

experimental  
station

# 20 Increasing 23 Food Access Report





## LETTER FROM **Executive Director**

Dear friend,

We are excited.

For over a decade, Experimental Station has been working to increase the quantity and quality of fruits and vegetables grown in our state. We have worked to help local farmers of color make infrastructural improvements to their farms and have advocated for a state plan to rebuild Illinois' food system infrastructure. We are therefore excited that, this past year, Illinois has seen important investments at the local, state, and federal levels to rebuild Illinois' food system.

This year's investments represent the beginning of an important shift away from the 10-year vision for Illinois agriculture celebrated in 2013, which aimed solely to increase the competitiveness of Illinois' commodity crops in the global marketplace. There was no place in that vision for increasing the production of fruits and vegetables for Illinoisans to consume. With more than 95% of the foods Illinoisans consume imported from elsewhere, we all experienced the results of that 2013 vision: serious food supply disruptions during the pandemic and the consequent discovery that we are a food-insecure state.

As we begin to make investments in our local food system, Illinois now needs to articulate its long-term vision for these investments. What is our 10- or even 20-year vision for Illinois agriculture that moves us toward greater food security? What transitions will be required to realize that vision? What resources? With climate disruptions occurring in major agricultural states (e.g. California), what new opportunities might be created for exporting Illinois' food crops? Could we envision Illinois in 10-20 years as a major exporter of lettuce, tomatoes, and carrots?

Through the work of our Link Up Illinois, 61st Street Farmers Market, and Link Access for Chicago Farmers Markets programs, Experimental Station already envisions the potential for an agricultural transition supported by rebuilding linkages between Illinois farmers and low-income Illinoisans seeking access to fresh and healthy foods. We invite you, in reading our 2023 outcomes on the following pages, to see why we are excited. We hope that you will be excited too!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Connie Spreen". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**Connie Spreen**  
Executive Director

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## TERMS YOU NEED TO KNOW:

### SNAP

SNAP stands for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, a federal nutrition assistance program. In Illinois, SNAP and Link are used synonymously.

### Nutrition Incentives

Support the purchase of fruits and vegetables by low-income consumers and comes in the form of matching dollars, vouchers, coupons, or discounts. Nutrition incentive programs across the U.S. most often serve individuals and families participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

### Link Card

The name of the card used in Illinois, operates like a debit card. Each state named their card for branding purposes.

### Link Match

The brand name for Experimental Station's nutrition incentives. Link Match is earned via a Link purchase and can be used to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at participating Illinois farmers markets and grocery stores.

# LETTER FROM The Program Manager

I am writing to share the exciting progress of Link Up Illinois, a program dedicated to strengthening communities and nourishing families through increased access to fresh, local food.

In 2023, we achieved a remarkable milestone: over \$1.24 million in Link Match redemption across our partners sites. This translates into a tangible impact for countless individuals and families. Through Link Up Illinois, SNAP participants can use matching vouchers (earned dollar for dollar on their current SNAP spending) to double their purchasing power for fresh produce, making healthy choices easier and more affordable.

Link Up Illinois' success underscores the critical role of programs like ours in building a more resilient and equitable food system. As Connie's letter highlights, Illinois' heavy reliance on imported food leaves us vulnerable to disruptions. This underscores the need for strategic investment in local agriculture. The more we can work together to feed more families while keeping our dollars local and supporting our farmers, the better.

Experimental Station, and the whole Link Up Illinois team, are committed to this investment. We're expanding to more farmers markets, farm stands, and CSAs every year, and in 2024 we expect to grow by 6-8 new brick and mortar locations as well (mostly in Chicago's South and West sides), reaching under-resourced communities and bridging the gap between farmers and consumers. This growth is fueled by the generous support of our partners, donors, and the unwavering support of people like you who share our vision of a food system that nourishes both people and the planet.

On behalf of Link Up Illinois, I extend my deepest gratitude. By raising awareness and advocating for policies that support local food production and access, we can collectively cultivate a healthier future for all Illinoisans.



Sincerely,  
Matthew L. Ruffi



## LINK AND LINK MATCH OPERATING PARTNERS



### 99 FARM DIRECT (Farmers Markets, Farm Stands, CSAs, etc.)

- 82 'traditional' farmers markets
- 24 operate year-round
- 8 farm stands
- 4 delivery services / online ordering
- 2 CSAs
- 3 mobile markets serving 16 locations



### 11 BRICK AND MORTAR STORES

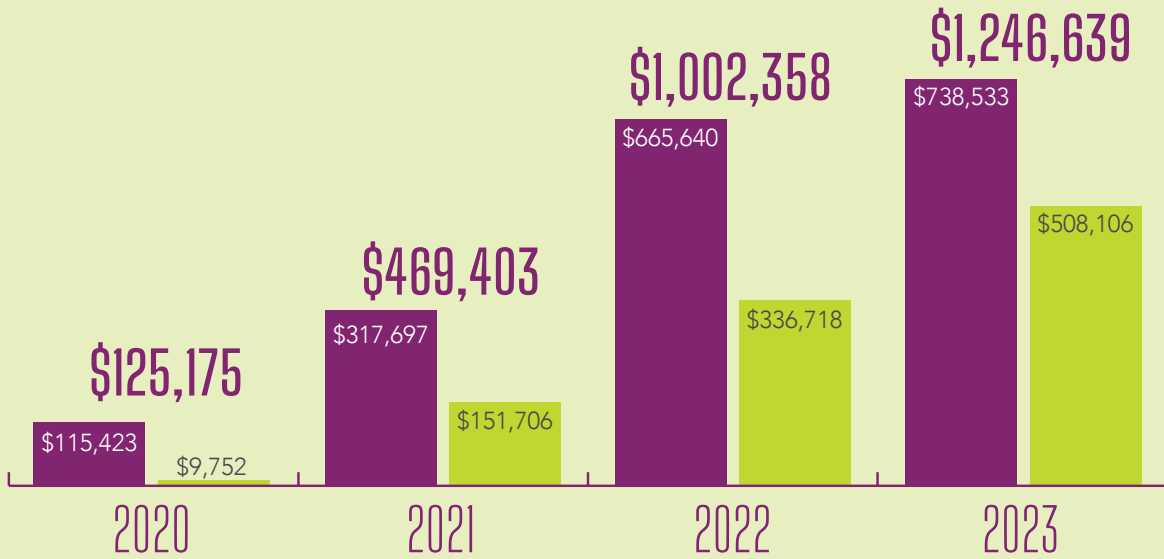
- 5 co-ops
- 6 small to mid sized grocers



Link Up Illinois Team

# PURCHASES OF FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES WITH LINK MATCH AT LINK UP ILLINOIS LOCATIONS

■ Brick and Mortar (Grocers, Co-ops, etc)
 ■ Farm Direct (Farmers Markets, Farm Stands, etc.)



A Link customer holds a Link Match voucher at Market 309 in Peoria.



Customers shop their groceries at Uptown Farmers Market in Chicago.

## LINK MATCH LOCATIONS

In 2023, Link Up Illinois worked with **110 programs** to offer incentive programs to Link customers at **123 locations** in the state's major metropolitan areas and many rural communities.

### NORTHERN ILLINOIS

#### Markets:

Aurora Farmers Market  
Aurora Farmers Market West  
Batavia Farmers Market  
DeKalb Farmers Market  
Downtown Elgin Farmers Market  
Downtown Evanston Farmers Market  
Glenview Farmers Market at Historic Wagner Farm  
It Takes A Village Community Farm  
Kankakee Farmers Market  
Lanark Farmers Market  
North Chicago Farmers Market  
North End City Market  
Northbrook Farmers Market  
Oak Park Farmers Market  
Palos Heights Farmers Market  
Park Forest Farmers Market  
Park Ridge Farmers Market  
QC Farmers Market  
River's Edge Farmers Market  
Rockford City Market  
Rockford Midtown Market  
Skokie Farmers Market  
Village of Fox Lake Farmers Market  
Waukegan Harbor & Marina Farmers Market  
Woodstock Farmers Market

#### Stores:

Sugar Beet Food Store Co-op

#### Delivery Services:

Jo Daviess Local Foods

### CENTRAL ILLINOIS

#### Markets:

Champaign Farmers Market  
Champaign-Urbana Winter Farmers Market  
Danville Farmers Market  
Downtown Bloomington Farmers Market  
Galesburg Farmers Market  
Good Samaritan Inn Family Market  
Illinois Products Farmers Market  
Jacksonville Farmers Market  
Market 309 at Bradley  
Market 309 at Peoria Women's Club  
Market 309 at Trewyn Park  
Old Capitol Farmers Market  
Peoria RiverFront Market  
Quincy Farmers Market  
Rantoul Farmers Market  
Sola Gratia Farm and CSA  
Terripin Farms  
Urbana's Market at the Square

#### Stores:

Common Ground Food Co-op  
Green Top Grocery

### SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

#### Markets:

Alton Farmers & Artisans Market  
Benton Farmers Market  
Carbondale Community Farmers Market  
DeMange Farm  
Du Quoin State Fairgrounds Farmers Market  
Elverado Farmers Market  
F.R.E.S.H. Farmers Market  
Farmers Market of Carbondale  
Humpday Farmers Market  
Land of Goshen Community Market  
LEAF Food Hub Mobile Market  
Marion Farmers Market  
Maryville Farmers Market Inc.  
Rochester Library Farmers Market  
Village of Brighton Farmers Market  
Vine Street Market at O'Fallon Station

#### Stores:

Neighborhood Co-op Grocery  
Town Square Market

#### Delivery Services:

LEAF Food Hub

### CHICAGO

#### Markets:

61st Street Farmers Market  
Andersonville Farmers Market  
Austin Town Hall City Market  
Bronzeville City Market  
Daley Plaza City Market  
Division Street City Market  
Edgewater Monday Market  
Farm on Ogden  
Fresh Moves Mobile Market  
Garfield Park Neighborhood Market  
Gary Comer Youth Center Farmers Market  
Glenwood Sunday Market  
Green City Market (Avondale, Lincoln Park, and West Loop)  
Growing Home, Inc. Farm Stand  
Hyde Park Farmers Market  
Lincoln Square Farmers Market  
Logan Square Farmers Market  
Mercado de Colores  
Muzz Mobile  
Northcenter Farmers Market  
PCC Market  
Plant Chicago Farmers Market  
Plant Chicago Firehouse Market  
Pop Up Grocery  
Pullman City Market  
Roosevelt Square Farmers Market  
Saint James Community Farm  
South Chicago Farm Stand  
Star Farm

Uptown Farmers Market  
Urban Canopy LUCSA  
West Humboldt Park City Market  
West Town Farmers Market  
Wicker Park Farmers Market

#### Stores:

Cermak Fresh Market (Pilsen)  
Dill Pickle Food Co-op  
Go Green Community Fresh Market  
Mi Mexico  
Morgan Mini Mart  
One Stop Foods

#### Delivery Services:

Forty Acres Fresh Market  
Top Box Foods



"I spoke to a mother of three [who told] us that without this program her children would not have access to fresh fruits and vegetables."

— Market Manager,  
Farmers Market of  
Carbondale

# LINK UP ILLINOIS PROGRAM SURVEY RESULTS

The 2023 Link Match Program Evaluation was conducted by the Tulane School of Public Health & Tropical Medicine.



**91.6%** of survey respondents rated their experience with Link Match as positive or very positive.



**88.4%** of survey respondents stated that Link Match was important or extremely important to their decision on how to spend their SNAP benefits.



**77.2%** of respondents indicated that Link Match has increased the amount of fruits and vegetables they eat.



**78.4%** stated that their health has gotten better because of Link Match.

“As a single mom, I am so grateful that I can earn extra cash/coupons [Link Match vouchers] to buy the healthy food I want for my family. Being a big supporter of our local farmers and being on a limited budget, I appreciate having access to getting more of their fresh produce, and it’s available seven days a week at the Co-op!”

— Link Match customer,  
Neighborhood Co-op

**27**  
LOCATIONS  
NORTHERN, IL

**44**  
LOCATIONS  
CHICAGO

**20**  
LOCATIONS  
CENTRAL IL

**19**  
LOCATIONS  
SOUTHERN IL



## SPOTLIGHT: DEMANGE FARMS

—Rooted in Community, Growing Together

DeMange Farms has nourished their community with fresh fruits and vegetables for 150 years—“Good, local food shouldn’t be out of reach for anyone!,” Eric DeMange emphasizes. This philosophy led DeMange Farms to accept SNAP benefits since the 1960s, and in 2023, they embraced Link Match incentives.

**Starting halfway through the season, over \$24,000 in Link Match benefits were redeemed by their customers by year’s end.**

“We’ve seen families filling their baskets with more fruits and vegetables since partnering with Link Up Illinois,” Eric shares, “and the smiles on their faces say it all.” With a commitment to fresh, local produce and innovative offerings like Link Match, DeMange Farms is ensuring their roots remain firmly planted in the community for generations to come.

## FRESH MOVES

—Moving Fresh

Fresh Moves Mobile Market, a program of Urban Growers Collective, is a ‘produce aisle on wheels’ providing access to local produce in Chicago’s historically divested neighborhoods. The bus stops in 14 locations outside of schools, community centers, churches, and health clinics. Many of their customers use Link, and “Link Match boosts participation,” says Fresh Moves manager Joshua Hughes.

**“Link Match is one of the biggest selling points for Fresh Moves. People are able to stretch their dollar and get access to produce that is fresher than some of the grocery options available to them.”**

He elaborates that “Fresh Moves sees a lot of senior citizens and people with disabilities. We are able to provide an assisted shopping experience that is easier than the big grocery stores.”



Signs promoting SNAP and Link Match acceptance at Wicker Park Farmers Market



Derrick Patrick of Fresh Moves carries fresh produce.



# SPOTLIGHT: PARTNERSHIPS CULTIVATING CHANGE

## ONE STOP FOODS

For over 54 years, One Stop Foods has been woven into the fabric of Chicago's North Kenwood/ Bronzeville community, catering to their needs and understanding their struggles. In 2023, they joined hands with Link Up Illinois to implement the Link Match program in their store, embarking on a journey to make fresh produce more accessible.

This partnership was not just about numbers; it was about building relationships. Store manager, Thomas Kaldis, and his staff became the bridge between Link Match and the community. His infectious enthusiasm and dedication permeated the store, with staff readily guiding shoppers to maximize their Link Match benefits.

The impact speaks for itself: **over \$86,000 in benefits used, a significant increase in fresh produce sales, and reduced waste paints a picture of success.** But the true story lies in the smiles on families' faces, young and old, discovering the power of healthy choices made more affordable with Link Match.

"The Link Match program has made a significant difference," says Tom, reflecting on the journey. "It's about more than just food; it's about empowering families and fostering a healthier community." One Stop Foods and Link Match have sown the seeds of change, proving that when community spirit and innovative programs unite, the harvest can be truly transformative.

## MI MEXICO

Mi Mexico is a key community grocery store located in the heart of the Chicago Gage Park neighborhood. For more than two decades, this store has been providing essential products to a diverse community. In 2020, Mi Mexico was the first Chicago grocery store to pilot Experimental Station's Link Match program.

During this pilot, Mi Mexico partnered with Link Up Illinois to implement Link Match, whereby SNAP recipients doubled their purchasing power for fresh fruit and vegetables. **This program has had a significant impact on the community: over \$125,000 in benefits have been used since 2020, and the store has experienced a remarkable increase in fresh produce sales.**

"The Link Match program has been a great success, and we are proud of it," said Ahmad, the store owner. "The community highly appreciates this initiative, and we feel honored to have been a part of it." Mi Mexico and Link Up Illinois' partnership has turned a convenience store into a source of fresh produce for the community.



Link Up Illinois Team meets with Thomas Kaldis, One Stop Foods' store manager.



Produce shelves display Link Match hang-tags Neighborhood Co-op Grocery

# LETTER FROM The Market Manager

The 61st Street Farmers Market continued to build on last year's growth in our 16th season, with 6,124 more Market attendees, eight new Market vendors, 147 new customers utilizing Link benefits, and an increase of 28.5% in Link Match purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables. These trends align with the Market's mission to support Midwest growers, educate consumers, and be available to all.

Rising food costs have resulted in increased demand for our Market and Link Match program. These increases indicate that once our community knows about incentives, they utilize them! A record-breaking Link sales day in September is a wonderful example of this, with over \$4,200 of Link and Link Match spent that day—the result of increased outreach efforts through our partnership with the local Department of Human Services office.

Meaningful change begins at the root with our youth. Providing food education to our young people allows them opportunities to engage with their food in ways that will have a lifelong impact on their health. The Market is fortunate to continue our long-standing partnership with Carnegie Elementary School. This long-term community partnership has resulted in the remarkable growth of our youth programs within the past year: we served 285 youth in 2023 compared to 108 in 2022.

These accomplishments are due to the dedicated efforts of our team and volunteers, to whom we are truly grateful. Together, we are working to change our food system—one bite at a time.

*Emily Cross*

Emily Cross  
Senior Program Manager



## SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

**1,648**

Average outdoor attendance/  
weekly customers

**35**

Market Days

**33**

Farmers/prepared food vendors

**15**

Chef Demonstrations

**36**

Market School/  
Sprout Station activities



The 61st Street Farmers Market bustling with customers.



Resident gardeners at Jackson Park Terrace pick out produce on a Harvest Day.

## 61ST STREET FARMERS MARKET 2023 LINK DATA

**\$72,869**

Total food purchased Link, Link Match, and other incentives

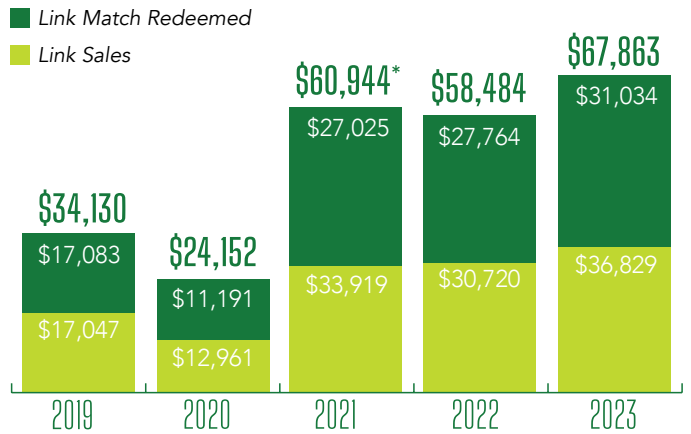
**97%**

Redemption rate for both Link and Link Match

**580**

unique Link customers, 147 were new to the Market in 2023

## LINK SALES AND LINK MATCH REDEEMED



\*2021 sales data includes Link and P-EBT.

## DATA HIGHLIGHTS

In October, with the support of the University of Chicago Survey Lab, the Market carried out its annual survey with 663 customers responding. We learned that:

**88.3%** come to the Market to buy fresh produce

**42.9%** eat a lot more fruits and vegetables as a result of coming to the Market

**55.6%** Tried a new fruit or vegetable that they had not tried before

**94.2%** of Link shoppers come for the Market's Link Match program

“Breaking records is a testament to consistency. The 61st Street Farmers Market is a model for curating a market for economically diverse communities with access for everyone in mind.”

— VEAH LARDE,  
FORTY ACRES/AUSTIN TOWN HALL MARKET



## FARMERS MARKET SELLERS COURSE

In its 4th year, our Farmers Market Sellers Course has increased job opportunities for community members and business owners looking to expand their knowledge and skills. Participants learn about market structures, customer service, best practices, and market day logistics. They also learn from experienced farmers how to handle customer challenges. Graduates have gone on to become market managers, work at non-profits or with local vendors, and even start their own market.



## CULTIVATING LOCAL FOOD CULTURE

An essential component of healthy food access is food and nutrition education. If one has access but lacks confidence to prepare a vegetable they have never used, they are unlikely to eat it. This will limit the variety of healthy foods they eat, which will in turn limit the nutrition they gain from their food.

The 61st Street Farmers Market runs robust year-round programming for children and adults in our community in order to fulfill our mission of providing food education resources to Woodlawn and surrounding communities. **In partnership with Carnegie Elementary School, Jackson Park Terrace affordable housing complex, chefs and others, we provide:**

243

Carnegie student participants

42

Summer gardening participants

8

Jackson Park Terrace Community gardening families

“It [cooking class] exposes them to something different. It breaks up the day and provides them a reason to come to school on Thursdays. It provides a resource that other schools have, that we don’t.”

— Ms. Simental  
Carnegie 5th grade teacher

1,500 LBS OF FREE PRODUCE TO JACKSON PARK TERRACE RESIDENTS

A HOOP HOUSE TEACHING GARDEN

COMMUNITY GARDENING SPACE AND INSTRUCTION

AFTER SCHOOL COOKING CLASSES



IN-SCHOOL GARDENING & HEALTHY EATING CLASSES



SUMMER GARDENING VISITS FOR YOUTH





Carnegie students in a healthy cooking class in Experimental Station's kitchen.



Chef Cordell demonstrates a crock pot recipe for Jackson Park Terrace residents.

## EXPANDING YOUTH COOKING CLASSES

The Market has enjoyed a longstanding partnership with neighboring Carnegie Elementary School, providing a robust food education curriculum for the 2nd through 4th grades. This year, Carnegie School teachers made a request when asked about the program's future: in addition to the after-school cooking classes for 4th graders, provide in-school cooking classes for the 5th graders!

Enthusied by their request, the Market provided a popular 4-class series of 5th grade cooking classes this fall. Both the students and teachers loved the opportunity to engage in a cooking class during the school day. Student feedback indicated that they enjoyed tasting and learning about new foods and expanding their food- and cooking-related knowledge.

## CULTIVATING JACKSON PARK TERRACE ENGAGEMENT

Located on the other side of the tracks from the Experimental Station, the Jackson Park Terrace (JPT) affordable housing development has provided the location for much of the 61st Street Farmers Market's youth and adult food education outreach. Through free gardening opportunities, weekly fresh produce distributions, seasonal chef demonstrations, cooking classes, market tours and a Market Shuttle to bring residents to the Market itself, the 61st Street Farmers Market connects Jackson Park Terrace residents to healthy foods and shares knowledge on how to prepare and enjoy them. In 2023, 78 JPT residents participated in the Market's educational activities.

## CROCKPOT COOKING CLASSES

To create a healthy ready-to-eat option at the end of the workday, we again offered our popular adult crockpot cooking class series for Jackson Park Terrace residents. Twelve residents learned how to make delicious slow-cooked, vegetable-filled recipes, receiving a crockpot of their own after attending the series. Residents gained crockpot cooking techniques, sampled six dishes, received recipes, enjoyed the fun community atmosphere, and celebrated together at the last class.

**"Thank you so much for all you do. I appreciate [the free produce and recipes] so much."**

— David, JPT resident

**"I really enjoyed myself. Can't wait to do the next one."**

— Dora, crockpot class participant

## SUPPORTING CHICAGO CITY FARMERS MARKETS ON THE GROUND

Since 2010, Experimental Station has partnered with the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) to provide Link service at the City-run farmers markets. Our staff act as market hosts, providing market support services and general information.

Experimental Station served seven City markets in 2023, several located on Chicago’s south and west sides where food access is limited: Austin Town Hall (West), Bronzeville (South), Mercado de Colores (Near West), Daley Plaza (Central), Division Street (Near North/Central), West Humboldt Park (West), and Pullman (Far South).

Farmers markets are more than just a place to buy fresh, locally grown produce. They are a valuable resource for communities, offering a chance to build relationships with local farmers/vendors and your neighbors.

The City Farmers Markets stand as distinctive hubs where the community is united by a mutual love for food, underscoring the significance of nurturing bonds and connections through shared values and collective experiences. In addition to promoting community, farmers markets play a crucial role in addressing food insecurity.

Raja Baptiste  
Program Manager

Raja Baptiste and Kate Gurke of Link Up Illinois ready to distribute Link Match at Daley Plaza Farmers Market.

## LINK SALES AND LINK MATCH REDEEMED

**\$39,375**

Link Match redeemed

**\$50,211**

in Link purchases!

“The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events is proud to partner with Experimental Station to expand food access in under-resourced neighborhoods through Chicago Farmers Markets. The Link Up Illinois program is an invaluable service that reaches areas of the city that need the most support.”

—Erin Harkey  
DCASE Commissioner



## PARTNERSHIPS/ COLLABORATIONS

Experimental Station’s many partnerships and collaborations with state and federal agencies, municipalities, nonprofit organizations, chambers of commerce, farmers markets, grocers, and so many others have enabled our programs to grow and the crucial on-the-ground work to get done. We are sincerely grateful for their partnership and look forward to what we will accomplish together in the future.

## LOOKING AHEAD

In the coming year, Experimental Station will continue to advance our vision of a food-secure Illinois where all have access to affordable fresh, locally grown foods and to knowledge of how they are grown, prepared, and enjoyed. To these ends, Experimental Station will:



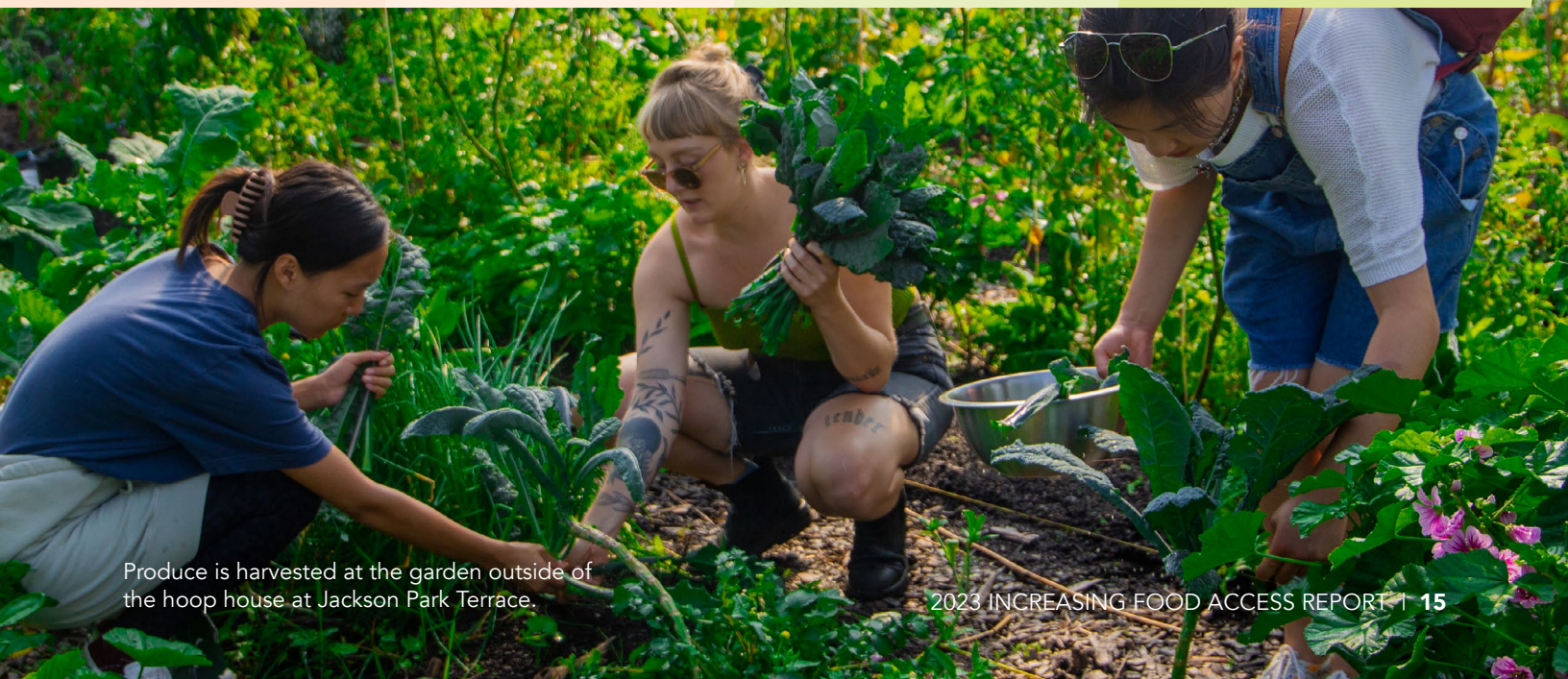
A market staff at Market 309 counts Link Match for a customer.

work to secure permanent funding for Link Up Illinois nutrition incentives in partnership with the Illinois Department of Human Services;

collaborate with statewide agencies and organizations to create a 10-20 year vision for Illinois agriculture, with a transition to climate resilient, diversified, non-commodity food crops at its center;

expand Link acceptance and Link Match to new locations such as small-scale farmers markets and brick and mortar locations in partnership with Albertsons, Yellow Banana, Cermak Fresh Market, and others;

and invest further in our local food education initiatives for youth, adults, and seniors in our community.



Produce is harvested at the garden outside of the hoop house at Jackson Park Terrace.



EXPERIMENTAL STATION'S FOOD ACCESS WORK WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF THE FOLLOWING:



**THE CHAPIN-MAY FOUNDATION OF ILLINOIS**

... AND OTHER GENEROUS DONORS.



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