



Many Hats: A Food Hub Operator's Toolkit Executive Summary

The Many Hats Food Hub Toolkit project led by University of Vermont in collaboration with Michigan State University's Center for Regional Food Systems and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), aimed to support food hub operators across the country through the development of a comprehensive toolkit to support food hub operators.

All project resources are available on <https://localfoodeconomics.com/many-hats/>.

PROJECT SUMMARY

With food hubs serving as vital part of the regional food economy, the project responded to a need for accessible, practical, and adaptive guidance to support operators in various stages of development. The resulting resource reflects a decade of research and practice, incorporating prior USDA guides, updated data, and direct input from experienced operators. It is designed to support hub leadership in operations, planning, food safety, partnerships, growth, and resilience.

PROJECT INFORMATION

The toolkit was developed through a collaborative and iterative process involving the following:



An advisory panel consisting of food hub leaders and value chain experts from across the country.



Semi-structured interviews with hub operators to identify key themes, strategies, and challenges.



Comprehensive literature review of existing USDA food hub resources and relevant case studies.



Thematic organization of the toolkit using metaphor of “hats” to represent leadership roles.

KEY FINDINGS

The toolkit identified critical areas for successful food hubs operations and leadership:

- Food hubs require **multi-functional leadership**—operators should be able to simultaneously manage logistics, business planning, and external partnerships.
- **Long-term sustainability** is strongly tied to the ability to access startup capital, implement food safety protocols, and maintain adaptable business models.
- Building **robust producer networks** through shared goals, values, and clear market commitments supports supply chain continuity.
- Effective hubs engage with **federal, state, and local resources** including grant funding, cooperative extension programs, and peer learning networks.
- **Communication, relationship management, and technical assistance** are foundational to both producer development and buyer satisfaction.
- Recent supply chain disruptions emphasized the need for **contingency planning** and resilient infrastructure across operations.

PROJECT OUTPUTS

Project outputs include:

- A [web-based toolkit](#) featuring modular chapters organized by leadership role as the ‘hats’ that food hub operators wear and provide resource links on relevant reports, certification resources and strategic planning tools. In addition, each chapter contains synthesized best practices, practical templates, and first-hand accounts from operators.
- A set of podcast episodes, titled [The Food Hub Podcast](#) complements the written material by allowing users to hear stories and insights directly from hub leaders.
- An [annotated bibliography](#) of peer reviewed articles on the food hub industry and published between 2011-2025.

These resources are intended for both new and experienced food hub operators, as well as technical assistance providers, funders, and state agencies. All project resources are available on <https://localfoodeconomics.com/many-hats/>. The toolkit, which includes 144 references and links, including downloadable templates and worksheets, full annotated bibliography, and the podcast episodes, can all be found through the link as a central platform for accessing all digital resources related to this project.



The “hat” metaphor used in the toolkit

is intended to reflect the evolving roles of food hub operators rather than a sequential model. Operators are encouraged to navigate the sections based on immediate needs rather than assuming a linear pathway of development. Each “hat” serves as a thematic anchor to help frame relevant tools and considerations.

PROJECT COOPERATORS

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