



## Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems (CLRFS) Forum Executive Summary

# VCE Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems (CLRFS) Forum

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginia's food system directly impacts the survival and viability of farms and farmland; the economic development of rural and urban communities; the care, restoration, and resilience of ecological resources such as local waterways; and critical health issues. We use the language of community, local, and regional food systems to broadly define a complex and interconnected set of systems and pathways that comprise sustainable food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management to bring about social, economic, and ecological change that benefits all residents. A more community-focused food system must be cultivated and nurtured by local leadership encompassing strong community ties that are inclusive of a diversity of voices and ideas. This approach involves the establishment of collaborations and partnerships to create more resilient, vibrant, and equitable food systems and economies.

Dr. Ed Jones, Director of Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE), established a temporary steering committee for a Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems (CLRFS) team in November 2015. His charge to this committee was to identify current VCE programs and program activities related to CLRFS and develop a workable and inclusive organizational structure for supporting these efforts across the Commonwealth. The steering committee realizes that Extension programming related to CLRFS is already happening throughout the state and in partnership with many

organizations, groups, and agencies. However, many people are unaware of existing food systems related programming being conducted by colleagues across the state, which not only limits current possibilities but also new opportunities to work toward a shared vision in Virginia.

Through a group process, the purpose of the VCE CLRFS Steering Committee has been to develop an action plan based on the collective impact framework to identify, enhance and promote community, local, and regional food systems resources, information, and partnerships to VCE specialists, agents, and community partners supporting "systems-level farm to table" work. To assess the breadth and variety of VCE programs in community, local, and regional food systems across Virginia, we developed a meeting space and time for VCE professionals to share interest and/or current work in the area of food, farming, and community at the CLRFS Forum. For our first Forum, we focused on projects in which VCE had an active role, but presenters were encouraged to include or invite their community and local partners in the project. Approximately 85 people attended the Forum held Tuesday, March 29, 2016 at the Carillon Bell Tower in Byrd Park, Richmond, Virginia.

The CLRFS Forum featured 24 presentations of diverse Extension educational programming related to the development and strengthening of Virginia's community, local, and regional food systems. The goal was to facilitate dialogue and a shared understanding of the innovative

approaches and collaborations that comprise food systems work in Virginia to collectively bring about social, economic, and ecological change that benefits all residents. Presentation abstracts including all presenters along with a summary of the presentations and list of participants are included in the full Forum Report.

The CLRFS initiative is based on the framework of Collective Impact (CI), an emerging theory of social change put forth by Kania and Kramer (2011, 2013). In practice, CI illustrates and results from a commitment of a group of people and organizations from different social sectors to develop a common agenda for addressing a complex issue or a “wicked problem.” A CI framework is well suited for issues that are more endemic and systemic rather than linear or technical in nature. A CI framework is currently being used to guide a number of initiatives and address a wide variety of societal issues in which require capacity building and evaluative thinking as foundational processes for social change including healthcare, poverty, food security, and environmental sustainability (Niewolny & Archibald, 2015).

The CLRFS Forum concluded with a World Café session. In general, responses during this session related to the value of networking and teamwork, as well as learning about the diversity of collaborative CLRFS projects already underway in Virginia. These themes were reiterated in the Forum evaluation responses. One response sums it well, “The forum fostered an atmosphere of collaboration, communication, and effective dialogue that enabled participants to see first-hand the idea of collective impact.” Participants noted the low number of community partners, the lack of research based projects, and lack of focus on the food “system” as defined by the food system wheel graphic of Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems as perhaps weaknesses of the Forum. These weaknesses can be interpreted as opportunities to be more

inclusive and foster more of a “sense of community” around CLRFS as we move forward.

With respect to next steps, participants said that the CLRFS Steering Committee needs to organize and facilitate more local or regional meetings focused on CLRFS work to encourage more collaboration among VCE personnel and community partners. Participants want to continue networking, via online resources, to allow them to share their projects and learn about other projects and resources (including personnel involved) across the Commonwealth. Perhaps the formation of additional working groups to address more specific areas of the food system wheel would move the process forward more quickly and cohesively. Development of interactive project resources along with an expert database were suggested.

Based on recommendations from Forum participants and additional input from our CLRFS Working Groups (Outreach, Growth, & Inventory; Structure & Organizational Process; Data Collection, Research, & Evaluation; and Communication & Engagement), the CLRFS Steering Committee has identified the following “next steps” in the process of reaching our goal of facilitating VCE’s CLRFS educational programming at the community, local, and/or regional level:

**On or before September 30, 2016:**

- Complete and widely distribute the summary report for the CLRFS Forum.
- Develop a database of persons interested in or working with community, local, and regional food systems that promotes statewide learning and participation.
- Develop and promote marketing tools and resources for CLRFS efforts, including a website, blog, and written materials covering items such as the model of CLRFS wheel diagram and action plan.

**On or before December 31, 2016:**

- Organize and conduct four district-wide in-service training/listening sessions in October 2016 and additional community stakeholder sessions during October through December 2016, to continue learning about local efforts and how to form a VCE CLRFS organizational structure.
- Develop a workable online format for sharing information on CLRFS projects, resources, contacts, and funding.

**On or before March 31, 2017:**

- Develop and distribute assessment tools for local program evaluation that can contribute to the development of a collective impact statement for CLRFS statewide.
- Compile and distill listening session input from VCE and community partners for presentation at the 2017 VCE Statewide Conference.
- Develop an agent's CLRFS facilitation toolkit, a compilation of program and personnel resources to assist VCE agents and their community partners to plan, develop, and sustain community, local and regional food system programs.
- Draft a VCE CLRFS organizational proposal for release at the 2017 VCE Statewide Conference to focus on partnerships, core working groups on food system topics, and emergent issues.

Since the Forum, we have created new ways to communicate our work together and engage across the Commonwealth. To follow our ongoing work, we invite you to visit:

**VCE CLRFS Topic Page:** <http://www.ext.vt.edu/topics/food-health/nutrition-wellness/clrfs/>

**VCE CLRFS Facebook Page:** <https://www.facebook.com/VACLRFSS/>

**CLRFS VCE Blog:** <http://blogs.ext.vt.edu/clr-food-systems/>

**CLRFS VCE Listserv:** [clrfs-vce-g@vt.edu](mailto:clrfs-vce-g@vt.edu)

**Report links:**

**VCE CLRFS Forum March 29, 2016**

**Presentations (pdfs of presentations):**

<http://www.ext.vt.edu/topics/food-health/nutrition-wellness/clrfs/index.html>

**2016 VCE CLRFS Forum Report (full report):** <http://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/ALCE/ALCE-156/ALCE-156.html>

**2016 VCE CLRFS Forum Report Executive Summary:** <http://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/ALCE/ALCE-157/ALCE-157.html>

**VCE CLRFS Model (wheel diagram):** <http://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/ALCE/ALCE-154/ALCE-154.html>

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