

# **TWO YEARS OF MARKET BOX ETHICAL FOOD SYSTEMS**

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## A NOTE FROM A COORDINATOR

Together, we've grown Market Box from an emergency pandemic response to a vibrant food justice project. We're in a daunting moment. As COVID-19 marches on, food and gas costs rise, and our most basic rights face severe threats, it can feel as though we face a fight on every front. We see Market Box as a project bound up in all battles: it feels more urgent than ever to build mutual aid structures that leave no one behind—especially working-class, low-income, Black communities, and those who are elderly or disabled. We wanted to take this moment to honor how this project has grown in the past two years: it's been the work of many hands.

We originally built Market Box on a Community Supported Agriculture model at Star Farm Chicago, a non-profit farm on the city's Southwest Side. We crowdfunded to buy produce boxes from the farm, and partnered with neighborhood mutual aid projects, like the People's Grab-N-Go food site in Washington Park, to grow our free distribution list. By summer 2020, our list of recipients on the South Side of Chicago had expanded to 400 households, self-identified as Black and low-income.

By winter 2020, we knew we needed to be able to operate year round. We partnered with Local Foods, a grocery store and wholesaler that sources from farms within a day's freight range of Chicago. We also shifted to a volunteer-centered distribution model, with over forty neighbors packing and driving each delivery week. Our volunteer-driven model lets us put our funds toward bulk buying with small farms, a system that has proven ethical, sustainable, and efficient: every dollar donated works to support local growers **and** neighborhood families.

We see this initiative of mutual aid as a form of direct action against the government malfeasance and state-sanctioned violence of food insecurity. By creating new relationships and reimagining how neighbors can act with accountability towards each other, we can generate community power in the face of government neglect.

Beyond providing food, in Market Box's short tenure we have phonebanked seniors to help them get vaccinated, distributed hundreds of books and backpacks to kids going back to school, and helped parents and grandparents get Christmas presents to their children. We've seen how taking care of each other can build civic power: through our network, neighbors who received deliveries or volunteered were also connected to tenant organizing, park preservation, and local elections.

By design, this work takes a lot of hands. This past year, our core team of three grew into over a dozen volunteer coordinators. We've added an advisory board of folks we trust to keep the project growing, and have hired part-time lead coordinators. In an impossible era, we have been able to support small farms through all seasons, and support our neighbors through periods of joblessness, illness, and bereavement.

Two years in, we're deeply grateful—to the grandmothers who sign up whole buildings, the neighbors who borrow cars to drive for us, and the hundreds of people who have built this ecosystem together. Read on for stats and excerpts from our first two years, and a look at what's next!

**Hannah Nyhart**, co-organizer of Market Box  
August 2022

## STATS

Since its inception in 2020, we've built Market Box from an emergency response to a sustainable ecosystem. Here's what that looked like, by the numbers:

### OUR PEOPLE

With regular emails, phonebanks, and texts, we tried to make sure nobody in our community slipped through the cracks. In our first two years, we were able to serve at least **740 households**, or **1,800+ people**<sup>1</sup>. Since January 2021, we've retained **80%** of our recipient list, and added **130** households.

### OUR OPERATION

In 2021, we made two big changes to make Market Box a year-round operation. We brought on Chicago grocer Local Foods as our sourcing partner, and took what we learned partnering with Star Farm Chicago to build an in-house, volunteer driven, distribution hub. With these changes, we were able to **double** the food per bag, and distribute every month of the year. This was the work of so many hands, namely the **450 volunteers** from across the city that have packed or driven with us!

In February 2022, we began renting storage and packing space at First Presbyterian Church in Woodlawn. We're excited to continue to grow this project in the neighborhood where it began!

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<sup>1</sup> Assumes the 60% of our list that self identify as "1-2 person" households average 1.5/household, and the 40% that self identify as "3 or more people" households average 4/household



### OUR FOOD // OUR FARMS

Market Box spent over \$100,000 with farms and small producers in the last year. Across all seasons, 90% of our food came from the Midwest, and in the summer months we were able to keep an even tighter loop: 80% of our source farms were within a one-state radius. The same family farms that table at Chicago farmers' markets—Nichols, Ellis, Mick Klug, PrairiErth—sold thousands of pounds of produce to Market Box!

### OUR IMPACT

In the past year alone, we bought around 98,000 lbs of food from midwest farmers and producers and got it to households across the South Side twice a month, every month. In years when many folks have seen unemployment run out, family members fall ill, and rising grocery bills, our community helped make sure people had good food on the table.



“ The People’s Grab-n-Go and **Market Box** are parts of the constellation of mutual aid groups that have emerged across Chicago, and the country, since the pandemic began a year ago. In those early, frightening days last spring, and again during a summer of protest, people throughout America recognized a need to look out for one another. ”

When mutual aid efforts weren’t directly supporting protests, they shared in the same work: Like the crowds in the streets, our projects were demanding we find better ways to keep our communities safe. We wanted to ensure that our initiatives were rooted in community care and Black joy. Our aim was to build welcoming spaces where families felt no shame seeking resources and didn’t have to worry about having to prove their circumstances. This is the opposite of the hard-to-navigate unemployment system, the ID requirements that meant people couldn’t pick up food-bank items on behalf of others, and the stimulus checks that left out undocumented neighbors. ”

from “Our Year in Mutual Aid” in  
*The New York Times*

By **Trina Reynolds-Tyler, Maira Khwaja, Dominique James, and Hannah Nyhart**

March 14, 2021

*In early 2021, a group of Market Box participants created a storytelling phone bank, where volunteers conducted interviews to record how our network experienced the pandemic and the changing political landscape. Here are some excerpts from those conversations. Interviews were organized and edited by Audrey Petty and Maira Khwaja, with photographs from the past two years by Davon Clark, Madeleine Parrish, and August Penny-Gunter.*



**Courtney K.**

**As told to Maira Khwaja (February 15, 2021)**

The pandemic has caused a lot of anxiety. I just noticed, I have this, what I call a low boil kind of depression, so I'm able to function, but just the fact that everything is happening in the house—for work, for the kids, my husband's job. We're all in the house and it's just, it's tough. It's tough. The kids aren't paying as close attention as they would. If they were in school, you'd be listening to the teacher, whereas at home, you can toggle and tab over to whatever it is you want to look at versus whatever class and so it's been a rough, rough transition, keeping them focused.

## Elsie LeNoir

As told to Katie Gunter (April 17, 2021)

I slipped on black ice last winter, broke my ankle, and I didn't know how I was going to get to the store. My friends and relatives, my neighbors, they help with things when they could. What I got from Market Box was enough to sustain a week or two. Every time I got a box, it was very timely. It was right on time, just when I really needed it most. And I really, really appreciated that.



## Ms. Wendy Jackson

As told to Samantha Guz (May 5, 2021)

Going forward in years to come, programs like Market Box can be a model for other not-for-profits, locally, regionally and nationally. Because it's known that those preconditions for life are really preconditions for health. And the disparities between people whose incomes are low—those are the people who are most likely to be affected by issues of climate change or pandemics or whatever.

I think that there's so much promise that will come out of Market Box, more than is apparent to me right now, but I just feel it. It's a knowingness I have that Market Box has so much more to become. It is becoming, I think.

## **Keke from Englewood**

**As told to Samatha Guz (April 21, 2021)**

I hope for equity. Because I strongly doubt the same type of issues I face are the same type of issues people who live in a high rise downtown face. Now, don't get me wrong. Definitely, they're facing some issues, right? It could be something related to their mental health or not being able to get outside and exercise. But in addition to those same ailments right now, being able to exercise, not being able to get outside. I feel like living where I live, I face a ton of more issues. Not that I want to make it, Well, who's got it bad or who's got it the worst competition? I just hope that more people can have access to opportunities like Market Box or other opportunities that I could be connected to through Market Box.



## **Aisha Hill**

**As told to Audrey Petty (April 20, 2021)**

It's been a rough year, a rough, rough year. I am a health care worker, but I work in a pediatric population, but I actually got it from coworkers. I'm a pediatric respiratory therapist. I work at a major hospital in Chicagoland. [...] My son graduated from eighth grade. It was a different year for him because of all the things he was expecting to have. Nothing happened. It was a complete stop. So that was a hard thing for him, but I think we managed, and we definitely learned to not sweat some big things and take time to enjoy the little things. [...] And the shootings. Not just a year of pandemic. But this year—I don't know what your political affiliation is, and not to offend you—but these years of Trump, a lot of things have surfaced. It showed—it took the scab off a lot of things.



**Jacqueline Scott**

**As told to Audrey Petty (February 17, 2021)**

We think, with everything—you think the coast is clear, we see the sun. Here you go. And then it's something else, I tell you, so yes. It's been very challenging for everybody, you know, but we're dealing with it the best we can, you know, pushing through the best we can, so that's all you can do.

## **SONNET**

*after Terrance Hayes*

by **Eve L. Ewing**

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*first appeared in Electric Arches. Reprinted with author's permission.*

## MARKET BOX AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

Market Box, as many of us know, emerged from a moment of crisis. As the coronavirus pandemic spread, quick trips to the grocery store became scary and time-consuming outings, and farmers' markets shut down. As people lost their jobs or had their hours reduced, the need for support quickly outpaced the lagging government response.

Fueled by more than 450 volunteers and more than 3,000 donations, Market Box grew out of a commitment to care for and support each other when other systems fail, and has served 740 families since May 2020. Beyond providing this essential, immediate support, Market Box also serves as an example of how we can adapt during crises and build systems of care that center and serve our community for the long-term. This model helped us address hunger in our community during the pandemic, and will be especially important as we work to protect each other in the face of the looming climate crisis.

As the pandemic has shown, many of our existing systems don't prioritize people. The simultaneous health and economic crisis further exposed that tying health insurance to employment makes access to health care unreliable when people need it most. Delayed and disrupted supply chains show how our food traveling extraordinary distances between farms and families creates a vulnerable and unpredictable food system. While we need changes at the systemic level, Market Box recognizes that some solutions

and actions have to step ahead of the government's response. Market Box is a reminder that any action that provides support and protection for our communities is worth doing.

The pandemic disproportionately impacted Black, brown, and low-income residents of Chicago: According to the City's public data, Black Chicagoans represented 42% of all COVID-19 deaths, even though they only represent 29% of the total population. White Chicagoans, however, represented 23% of COVID-19 deaths but make up 48% of the City's population. Further, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported that from February 2020 to October 2021, low-wage industries experienced nearly twice as much job loss as in medium-wage industries and roughly 15 times as much job loss as in high-wage industries.

Like the pandemic and other disasters, we know the impacts of climate change will be felt first and felt hardest by communities that already experience marginalization and discrimination. While much of Chicago has not yet seen significant changes in its environment due to climate change, flooding is already worsening east of Halsted as storms get heavier, the City's infrastructure and streets are buckling under rising temperatures, and Lake Michigan's shoreline continues to erode.

Knowing that our existing systems often ignore our most

marginalized or vulnerable residents, Market Box explicitly focuses on serving Black and low-income Chicagoans across the South Side. We also deliver to many home-bound neighbors to make it as easy as possible for everyone to get fresh produce. Projects like Market Box allow us to explicitly center racial equity in our response and focus on serving people we know other systems leave behind.

Market Box allows us to feed our neighbors while supporting local farms and businesses at the same time. We're also able to incorporate sustainability by sourcing food from within a day's freight trip whenever possible to reduce the resources needed. Navigating the climate crisis will require these same mutually supportive models, and we're proud that the relationships we develop now serve as the first step.

We firmly believe our government has a responsibility to respond to the climate crisis by strengthening local agriculture, and specifically acting to protect our most vulnerable communities. But, as we recognized at the beginning of the pandemic, we cannot wait for institutions to deliberate on if, when, and how they will act. Market Box proves there are immediate things we can do to protect and support one another in the face of crises. As we think about what we need to support our communities as climate change accelerates, Market Box provides an exciting example of what is possible when we come together and act strategically to care for each other.

**Mara Heneghan**, co-organizer of Market Box

## FOUR BOYS ON ELLIS [AN/OTHER RE-TELLING]

after Eve L. Ewing

By Saleem Hue Penny

*"...this that Grey Poupon/ that Evian/ that TED Talk, ayyyyye"*/ the boys dapped each other up & up & higher up & still higher up. they popped wheelies midway above the Plaisance: "SIT DOWN! ... BE HUMBLE!" they shouted, soaring moon-bound until the whole university became little monopoly buildings. plastic libraries & dorms transformed into *shuriken!* the boys snapped the swirling stars on their spokes, a chorus of *click-click, click-clicks* evoked. they a cyclone. him a cricket. them a cicada. he a comet. black brilliance IS MET EARLY & OFTEN WITH RESISTANCE. I WORRY, WILL THE BLOCK ROT ONCE GRANNY CAN'T TEND THE PLOTS? WHO WILL STAKE THE TOMATOES & TIE THE ZUCCHINI? WHO WILL WASH THE OKRA OR SAVE THE MELON SEEDS? SHE CAN'T AFFORD THE KALE & "NO, OUR STORE NO LONGER STOCKS MUSTARD GREENS."

FACT: TWO SUMMERS BACK, OUR LEMON BALM WAS SNATCHED, SPEARMINT SNIPPED, & ROSEMARY STEMS STRIPPED. OFFICIALS LEFT OUR DELICACIES WRITHING, WITHERING, DEHYDRATING IN THE HEAT. FACT: SUMMERTIME CHI NEEDS SUMMERTIME DREAMS. WE, THE PEOPLE, MUTUALLY AGREED TO AID IS TO SHARE: STEEP, THEN SIP, & RECOMMIT. MANIFEST, TOGETHER, WHAT WE NEED.

# **CALL TO ACTION!**

As we move into year three of Market Box, we have made the decision to sustain our commitment to growing neighborly networks of food aid and supporting pathways to community organizing. This year, we have created a non-profit 501c3 organization called Ecosystems of Care to house Market Box and other community projects, and have moved our operations into the space of First Presbyterian Church on 64th and Kimbark. As of late July 2022, COVID-19 rates have returned to a High community transmission level according to the CDC, while the government has ended much of its COVID-related economic support and protections.

Meanwhile, our neighbors are increasingly struggling economically. According to the USDA, food prices are up 10% from where they were a year ago, in July 2021. We can't take acts of care for granted; in fact, they may be the systems that sustain us through the next chapter of economic and pandemic recovery.

**We ask you, members of our core network, to commit yourself to telling a friend about Market Box—to volunteer, to drive, to donate, or to post about it on your social network.**

The people's many, small contributions are what will keep us moving forward, in Market Box and beyond.

Make a donation or sign up to volunteer at [marketboxchi.org](http://marketboxchi.org)

Follow us on Instagram @marketboxchi

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# BUILDING ECOSYSTEMS & CARE FROM FARM TO TABLE

[MARKETBOXCHI.ORG](http://MARKETBOXCHI.ORG)