

From Farm to Family Table: How Community Farmers Markets Is Growing Climate Solutions in Georgia

Summary

What happens when surplus produce meets a good recipe? In this conversation, Casey Hood, Director of Operations & Vendor Support, and Raevin Hawkins, Food Systems Innovation Manager, at Community Farmers Markets join host Eriqah Vincent to talk about how the organization is turning surplus produce into free meals for Atlanta families, doubling SNAP and EBT benefits at its markets, and building community around fresh, local food.

Key Takeaways

- Community Farmers Markets runs four traditional outdoor markets plus a growing network of aggregated markets, including pop-up farm stands at Atlanta Public Schools and MARTA stations, working with more than 160 small businesses, including 43 local farms.
- With support from a Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions & Equity Grant, the organization is turning surplus produce into plant-based, ready-to-eat meals, reducing food waste while promoting plant-based diets.
- The team recently shifted its meal distribution strategy from MARTA markets to free produce markets at Title I Atlanta Public Schools, where they reach three to four times more families per visit.
- Community Farmers Markets doubles SNAP and EBT benefits through a partnership with Wholesome Wave Georgia, and offers discounted application fees for BIPOC vendors and waived weekly fees for farmers.
- Despite challenges like extreme weather, land access for younger farmers, and funding uncertainty, Casey and Raevin find hope in their farmers, their community partners, and the families and kids who show up to the markets every week.

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Eriqah Vincent: Hi, everyone, thank you so much once again for joining us for this interview series. We're so excited today to have another Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions and Equity Grant recipient organization with us, an organization I deeply admire. So I'm so glad to have both Casey Hood and Raevin Hawkins here from Community Farmers Markets.

Hi, Casey and Raevin, thank you so much for joining us.

Casey Hood: Yeah, thank you for having us.

Eriqah Vincent: Yes, of course. So let's kick this right off — I'd like to start by asking you both to introduce yourselves, and introduce the work that Community Farmers Markets does in the community, which is so important.

Raevin Hawkins: My name is Raevin. I'm an Atlanta native, born and raised in the city. I went to school at Florida A&M University, and I ended up studying construction engineering. From there, I really wanted to be involved in sustainable projects, so I got involved with Community Farmers Markets, doing food access aggregate markets. From there I was able to get into operations, which allowed me to connect with local farmers, sourcing produce from right around the Southeast and within the city. From there we've just continued to do aggregate markets and food access projects with Title I schools, and it's been a great opportunity for me to give back to the community I was raised in.

Eriqah Vincent: Okay.

Casey Hood: And I'm Casey Hood — also Atlanta born and raised, this is my home. I studied out in California, environmental science and international and intercultural studies. Out there I worked on my school's farm and did our compost program, and that was kind of my intro into the agricultural world. When I graduated, I spent some time traveling and WWOOFing, where I got to work on organic farms around the world — I worked in Chile and Greece on some local farms — and then came back to Atlanta and carried that work over, working with a couple of local farms. That's how I first got connected with Community Farmers Markets, as a farm vendor.

Community Farmers Markets is a local nonprofit — we were founded in 2011. We're an umbrella organization for markets, so when you think about your regular outdoor farmers markets, we have four big regular farmers markets, and then we also have aggregated markets — they're kind of like farm stand pop-ups where we're buying from local farmers and then selling on their behalf. We see it as a bit of vendor support for farmers, because they have a full-time job out in the field, and sometimes asking them to come out to a market is a lot — it's a second job at the end of the day. So we run those two different models of markets. We also have a really robust outreach program — you might see us at schools or community centers, talking about how important it is to eat locally, and the importance of sustainability in the agricultural world. We do chef demos and basic lessons around that. We also have a vendor support program, because we work with over 160 small businesses through our markets — 43 of those are local farmers — so that can look like helping them with logo design, or webinars that help elevate their business. We also offer financial incentives through the market, through our SNAP and EBT match program, and five-dollar vouchers that we give out whenever we do outreach in the community. So that's a little bit about the organization.

Eriqah Vincent: Awesome, thank you so much for talking about that, and thank you for introducing us to Community Farmers Markets, because I have visited the MARTA markets you all do before.

Casey Hood: Yeah, yeah.

Eriqah Vincent: I'm really, really happy to talk to y'all for many reasons, but one of them is because of the great work I've seen you all do firsthand. Community Farmers Markets received a 2024–2025 Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions and Equity Grant — congratulations to you all, and I was so glad to be part of the advisory committee that awarded that to you, as well as the

rest of that cohort, really phenomenal projects, some of which we've already heard from this year. Please tell us more about the work of this grant, the funding, and the community, and about the recent shift in strategy for your organization — I know you all changed your strategy a bit from the last time we encountered you, so I'd love to hear more about that transition.

Casey Hood: Yeah, so the grant is based around this idea — what we've seen in markets is that, at the end of the day, sometimes our farmers have excess produce, and that can become food waste, or it can go back into compost, which isn't so bad, but what if we could make it into a value-added product that's also great for our community? So the grant is based around taking that excess produce and turning it into value-added products that we then give to our community. They're all plant-based, veggie-forward recipes, and we're working with our local farmers to procure the vegetables for those dishes. We started that with the MARTA markets, like you were talking about — Raevin, do you want to talk a little about the test kitchens we did last winter at the MARTA markets?

Raevin Hawkins: Yeah, for sure. So last year, toward the winter season, as things slowed down, we shifted toward doing a test kitchen at the MARTA stations. We tested 20 recipes, and we had our educational chefs come out and provide those recipes and samples to the community. We got feedback from that, and from there we narrowed it down to 10 recipes we wanted to offer to the community, and that process involved connecting with farmers, getting their excess produce, processing it, packaging it, and then providing it to the community.

Most recently we made a Sweet Potato Chili that was distributed at an elementary school, and that was just an amazing opportunity to send families home with a dinner they didn't have to prepare — all they had to do was heat and serve it. Then, the next time we did a Drawdown distribution, we did an applesauce with seconds from apples from Beech Creek Orchards, a local orchard out in Tallapoosa.

Casey Hood: Mm-hmm, and when you mentioned the shift in our process — originally we did all of our test kitchen work with the MARTA markets, which was great, but we recently took on a grant with United Way where we're working with three partner sites that are all Title I APS schools. Each time we're having one of those markets, we're interacting with at least a hundred individual families — three, four times what we were seeing at the MARTA markets — and we thought this would be a great pivot, since we have the opportunity to provide these products to more families, more kids. So each time we have these markets, we have our educational chef out there doing a chef demo, and then we're also providing the dish — as Raevin mentioned, that Sweet Potato Chili was our first successful foray with the project, and being able to see a parent's face and just say, don't worry about dinner tonight, we've got your Sweet Potato Chili, and knowing that came from a local farm — it's been a really cool project to see it finally take flight. We're also partnering with Open Hand Atlanta, who's allowing us to use their certified kitchen space, and then for packaging, we've been really excited to work with Better Earth, who makes all compostable packaging — they have a base down here in Atlanta, so we've been really excited to partner with them, so we're not using plastic packaging, but something compostable that further builds on the Drawdown Georgia goals.

Eriqah Vincent: I absolutely love this, I love hearing about this — not only the MARTA markets, but also this new development working with APS. We know it's not a secret that there are many children and families who are food insecure, and sometimes, you know, we certainly saw that during COVID. I live in DeKalb County, and DeKalb County decided to distribute meals because they realized that, for some kids, their only meals were the ones they were getting at school.

That's so important for organizations, community organizations especially, to be thinking about — how are we making families and children more food secure? So I love hearing about that opportunity to feed the community on a bigger level.

Casey Hood: Yeah, and with these markets, we're specifically visiting each school once a month, and we're choosing to structure that around things like spring break, when they might not have that guaranteed lunch at school. We're giving them free produce and the Drawdown meal to help get through whatever the vacation is, or whenever they're going to be out of school.

Eriqah Vincent: How do you center issues around equity? We just talked about it, but I'd love to hear you elevate on that — how are you centering equity in the work you're doing, and why is that an important focus for your organization?

Raevin Hawkins: Yeah, so at all of our markets, we double SNAP and EBT benefits through a partnership with Wholesome Wave Georgia — we're able to double the amount of money a family would be able to spend at a market. By doing that, it makes the farmers market produce a little more accessible to families, and takes a little of the burden off the sticker shock you might experience at a farmers market, so people are able to shop freely and get seasonal, local produce.

Casey Hood: And we've also really tried — I mentioned we have our four big outdoor farmers markets, but with things like the MARTA markets and the APS school markets, we're really trying to focus on neighborhoods that don't have direct access to a grocery store.

Eriqah Vincent: Yes.

Casey Hood: Especially for neighborhoods that are more walking-centered and might not have as much access to a car. So in these lower-income, low-access neighborhoods, we're getting creative with how we're bringing food to folks, and that's where you see our aggregated market model. It might be a neighborhood spot where a full big market might not be what that community's looking for, but being able to pop up with a farm stand makes it more accessible — that's kind of how we're picking those neighborhoods. And when we think about all of the vendors we serve, all of our BIPOC vendors get a 50 percent discount on their application, and all of our farmers receive waived vendor fees, so they don't have to pay the weekly vendor fee. We feel like that's really important, to bring equity into the businesses we're working with at the farmers markets. About 46 percent of our vendors are BIPOC vendors, 53 percent are women, so we really try to help our vendor pool — folks who might not have had the same opportunity in the past — elevate their businesses, and give them a bit of a price cut where we can.

Eriqah Vincent: That's really fantastic. I have another question — you were talking about the APS schools you pop up at once a month, which I think is a great cadence. Have you faced any conversations around food preparation, as far as how long it's going to take? A lot of these parents are working all day, so how long is it going to take to prepare the food while the kids are doing homework or whatever in the evening, and how have you combated that? Because I think a lot of times when we think about quick meals, parents are thinking, okay, let's grab something from a restaurant, or let's go through the drive-through real quick. So have y'all thought about, and I'd love to hear more about, your mindset around making not only the food more accessible, but healthy meals more accessible?

Casey Hood: Yeah, so, as I was saying before, at each of these markets we make sure a chef demo is a crucial part — you'll see that at all of the markets we do, because we want the recipe

to be accessible. So whatever it is they're making, it's easy enough that they could chop it up and make it literally on a little table outside of a school or at a market. We try to make it easy at all of the APS markets we're doing. We also have the recipe printed up, and whatever the chef is making that day is the free produce we have out on the table. So literally someone can go through the line, taste something, get inspired, and then pull the recipe and know they can make that at home.

Eriqah Vincent: That's fantastic.

Raevin Hawkins: So important.

Casey Hood: Yeah.

Raevin Hawkins: I've also noticed that at the APS free produce markets, there's a lot of conversation going through the line when people are picking up their vegetables, about how to use it. There's a lot of learning from the community about favorite recipes, and learning how to use zucchini — we've had conversations about how you can prepare your squash the way you prepare your zucchini, and a lot of people may not know that, or just need that little spark of inspiration to go home and make a delicious, healthy meal.

Casey Hood: And also, we try to make all of our recipes super accessible — for example, if you went to our Instagram, you could click on summer recipes and see a ton of recipes our chefs have made in the past. We try to put it out there wherever we can. Raevin, did you want to speak a little to how we find farmers for our aggregate markets?

Raevin Hawkins: Our first focus, our number one tier, would be hyper-local food, which for us is defined as produce coming from within a 10-mile radius of the distribution site. We're really lucky in Atlanta to have access to so many urban farms, so we're always going to look to them first, and look to where they're distributing first, to see if we can get produce from them. From there, we go to local farms, which for us is within a wider radius, and with those local farms, we're hoping to connect with BIPOC farmers or historical farms that are practicing conservation and are focused on conserving the history of that agricultural site. From there, for things like sweet potatoes or onions, I've noticed those tend to come from our neighbors in Alabama or South Carolina — local and regional farmers within about 200 miles — we're also able to source from them. Keeping it regional, keeping it seasonal, is our goal for that portion. And then at the MARTA market, we also had things like bananas, which, as you may know, don't necessarily come from the states, but it's really important to offer an easy, familiar staple that people can eat on the go, that people don't have to try to overcome a learning curve to eat. Keeping a balance of local and familiar food is always great.

And then with our APS free produce market, we're able to really narrow in on Drawdown Georgia's mission by partnering with Concrete Jungle. What Concrete Jungle helps us do is get gleaned produce from farms — produce that would otherwise not be distributed due to cosmetic differences, or things a supermarket may not accept but that are otherwise fine to eat. They partner with us, they deliver the food directly to the schools, and we're able to reduce food waste that way, by distributing that food for free, knowing it's going to a family who needs it. We're just really excited we're able to partner with Concrete Jungle, because they're a great partner in reducing food waste and connecting us with more local and regional farms.

Eriqah Vincent: I really appreciate the intentionality behind supporting local — the carbon footprint, how far are we going to get this food. That intentionality is so important, and I've lived

in my share of food scarcity spaces in Atlanta — I'm not from Atlanta, I'm from up north, but I've been here for some time — so I'm certainly appreciative of the intentionality around bringing fresh food, especially to areas that need the business, that need the traffic, but also to places that need fresh and healthy food. Doubly impactful on both sides of that journey for the food, and I think that's so important. We've talked a lot about y'all's access to some of these things, and how you're providing access for other folks in various ways — what about your own access as an organization, your own challenges? What are the biggest challenges you're already facing, or that you foresee facing, in your work, and how have you overcome those challenges, and what lessons have you learned along the way?

Casey Hood: So from the farmer's perspective, and in the vein of climate change, we've certainly seen our farmers get hit hard by extreme weather — that could be flooding, it could be these extreme freezes where the temperature drops considerably, this back-and-forth, crazy wind that just rips up somebody's row cover. That's been hard to watch, and we've tried to figure out how to best support our farmers. We have a farmer fund we work with through Georgia Organics. We've also been able to help build and connect farmers with resources to get better infrastructure — a great example of that is that we helped fund an incredible group called Eco Paradigm, that helps with farm infrastructure, and we helped them go out to Caribe United Farm and build hoop houses that are better equipped to deal with extreme weather. Another challenge we see is the aging out of farmers — there's a generational shift, where we've got the elders in our farmer community aging out, and the younger generation of farmers, whose biggest challenge is land access, because they don't own their land — the thought of somebody telling them they can no longer rent there is an issue, because you can't invest in land you're not building toward long-term. So we've tried to introduce our aging-out farmers to our young farmers — is there a connection there, on passing land over to each other? That's something that's important to us. And then, of course, funding is an issue right now, and Raevin, I know you were feeling the same way — did you want to talk a little about that?

Raevin Hawkins: Yeah, I think over the past year, and even more recently in 2025, we've definitely felt the uncertainty in funding for nonprofits, land-based work, and equity initiatives. I think the most important thing is that we're able to rely on local partners, such as Wholesome Wave Georgia, who keeps our SNAP match going, and really lean on our community to help fulfill needs when we aren't sure where our funding is coming from, or whether it's going to continue, or what the landscape of grant cycles is going to look like in the future.

In that same vein, especially working at the MARTA market, I was able to notice a disruption of federal and state benefits like SNAP and EBT — during the pandemic, and especially after, a lot of people's benefits were drastically reduced, and that naturally is a barrier to people receiving nutritious, whole foods they'd otherwise like to purchase. It's been a struggle for a lot of our community members to either get those benefits reinstated, or to readjust to the smaller amount of benefits they do receive. With that, again, leaning on our local partners, and continuing to do outreach in communities more impacted by these problems, is our main way of combating those issues.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely. We've had a lot of conversations on this show about philanthropy, and about the ways philanthropy can support folks in a changing world, and how organizations and philanthropy especially are going to need to adjust the way they support organizations doing such phenomenal, impactful work like Community Farmers Markets. This has been really insightful, and I appreciate you both being here. I guess one of my last questions before I ask my favorite question — I really loved what you said, Raevin, about the learning you hear about in

the line, when folks are coming through and talking about how to prepare zucchini, or comparing it to squash, learning from each other in that peer-to-peer way. What other feedback have you gotten — both ways you can improve, but also ways this has helped folks? I'd love to hear more about how the community has reacted to this impactful work y'all are doing.

Raevin Hawkins: Yeah, it's been really great. The community is very accepting and excited to see us — when we're on campus, when we're running MARTA markets, you really form a connection with people you see week after week, month over month. I think that just provides a trust-building opportunity, and people are very excited that we're there, that we're providing these opportunities to receive produce. It's been a great opportunity. Casey, did you want to add anything?

Casey Hood: Yeah, I'd just say that, this time more than ever, I feel from our community that the third space we create at our markets is so important — that's what makes us different from going to a grocery store. People need community right now, and we're able to offer that every week, multiple times a week. You can come out and be part of our community, find that third space to connect with folks, and get some groceries while you're at it, support your local farmers. So I see our community really showing up and appreciating that.

Eriqah Vincent: That's great to hear, I love that. This is my favorite question, it's the last one I have for you both — thank you so much once again for joining us — what is giving each of you hope around climate in Georgia?

Raevin Hawkins: Yeah, so there are so many ways to find hope — the patrons of the markets are definitely people who show up enthusiastically, they engage with our opportunities, and are a great motivator and touchpoint for communication and education around seasonality and climate impact. I'd also say my coworkers and fellow market managers — they do great work every week putting on markets, providing that third space Casey was talking about, whether it's children's reading circles, yoga opportunities, getting your knives sharpened, basic things like that. I've really found hope in seeing the same faces, deepening connection — it's just a really great beacon of light in an otherwise unsecure situation. So it's been nice.

Casey Hood: And I'd say the farmers always give me hope, for what they go through to bring that food to market, and what they've been through, whether it's funding or the crazy weather — they always show up, they're consistent, and they're there for their community, to nourish their community, and they always inspire me. I'd also say all the foundations that have contributed to Drawdown Georgia give me hope — that philanthropy folks see what's happening, and understand the importance of supporting organizations like ours, so that really gives me hope. All of our community partners too — I've noticed, in the last couple of months, seeing all of the local organizations like ours, Wholesome Wave Georgia, Food Well Alliance, Georgia Organics, United Way, Concrete Jungle — these are all organizations I really feel like we're coming together with on a common thread of building support amongst each other. And then I'd also say all the kids we see at the market — they're a constant beacon of hope, they're engaged, they're excited, they're curious, and they inspire me, because I see them going places, and I see them learning in the market space too.

Eriqah Vincent: I didn't know y'all did knife sharpening at the market — yes.

Casey Hood: Spike is the knife sharpener's name, he's out consistently at a lot of the markets.

Eriqah Vincent: I was just saying we need new knives.

Casey Hood: Yeah.

Eriqah Vincent: So I'll remember that — I haven't been to the MARTA market in some time, so I'll have to revisit again. Thank you, Community Farmers Markets, for the work you're doing — it's so important, it's so valuable, and y'all can only do so much, but if we all do a little bit, then a lot will get done. And I certainly think Community Farmers Markets is doing as much as y'all can, so I really appreciate the work you're doing, Casey, and you're doing, Raevin, and all y'all over there at Community Farmers Markets. So thank you all so much, and thank you for being here to talk about your story.

Thank you all for joining us once again. Please continue to visit our YouTube channel to see all of the great organizations we're talking to, especially our Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions and Equity Grant recipients — they're really doing phenomenal work in this state, and giving me a lot of hope around climate in Georgia. So thank you all again, thank you for watching, and we'll see y'all next time. Bye.