



Finding The Next Frontier: Improving Systems of Support for Small and Mid-Scale Producers

Authored by Justin McElderry, Design Fellow, Food Systems Action Lab, Illinois Institute of Technology; Pratyoosh Kashyap, Postdoctoral Associate, Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation, Virginia Tech; Kim Niewolny, Professor and Director, Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation, Virginia Tech; Weslynn Ashton, Professor and Co-Director, Food Systems Action Lab, Illinois Institute of Technology

Executive Summary

This report examines wholesale market access for small and historically underserved agricultural producers, with a focus on the technical assistance (TA) systems that support them. The study specifically investigates the barriers that Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers face in accessing wholesale and institutional markets, evaluates the structure and effectiveness of existing TA offerings, and identifies actionable strategies to improve support delivery, data systems, and public policy alignment.

Drawing on surveys and interviews with producers and TA providers across selected U.S. regions, the research surfaces both long-standing inequities and emerging approaches to address them. It provides insight into how TA is currently designed and delivered, the challenges producers encounter when trying to scale into wholesale markets, and the degree to which USDA, related programs, and other TA providers are meeting their intended goals. The findings point to several areas for further investment and refinement:

- Improved alignment between the practical realities facing producers and TA providers on the ground.
- Increased support for intermediary infrastructure, such as food hubs and shared logistics.
- TA models that are culturally responsive, regionally tailored, and designed in collaboration with producers.

- More relevant and transparent metrics for assessing producer readiness and equitable market participation.

The report concludes with recommendations for USDA officials, philanthropic funders, TA organizations, and other institutional stakeholders. These include strategies for supporting regional TA collaboratives, building producer capacity, and advancing data interoperability and knowledge sharing across the food system.

This report was developed through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA AMS). The project was led by Virginia Tech's Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation in collaboration with the Illinois Institute of Technology's Food Systems Action Lab. They were supported by a regional advisory group and a network of technical assistance providers, producers, and community-based partners across the Southeast and Midwest.

Introduction

Strengthening the resilience of the U.S. food system is a national imperative. From mitigating supply chain disruptions to creating regional jobs and advancing environmental sustainability, agricultural markets directly shape economic and ecological outcomes nationwide. A key part of agriculture's performance depends on whether producers of all sizes and backgrounds can participate meaningfully in distinct market channels, especially those tied to wholesale and institutional purchasing. When wholesale markets function well, they generate

reliable farmer income, improve food access in underserved areas, support regional economies, and reduce environmental costs through shorter, more responsive supply chains.

Yet across the country, many producers—particularly Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers—remain underrepresented in these channels. Their participation rates in institutional and wholesale markets remain low, despite strong policy support for equitable procurement and significant public investment in programs to increase access. These gaps are not simply about demographics; they reflect long-standing inefficiencies and blind spots in how support systems are designed and delivered. **For example, Black farmers lost nearly 90% of their farmland between 1910 and 1997 due to discriminatory lending practices, forced land sales, and systemic exclusion from USDA programs.**

Tribal producers face persistent challenges related to land held in federal trust, which complicates infrastructure investment and economic planning. Hispanic producers, many of whom are first-generation landowners, often experience language barriers and limited access to the networks and financing needed to reach wholesale scale. These conditions have contributed to reduced access to capital, weaker market linkages, and underutilization of federal and state procurement channels for individuals from these groups.

At the same time, wholesale and institutional markets—including K–12 schools, hospitals, correctional facilities, and nutrition assistance programs—represent a vital piece of the U.S. food economy. They offer producers stable demand, large-volume contracts, and opportunities to build long-term business resilience. Programs like the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA), Local Food for Schools (LFS), and investments in Regional Food Business Centers (RFBCs) reflect a growing recognition that strengthening regional supply chains improves food system adaptability and economic security, alongside social equity. However, access to these markets often requires producers to meet specific readiness criteria: traceability, regulatory compliance, consistent volume, and the ability to navigate procurement systems that are often more aligned with larger-scale operations.

This is where technical assistance (TA) plays a pivotal role. TA includes services such as business planning, regulatory guidance, grant navigation, food safety training, aggregation coordination, and support with procurement logistics. These services help producers build the capacity to meet wholesale standards and form relationships with institutional buyers. However, the TA landscape is fragmented—offered by nonprofits, government agencies, universities, and private partners—and varies widely in delivery format, accessibility, and cultural relevance. Many producers in our study report that available TA does not match their specific business stage, production model, or goals. In some cases, producers are unaware that support exists at all.

This study was designed to better understand how TA can more effectively support Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers entering wholesale markets—and, in doing so, strengthen regional supply chains as a whole. Funded through a cooperative agreement with the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and led by Virginia Tech’s Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation and the Illinois Institute of Technology’s Food Systems Action Lab, the project aims to address four core questions:

- What are the motivations, challenges, and technical assistance needs facing Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers seeking to sell into wholesale markets?
- How do existing TA programs—public, private, and nonprofit—respond to or overlook these needs?
- What core competencies and values should guide the future design and delivery of TA for historically underserved producers?
- How can TA providers, policy designers, and funders work together to align support structures with producers’ real-world conditions and aspirations?

To answer these questions, the research team conducted a mixed-methods inquiry, including interviews and surveys with producers, listening sessions with TA providers, and a review of current TA curricula and resource materials. The project focused on two key regions—the Southeast/Appalachia and the Midwest/Great Lakes—with the understanding that the findings would be relevant to broader national conversations

about food system equity, procurement reform, and economic development.

This work builds on an established body of research focused on racial equity, land access, and structural exclusion within U.S. agriculture, as well as on more recent studies examining the challenges producers face when entering institutional and wholesale markets. These include inquiries into the efficacy of USDA programs designed to support underserved producers, evaluations of technical assistance delivery models, and broader assessments of power dynamics in food system infrastructure. By engaging both producers and TA providers, this project contributes to and extends that knowledge base, shifting the focus from describing disparities toward actionable systems-level improvements.

Through this report, we aim to surface the operational gaps, producer perspectives, and institutional insights that can inform smarter, more effective TA delivery. The findings offer practical considerations for USDA program design, public and philanthropic investments, and the work of TA organizations nationwide. Ultimately, the report supports a shared goal: building a food system that is more inclusive, more resilient, and more responsive to the full range of producers who keep it functioning.

Background

A well-functioning food system depends on the active participation of producers across a wide range of geographies, business models, and backgrounds. This diversity increases the system's ability to respond to supply chain shocks, meet evolving consumer demand, and support stable regional economies. Yet many producers—particularly Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers—remain disconnected from large-scale market opportunities such as wholesale and institutional procurement. These persistent gaps reflect long-standing structural dynamics that continue to shape who participates in the nation's agricultural economy—and who does not.

Historical Patterns of Exclusion

The barriers faced by certain groups of producers are not new. In *The Decline (and Revival) of Black Farmers and Rural Landowners*, researchers John Gilbert, Gwen Sharp, and M. Sindy Felin describe

the systematic loss of farmland among Black farmers, estimated at 90% between 1910 and 1997. They attribute this to overlapping forces, including discrimination in lending, legal loopholes around heirs' property, and a lack of access to the same federal programs that helped build and preserve white-owned agricultural land during the 20th century.

Tribal producers have encountered parallel but distinct constraints. The USDA Equity Commission Interim Report (2023) identifies how land held in federal trust, fractionated ownership, and limited infrastructure investment on Tribal lands have created significant challenges for producers trying to grow or market agricultural products. These barriers have often required Native producers to develop workarounds, such as informal leasing or off-reservation processing, to access the same markets others take for granted.

Meanwhile, in *The New American Farmer*, Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern (2019) documents how many Hispanic producers—especially first-generation immigrants—operate small-scale, diversified farms using family labor and culturally specific production methods. Despite their resourcefulness and entrepreneurial drive, these producers often fall outside conventional TA systems and lack access to capital, language-accessible services, and procurement relationships. Their contributions are essential, yet often undervalued or unsupported in regional food economies.

Programs like the USDA's 2501 Program were created to address these persistent gaps. The agency's Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement describes how the program provides grants to organizations serving producers who have historically had limited access to USDA support. Yet despite these well-intentioned efforts, program participation continues to vary widely by region, and many producers still encounter structural friction when trying to access these services or qualify for procurement opportunities.

Technical Assistance and the Challenge of System Alignment

Technical assistance (TA) is often framed as a general support mechanism for producers—but in practice, it plays a central role in shaping who is positioned to grow, scale, and participate in

wholesale and institutional markets. When well-designed, TA equips producers with the skills, tools, and confidence to take on larger contracts, meet food safety standards, and build relationships with buyers. When misaligned, it can reinforce bottlenecks, exclude its intended audience, or create new burdens in the form of compliance-heavy requirements.

Across USDA programs, non-profit networks, and university extension systems, the current TA landscape is fragmented. In some regions, producers must navigate a confusing mix of training, grant portals, and service providers just to access basic support. In other regions, limited staffing or outreach budgets mean that entire categories of producers, particularly those operating at a small scale or with alternative business models, go unseen or underserved. These challenges are particularly acute when institutional procurement systems expand without parallel investments in the support systems producers rely on. If TA providers lack the capacity to guide producers through procurement onboarding, or if buyers' expectations don't align with producers' capabilities, market linkages can stall.

In *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*, Leah Penniman (2018) emphasizes the importance of trust and relevance in TA delivery. She illustrates how producers are far more likely to opt into mentorship when it aligns with their values, production model, and long-term goals. Many of the farmers profiled in her work choose to grow slowly, sell through community channels, or avoid institutional buyers—not out of disinterest, but because existing systems lack clear, reliable, and reciprocal pathways. Penniman also notes that producers assess buyers not only on price, but on consistency, responsiveness, and mutual respect. If a buyer shows up once and disappears, a producer may walk away. But when buyers return regularly, give feedback, and pay reliably, even small producers are more likely to invest in long-term supply relationships.

These dynamics are echoed in broader federal initiatives. In response to supply chain fragility and underrepresentation in procurement, USDA has introduced programs such as the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA), Local Food for Schools (LFS), and a national network of cooperative agreements. These initiatives signal a growing recognition that inclusive regional supply chains are vital to national resilience. However,

access to these programs often depends on the performance of a patchwork of intermediaries—food hubs, aggregators, extension offices, and nonprofits—whose capacity and reach vary dramatically by location. Even the most well-designed programs can falter when the intermediaries responsible for delivery lack infrastructure, staffing, or the trust of producers.

The launch of the USDA Regional Food Business Centers in 2022 marks a shift toward more coordinated support, with centers tasked with improving TA delivery, capital access, and regional logistics. In *Securing the Future of U.S. Agriculture*, Carlisle et al. (2022) argue that such interventions are critical to enabling a circular, regionally distributed food economy, particularly one that can adapt to environmental and supply chain stressors. Still, they caution that for these centers to succeed, they must be embedded in the operational realities of producers, not just the strategic goals of buyers or institutions.

This tension is evident in the experience of many immigrant and first-generation producers as well. In *The New American Farmer*, Minkoff-Zern (2019) describes how small-scale farmers, particularly those from Hispanic backgrounds, often avoid institutional sales not because they lack production capacity, but because formalized systems of recordkeeping, certifications, and regulatory compliance feel inaccessible or uninviting. Their decision to pursue alternative markets is often a strategic, not reluctant, choice.

Taken together, this body of work points to a broader need for alignment—not only between producers and buyers, but between policy design, institutional procurement, and the everyday conditions in which producers operate. Technical assistance, when designed with this context in mind, has the potential to close this gap. But when delivered generically or without sustained support, it risks reinforcing the very disparities it seeks to resolve.

Framing the Opportunity

Improving how technical assistance is delivered, particularly to producers who have not been well served by existing TA and to those whose business models fall outside conventional procurement channels, strengthens the food system as a whole. A

more diverse mix of suppliers improves regional supply chain resilience, reduces market concentration and over-reliance on a small number of vendors, and gives public and private institutions access to a wider variety of products. For producers, well-targeted TA increases efficiency, supports business development, and reduces the time and risk involved in pursuing larger contracts.

For these benefits to materialize, TA must be understood not just as an educational service but as critical infrastructure that enables producers of various backgrounds to participate in the market. It must be funded, staffed, and evaluated with the same seriousness as other core components of the supply chain. This report builds on that premise by analyzing how producers experience TA, how it functions in practice, and what it might take to deliver it more effectively.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods exploratory design to better understand how technical assistance (TA) systems support—or fall short in supporting—Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers seeking access to wholesale and institutional markets. The approach combined primary data collection through surveys and interviews with a structured literature review and secondary data scan. Together, these methods aimed to surface not only the challenges producers face, but also the structural features and design logic behind current TA delivery systems.

Research Design and Scope

The geographic scope included the Southeast/Appalachia and the Midwest/Great Lakes regions. These regions were selected to ensure diversity of producer experience and TA infrastructure, while allowing for comparative insights that can inform national program design.

Data Collection Methods

Structured survey instruments were developed—one for producers. The producer survey collected data on farm characteristics, market participation, prior TA experience, and perceived barriers to accessing wholesale markets. The TA provider interview guide explored organizational structure, program delivery models, outreach capacity, and reflections on the effectiveness of public and private support systems. The survey was distributed digitally through partner

organizations, food system coalitions, and TA networks to reach a range of respondents across the targeted regions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of producers and TA providers who opted in via the survey or were referred through regional networks. These interviews provided deeper insight into participant experiences, including trust in institutions, decision-making around scaling, and the nuances of navigating wholesale market systems. All interviews were conducted virtually, recorded with consent, and transcribed. Transcripts were then thematically coded to identify patterns, contradictions, and regionally specific challenges or innovations.

Participant Overview

The research sample included a wide cross-section of producers and TA providers, representing different farm sizes, business models, and organizational affiliations. While not designed to be statistically representative, the study intentionally captured a diverse range of operational realities and geographic contexts to inform systemic insight.

Findings

Overview of Themes

This section brings together the core findings from the two primary research components of this study: a producer survey and a set of structured interviews with technical assistance (TA) providers. Each dataset offers a distinct lens into the wholesale readiness landscape: the survey provides a snapshot of where producers are, what barriers they face, and how they perceive support systems; the interviews offer a deeper understanding of how those systems operate, what internal challenges TA providers face, and what strategies are emerging in the field.

The survey received responses from 31 producers across the Southeast/Appalachia and Midwest/Great Lakes regions. While not statistically representative, the data reflect a diverse cross-section of farm scales, demographics, and levels of experience. The TA provider interviews included 20 professionals working across USDA programs, Cooperative Extension, nonprofit organizations, and independent consultancies in these regions. Many interviewees have spent years embedded in underserved

communities and have spoken not only from organizational experience but also from deeply personal, field-level relationships.

Themes are organized across four key areas: Market Readiness, Technical Assistance, Infrastructure & Capital, and Trust & Institutional Engagement. Within each, we present both producer insights (primarily quantitative) and provider reflections (primarily qualitative), aiming to capture the operational and systemic dimensions of wholesale access.

Producer Survey Insights

Market Readiness

The survey revealed both a clear interest in wholesale markets and significant uncertainty about how to engage with them. **A little over half (56.5%) of producers reported selling at least some of their products to wholesale buyers—most commonly to food hubs, restaurants, and small groceries.**

However, these sales often account for only a small portion of total income, and many producers reported feeling only partially prepared to meet wholesale expectations.

An even larger group (64.7%) expressed interest in expanding to wholesale in the future, signaling potential for growth. But the leap from direct-to-consumer to institutional or aggregated sales is steep. Producers noted limited knowledge of food safety protocols, procurement timelines, pricing structures, and packaging requirements. As one respondent put it, “There’s no one path—it’s not like you wake up and know how to sell to a school.”

Readiness was also shaped by the nature of the producer’s operation. Many respondents were part-time or seasonal growers. Only 25% identified farming as their primary source of income. This has direct implications for market engagement: producers who farm part-time often lack the margin for experimentation, making them less likely to risk scaling without strong support or guaranteed buyers.

Technical Assistance

Producer experiences with technical assistance varied widely. While some reported positive relationships with local nonprofit groups or peer-led trainings, many were unaware of available resources

or unsure how to navigate them. **72% of respondents had not heard of USDA’s Regional Food Business Centers—highlighting not just a communications gap, but a deeper disconnect between program design and field-level knowledge.**

Where TA had been accessed, producers often found it misaligned with their needs. Programs were described as too short-term, too technical, or too abstract. Several respondents mentioned having attended trainings that felt “like they weren’t for me”—either because of the language used, the assumptions made about business scale, or the lack of context around cultural practices and production systems.

Producers expressed a strong preference for peer-to-peer formats, field days, or one-on-one support, especially when offered by someone from their own community or network. Over half selected in-person workshops or farm visits as their preferred TA format, while very few opted for webinars, static guides, or large-scale info sessions. This reinforces the idea that trust, familiarity, and communication style matter just as much as content when delivering effective assistance.

Infrastructure and Capital

Three major themes emerged from producer responses regarding infrastructure and capital: access to land, the cost of scaling, and the availability of grant support. Many producers, particularly first-generation farmers, reported difficulty securing affordable land or stable leases. Without long-term land tenure, investments in infrastructure like refrigeration, fencing, or food safety systems felt risky. One respondent described it as “like building on quicksand—you don’t know if the land will still be yours next year.”

Access to capital was even more constrained. Over 75% of respondents said they lacked the funds needed to make necessary improvements. Several pointed to the challenge of navigating grant systems, especially those that required up-front spending with later reimbursement. Others simply weren’t aware of what was available or how to apply. For many, the paperwork, matching requirements, or audit risk created more fear than opportunity.

Finally, many producers noted that wholesale markets often require a different kind of

infrastructure: better post-harvest handling, transportation capacity, and compliance systems. Yet few respondents had access to aggregation facilities, refrigerated storage, or processing spaces, further limiting their ability to participate at scale.

Trust and Institutional Engagement

Perhaps the most telling theme from the producer survey was a deep ambivalence about formal institutions. While respondents expressed interest in market growth and professional development, many were hesitant to engage with USDA, Cooperative Extension, or grant programs. This hesitancy wasn't always rooted in present-day discrimination, but in accumulated experience—stories passed between producers about programs that failed, offices that turned people away, or advisors who didn't understand their operations.

Respondents expressed greater trust in local organizations, peer networks, and long-standing relationships. When asked where they would turn for advice, many named fellow farmers or regional nonprofits, not state or federal agencies. This pattern suggests that building market access is not just a matter of technical readiness. It is a matter of relational trust, built over time, and often mediated through networks of familiarity and shared lived experience.

TA Provider Interview Insights

Systemic and Structural Challenges

Technical assistance providers spoke candidly about the constraints they face, many of which mirrored the producer experiences above. Structural racism, grant unpredictability, and limited hiring flexibility were cited as persistent barriers to equitable TA delivery. Providers emphasized how funding structures often require them to chase metrics or deliver programming at a pace that doesn't allow for deep engagement. Several mentioned being expected to “do a lot with very little”—to manage multiple programs across wide geographies with minimal staff.

The instability of short-term grants also emerged as a major concern. One provider explained, “We can't build trust in a community if our program disappears after one year.” Others discussed how oversubscription to TA or funding programs can lead to disappointment, even resentment, when only a handful of producers are served.

Capacity and Competency

Providers themselves feel stretched thin. Many are working without transportation budgets, multilingual staff, or culturally relevant materials. While several had tried to hire from within underserved communities, budget limitations or organizational barriers made this difficult. As a result, many providers operate with limited cultural proximity to the communities they serve.

This gap can show up in subtle ways—through the tone of communication, the choice of language, or assumptions made in workshops. Providers reported that when programming doesn't “speak the same language” (literally or figuratively), producers disengage quickly. Still, many providers demonstrated a deep commitment to improvement. They described efforts to learn from their clients, adapt materials, and shift expectations away from transactional delivery toward long-term partnerships.

Outreach and Delivery

One of the most repeated critiques from providers was about the design of current programs. “Too much is one-size-fits-all,” said one, noting that procurement pathways, recordkeeping tools, and even business planning models often assume producers are full-time, well-capitalized, and fluent in formal grant systems. Providers called for longer-term engagement, more hands-on field time, and fewer bureaucratic constraints. They pointed to peer-led training models, storytelling approaches, and relationship-based grant coaching as alternatives that better reflect producer reality.

Opportunities and Promising Practices

Despite challenges, providers shared several examples of effective strategies:

- Co-designing programs with producers instead of delivering top-down curricula.
- Using peer trainers or hiring producers as TA staff
- Offering technical assistance and financial support together to avoid “empty advice” that producers can't act on because they do not have the financial resources to do so.
- Working through intermediaries trusted in the community, such as churches, cooperatives, non-profit farmer support organizations, or mutual aid groups.

- Pushing funders to adopt more flexible, long-term grant models that reward relationship-building, not just outputs.

Several interviewees noted that these strategies reflect the principles embedded in the Mission-Oriented Agricultural Innovation Systems (MAIS) framework: namely, that real innovation is relational, cross-sectoral, and focused on shared public goals, not just economic efficiency. The Mission-Oriented Agricultural Innovation Systems (MAIS) framework builds on traditional agricultural innovation systems by explicitly focusing on public missions, such as equity, sustainability, or food system transformation. It emphasizes coordination across institutions, long-term investment, and inclusive engagement with the people most impacted by system change (Hekkert et al. 2020; Klerkx & Begemann 2020).

Synthesis of Findings

The dual lens of producers and providers surfaces several cross-cutting insights:

Market access is not linear or technical—it is embedded in trust, relationships, and capacity. Producers cannot be expected to scale into markets they do not fully understand, do not trust, or do not feel welcomed in. Similarly, providers cannot effectively serve if they are under-resourced, overburdened, or disconnected from producer realities.

There is readiness, but it is uneven and often invisible to institutions. Many producers are already selling regionally, using informal systems or creative strategies. Their knowledge is real, but it doesn't always map onto what formal buyers or grant programs are looking for. Similarly, providers often know what needs to be done, but are constrained by rules, funding gaps, or institutional inertia.

Relational infrastructure matters as much as physical infrastructure. Cold storage, processing facilities, and transportation matter—but so do relationships—who a producer trusts to explain a grant, who will vouch for a buyer, or who can navigate a reimbursement issue can shape whether a market pathway is viable.

One-size-fits-all systems leave the most vulnerable producers behind. The producers most

rooted in their communities, most diversified, or most values-driven are often the ones least able to participate in rigid procurement systems. Making markets work for them means building systems that adapt, not expecting producers to do all the adapting.

Ultimately, the findings reinforce that if public programs and TA systems aim to expand wholesale access, they must do so with attention to context, culture, and the lived constraints of both producers and providers.

Recommendations & Implications

This study affirms that expanding wholesale market access for Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers is not simply a matter of adding more funding or offering individual training. It requires a broader redesign of how technical assistance (TA), infrastructure, financing, and procurement systems are aligned, and whether they work in practice for the producers they claim to serve. The findings reflect a need for both systemic change and targeted intervention. Trust, tailored delivery, and time are as important as tools or capital. Likewise, policy goals must be matched by relational infrastructure and programmatic flexibility if they are to be effective. The recommendations below are intended to support USDA officials, philanthropic funders, TA providers, institutional buyers, and other actors working to build a food system that can equitably support a wider range of producers.

Federal Program Design and Administration

Federal agencies set the rules, funding mechanisms, and performance metrics that shape TA delivery and wholesale procurement. Findings from this study point to several key changes that could make federal programming more effective and better aligned with producer realities.

- Redesign program metrics to prioritize relational outcomes, such as repeated engagement or trust built over time, rather than purely transactional benchmarks like the number of trainings delivered, participants engaged, or applications submitted. TA providers need flexibility to spend time with producers and return for follow-

up, especially in communities where historical mistrust or institutional harm is still felt.

- Offer TA and financial support in tandem. Many producers report that TA is of limited use when not coupled with immediate capital, especially in a reimbursement-only model. Expanding pre-payment options or offering funding through intermediaries can reduce the risk placed on producers and improve the overall usability of grants.
- Link outreach and support to infrastructure investments. Programs like the Regional Food Business Centers should be linked to outreach and support strategies that ensure producers can actually access and benefit from those resources. Physical infrastructure—such as storage, processing, or aggregation—will only be effective if accompanied by navigational support and transparent access policies.

Technical Assistance Delivery and Provider Support

TA providers are tasked with delivering support across highly varied contexts—often with limited funding, inconsistent staffing, and restrictive program structures. The providers interviewed for this study emphasized the need for more flexible, culturally grounded, and relationship-based approaches.

One of the clearest insights from both producers and providers was the value of peer-to-peer learning. TA programs that include farmer-to-farmer mentorship, locally trusted navigators, or embedded community organizations tend to generate more participation and build deeper trust. These relational models stand in contrast to one-time webinars or generic resource guides, which many producers found unrelatable or difficult to apply.

Providers also highlighted their own need for better support. Many are stretched across multiple counties or projects, with limited time to tailor programming or build sustained relationships. Increased investment in core staffing, localized training, and outreach budgets could significantly improve provider capacity. Similarly, allowing for more adaptation and producer co-design in programming would increase relevance and effectiveness. Administrative burden is another shared pain point. Producers often lack the time, data, or digital access to engage with complex application systems. TA

providers can help reduce this burden by offering back-office assistance, templated recordkeeping tools, and pre-application coaching. Doing so not only increases program participation but also builds producer confidence.

Philanthropic Investment and Coordination

Philanthropic organizations are uniquely positioned to fill gaps that public funding cannot always address, especially in relationship-building, experimentation, and long-term organizational stability. One recommendation is to increase unrestricted funding to organizations already embedded in underserved communities. Many of these groups are trusted but under-resourced, making them vulnerable to burnout or mission drift when chasing project-based grants. Core support funding enables them to retain staff, plan beyond a single year, and respond to evolving needs without bureaucratic lag.

Philanthropy can also play a catalytic role in building regional coordination. Investments in TA collaboratives, regional data infrastructure, or shared logistical support can extend the reach of individual organizations and reduce duplication of effort. These investments help transform isolated TA providers into a true support ecosystem. Finally, philanthropic funders should model alternative approaches to evaluation—ones that center community experience, emphasize co-design, and account for incremental trust-building. Evaluation frameworks that reflect the reality of long-term transformation rather than short-term outputs will yield more actionable insights and avoid misinterpreting complexity as failure.

Wholesale Market Participation & Buyer Relationships

Wholesale markets—whether through food hubs, distributors, cooperatives, or direct-to-retailer relationships—remain underutilized pathways for many underserved producers. This underutilization is not necessarily due to a lack of interest or capacity, but rather due to the complexity of participation and the structural mismatch between producer operations and buyer expectations. Many producers in this study described wholesale systems as opaque or unwelcoming.

Entry points are often unclear, buyer standards are not always communicated transparently, and the administrative load required to comply with buyer requirements, such as food safety documentation, traceability, or consistent volume, is high. One recommendation is simplification. Wholesale buyers, including private intermediaries, can work with TA providers to clarify expectations, translate onboarding materials into plain language, and offer producer-facing guidance on pricing, certifications, and logistics. Even simple changes—such as sample contracts, decision trees, or pre-qualification checklists—can significantly lower the perceived and actual risk of engagement.

Another opportunity lies in building longer-term, relationship-based agreements between buyers and producers. Rather than relying solely on spot markets or single-season arrangements, buyers can offer multi-year or renewable contracts with flexibility around volume or timing. These types of agreements provide a level of predictability critical for producers considering infrastructure investments or scaling decisions. Buyers can also invest in shared aggregation or logistics systems, such as coordinated pickups, shared trucking routes, or pooled packaging infrastructure, that reduce the burden placed on individual producers. These kinds of interventions not only improve market access but also enhance the overall functionality and resilience of regional food supply chains.

Importantly, this study suggests that expanding access to wholesale markets is not about creating entirely new systems—it is about modifying existing channels to be more transparent, supportive, and adaptable to the realities of small and underserved producers. Doing so supports not only producer participation but also the long-term viability of intermediaries and buyers seeking reliable, regionally sourced supply.

Toward Structural Alignment

Across all categories of recommendation, one theme is consistent: **technical assistance alone cannot transform market access.** What is needed is structural alignment between producer conditions, program design, and institutional goals. This includes rethinking how success is measured, how programs are structured, and how risk is distributed. It means investing not just in innovation, but in intermediation—the messy but necessary work of

helping people navigate systems, build relationships, and align resources.

Relational infrastructure must be treated with the same seriousness as physical infrastructure. Without trust, no grant, no training, and no buyer will be enough. Without capacity, no opportunity can be taken. And without coordination, even the best programs will fall short of their goals. The recommendations above are not exhaustive, but they point toward a more resilient, more connected, and ultimately more functional future—one in which producers, TA providers, institutions, and funders are not simply aligned in purpose, but supported in practice.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the current landscape of wholesale market access for Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers, with a particular focus on how technical assistance (TA) systems are designed, delivered, and experienced by those seeking to scale into wholesale and institutional markets. Through a combination of producer surveys and in-depth interviews with TA providers, the research offers a grounded picture of both persistent barriers and emerging opportunities. What emerges is not a story of failure or lack of interest, but one of misalignment. Many producers expressed clear motivation and willingness to grow their operations, explore new markets, and contribute to regional supply chains. However, they continue to encounter structural and relational challenges that make wholesale market participation difficult. These include a lack of accessible infrastructure, inadequate financial flexibility, uneven trust in public institutions, and TA offerings that often miss the mark in terms of delivery format, language, or contextual relevance.

At the same time, TA providers described being constrained by grant structures, limited staffing, and rigid program requirements that do not always allow for the depth of engagement or cultural responsiveness that these producers require. Many providers operate with a strong sense of mission and community commitment, but face difficulty sustaining long-term relationships under current funding models. While efforts to expand market access are underway at multiple levels, the pace of programmatic adaptation has not always kept up with the complexity of producer realities.

This study highlights a shared recognition that expanding access to wholesale markets must be accompanied by a rethinking of how wholesale market readiness is defined, how support is delivered, and how success is measured. Readiness is not a static checklist—it is an evolving combination of infrastructure, relationships, trust, and access to timely, relevant guidance.

Technical assistance must move beyond short-term programming toward long-term partnership, built around co-learning, cultural fluency, and a willingness to meet producers where they are.

For USDA, philanthropic funders, TA organizations, and regional food system stakeholders, this presents an opportunity—not only to improve program uptake, but also to redesign support systems that are more stable, more effective, and more grounded in the lived experience of those they intend to serve. When producers are better supported, markets function more reliably. When technical assistance is tailored and trust-based, institutional relationships become more durable. And when access is expanded thoughtfully, the resilience of the entire food system is strengthened.

In short, the findings of this report point to a fundamental shift: from transactional delivery to relational infrastructure. From fragmented services to coordinated ecosystems. And from standardized programming to adaptive, community-informed support. The producers are not just ready—they are resourceful. The work ahead lies in building systems that recognize and reflect that truth.

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