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# Evidence-Based Health Policy Project

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## **Briefing Summary: December 14th, 2016**

### **Farmers, Eaters, and Legislators: The State Role in Food Systems and Nutrition Policy**

Full briefing materials are available at:

<https://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu/programs/health-policy/ebhpp/events/index.htm>

#### Speaker Contact Information

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##### **Dr. Jed Colquhoun**

UW-Extension, Agricultural and Natural Resources Extension

*Wisconsin Agriculture: A Viable Local Solution to Nutritional Insecurity*

[colquhoun@wisc.edu](mailto:colquhoun@wisc.edu)

##### **Vanessa Herald**

UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems

*Wisconsin on the Lunch Tray: How Local and Regional Food Systems Grow Healthy Children*

[vherald@wisc.edu](mailto:vherald@wisc.edu)

##### **Ellen Ritter and Amy Mihm**

UW Health, Culinary and Clinical Nutrition Services

*Local and Sustainable Purchasing at UW Health*

[eritter3@uwhealth.org](mailto:eritter3@uwhealth.org), [amihm@uwhealth.org](mailto:amihm@uwhealth.org)

##### **Dr. Jed Colquhoun**

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Dr. Colquhoun presented an overview of Wisconsin's agricultural sector, including current successes and areas for improvement in farm-to-institution systems. While Wisconsin is a top producer of milk, cheese, corn, oats and cranberries, only 10% of the Wisconsin workforce is directly involved in the agriculture industry. Wisconsin agriculture creates \$88.4 billion annually in economic activity with a total of 68,900 farms. Dr. Colquhoun presented comparative statistics regarding spending on food in the U.S. and other nations. While U.S. expenditures on food are lower than comparable countries, an average of 12% of Wisconsin residents experience food insecurity – an issue for both urban and rural households. Considerable energy and investment is expended on crop production, packaging and distribution, but the majority of food waste occurs in post-production, where 40% of produced calories are wasted due to personal preferences and appearance of produce. Dr. Colquhoun pointed out that food is only nutritious if it is consumed, and that culturally appropriate provision of food is equally important. He noted that canned foods can be nutritious and may serve as an appropriate vehicle that can save refrigeration and transportation costs. Invisible solutions within existing production systems have the highest likelihood of success, strengthening local economies, building the state workforce and supporting Wisconsin farmers. Taxpayers pay an average of \$500 per person annually in subsidizing adverse healthcare outcomes of poor nutrition which could be better spent on marketing, education and investment in healthy food systems, according to Dr. Colquhoun. Reducing food insecurity is not a matter of spending more money on food, but rather reallocating resources to create systems that provide appropriate, nutritious food to those in need.

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## **Vanessa Herald**

Ms. Herald focused on farm-to-school programming in Wisconsin. Many aspects of farm-to-school are different than the farm-to-table restaurant industry, as schools operate with different equipment, at a significant scale, within strict regulatory constraints and with a population of food-discriminatory children. Farm-to-school involves three primary beneficiaries: children, farmers and communities. Over \$175 million is spent annually in Wisconsin school cafeterias, serving half a million lunches each day. Over half of children qualify for free and reduced lunch, meaning they not only find academic nourishment at school but also nutrition and possibly their only daily healthy meal. A majority of Wisconsin counties are involved in some kind of farm-to-school initiative, more than another other responding state in the nation. With such a significant financial and community investment in farm-to-school, there is substantial opportunity to shift some degree of revenue to local growers and markets. Research shows that involvement in farm-to-school programming will increase a child's likelihood to try new foods, making healthy choices and understanding state agriculture and food seasonality. Research with Wisconsin's AmeriCorps farm-to-school program also shows that the children that benefit the most are the highest need, with vulnerable children consuming more produce in a farm-to-school environment. A growing body of evidence also suggests that farm-to-school boosts academic achievement as well. Farmers that enter farm-to-school programs have cited a 5% increase in profits and a rise in community involvement overall. Working with a farm-to-school program can provide producers with a stable, high-volume revenue source. Increasingly extensive networks of producers, packagers, distributors and administrators will be needed in today's evolving market where programs are scaling up and using creative approaches to address stakeholder needs. Initiatives such as Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin also support innovative structures. Ms. Herald affirms that increases of state contributions to school meal reimbursements can greatly impact the way in which food service professionals serve children and further expand healthy options for eaters.

## **Ellen Ritter and Amy Mihm**

Ms. Ritter and Ms. Mihm discussed the opportunities for private sector involvement in healthy food systems. UW Health serves over 600,000 patients each year and first instituted sustainability policies in 2016. Their goal includes 20% of food dedicated to responsible and sustainable practices. They now source produce, dairy and meat locally, even through large-scale distributors. Ms. Ritter and Ms. Mihm affirmed that the key elements of trust and commitment have helped them build partnerships with local growers. Farmers must know that a product will be purchased consistently year after year to facilitate crop forecasting. Such initiatives have proved successful for both cultural and financial purposes. UW Health lowered its salad bar rates from \$8.99 per pound to \$4.99 per pound and witnessed a 46% volume increase in salad bar consumption. They have found that by reengineering menus to make healthy options more affordable, patients and staff are more likely to make nutritious choices. Focusing on seasonal ingredients has both cut costs and increased consumption of produce as well. They challenged the assumption that purchasing locally would necessarily be more expensive, as often seasonal Wisconsin-produced ingredients are more affordable than transported produce. UW Health also promotes a culture of healthy food systems by hosting an on-site farmers market, highlighting walking routes and marketing healthy choices. The organization no longer sees its cafeterias as a profit source, but now strives to remain revenue-neutral and invest in long-term desirable health outcomes. Ms. Ritter and Ms. Mihm also explained that UW Health supports humane handling and sustainable agricultural practices, along with alternative means of growing such as hydroponic and aquaponic farming.