Values at the Heart of Ceres Community Project's Food Sourcing and Procurement Operations, a California Food is Medicine Program

A CASE STUDY

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Ceres COMMUNITY PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

As the prevalence of diet-related chronic health conditions such as prediabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes continues to rise in the United States, there is a growing interest in interventions centered around nutrition to help manage, treat and improve these conditions. As defined by the Aspen Institute, Food is Medicine includes "a spectrum of programs and services that respond to the critical link between nutrition and health." Through their nexus with the healthcare system, Food is Medicine programs provide patients experiencing diet-related health conditions with medically supportive food and nutrition interventions, such as medically tailored meals, medically tailored groceries, and produce prescriptions, along with nutrition education. Ceres Community Project (Ceres), based in Sonoma County, California, is a non-profit community-based organization that serves as an illustrative example of a Food is Medicine program. Ceres' mission is to "create health for people, communities and the planet through love, healing food and empowering the next generation."

CERES COMMUNITY PROJECT (CERES), BASED IN SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, IS A NON-PROFIT COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION THAT SERVES AS AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE OF A FOOD IS MEDICINE PROGRAM. CERES' MISSION IS TO "CREATE HEALTH FOR PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND THE PLANET THROUGH LOVE, HEALING FOOD AND EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION."

When Ceres began operating in 2007, its vision was clear: not all food is medicine. Poor quality food was contributing to the epidemic of chronic disease, but high-quality whole foods could help prevent, manage, and treat those same illnesses. Ceres also realized that when people are ill, they tend to eat less yet need the nutrition in food even more. The organization made a commitment to only source and provide 100% organic, whole foods in an effort to provide the highest quality meals.

Over the past 18 years, Ceres has provided and delivered medically tailored meals to its clients to help them achieve and maintain a healthy diet as a means of improving their health. At the onset of the COVID pandemic, the organization began offering groceries to the 62% of their clients who screened positive for food insecurity and in 2021, they launched a perinatal pilot that includes produce prescriptions. The majority of Ceres' clients (80% or more) are living on less than $30,000 annually and/or are 60 years of age or older (58%). Ceres provides an average of 4,500 meals per week. In 2022, their local Medicaid Managed Care plan started reimbursing Ceres for medically tailored meals and groceries prescribed as part of a patient's treatment plan under the California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal initiative (CalAIM).

The provision of 100% organic, locally sourced, and unprocessed meals is at the core of Ceres operations to achieve its mission and serve its clients while simultaneously protecting the environment.

INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

Ceres' menu is plant-forward, and nutrient-dense. The values governing Ceres' decisions on how to source and procure foods will be described in detail in the "Maximizing the Impact of Food Purchasing Dollars" section. In addition to providing medically tailored meals, groceries and produce prescriptions, Ceres offers community nutrition education, trains communities across the country about the Ceres' model, and advances policy and systems solutions. Ceres also offers a youth development program which engages about 300 youth annually in hands-on learning growing food and preparing meals, provides education about food systems issues, and includes a leadership pathway.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

To develop this case study, members of the Food Law and Policy Clinic team conducted desk research and interviewed Cathryn Couch, Chief Executive Officer and Founder of Ceres. The hour-long semi-structured, virtual interview covered the conceptualization and implementation of values-driven food purchasing operations at Ceres, barriers and facilitators of these operations, future plans for assessment and evaluation, and advice for other Food is Medicine organizations who want to follow in Ceres' footsteps. The information gathered during the desk research and interview is presented in this case study.

MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF FOOD PURCHASING DOLLARS

"Everything matters" is a principle that guides Ceres operations. Ceres' choices are informed by the perspective that, "decisions about how we farm and how we eat are not neutral" – in other words, they create either positive or negative consequences. Ceres strives to provide its clients with the healthiest meals that are most optimal for the clients' well-being and social connection, and safest for the environment and food and farm workers.

Ceres delivers to its clients *100% organic* meals; and as far as we know, it is the only 100% organic medically tailored meal delivery program in the nation. All meals and food ingredients provided at Ceres are cooked from scratch, including condiments such as ketchup. In 2016, Ceres released a white paper describing the impact of its food sourcing choices on personal, community, and environmental health. The paper summarizes scientific literature and presents the rationale for sourcing pesticide-free produce and no added hormones, antibiotic-free and grass-fed dairy products and proteins, as well as reducing or eliminating the use of unhealthy fats and refined sweeteners.

MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF FOOD PURCHASING DOLLARS (CONTINUED)

Personal health and health equity are at the heart of Ceres' decision to prioritize locally produced, organic foods. Studies have shown that organic food has higher concentrations of antioxidants and other nutrients, potentially equal to eating one or two extra servings of fruits and vegetables a day; and greater consumption of fruits and vegetables is associated with lower rates of many illnesses. Additionally, just under half of Ceres' clients are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). Sourcing organic food lowers pesticide exposure for farm workers, many of whom are BIPOC. Further, through local food purchasing, Ceres is investing in local economies where its clients and their families live and work.

Ceres values *community*. "The human experience is fundamental to our well-being." Community member feedback has emphasized the unique value of Ceres' community-based services, as clients report feeling "the love in the food" and "like the whole community cares about me." Ceres' operations are dependent on the community in which it functions. More than 900 volunteers per year — 300 of which are youth — donate their time to Ceres' operations. As noted above, Ceres' model includes a youth development program where youth volunteer in Ceres' two organic gardens and two kitchens, help to grow food and prepare meals for Ceres' clients. Ceres' research shows that youth who have participated continue to cook from scratch and eat a healthy, whole foods-based diet for years after they leave the program. In addition, approximately three-quarters of their adult volunteers improved their eating habits without receiving any education or services, underscoring the multiplier benefits of working in community.

Another value that governs Ceres' food purchasing operations is its *impact on the climate and the environment*. Adopting an organic food systems approach helps support biodiversity, protect clean air and water, build soil health and sequester more carbon, reduce energy use, and promote long-term food system sustainability. The state of California has set a target of doubling organic agriculture to 20% of all cultivated acres by 2045, and Ceres is helping the state achieve its goals by using state Medicaid reimbursements to support the market for locally produced organic products.

PURCHASING OPERATIONS

Ceres' food purchasing operations fall under the responsibilities of the Senior Manager for Meal Program Operations. The Senior Manager oversees the entirety of the Ceres Meal Program, including establishing food procurement best practices, and overseeing

PURCHASING OPERATIONS (CONTINUED)

food production, packaging, food safety and quality assurance. Further, the Senior Manager supervises the Procurement Manager and works with them to leverage donations and set purchasing guidelines that balance local purchasing with budget goals. The Senior Manager is also responsible for modeling Ceres' Operating Principles and Agreements, implementing feedback loops and improving processes around meal quality.

Ceres is intentional about sourcing its food ingredients from specific, local vendors and *partnerships and collaborations* are highly valued. The goal is "organic, seasonal, nutrient-rich foods that are local and sustainable as much as possible."

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- Community Gardens - Ceres has two youth-run gardens that it uses to grow organic produce that is used frequently in the kitchens, or that is not otherwise available in the marketplace, such as organic tomatillos. In 2024, these gardens produced more than 12,000 pounds of produce valued at $27,000. Although the production practices used in these gardens are regenerative and organic, the gardens are not yet certified organic because Ceres does not own the land where they operate and the costs of organic certification are currently prohibitive.
- Food Hubs - Regarding produce, Ceres sources from two organizations that manage the aggregation and distribution of local and regionally sourced fruits and vegetables. Ceres works with Veritable Vegetable, a women-owned cooperative based in San Francisco, which uses a zero-emission vehicle fleet and Farmers Exchange of Earthly Delights (FEED) Cooperative in Petaluma, which sources from a network of 50 farms, primarily in Sonoma and Marin County. Through these two vendors, Ceres purchases from more than 100 local and regional certified organic farms and ranches.
- 100% of Ceres' goat dairy and turkey come from farms that show a strong commitment to animal welfare and/or achieve an animal welfare certification. All dairy and animal products are grass-fed. The goat dairy is sourced from Redwood Hill Farm, a Certified Humane farm. Turkey is sourced from Diestel Family Ranch, a Global Animal Partnership Step 3 producer that provides enhanced outdoor access and employs regenerative practices, such as composting to support soil health and biodiversity. Pasture-raised eggs are sourced from Green Star Farm, whose lead farmer was recognized by the Community Alliance with Family Farmers in 2023 as the Climate Smart Farmer of the Year. Further, cow

PURCHASING OPERATIONS (CONTINUED)

dairy products are sourced from either Clover Sonoma or Straus Family Creamery, both providing organic products.

- Ceres sources all its organic, free-range poultry from Petaluma Poultry; meats come from Marin Sun Farms and ranches in Sonoma and Marin counties; sustainably caught seafood is purchased through a local vendor with all fish being caught from the central California to southern Oregon coast.
- Bulk Distributor for Dry Goods - United Natural Foods is Ceres' only non-local partner, namely because the vast majority of food provided by Ceres consists of fresh fruits and vegetables and proteins.
- Donors - Ceres accepts donations of organic produce and staple ingredients (e.g., olive oil, eggs) from local producers and home gardens. Ceres also accepts in-kind donations from business partners. More recently, Ceres has fostered a local sourcing relationship with an organic food manufacturer seeking to reduce food waste, which helps promote climate resilience.

PERCEIVED DIFFICULTIES, CHALLENGES, AND BENEFITS

Price is a commonly perceived challenge when incorporating good food purchasing values into Food is Medicine procurement operations. However, Ceres pointed out that labor and facilities costs make up 75% or more of the cost of a meal, with food itself making up just 20-25% of the cost. While the decision to purchase organic food may slightly increase the overall cost of a meal, it is much less significant than labor costs. To Ceres, the added benefits for clients and the community are well worth it. For example, there are tradeoffs between value and price in purchasing local, organic food that is often more expensive and labor intensive but also comes with positive up- and down-stream impacts. Additionally, nutrient-dense ingredients, such as quinoa, are sometimes more costly than less healthy staples like rice. The incorporation of these values into food purchasing decisions can require additional resources to vet and develop relationships with smaller producers, which necessitates support from staff such as Ceres' Senior Manager of Culinary Operations and Procurement Manager.

Many organizations faced supply chain disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, Ceres did not. Ceres' 100% organic sourcing process and strong relationships with local vendors has translated into a more resilient supply chain. Ceres

credits its support from individuals, foundations, businesses, and organizations to its strong relationships with local suppliers and donors who are similarly aligned with Ceres' holistic approach to high-quality food sourcing to support clients.

LOOKING AHEAD

EVALUATION OF FOOD SOURCING AND PURCHASING PRACTICES

Ceres does not have written procurement policies because it has been sourcing 100% organic and primarily local food from its inception. However, Ceres is planning to lay out a policy framework, a standard operating procedure, and evaluation of these values-driven food operations in 2025. Ceres is currently considering different approaches to assess its purchasing operations, such as indexes for evaluating its impact on sustainability.

TIPS AND ADVICE FOR INTEGRATING VALUES INTO FOOD IS MEDICINE PURCHASING OPERATIONS

Ceres' advice for other Food is Medicine providers seeking to integrate values into their food procurement operations is to "remember that every step matters, sourcing matters" and that "decisions about how we farm and how we eat are not neutral."

- **Align food sourcing decisions with the organizational mission and values.** Every organization must define its own mission and values. Purchasing operations should be in line with those.
- **Lay a robust foundation to underscore the importance of food sourcing decisions.** When advocating for their defined values, organizations should "make a case for why it matters" and prove that it "matters enough to do something about it," be it for clients' health, health equity for food and farm workers, environmental sustainability, local economic benefits, or other reasons.
- **Give priority to certain absolute, non-negotiable organizational values.** Not all organizations are or will be perfect, and complete integration of every value may not be achieved, but it is important to set a list of priorities within their organizational values.

Of note, upon changing pre-existing organizational procurement policies to match these values, operations may be more costly (e.g.,

finding new vendors) in the short term but worth the investment given the long-term impacts on personal health and health equity, the environment, and the community.

SUPPORTIVE POLICY

The following supportive governmental policies would better enable organizations like Ceres to serve the communities in which they are embedded and make food purchasing choices guided by values like *equity, health, community, and climate*, thus maximizing the potential impact of Medicaid coverage for medically supportive foods.

- State guidance encouraging or requiring values-based and equitable procurement of medically supportive foods consistent with governmental goals around equity, health, economic development, and the environment.
- Higher or tiered reimbursement rates for providers to facilitate the purchase of high-quality, local, organic, or regeneratively produced foods.
- Grant, infrastructure, or other funding to support internal capacity to implement values-based and equitable procurement from local producers.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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