill the need of the community. Participants noted that produce is frequently gone shortly after it becomes available. One participant suggested reaching out to additional community partners and local farms to donate produce. Limehouse Produce and Joseph and Helen Fields Farms were both suggested.
- **Increase outreach and awareness.** Participants noted that many community members remain unaware of the program and encouraged greater efforts to spread the word. One participant in Hollywood suggested putting it on the town website. Though, it was noted that increase awareness would also require an increase in supply since the current supply is taken quickly by existing users.
- **Pre-box individual portions.** Participants suggested that pre-packaging produce into individual boxes would ensure more even distribution among community members and would also make it easier to set aside portions for homebound individuals who rely on others to pick up on their behalf.
- **Add a second delivery later in the day.** Because produce is currently delivered in the mornings and is often gone quickly, participants suggested an additional delivery later in the day to ensure that working community members who cannot visit in the morning have an equal opportunity to access fresh produce.
- **Ensure messaging around it being free is clear.** One participant was confused about if it was free or if they would be charged later for what they had taken.

Conclusions

Community members who participated in the focus groups painted a compelling picture of the impact of Free & Fresh on their lives and their community. The program addresses a genuine and pressing need, providing consistent access to high-quality fresh produce for individuals and families who might otherwise go without. Its benefits extend well beyond food access, touching on financial relief, improved health and nutrition, and a strengthened sense of community connection and mutual support. Participant feedback reflects not only deep appreciation for what Free & Fresh provides today, but also a clear desire to see the program grow and reach more people. The findings from this focus group affirm that Free & Fresh is a valued, trusted, and indispensable community resource, and that continued investment in the program will yield meaningful and lasting impact for the residents of Charleston County.



Ripple Effect Mapping

Summary Report

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

- 1 Strategically placed food fridges are reaching communities with limited access to fresh food and filling gaps not addressed by other services (e.g., location; economic status)
- 2 The program helps stretch household budgets, improves access to healthy foods, and reduces stigma by offering free, reliable, and anonymous access
- 3 The public library functions as a welcoming, trusted hub where individuals can access food alongside other resources
- 4 A strong network of mission-aligned partners provides funding, food, materials, and operational support, creating a shared investment in the program's sustainability
- 5 The Free & Fresh model has led to similar initiatives across South Carolina, expanding access to fresh food beyond the original program footprint.

Overview

Free & Fresh offers community members low barrier access to free, fresh produce through fridges strategically placed in Charleston County Public Libraries. Supported by a variety of partners, the program aims to combat food insecurity and promote healthier eating. Since launching in 2021, the program has distributed tens of thousands of pounds of food.

The Charleston County Public Library is collaborating with McClam Consulting to complete an evaluation of the Free & Fresh program. This report summarizes key themes from a Ripple Effect Mapping session held in March 2026. The session engaged the program's collaborative partners in a structured discussion to identify key outcomes, partnerships, and community-level effects. The session resulted in a visual "mind map" of the program as well as key themes (highlighted above).

PARTICIPATING PARTNERS

Charleston County Public Library

Grow Food Carolina

Lowcountry Food Bank

Roper St Francis Healthcare

Trident United Way

Charleston Parks Conservancy

Katie's Krops

Lowcountry Street Grocery

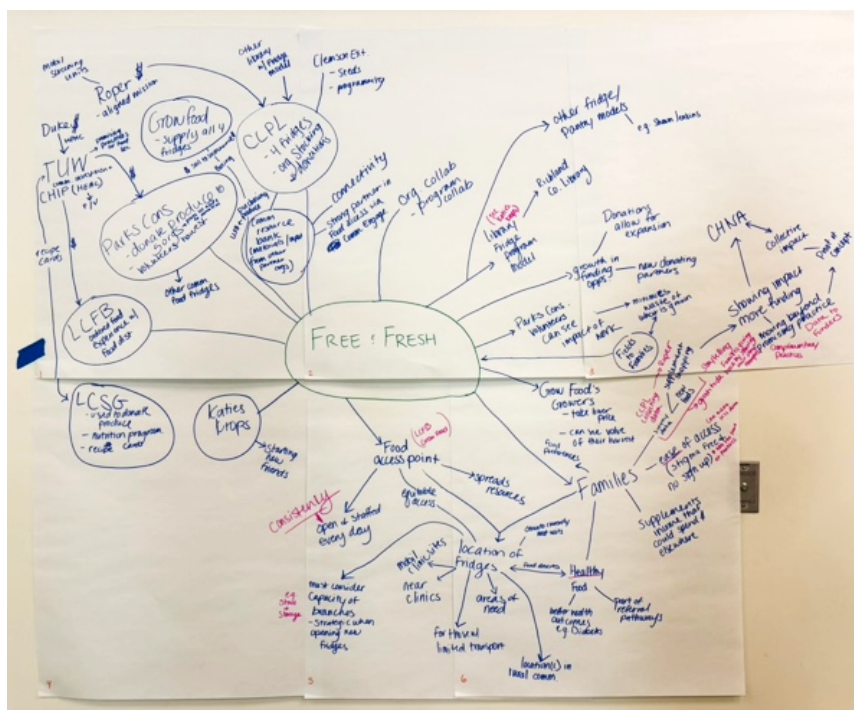
Background

The Charleston County Public Library's (CCPL) Free & Fresh program provides free, accessible fresh produce through strategically placed community fridges across the county. Designed to reduce barriers to healthy food access, the program offers a reliable and stigma-free resource for individuals and families. By combining community-based infrastructure with a strong network of partners, Free & Fresh not only meets immediate food needs but also contributes to broader efforts to improve health and well-being. The program launched in 2020 with support in part from a Healthy People Health Carolinas subaward provided by Roper St. Francis Healthcare and Trident United Way. Since its inception, the program has continued to expand its reach with help from community partners and deepen its impact within the community. To better understand the role of these partners and the scope of the project's impact, the McClam Consulting evaluation team conducted a Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) session in March 2026.

Evaluation Methods

REM¹ is a participatory evaluation approach designed to capture both the intended and unintended outcomes of a program by engaging stakeholders in a structured, strengths-based discussion. This approach is particularly well-suited for community-based initiatives like Free & Fresh, where impacts often extend beyond direct service delivery to influence partnerships, systems, and community dynamics.

The REM session brought together key program partners to reflect on their experiences with Free & Fresh and to identify the program's most meaningful outcomes. Through a guided conversation, participants shared stories, observations, and examples of change, which were documented in real time using a visual mind-mapping process. As participants shared their perspectives, responses were captured in real time using a hand drawn mind map (right) which was later digitized using Xmind software. This allowed the group to collectively visualize connections and build on one another's insights. The session continued until no new themes emerged. All participants provided verbal consent, and confidentiality protocols were reviewed prior to the discussion.



Mind-map created during REM session

Findings

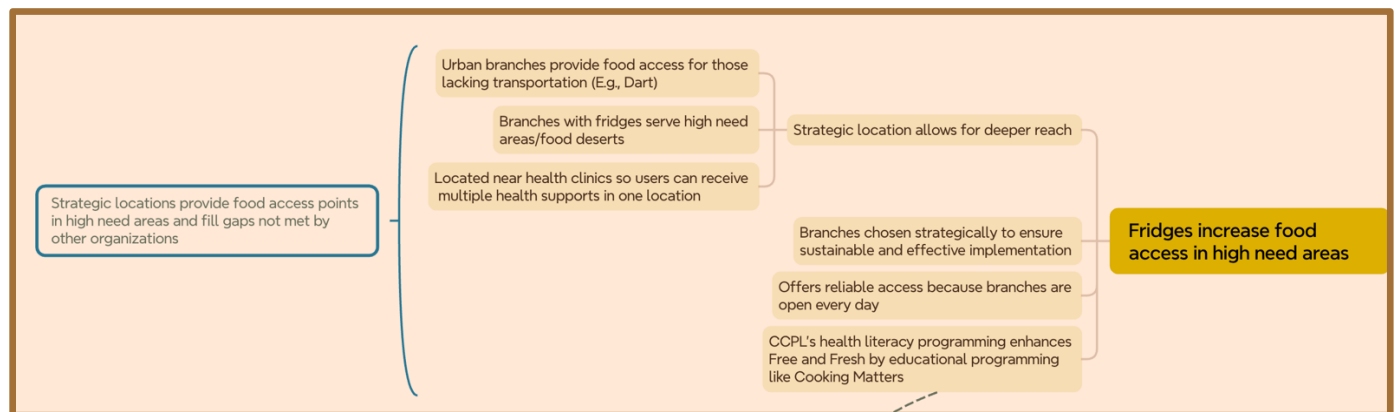
This collaborative exercise resulted in a comprehensive map illustrating the program's ripple effects across individuals, organizations, and the broader community (Appendix D). It highlights how the Free & Fresh program expands food access, strengthens partnerships, supports families, and contributes to a more coordinated and responsive local food system.

The following themes reflect the key insights and areas of impact identified during the Ripple Effect Mapping session. Snapshots from the map depict the relationships between program components and the connection between inputs and outputs. Together, they illustrate how the Free & Fresh program extends beyond food distribution to influence partnerships, access, and the broader community.

Strategic Placement of Fridges Expands Food Access

Partners highlighted that the strategic placement of food fridges is central to the program's impact. Located in food deserts, the fridges reach community members with limited access to fresh food. Some library branch locations (e.g., John L. Dart Library) are also located close to public transit which reduces transportation barriers, while others (e.g., Otranto Road Library) have mobile health clinics on site which allows fridge users and other patrons to receive multiple health supports in one place. Placing fridges within library branches enhances program sustainability through existing staffing and infrastructure of the library system. With libraries open and staffed daily, the program offers a dependable source of fresh food in locations that meet fridge users where they are.

Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #1: Fridges increase food access in high needs areas



The Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #1 (above) depicts the collaborative partners' conversation about the strategic locations of the Free & Fresh fridges.

Fridges Meet Families Where They Are With Tangible Support

The program provides tangible benefits for families by reducing stigma, helping stretch household budgets, and improving access to healthy foods. Partners explained that the program is intentionally designed to be stigma-free, with no sign-up process or eligibility requirements, allowing individuals to access food with dignity and ease. Fridge users never have to give their name or check in with staff to use the fridge, they don't even have to

have a library card. Partners emphasized the significance of a program with no sign-up or eligibility requirements since it allows the program to reach residents that don't qualify for other forms of assistance (e.g., SNAP).

“Having these fridges...helps increase ease of access. You don’t have to tell your story, don’t have to explain, or show proof of income. This is a community resource available with the understanding that folks who are really in need are going to utilize it.”

In addition to reducing stigma for those seeking food assistance, the program also stretches household budgets. Subsidizing grocery shopping with food from the fridge means users don't have to sacrifice other necessities like utilities and medication to eat healthy. This access to fresh healthy food helps users meet their personal dietary goals, provides an avenue for adhering to physicians' dietary recommendations, and ultimately over time contributes to improved health outcomes.

“It can also be helpful for families who have received some form of medical diagnosis like diabetes or high blood pressure to know that they have a space where they can actually follow their Drs recommendations of trying to eat healthier foods.”

The program further prioritizes families' needs by tailoring the produce purchase order to their likes when possible. On the other hand, the program also introduces families to new produce they wouldn't otherwise try and provides recipe cards to instruct them on how to prepare it.

Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #2: Serving families is the priority



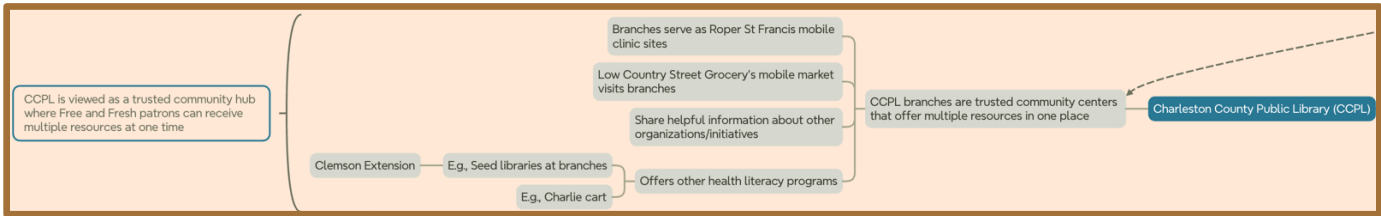
The Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #2 (above) depicts the collaborative partners' conversation around the various ways the program prioritizes families' needs and the impact that has.

Libraries are Seen as Trusted Community Hubs

Although many partners support the Free & Fresh program, the library system is its foundation. Participants emphasized that public libraries are widely viewed as trusted, welcoming, and safe spaces. This perception is

strengthened by the breadth of resources and services libraries provide, reinforcing their role as dependable community hubs. Locating the fridges within library branches allows individuals to access food in a trusted environment while also connecting to additional supports. As a trusted community hub, the library is uniquely positioned to facilitate partnerships with outside organizations, such as mobile health clinics, that further support the health and wellness of its patrons. Because community members already have an established rapport with the library, these partnerships are more likely to be welcomed and utilized.

Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #3: Charleston County Public Library (CCPL)



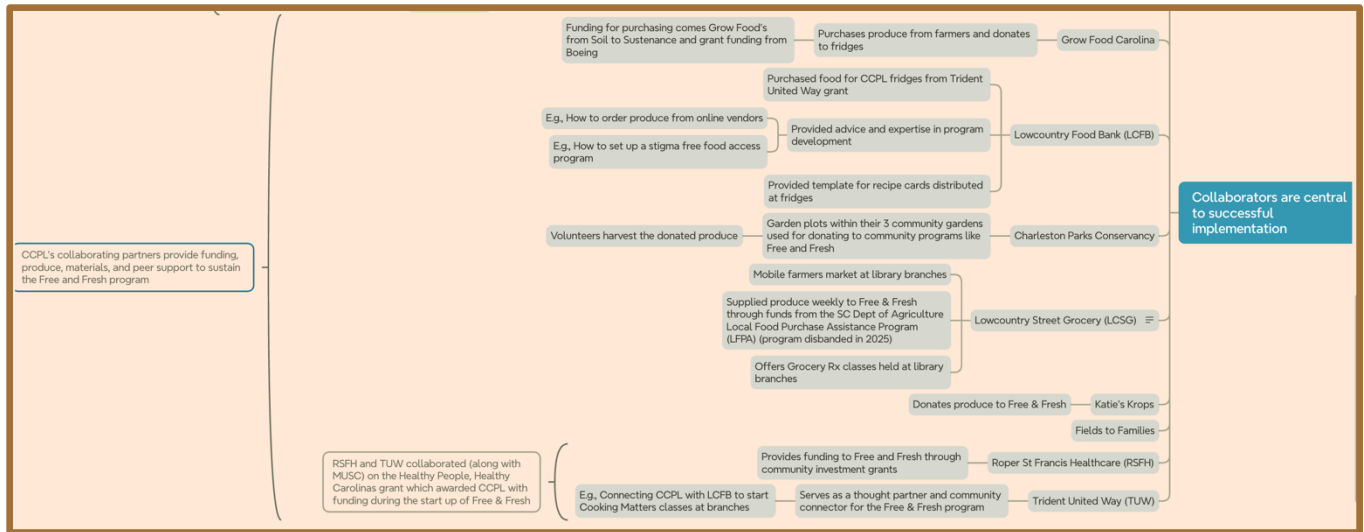
The Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #3 (above) depicts the collaborative partners’ conversation about how CCPL is seen as a trusted community hub offering valuable resources in one safe and welcoming location.

Strong Partnerships Sustain the Program

The success of the Free & Fresh program is closely tied to its strong network of collaborating partners, each contributing unique resources and expertise that support the program’s sustainability and growth. Partners provide a combination of funding, fresh produce, materials, and strategic guidance, creating a shared investment in the program’s ongoing success. Several organizations play key roles in sourcing and supplying food, including GrowFood Carolina, which purchases produce from local farmers to donate to the fridges, as well as Fields to Families and Katie’s Krops, which contribute locally grown and surplus produce. Charleston Parks Conservancy further supports these efforts through community garden plots dedicated to supplying initiatives like Free & Fresh.

Other partners contribute through programmatic support, funding, and system-level guidance. Lowcountry Food Bank, a thought partner since the project’s inception, has played a pivotal role by donating produce through a Trident United Way grant and offering ongoing expertise in food sourcing and distribution strategies. Lowcountry Street Grocery supports the program by hosting mobile market stops and Grocery Rx classes, reinforcing the library’s role as a trusted community resource. Additionally, Lowcountry Street Grocery has previously donated produce through USDA grant funding. Roper St. Francis Healthcare has been a primary funder since the program’s inception through the Healthy People Healthy Carolinas initiative, in collaboration with Trident United Way and the Medical University of South Carolina, who were instrumental in launching the Free & Fresh program via a subaward to CCPL. Trident United Way has served as a consistent partner and community connector, supporting the program beyond its initial funding by facilitating resources such as translation of materials into Spanish and connecting CCPL with key partners like Lowcountry Food Bank, whose early guidance helped establish the program’s foundation. Together these organizations form a collaborative ecosystem that not only sustains the Free & Fresh program but also strengthens the broader local food system.

Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #4: Collaborators are central to successful implementation

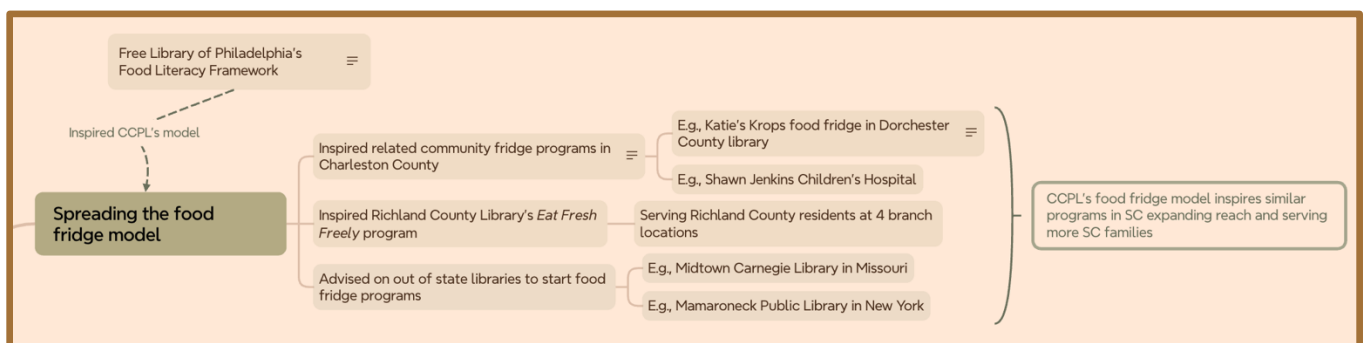


The Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #4 (above) depicts each collaborative partners' role in the program.

CCPL's Model Inspires Broader Adoption

Participants described the Free & Fresh program as part of a growing chain of innovation in food access. The program was inspired by the Free Library of Philadelphia's Food Literacy Framework, and program has, in turn, sparked new initiatives across multiple communities. This includes South Carolina's Richland County Library's *Eat Fresh Freely* program which operates food fridges in four library branches, as well as adoption of similar models by Midtown Carnegie in Missouri and Mamaroneck Library in New York. The program's influence also extends beyond libraries, inspiring a food pantry at Shawn Jenkins Children's Hospital and a forthcoming food fridge led by Katie's Krops in Dorchester County.

Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #5: Spreading the food fridge model



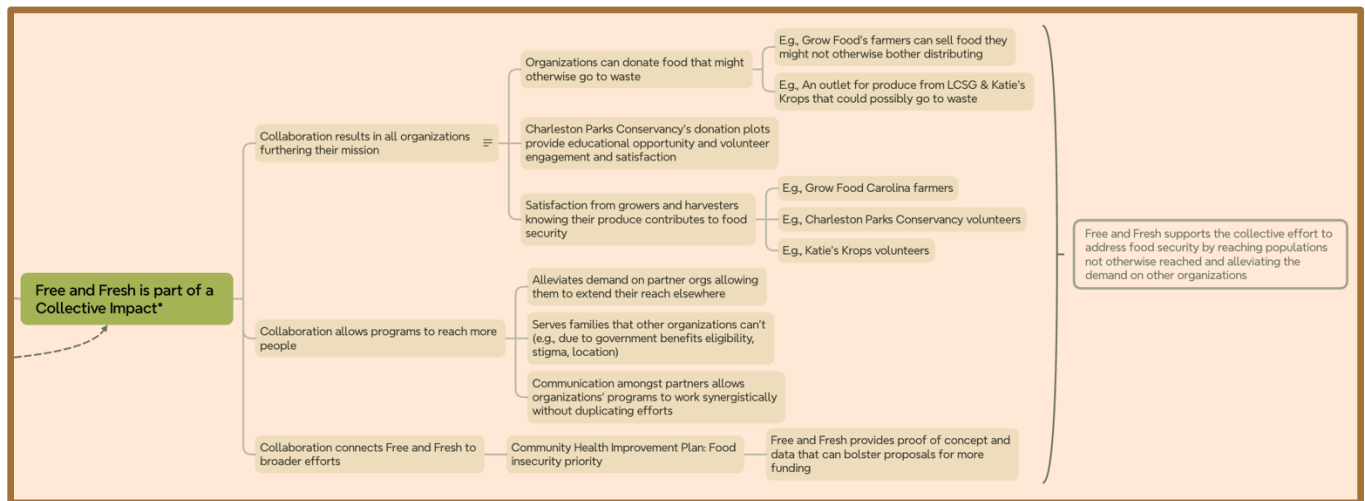
The Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #5 (above) depicts the collaborative partners' conversation about how Free & Fresh was inspired by another library fridge program and has in turn inspired others.

Free & Fresh Strengthens the Local Food System Through Collective Impact

Free & Fresh plays a strategic role within Charleston County's broader food access system by complementing existing efforts and reaching individuals who may not engage with traditional services. By helping absorb

demand, the program allows other organizations like Lowcountry Food Bank to focus their resources in new areas, strengthening the overall system. Participants described Free & Fresh as part of a collective impact² approach, where all partners can advance their own missions through the program, including supporting local farmers, expanding community gardening, minimizing food waste, improving food access, and providing gardening education to youth. The program also creates a sense of purpose for growers and volunteers at organizations like GrowFood and Charleston Parks Conservancy who directly contribute to feeding their neighbors. Its alignment with the Community Health Improvement Plan further positions Free & Fresh as a coordinated, systems-level effort to improve health outcomes while also generating evidence and data to strengthen funding impact.

Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #6: Free and Fresh is part of collective impact



The Ripple Effect Map Snapshot #6 (above) depicts Free & Fresh's role in the collective impact of food security work in Charleston County.

Conclusions

The Ripple Effect Mapping findings demonstrate that Free & Fresh is more than a food access program, it is a catalyst for community-wide impact. Through strategic placement, trusted library infrastructure, and strong cross-sector partnerships, the program expands access to healthy food while strengthening the broader food system. Its ripple effects are evident in the way it inspires new initiatives, supports partner missions, and creates meaningful opportunities for community members to contribute. By operating as part of a collective impact approach and aligning with countywide health priorities, Free & Fresh addresses immediate needs while advancing long-term solutions. Together, these findings highlight the program's role as a sustainable, scalable model for improving community health and well-being.



Value on Investment

Summary Report

Applying a conservative **Value on Investment** framework, the Free & Fresh program returned \$2.87 in social value for every \$1 invested.

Free & Fresh nearly triples its value to the community for every dollar spent.

Background

Charleston County Public Library (CCPL) partnered with [McClam Consulting](#) to conduct a public health evaluation of the [Free & Fresh](#) program. Free & Fresh distributes fresh produce to combat food insecurity in Charleston County, particularly in underserved communities.

Charleston County continues to face significant food insecurity. As of the most recently released County Health Rankings, approximately 12% of the population in Charleston County are food insecure and 6% of people have low incomes and do not live close to a grocery store, limiting their ability to access healthy foods.³ Inadequate access to healthy food can raise obesity risk by reducing diet quality and making it harder to sustain healthy eating behaviors.⁴ The program specifically addresses access to nutritious food and education on healthy living tailored to the communities.

Purpose

To better understand the Free & Fresh program's economic impact and overall benefit to the community, the Charleston County Public Library is partnering with McClam Consulting to conduct a Value on Investment (VOI) study. The purpose of this study is to quantify the economic value generated by the initiative relative to the total resources invested. Beyond traditional return on investment (ROI) calculations, this study adopts a broader VOI framework to capture not only direct financial returns but also the societal and health-related value resulting from increased food security and improved community well-being.

Study Objectives

1. **Quantify total monetary investment** in the Free & Fresh community fridge initiative, including staff time, operational costs, and the fair market value of donated or purchased food and materials.
2. **Estimate the economic value of community benefits** associated with increased access to healthy food - such as improvements in diet quality, reductions in food insecurity, and prevention or management of chronic disease.
3. **Calculate the initiative's overall Value on Investment (VOI)** by comparing community benefits to total investment costs.
4. **Provide actionable insights** to inform future program sustainability, replication, and policy advocacy.

Research Questions

1. What is the total financial and in-kind investment required to implement and maintain the Free & Fresh community fridge initiative?
2. What measurable or monetizable health and social benefits have resulted from the initiative?
3. What is the ratio of community value generated to the total investment made (VOI)?
4. How can findings be used to strengthen funding proposals and stakeholder support for continued or expanded implementation?

Methods

Conceptual Framework and Study Design

This study applies a mixed-methods Value on Investment (VOI) framework to capture both financial and non-financial value generated by the Free & Fresh program.⁵ VOI builds on Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodology, which monetizes social, economic, and health outcomes to estimate the broader value created beyond traditional cost measures.

VOI extends this approach by incorporating wellbeing-informed valuation and quality-of-life impacts when appropriate, allowing for a more comprehensive assessment of program value from participant, community, and societal perspectives. Unlike cost-effectiveness analyses that express outcomes in units such as quality-adjusted life years (QALYs), VOI translates meaningful outcome changes into monetary equivalents that reflect real welfare gains.⁶

Consistent with this framework, value was conceptualized across three domains:

- **Direct value:** Immediate economic benefits such as cost savings and resource utilization.
- **Indirect value:** Downstream effects including health, psychosocial, and household stability outcomes.
- **Societal value:** Broader community and systems-level contributions, including strengthened partnerships and improved access to resources.

This framework guided analytic decisions related to outcome selection, valuation, and interpretation of program impact.

Program Input and Outcome Identification

Stakeholder Engagement and Data Sources

Stakeholder engagement informed every stage of the VOI analysis, including input and outcome identification, outcome prioritization, valuation assumptions, and interpretation of findings (Table 1). This structured process supported the principle of materiality by ensuring that monetized outcomes reflected the experiences and priorities of those most closely connected to the Free & Fresh program.

Table 1. Stakeholder Roles in Outcome Identification and Valuation

Stakeholder Group	Function in VOI/SROI	Rationale for Inclusion in Free & Fresh Evaluation
CCPL Staff (leadership, community engagement team, and branch staff)	Primary contributors to both input and outcome identification and prioritization	Staff are closely embedded in program delivery and routinely observe participant needs, utilization patterns, and operational considerations. Their implementation perspective supports identification of outcomes that are meaningful, observable, and feasible to measure.
Program Patrons (fridge users)	Outcome validation, contextualization, and qualitative insight into lived experience	Patron engagement ensures that prioritized outcomes reflect participant experiences. Focus groups provide depth regarding perceived change and help anchor valuation assumptions while minimizing participant burden.
Community Partners	Identification of system-level outcomes, ripple effects, and contribution pathways	Partners provide insight into broader organizational and community impacts, supporting assessment of attribution, ecosystem effects, and indirect value creation.

Primary data collection included: a brief **staff survey**, two structured and facilitated **focus groups with community members**, one facilitated **mapping session with partners/key stakeholders**. Secondary data sources included: **program records** and administrative documentation, a cross-sectional **survey among community members**, a **needs assessment** conducted as another study for CCPL, and peer-reviewed **literature** and established financial proxy sources. All data were triangulated across all sources to strengthen analytic credibility and reduce reliance on any single perspective. For example, project outcomes provided by CCPL staff were corroborated by fridge patrons during focus groups. Relevant findings from secondary data are presented in Appendix E.

Staff Survey

CCPL staff completed a brief open-ended survey designed to elicit perceived program-related changes across individual, community, organizational, and systems levels. Responses were used to support the identification of outcomes and to ensure that the VOI analysis reflected implementation-informed perspectives. Staff were asked, *“What changes do you (or others) experience as a result of the Free & Fresh program? Think of all the ways the program impacts people, communities, organizations, and systems.”*

Focus Groups and Mapping Session

A structured outcome prioritization exercise was conducted during two focus groups with users of the fridge and a Ripple Effect Mapping session with partners to the program. The prioritization exercise was designed to identify and rank outcomes. Following facilitated discussion of perceived program impacts, participants engaged in an individual reflection activity to identify outcomes they considered most important. Participants were given approximately five minutes to write down key outcomes in response to the prompt: *“Of all the ways having access to a free fresh food fridge could impact people, what matters most for your life or your household?”*

Responses were grouped thematically in real time. Once the full set of outcomes was displayed, participants were invited to ask clarifying questions or provide feedback to ensure shared understanding of the outcome list. Participants then completed a ranking exercise in which they voted for the top three outcomes they believed should be prioritized based on perceived importance to their lives or households. Participants were allowed to

put all three votes towards one outcome if they wanted. The prioritized outcomes informed subsequent stages of the VOI analysis including outcome selection. Following the prioritization exercise, participants were invited to share any additional insights or impacts not previously discussed, allowing for the identification of outcomes that may not have emerged through structured ranking alone.

Analytical Approach

Outcomes were selected for monetization based on three criteria: stakeholder prioritization through the engagement process described above, availability of credible financial proxies in the peer-reviewed literature, and sufficiency of program data to calculate a defensible quantity. Outcomes that did not meet all three criteria were retained as narrative-only Value of Investment (VOI) outcomes, contributing to the story of program impact without inclusion in the monetary calculation.⁷

The total present value of monetized outcomes was calculated by summing adjusted impact values across all monetized outcomes after applying deadweight, displacement, and attribution deductions. The **VOI ratio** was then calculated as total present value divided by total program investment (Figure 1).

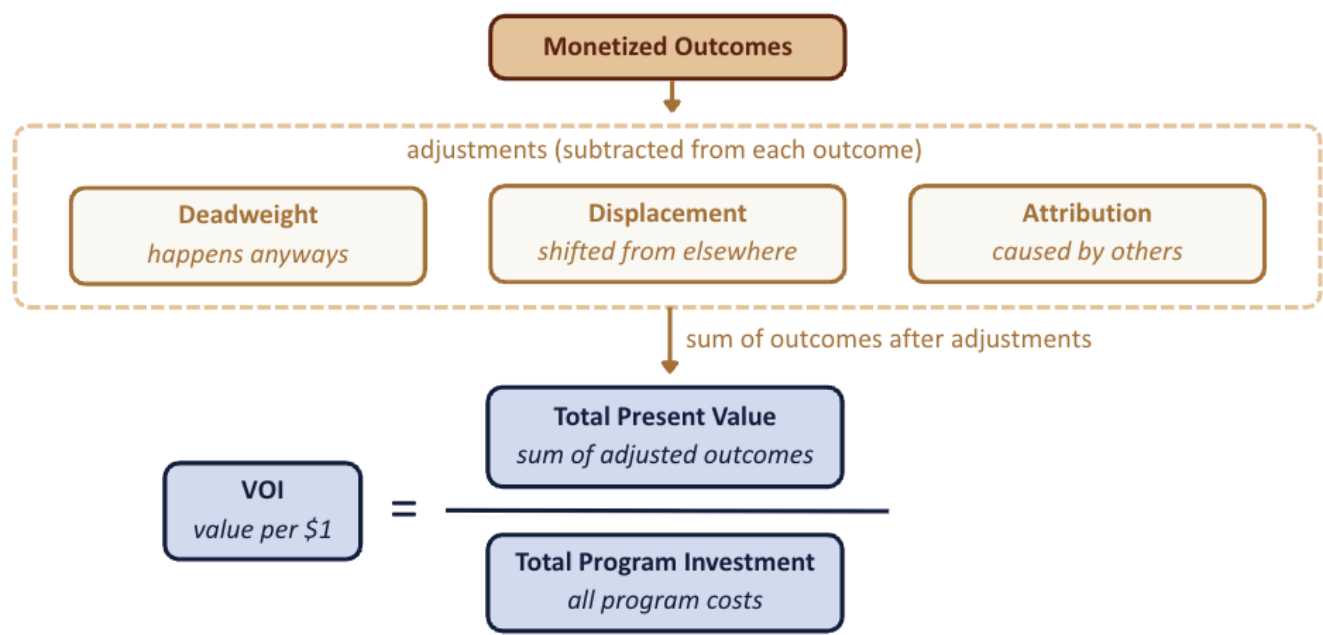


Figure 1. VOI ratio calculation.

To test the robustness of the VOI ratio to changes in key assumptions, a one-variable-at-a-time (OAT) sensitivity analysis was conducted.⁷ Four variables (financial proxy value, quantity of stakeholders, deadweight, and attribution) were halved and doubled in isolation for each of the three outcomes accounting for the largest share of total monetized value. The resulting range of VOI ratios is reported in the Results section.

Program Input Measurement Strategy

Program inputs were defined as all financial and in-kind resources required to implement and sustain Free & Fresh across three library branch locations. Including in-kind resources was consistent with the SROI principle of accounting for the full value of resources invested rather than budgeted expenditures alone.⁸ Inputs were organized into four categories: produce, fridges and maintenance, supplies, and staff time. Purchased produce

was valued at the actual unit cost paid by CCPL (averaging \$0.93 per pound). Donated produce was assigned the same per-pound value rather than retail market value, applying a conservative in-kind valuation approach.⁷ However, given that organizations involved in Charleston's Community Health Improvement Plan have identified prioritizing food security through collective impact, we have also included a secondary VOI calculation where donated produce was left as in-kind. Staff time was monetized using the percentage of effort allocated to the program multiplied by each staff member's annual salary.

Program Outcome Measurement Strategy

Outcomes were measured using a combination of directly observed program data, validated self-report instruments, and modeled estimates drawn from peer-reviewed literature. To isolate the value attributable to the Free & Fresh program specifically, each monetized outcome was adjusted for three counterfactual factors: deadweight, displacement, and attribution. **Deadweight** was defined as the proportion of the outcome that would have occurred even without the program. **Displacement**, which captures whether outcomes generated by a program come at the expense of comparable outcomes for others, was set to 0% for all monetized outcomes because Free & Fresh adds to rather than replaces existing food access infrastructure. **Attribution** was defined as the percentage of the outcome that is due to other organizations, people, or factors outside of Free & Fresh.

Increased Access to Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

Indicator: A financial proxy of \$2.00/lb was applied, a conservative figure relative to the USDA ERS Fruit and Vegetable Prices data, in which the average per-pound retail price across 66 fresh fruits and vegetables was \$2.41 (median \$2.13). The \$2.00/lb proxy sits below the median, consistent with the SROI principle of not overclaiming.⁹

Quantity: Program logs for FY2025 (October 2024 - September 2025) provided administrative data on total pounds of produce distributed across three library branch locations (58,470.5 lbs).

Adjustments: A deadweight of 20% and attribution of 15% were applied, consistent with other SROI studies with comparable outcomes.⁷ The 20% deadweight reflects the proportion of recipients who may have accessed fresh produce through alternative channels (e.g., other food assistance programs, family support) in the absence of Free & Fresh, while the 15% attribution accounts for the contributions of donors, partner organizations, and broader community resources that support produce access in Charleston County.

Time Saved Accessing Food

Indicator: Because Free & Fresh does not require enrollment, paperwork, or eligibility verification, we estimate time saved by comparing this model (no access requirement) to traditional food assistance programs. Time saved was valued at \$15.00 per hour applied to an estimated 20 minutes saved per visit (\$5.00 per visit). Although the Charleston-North Charleston MSA mean hourly wage was \$29.65 in May 2024, 8/8/26 12:30:00 PM a more conservative rate was applied to reflect the demographic profile of Free & Fresh users, who skew older (46% age 60+) and lower-income (77.8% food-insecure), consistent with SROI guidance to use the wage rate most representative of the affected population.⁸

Quantity: Program logs for FY2025 (October 2024 - September 2025) provided administrative data on total fridge uses (n=21,740). Fridge use was recorded each time an item was taken from the fridge across all three library branch locations in FY25.

Adjustments: A deadweight of 20% and attribution of 15% were applied, consistent with other SROI studies with comparable outcomes.⁷ The 20% deadweight reflects that some users would have obtained produce through other lower-barrier channels even without the program, while the 15% attribution accounts for the role of partner organizations and the library's broader infrastructure in enabling the no-barrier, walk-in model that generates the time savings.

Reduced Transportation Costs

Indicator: Reduced transportation costs were valued at \$2.10 per visit, calculated as a conservative 3-mile round-trip distance multiplied by the IRS 2025 standard business mileage rate of \$0.70 per mile.¹¹ The IRS rate is a conservative measure compared to local public transit fares in Charleston (CARTA single-ride fare \$2.00; senior fare \$1.00).¹² The USDA Food Access Research Atlas defines a food desert in urban areas as a census tract where a significant portion of residents lives more than 1 mile from a supermarket, and in rural areas, more than 10 miles. Charleston County is mixed urban/rural, so a 1.5-mile one-way / 3-mile round-trip assumption for a Charleston food-insecure user is consistent with the USDA's urban food desert threshold.¹³

Quantity: Program logs for FY2025 (October 2024 - September 2025) provided administrative data on total fridge uses (n=21,740). Fridge use was recorded each time an item was taken from the fridge across all three library branch locations in FY25.

Adjustments: A deadweight of 25% and attribution of 15% were applied. The 25% deadweight, slightly higher than the 20% applied to produce access and time saved, reflects that a portion of Free & Fresh visits occurred during trips users were already making to the library for other purposes, meaning a transportation cost would not have been avoided in those cases. The 15% attribution is consistent with other SROI studies with comparable outcomes⁷ and acknowledges the contribution of CCPL's branch network infrastructure, which is funded and maintained independently of the Free & Fresh program.

Avoided Healthcare Costs / Increased Fruit and Vegetable Consumption

Indicator: Avoided healthcare costs were valued at \$1,834 per food-insecure user per year, drawn from a study published by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention which used linked 2011–2013 National Health Interview Survey/Medical Expenditure Panel Survey data (NHIS/MEPS) data to estimate average health care costs associated with food insecurity.¹⁴ This still remains conservative because Medicare-specific estimates are substantially higher and a large percentage (46%) of the Free & Fresh user base was age 60+.

Quantity: Because the Free & Fresh program does not collect individual-level registration data, a unique user estimate was derived indirectly. A cross-sectional patron survey (n = 104) was administered at all branches to assess participant-reported outcomes, including frequency of fridge use, primary reason for access, self-reported change in fruit and vegetable consumption, and food insecurity status using the validated USDA 2-Item Food Security Screener. Survey data on fridge use frequency were used to calculate a weighted average visit rate of approximately 63.4 visits per person per year, based on the observed distribution of daily (10.6%), weekly (65.4%), monthly (11.5%), and rare (12.5%) users; dividing total annual uses (21,740) by this weighted average yielded an estimated 343 unique users (conservative upper bound: 418, assuming all users visit weekly). Food insecurity prevalence was calculated using the standard USDA scoring protocol, in which a response of "often true" or "sometimes true" on either screener item was classified as food insecure; of the 54 respondents who answered both items, 77.8% were classified as food insecure, substantially higher than the 2024 national prevalence of 13.7% reported by the USDA Economic Research Service and consistent with the program's reach

into high-need populations. For the avoided healthcare costs outcome, the unique user estimate was restricted to the food-insecure subset (n = 267), aligning the denominator with the population to which the financial proxy applies. This approach is consistent with SROI guidance to use best-available estimates when exact comparisons are not possible.⁸

Adjustments: To account for the indirect causal pathway between fresh produce access and healthcare expenditure, and the many concurrent determinants of healthcare utilization, higher deadweight (50%) and attribution (50%) adjustments were applied than for outcomes with more direct causal links to the program.

Reduced Food Waste

Indicator: Reduced food waste was valued at \$0.033 per pound, calculated from the Charleston County Environmental Management tipping fee (i.e., disposal fee) of \$66 per ton at the Bees Ferry Landfill (\$66.00 ÷ 2,000 lbs = \$0.033/lb).¹⁵ This is the actual per-ton disposal cost charged within Charleston County for municipal solid waste, making it the most geographically appropriate proxy for waste diversion attributable to a Charleston-based food rescue program.

Quantity: Program logs for FY2025 (October 2024 - September 2025) provided administrative data on total pounds of produce distributed across three library branch locations (58,470.5 lbs).

Adjustments: A deadweight of 15% and attribution of 10% were applied, consistent with other SROI studies with comparable outcomes.⁷ The 15% deadweight reflects that some donated produce might have been composted, redistributed, or otherwise diverted from landfill by donors even in the absence of Free & Fresh. The 10% attribution acknowledges that food donors, logistics partners, and the library's collection infrastructure all contribute to successful diversion, with the program itself responsible for the majority of the diverted volume.

Results

Program Inputs

Total investment in the Free & Fresh program during FY2025 was **\$106,567** when donated produce was included as a monetized cost, or **\$94,166** when donated produce was treated as in-kind support. The former figure is used as the primary investment denominator throughout this report. Across input categories, produce accounted for the largest share of investment (51%), followed by staff time (36%), fridges and maintenance (12%), and supplies and tracking equipment (1%). Table 2 presents the full breakdown of inputs by category.

Table 2. Free & Fresh Program Inputs, FY2025

Input Category	Detail	Annual Value
Produce purchased	45,136 lbs at \$0.93/lb	\$41,976
Produce donated	13,335 lbs at \$0.93/lb (cost-based valuation)	\$12,401
Fridges and maintenance	Three branch fridges + one HQ fridge	\$12,608
Staff time	Branch staff, Community Engagement, Outreach, Marketing/Communications	\$38,510

Input Category	Detail	Annual Value
Supplies	Printed materials, bags, baskets, branding	\$617
Tracking equipment	Door counter, scale	\$455
Total (donated produce as cost)		\$106,567
Total (donated produce as in-kind)		\$94,166

Monetized Outcomes

Five outcomes met the three criteria for full monetization (stakeholder prioritization, availability of a credible financial proxy, and sufficient program data to calculate a defensible quantity). After applying deadweight, displacement, and attribution adjustments, these five outcomes generated a total adjusted present value of **\$306,279**. Table 3 presents each monetized outcome with its quantity, financial proxy, adjustment factors, and resulting impact value.

Table 3. Monetized Outcomes of the Free & Fresh Program, FY2025

Outcome	Quantity	Financial Proxy	DW	Attr	Impact
Avoided healthcare costs	267 food-insecure users	\$1,834/year ¹⁴	50%	50%	\$122,353
Increased access to fresh produce	58,471 lbs distributed	\$2.00/lb ⁹	20%	15%	\$79,520
Time saved accessing food	21,740 visits	\$5.00/visit (20 min × \$15/hr)	20%	15%	\$73,916
Reduced transportation costs	21,740 visits	\$2.10/visit (3 mi × 2025 IRS rate of \$0.70/mi)	25%	15%	\$29,104
Reduced food waste	58,471 lbs diverted	\$0.033/lb ¹⁶	15%	10%	\$1,387
Total Adjusted Present Value					\$306,279

Note: Displacement was set to 0% for all outcomes (see Methods). DW = deadweight; Attr = attribution.

Avoided healthcare costs contributed the largest single share of monetized value (40%), followed by increased produce access (26%), time saved (24%), reduced transportation costs (10%), and reduced food waste (less than 1%).

Value on Investment Ratio

The VOI ratio for FY2025 was **2.87:1**, indicating that **every \$1 invested in the Free & Fresh program generated an estimated \$2.87 in social value for Charleston County**. In other words, Free & Fresh generated almost \$3 in community benefit for every \$1 spent, **nearly tripling its value to the community for every dollar invested**. When donated produce was treated as in-kind rather than as a monetized cost, the ratio was 3.25:1, indicating that every \$1 invested in the Free & Fresh program (given the existing collective impact from partnering organizations) generated an estimated \$3.25 in social value for Charleston County. The 2.87:1 figure is reported as the primary result because it reflects the more conservative interpretation of total resource value.

3X \$

Free & Fresh program returned \$2.87 in social value for every \$1 invested. The program **triples its value to the community for every dollar spent.**

Sensitivity Analysis

To ensure confidence in the VOI assumptions, a sensitivity analysis was performed. This analysis tested the significance of three outcomes as the most sensitive areas, accounting for approximately 90% of total monetized value: avoided healthcare costs, increased produce access, and time saved. Each of four variables (financial proxy value, quantity of stakeholders, deadweight, and attribution) was halved and doubled in isolation, generating 24 scenarios per the methodology described in the Methods section. The resulting VOI ratio ranged from **1.73:1 to 4.02:1**, indicating that the outcomes are not overly sensitive to change. The lowest ratio (1.73:1) occurred when either deadweight or attribution on avoided healthcare costs was doubled to 100%, effectively zeroing out that outcome's contribution. The highest ratio (4.02:1) occurred when either the financial proxy or the quantity for avoided healthcare costs was doubled. This analysis further confirms that Free & Fresh is responsible for much of the change experienced.

Narrative-Only VOI Outcomes

In addition to the five monetized outcomes, 19 outcomes were retained as narrative-only VOI outcomes or outcomes for which there was credible stakeholder-reported evidence of impact but insufficient program data, validated indicators, or credible financial proxies to support monetization. These outcomes are reported here to contribute to the full narrative of program impact without being included in the monetary calculation. The narrative-only outcomes are grouped into three thematic categories below, with representative stakeholder voices.

Participant Economic Security and Household Stability

Free & Fresh patrons consistently reported that the program reduces the financial burden of accessing fresh, healthy food, particularly during a period of rising grocery costs. Narrative only outcomes included:

1. Reduced need for emergency / high-cost food purchases
2. Improved household food security
3. Reduced financial tradeoffs between food and essentials
4. Reduced reliance on other food assistance

In the prioritization exercises, "**Reduces Financial Burden**" received the highest number of votes, confirming that economic relief is the outcome patrons themselves rank as most important (Table 4). Staff observations align with this finding, describing the program as a mechanism that allows households to "divert household funds to other items" because they can obtain fresh produce at no cost. Several staff specifically noted the importance of this savings for fixed-income patrons, including elderly community members and families

navigating high grocery costs. Free & Fresh thus appears to function as a partial substitute for grocery expenditure, freeing household resources for other essentials such as rent, utilities, and medical costs.

Table 4. Patron and Partner Prioritized Outcomes

Outcome (combined ranking)	Hollywood Branch (community member votes)	Otranto Branch (community member votes)	Ripple Effect Mapping Session (partner votes)	Combined Total Votes
Reduces financial burden	10	6	n/a	16
Increases community connection, collective impact	11	n/a	5	16
Improves health	9	2	4	15
Improves food access (reliable, close by, available to all, fresh/high quality produce)	3	2	8	13
Provides nutrition education and meal planning	n/a	2	1	3

Note: Participants ranked their top three priority outcomes from a facilitated discussion of perceived program impacts. Hollywood and Otranto figures represent patron focus group votes; Ripple Effect Mapping figures represent CCPL leadership and community partner votes. Outcomes are sorted by combined ranking across all three exercises.

Nutrition, Health, and Wellbeing

Stakeholders identified a wide range of nutrition- and health-related benefits that emerged consistently across staff surveys, leadership mapping, and patron prioritization. Narrative only outcomes included:

1. Increased fruit and vegetable consumption
2. Improved diet quality (e.g., larger range of fruits and vegetables)
3. Improved nutrition awareness and food education
4. Improved ability to prepare healthy meals
5. Improved ability to provide healthy meals for children
6. Reduced stress and anxiety (especially related to food insecurity)
7. Reduced chronic disease burden over time

Patrons ranked **"Improves Health"** as a top three priority outcome and CCPL leadership identified specific clinical pathways through which the program may contribute to long-term health, including improved cholesterol, weight management, fiber intake, and overall nutrient intake. Staff described the program as a vehicle for introducing patrons, particularly children and elderly users, to new produce items they might not otherwise try or be able to afford, citing examples ranging from acorn squash and rainbow carrots to kiwis, avocados, and oyster mushrooms; patrons confirmed this to be true. Multiple staff members reported that children grab fruit as an after-school snack, that older students who arrive too late for the Kids Cafe snack program are able to get fruit instead, and that elderly patrons on fixed incomes rely on the fridge for healthy

meal planning. Staff also reported that patrons with diet-sensitive chronic conditions (diabetes, hypertension, kidney disease) appear to benefit from increased access to fresh, less-processed food; patrons confirmed this to be true.

Community, Organizational, and Systems-Level Effects

Narrative outcomes at the community and organizational level were particularly rich and convergent across stakeholder groups. Narrative only outcomes included:

1. Reduced stigma accessing food
2. Strengthened community engagement and trust
3. Enhanced CCPL reputation and goodwill
4. CCPL becomes a safe space and resource hub
5. Improved staff sense of purpose and connection
6. Increased partnerships
7. Reduced demand on emergency food systems
8. Support for scalable, low-barrier prevention models

CCPL leadership and staff identified the program as a driver of trust-building between the library and the community, with multiple staff describing how Free & Fresh "brings in patrons for more than just the fridge." Leadership noted that patrons who arrive for produce often browse the collection, use computers, or learn about other library programs and resources. Leadership specifically identified Free & Fresh as a stigma-reducing alternative to traditional food assistance, noting that the no-eligibility, no-sign-up model removes barriers commonly associated with means-tested programs. Patrons themselves prioritized **"Increases Community Connection"**, confirming that community-building is not only a staff observation but a felt experience among users.

Free & Fresh also appears to function as a catalyst for additional community contributions. Staff reported that patrons donate non-perishable items and home-grown produce, that local farms and organizations (e.g., Stone Soup Collective) regularly donate prepared food and produce, and that the program has brought entirely new patrons into the library system. Staff at multiple branches identified the library's role as a **"third space"** and **"resource hub"**, a finding echoed in the prioritization exercises. Together these effects suggest that Free & Fresh generates value that extends substantially beyond direct food distribution, contributing to library engagement, community cohesion, organizational reputation, and the broader food access ecosystem in Charleston County.

Discussion

This study finds that the Free & Fresh program generated an estimated \$2.87 in social value for every \$1 invested during FY2025 (or \$3.25 when donated produce is treated as in-kind), translating \$106,567 in program investment into \$306,279 of monetized social value across five outcomes spanning produce access, time and transportation savings, avoided healthcare costs, and waste diversion. This return remained strong despite conservative assumptions and was accompanied by 19 additional stakeholder-prioritized benefits, including reduced financial burden, stronger community connection, and reduced stigma, that could not be monetized with available data.

These findings give CCPL a defensible, deliberately conservative evidence base for funding proposals and stakeholder engagement, demonstrating that Free & Fresh returns measurable social value well in excess of its cost and providing a quantified case for sustaining, expanding, or replicating the no-barrier produce model across additional branches and communities.

To our knowledge, this is the first published Social Return on Investment or Value on Investment analysis of a public library-based, no-barrier fresh produce access program in the United States. This study therefore makes two contributions to the literature: it provides the first US-based SROI/VOI estimate for a library-embedded produce access program, and it applies a VOI framing within an SROI methodology. Additional SROI/VOI analyses are still needed to establish a national evidence base, refine financial proxies for US contexts, and enable meaningful cross-program comparison.

The Free & Fresh VOI ratio of 2.87:1 (3.25:1 with donated produce treated as in-kind) sits comfortably within the range reported by broader peer-reviewed SROI analyses of comparable food programs. Johnston et al. (2025) conducted an evaluative SROI of a free-meal program for rural cancer patients and found that every dollar invested returned an estimated AU\$3.06 in social value.¹⁷ Martin et al. (2022) evaluated a Canadian urban food-bank garden and conservatively estimated \$1.61 in social value per dollar invested.¹⁸ Clare et al. (2023) reported a forecast SROI of 4.5:1 across three New Zealand food-rescue organizations⁷; the Free & Fresh ratio is lower, but this is consistent with the tendency of forecast analyses, which model intended rather than realized outcomes, to produce higher ratios than evaluative ones. More broadly, a systematic review of 40 public-health SROI studies across all topic areas (three of which were related to nutrition), found ratios ranging from 1.1:1 to 65:1¹⁹, placing Free & Fresh toward the conservative lower-middle of the published distribution. Finally, although it uses a narrower healthcare-cost framing rather than full social-value monetization, a US review of social-determinants-of-health interventions found that food-insecurity programs returned a positive average ROI of 85%,²⁰ indicating that the positive direction and magnitude of the Free & Fresh result are in line with broader US evidence.

Limitations

Several limitations of this analysis warrant acknowledgement, both to support appropriate interpretation of the findings and to identify priorities for strengthening future evaluations of the Free & Fresh program.

Survey representativeness and food insecurity prevalence. The patron survey (n = 104) was administered during fridge stocking events across CCPL branches, which may have over-sampled regular fridge users and under-sampled occasional or one-time users. Additionally, only 54 respondents completed both items of the USDA 2-Item Food Security Screener, meaning the 77.8% food insecurity prevalence rate used to filter the avoided healthcare costs denominator is based on roughly half the full survey sample. This rate is substantially higher than the 2024 national prevalence of 13.7% reported by USDA ERS, which is consistent with the program's intentional reach into high-need populations but should be interpreted as describing the responding subset rather than the full user base.

Avoided healthcare costs as a modeled rather than measured outcome. Avoided healthcare costs accounted for approximately 40% of total monetized value but were estimated using a financial proxy rather than measured directly in Free & Fresh participants. The estimate (\$1,834/year) reflects the cross-sectional association between food insecurity and healthcare expenditure in a national sample, not a causal effect of

receiving free produce. To account for this indirect causal pathway and the many concurrent determinants of healthcare utilization, elevated deadweight (50%) and attribution (50%) adjustments were applied. The sensitivity analysis confirmed that this outcome is the single largest driver of the overall VOI ratio: doubling either deadweight or attribution on this outcome reduced the ratio to 1.73:1, while halving either variable raised it above 3.45:1. Until intervention-level evidence linking community produce access to measurable healthcare cost reductions becomes available, this outcome should be interpreted as the most uncertain element of the analysis.

Use of national financial proxies in a local context. Several financial proxies were drawn from national or regional benchmarks rather than Charleston-specific data, including the USDA ERS national-average produce prices, the national healthcare expenditure differential, and the IRS standard business mileage rate. Charleston-specific data were used when available, such as the Charleston County Bees Ferry Landfill tipping fee for reduced food waste, the Charleston-North Charleston MSA wage data for time saved, and CARTA fares for transportation costs. The national proxies are the established standards in the peer-reviewed food access SROI literature, but they may not perfectly reflect local market conditions in Charleston County.

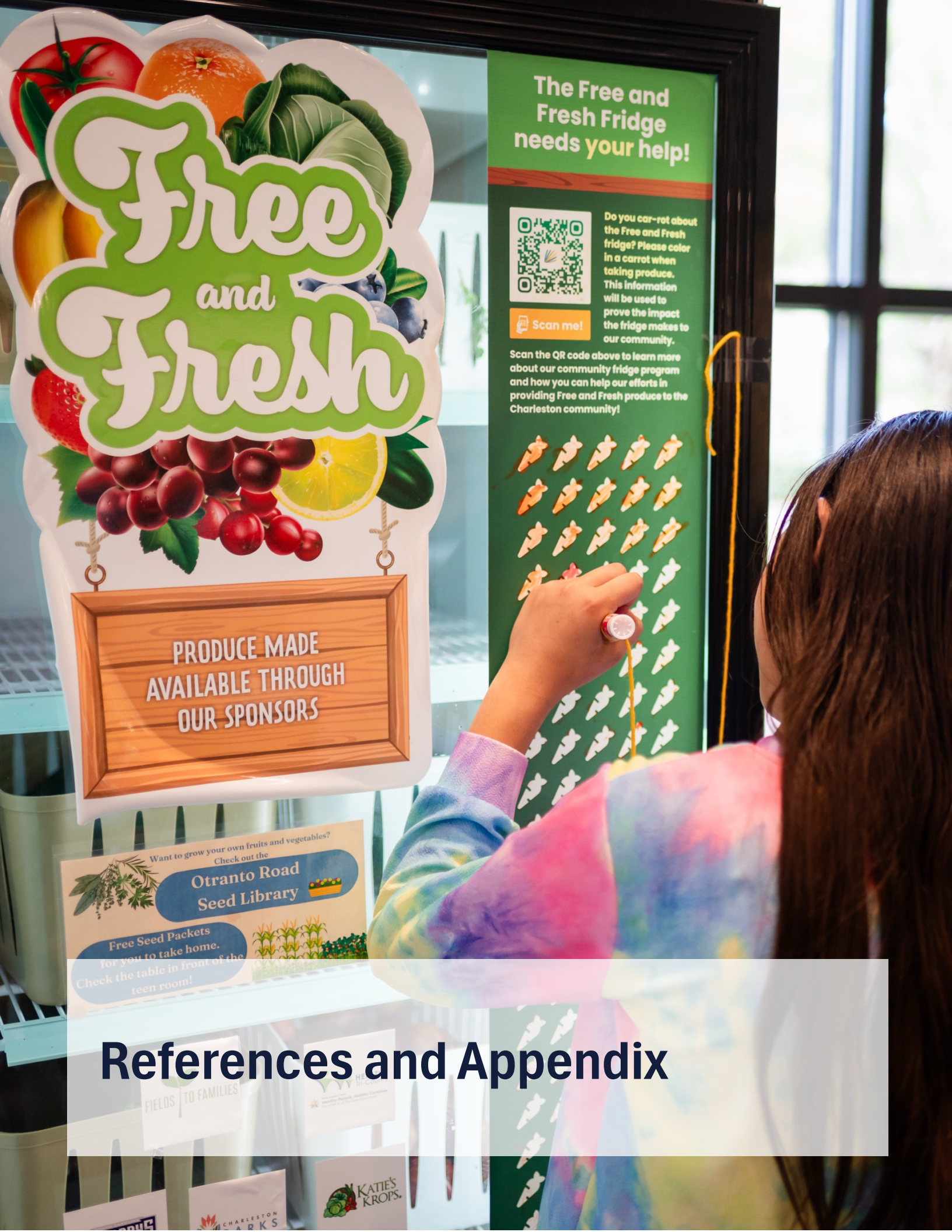
Conservative wage assumption for time saved. Time saved was valued at \$15.00 per hour, below the May 2024 Charleston-North Charleston MSA mean hourly wage of \$29.65, to reflect the older (46% age 60+) and lower-income (77.8% food-insecure) profile of Free & Fresh users. While this choice aligns with SROI guidance to use the wage rate most representative of the affected population, the appropriate hourly value of time for retired, unemployed, or fixed-income individuals is not well established in the literature. Sensitivity analysis confirmed that the VOI ratio is robust to halving or doubling this assumption.

Outcomes not included due to insufficient evidence. Nineteen outcomes were retained as narrative-only rather than monetized due to insufficient program data, validated indicators, or credible financial proxies. The total VOI ratio therefore reflects only the subset of outcomes for which all three monetization criteria were satisfied; the true social value generated by Free & Fresh is likely greater than the \$2.87 per dollar invested reported here.

No direct comparison to peer-reviewed VOI/SROI findings for similar US food access programs. The only directly comparable peer-reviewed study is Clare et al. (2023), which evaluated three food rescue organizations in Aotearoa New Zealand and reported a multi-case SROI ratio of 4.5:1.⁷ The Free & Fresh VOI ratio of 2.87:1 is somewhat lower but within a comparable range, while differences in healthcare financing, social safety net structures, and methodological conventions for financial proxy selection limit direct cross-country comparison.

Conclusion

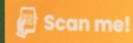
The Free & Fresh program demonstrates that a no-barrier, library-embedded model of fresh produce access can generate substantial and measurable value for the community it serves. Applying a deliberately conservative Value on Investment framework, this evaluation estimated that the program returned \$2.87 in social value for every \$1 invested. This represents that **Free & Fresh generated nearly threefold the value of the resources invested**. In addition to monetary return, the program presents other intrinsic value to the patrons and community, from improved nutrition and household stability to reduced stigma and stronger community connection.



The Free and Fresh Fridge needs **your** help!



Do you car-rot about the Free and Fresh fridge? Please color in a carrot when taking produce. This information will be used to prove the impact the fridge makes to our community.



Scan the QR code above to learn more about our community fridge program and how you can help our efforts in providing Free and Fresh produce to the Charleston community!



PRODUCE MADE
AVAILABLE THROUGH
OUR SPONSORS

Want to grow your own fruits and vegetables?
Check out the

Otranto Road
Seed Library

Free Seed Packets
for you to take home.
Check the table in front of the
teen room!

References and Appendix

FIELDS TO FAMILIES



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Appendix A: Community Focus Group Discussion Guide

Introductions

Welcome and thank you for sharing your time to participate in this community listening session. I am Maria McClam and I am the director of a small public health evaluation consulting business here in Charleston. I am joined by my colleague Lesley Leake, who will be helping take notes and keep our session running smoothly.

We are partnering with the Charleston County Public Library to conduct this community listening session. This session is a part of a larger evaluation of their Free & Fresh program, which includes the fresh food fridge and the nutrition information cards that are placed by the fridge. The goal is to show how the fridge impacts the community. So, we are here today to ask you all some questions about your experience with the fridge and how it has made a difference to you so we can “tell the story” behind how it impacts people. Information that you share with us about the Free & Fresh program will be used to show how it is helping people and how it could better serve the community.

I’m here to keep the conversation going, so please talk amongst yourselves. During our discussion today, there are no right or wrong answers. We all have different experiences, so we don’t to agree today and if you have had a different experience than someone, please do share that so we can learn more. We will ask you to keep confidential anything you hear shared here today- so do not share anything you hear here today.

Your participation in this session is voluntary. You can share as little or much as you feel comfortable with, and you can stop participating at any time. Your responses will be recorded by the notetaker, but your name and other identifiable information will be removed. The information you share with us today will be reported to the library. BUT, the report will only be a summary of what we hear. You will not be identified by name in the report and what you say will not be associated with your name. Do you all have any questions about that?

*And last, to help us with the report, do you all feel comfortable if we record the session for our notes? If you are comfortable with all of this, please give me a thumbs up and we can proceed with our session. **[START RECORDER].***

Does anyone have any questions before we get started?

Focus Group Questions:

1. Please tell us what you’d like us to call you (e.g. first name) and how you first heard about the fridge.

2. Think back to before you ever used the fridge... what was it like to get access to fresh food?
3. What about the Free & Fresh program has been the most helpful to you?
Probe: What do you like most about the fridge—what's working well for you?
Probe: Do you use the recipe cards? Community resource guides?
4. How has the fridge made a difference in your daily life, your household, or your ability to get fresh food?
5. What could make using the fridge easier?
Probe: Have you experienced any challenges when trying to use the fridge?
Probe: If you could change or add one thing to the Free & Fresh program to better meet your needs, what would it be?
6. If you were in charge of the Free & Fresh program, what would you make sure to do?
Probe: what would you be sure NOT to do?
7. As I stated when we started, the purpose of this discussion is to learn more about how the fridge has impacted you. So, what else do you think that I need to know about the program that we haven't talked about?

Distribute Demographic Survey

Appendix B: Prioritization Exercise

Prioritization Exercise [last 10-15 min]

So, now, I've heard you generate some great ideas about ways the program has helped you. We would also like to do one other exercise with you. Part of the feedback you have shared today will feed into a study that will show the value of the fridge by ranking all the potential outcomes that having access to a fridge brings to a community.

We want to prioritize some of what you mentioned on the impacts that the program has.

1) Sticky Notes: Impacts

Please take about 5 minutes to

Given our conversation, write down 5 of the most important impacts that this program has on people and the community.

Probe: If you're struggling to think of something, think about what benefits have you experienced. Or all the ways having access to a free fridge could impact people.

Use the sticky notes that are provided to write one idea per note to answer the question

When you're finished, come bring them up here

Moderator should work to group ideas by theme as they are provided. Proceed until all members' ideas have been documented.

2) Sticky Dots: Prioritize

*Now, let's make sure we are all on the same page with these ideas. **Moderator introduces themes.** Are there any questions or comments about what we've put up here, so far?*

Okay, now we are going to prioritize these by what matters most to you.

Of all the ways the program impacts people, what matters most to you?

You will be given 3 stickers, place a sticker on the three that you feel are most important.

Feel free to put all 3 stickers on one topic.

That concludes our session. As I said earlier, community members perspectives and experiences are very important. What you shared today will help shape the investment of money into the fridge, so we thank you for your time and participation.

Appendix C: Demographic Survey

Focus Group Participant Survey

Please answer the following questions. We need this information to help us describe the types of people who participated. All information will be kept confidential. Your answers will not be linked to you, SO PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ANYWHERE ON THIS SURVEY.

About how long have you been using the Free & Fresh program?

- ☐ I am not currently using it
- ☐ Less than a month
- ☐ 1-3 months
- ☐ 4-9 months
- ☐ 9 months or longer

How did you travel here today?

- ☐ I drove a car
- ☐ I rode in a car driven by a family member or friend
- ☐ I walked
- ☐ I took the bus
- ☐ Other _____

Which of the following describes you? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Black/African American
- ☐ White
- ☐ Hispanic or Latinx
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Other _____

Prefer not to say

Please check your age group.

- ☐ 18-20
- ☐ 20-25
- ☐ 26-29
- ☐ 30-35
- ☐ 36-59
- ☐ 40-45
- ☐ 46-49
- ☐ 50+

What is your home zip code?

Are you?

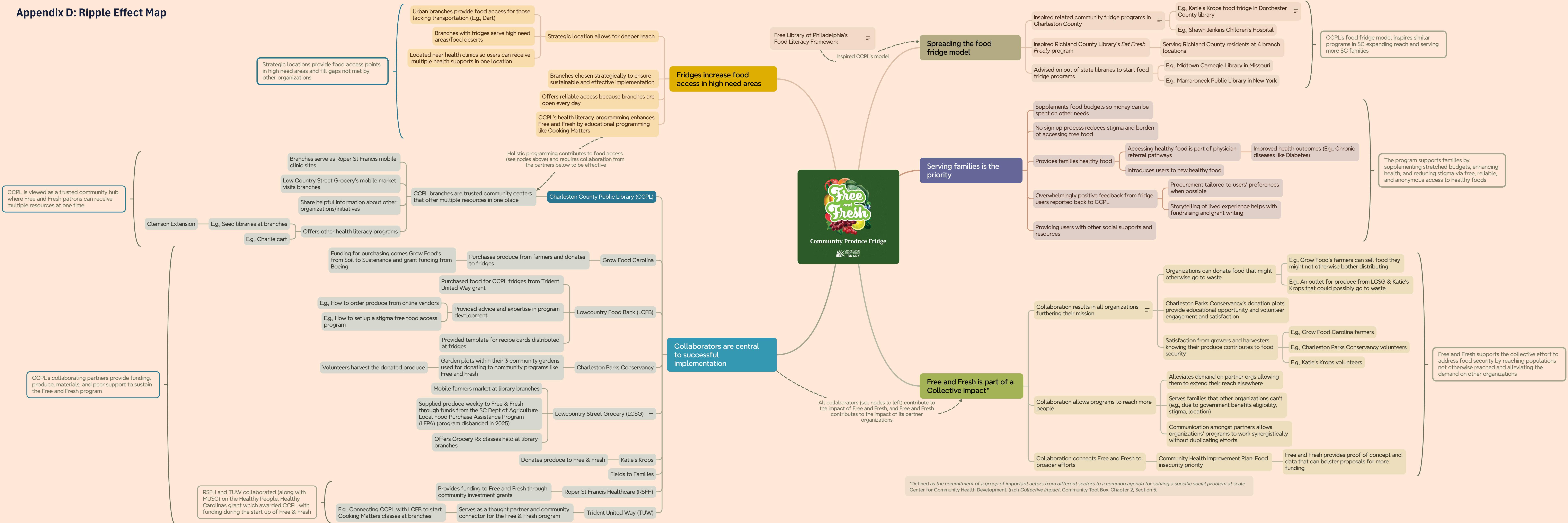
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to say

How important is the Free & Fresh program (i.e. the fridge) to your ability to eat healthy?

- ☐ Extremely important
- ☐ Somewhat important
- ☐ Slightly important
- ☐ Not important
- ☐ Don't know / Not Sure

Thank you for your participation!

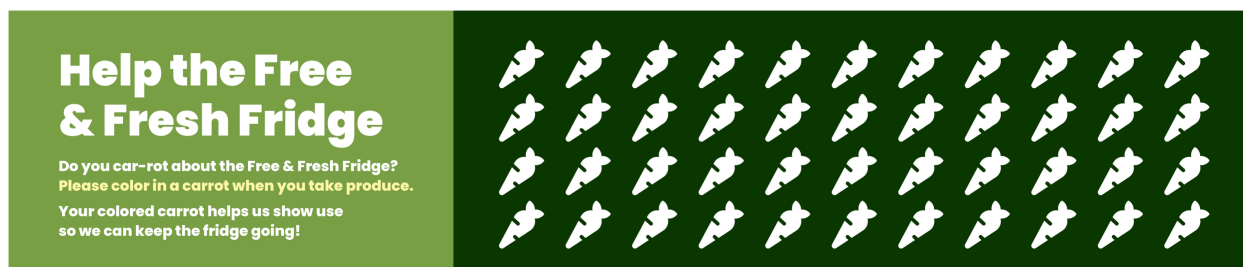
Appendix D: Ripple Effect Map



Appendix E: Relevant Secondary Data Findings

Carrot Tracker

The 'Carrot Tracker' system was used by CCPL to track total fridge uses.



Program Records for Pounds of Produce

The Free & Fresh program distributed 58,470.5 pounds of fresh produce across four Charleston County Public Library branches in FY2025.

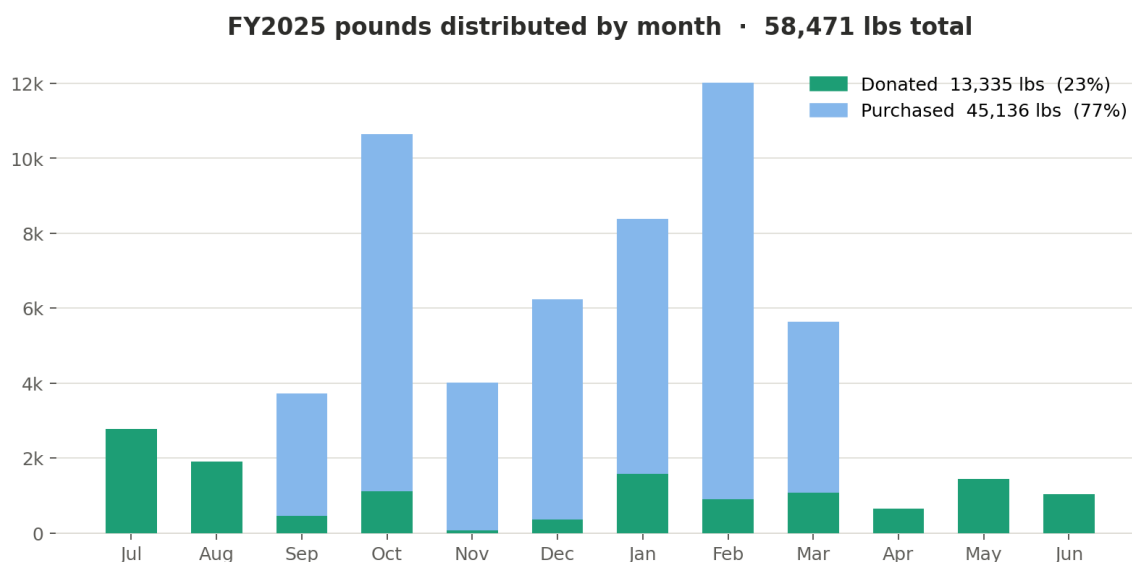


Figure 1. FY2025 pounds of produce distributed by month, donated vs. purchased.

Free & Fresh Community Survey

A cross-sectional patron survey was administered to 104 fridge users across four Charleston County Public Library branches. The cross-sectional survey included respondents from all four active program branches. Otranto Road had the highest representation (42.3%), followed by St. Paul's/Hollywood (24.0%), John L. Dart (23.1%), and Keith Summey North Charleston (10.6%). Branch representation in the survey broadly reflects program scale across locations, though Keith Summey is the newest branch and its lower share may reflect its shorter operational history rather than lower use.

Who Uses the Program?

Race and Ethnicity

The majority of cross-sectional survey respondents identified as Black or African American (56.7%), followed by White (33.7%). This racial distribution reflects the program's reach into communities of color, which face disproportionately high rates of food insecurity and diet-related chronic disease in Charleston County.

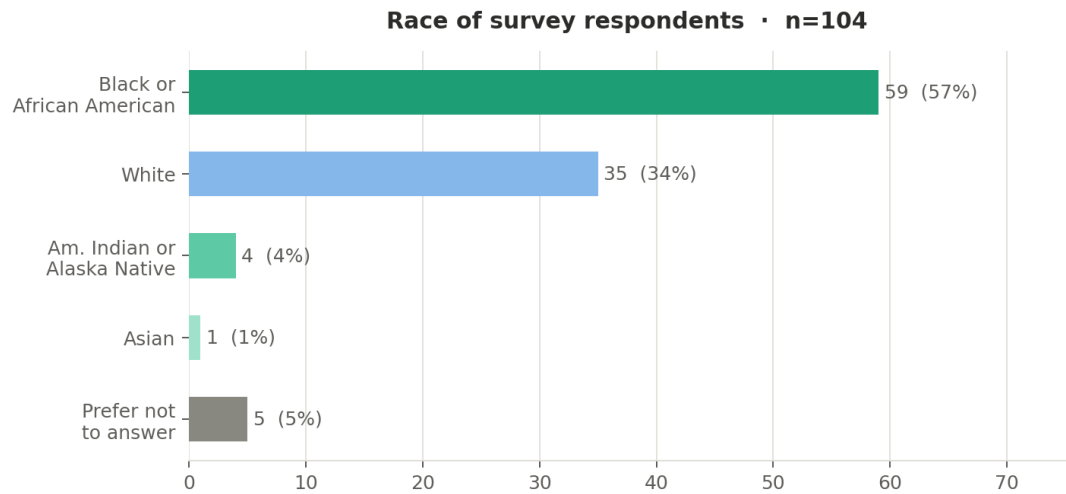


Figure 1. Race of cross-sectional survey respondents (n=104).

Age

Nearly half of survey respondents (46.2%) were aged 60 or older, making older adults the largest single age group served by the program. This is consistent with the qualitative feedback collected: many respondents described themselves as seniors on fixed incomes for whom fresh produce is otherwise inaccessible or unaffordable.

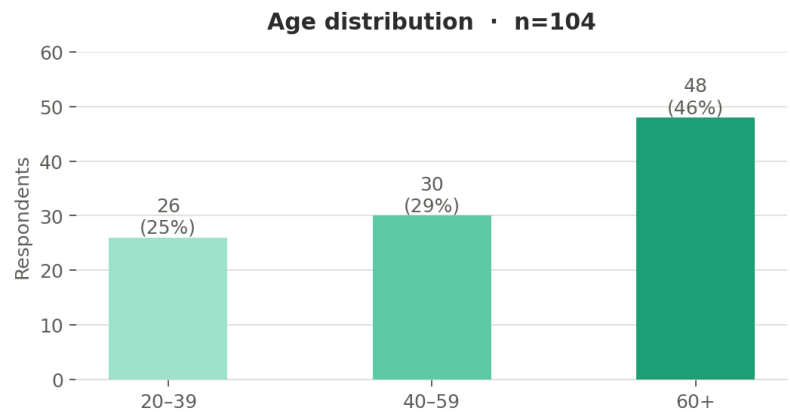


Figure 2. Age distribution of cross-sectional survey respondents (n=104).

"I'm 72 and disabled and cannot afford to eat vegetables and fruits so this program is amazing."

"I'm on a fixed income. I would very much want the program back since I am not able to buy fresh fruit and vegetables at the grocery store."

How Often and Why?

Fridge Access Frequency

The program is used frequently and consistently. Three quarters of respondents (76%) report accessing the fridge on a weekly or daily basis, indicating that for many participants this is not an occasional supplement but a regular part of how they obtain fresh produce.

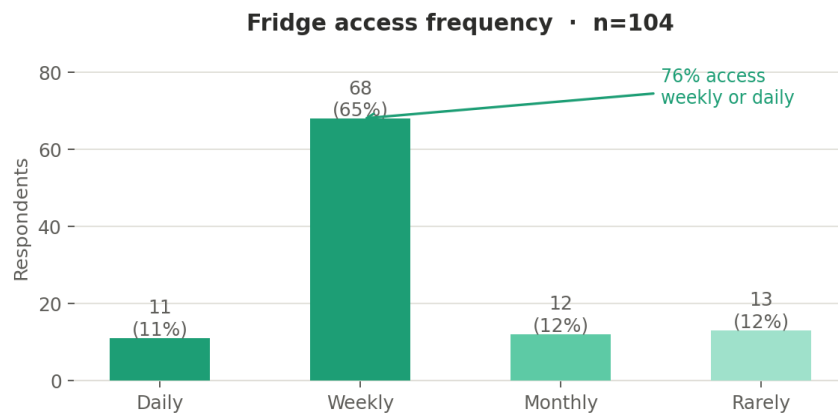


Figure 3. How often respondents access the Free & Fresh fridge (n=104).

Primary Reason for Access

When asked to identify the single strongest reason they access the fridge, 41.7% of respondents cited access to free food, followed by health benefits (32.0%) and exposure to new foods (9.7%). An additional 16.5% gave multiple reasons or open-ended responses that combined food access and health motivations.

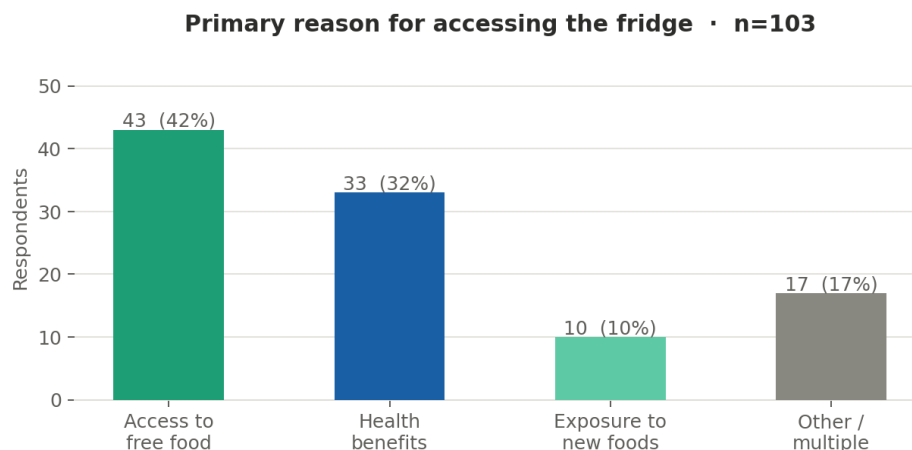


Figure 4. Primary reason for accessing the Free & Fresh fridge (n=103, 1 missing).

"Access to free and fresh veggies in the community is invaluable. Sometimes I can share food overages, sometimes I need something to put in my own pot."

"Thank you so much for doing this program. Truly made a difference in so many lives - with groceries being so expensive, it's so hard to eat healthy."

Food Security

The USDA 2-Item Food Security Screener was included in the cross-sectional survey to assess food insecurity among fridge users. Of the 54 respondents who answered both screener items, 77.8% were classified as food insecure - reporting "often true" or "sometimes true" on at least one of the two questions. This rate is nearly six times the 2024 national prevalence of 13.7% (USDA ERS, 2024), confirming that the program is reaching a high-need population. Fifty respondents did not answer the screener questions, likely reflecting survey routing or the optional nature of the items.

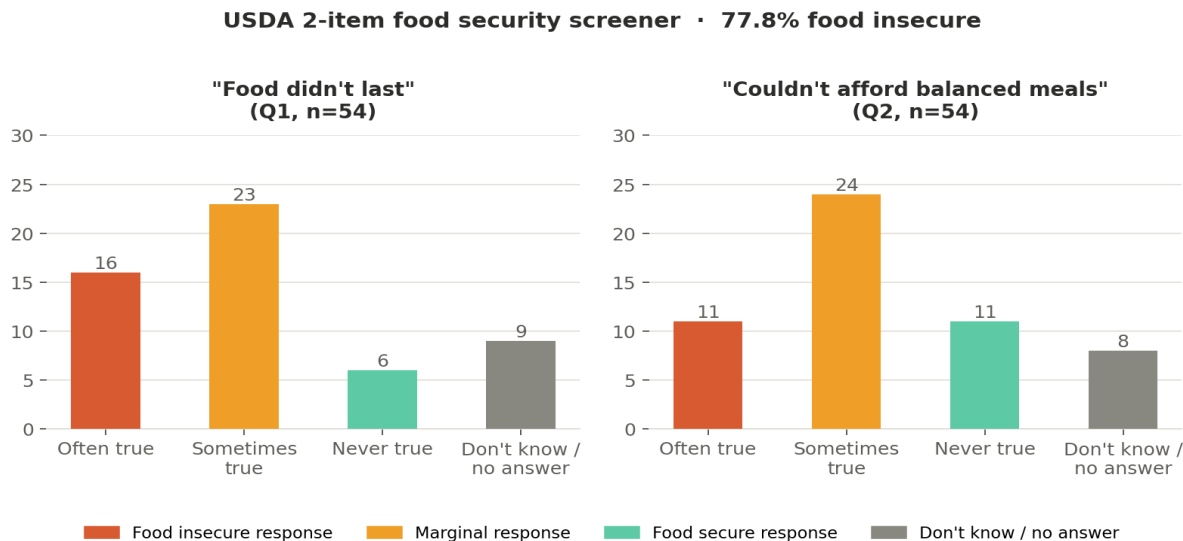


Figure 5. USDA 2-item food security screener results (n=54 who answered both items). Food insecure = "often true" or "sometimes true" on either question.

On the first screener item - "The food that we bought just didn't last" - 72.2% of respondents gave a food-insecure response (often or sometimes true). On the second item - "We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals" - 64.8% gave a food-insecure response. These rates are consistent with the self-reported reasons for fridge use and the qualitative feedback, which repeatedly references fixed incomes, disability, and the cost of fresh produce as barriers.

"Please don't take it away - it is a big help to us as we are low income."

"It helps very much. We would not have fruit or veggies if not for this program."

Impact on Fruit and Vegetable Consumption

Among the 62 respondents who answered the question about fruit and vegetable consumption, 85.5% reported that the Free & Fresh program had increased their consumption of fruits and vegetables.

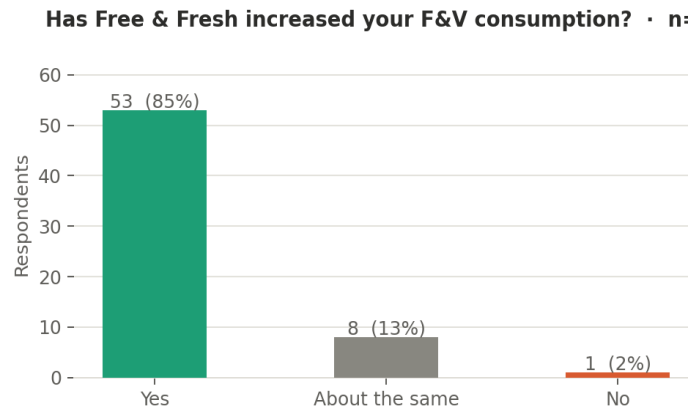


Figure 6. Self-reported change in fruit and vegetable consumption (n=62).

This finding is particularly significant in the context of Charleston County's documented health disparities. Self-reported increases in fruit and vegetable intake are consistent with improved diet quality and, over time, reduced chronic disease risk, outcomes that anchor the health-related components of the VOI analysis. The program's no-barrier, no-enrollment model appears to meaningfully change eating patterns for the majority of regular users.

"What a blessing it is to have all these vegetables readily available. Some of the vegetables I would have never tried if I had to purchase. I do eat more vegetables now."

"This is a wonderful program. It is basically the only way I can get fresh vegetables."

Program Awareness - Patron Needs Assessment

The CCPL broader patron needs assessment (n=5,322) provides important context on program awareness and reach within the general library patron population. Of the 5,111 respondents who answered the awareness question, 20.5% (n=1,089) were aware of the Free & Fresh program. Of those who responded to the usage question (n=1,077), 13.7% had successfully accessed food from the fridge (n=148), and an additional 1.5% had tried but found the fridge empty (n=16).

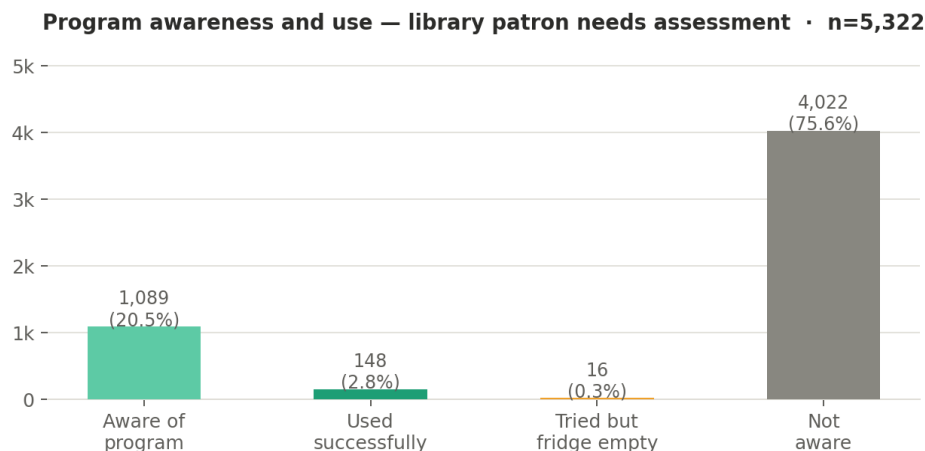


Figure 7. Program awareness (5,111 responses) and use (1,077 responses) among general library patrons survey respondents (n=5,322).

Note, this figure presents an amalgamation of results from two questions on the needs assessment survey.

The relatively low awareness rate (20.5%) among general library patrons, combined with high satisfaction among actual users, suggests significant unmet demand and an opportunity to expand program reach through more active promotion. The 16 respondents who attempted to access the fridge but found it empty represent an additional signal worth monitoring, fridge availability relative to demand is a program quality indicator that could be incorporated into future data collection.

ABOUT

McClam Consulting

*Applied Public Health Research &
Program Evaluation*

McClam Consulting is an applied public health research and program evaluation firm based in Charleston, South Carolina. Led by Dr. Maria Z. McClam, the firm provides rigorous research design and program evaluation services to public health organizations, academic institutions, foundations, and community-based partners across South Carolina. We produce clear and evidence-based insights - both numbers and stories - that show impact and strengthen funding and policy support.

Our work sits at the intersection of research and practice - translating complex data into clear, actionable recommendations for decision-makers committed to improving health outcomes.

L Leake Consulting

*Applied Public Health Research &
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L. Leake Consulting helps organizations serve the people and communities at the heart of their mission through program evaluation that provides clients with actionable data and clear insights to drive organizations' impact. Dr. Leake offers clients over 10 years of experience using a breadth of qualitative and quantitative approaches including surveys, EHR export and analysis, interviews, focus groups, and innovative approaches such as Rich Pictures and Ripple Effect Mapping.

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