



THE LAND  
CONNECTION

# 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

# Dear TLC community members,



**Lisa Bralts-Kelly**

Vice President, The Land Connection

As I write this in very late April, the trees are flowering and the grass is rapidly greening up in central Illinois. I imagine that's happening where you live, too. But something's missing from the spring landscape: Farmers planting crops for harvest in the fall.

Things being this slow this late in the spring due to weather is hardly unheard of, but it's getting a little close for comfort. It's not late, my friend Karen Linder, whose family farms in Onarga, IL, told me recently. But we're getting antsy.

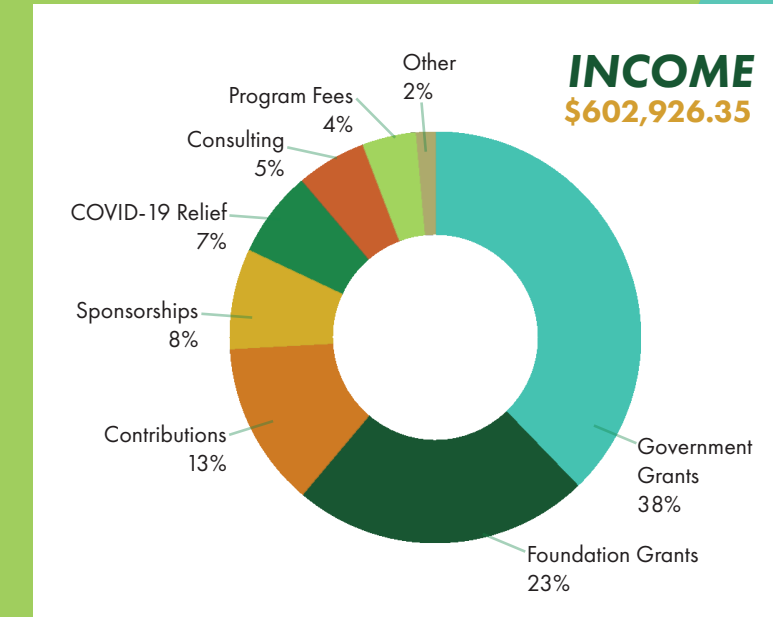
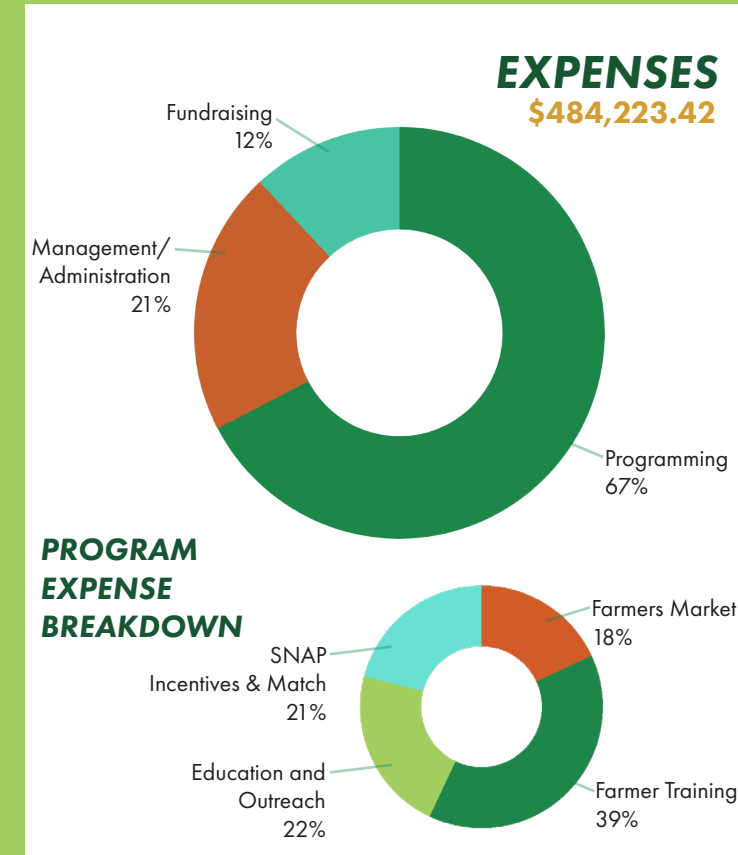
Climate change and its broad effect on weather, pollinators, invasive species, and the like are not the only current events making farmers antsy in 2022. Supply chain problems continue due to the global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Continuing war in Ukraine threatens the food security of millions and millions of people, and its ripple effects could be deeply felt worldwide. Inflation, the sharply rising price of fuel and fertilizer—all of these issues and more are contributing significantly to pressure on our global food system.

We're a long way from being fully self-sufficient and taking care of all our food needs here in the Midwest. But we can do more to take a little bit of pressure off the global food system by more vigorously supporting the farming, distribution, access to, and eating of locally and regionally-grown food.

The relationship between farmers and eaters is symbiotic, with every person playing a critical role in the health of their local food system. This work isn't just about feeding people. It's also about fostering community and camaraderie. Gathering folks to meet not only their farmers, but each other—to see each other, talk to each other, and witness each other—is critical as we work together to emerge from a pandemic and take honest stock of what lies ahead.

There's no doubt about it. Change is in the air, and time is of the essence! The Land Connection strives, every day, to respond to the transformational reality of current events, and you'll see evidence of that in the report following this note. Your support of our work has been, and will continue to be, absolutely vital as we manage the ambiguity of the times and rise to as many occasions as possible. We hope the relationship continues... and deepens.

## 2021 FINANCIALS



**Funds spent directly supporting food and farm businesses:**

**\$24,767.88**

# FARMERS MARKETS

## 2021 BY THE NUMBERS:

- Serves an average 800-1,200 shoppers each week
- Provides a sales outlet for 90+ farmers, food businesses, and artisans
- Infuses nearly \$5,000 a week into our local economy—with sales reaching as high as \$17,000 a week in the peak of the season!

The Land Connection works hard to ensure our neighbors have year-round access to fresh, nutritious, local food through the Champaign Farmers Market and Champaign-Urbana Winter Farmers Market.

TLC's markets highlight the bounty of food produced right here in central Illinois, meaning your food doesn't have to travel far from the field to your supper plate.

In addition to connecting farmers and eaters, the Champaign-Urbana Farmers Markets serve as a hub for TLC's food access and food education work.

Looking ahead, TLC is aiming to grow the number of food vendors at the Champaign-Urbana Farmers Markets, offer more community programming (from yoga to a Kids Corner), and get more people the nutrition assistance they deserve.



Pictured: Eric Zarnesky runs Diamond's Homestead's booth at the Champaign Farmers Market.

Ricky Niester started Diamond's Homestead in 2018 with the goal of growing healthy, affordable food for everyone throughout central Illinois. After just a few seasons of selling at the Champaign-Urbana Farmers Markets, as well as markets in Bloomington and Springfield, Ricky's business is thriving.

What started with a cardboard, handwritten sign at his market booth has flourished into a staple stop for shoppers hooked on his microgreens.

Diamond's Homestead sells out almost every week! You can even find Diamond's Homestead products in restaurants and select grocery stores around central Illinois.

**Stay up-to-date with Champaign-Urbana Farmers Market happenings all year long!**

SCAN ME



# FOOD ACCESS

Access to nutritious food is a basic human right. The Land Connection centers consumer choice, empowering SNAP shoppers by expanding their food budgets and giving them more opportunity to buy locally grown produce, meat, dairy, bread, and other staples.

The Universal Link Program provides people with **up to \$80 each week** to spend on eligible items at the Champaign Farmers Market, Champaign-Urbana Winter Farmers Market, Urbana Market at the Square, and Common Ground Food Co-op.

In 2022, The Land Connection plans to **expand this program to serve at least 5 more farmers markets** in central Illinois—with more possible based on the needs of the community.

## 2021 BY THE NUMBERS:

- \$42,000 spent matching LINK benefits
- \$15,000 dollars spent supporting WIC and Senior food benefits
- 250 individuals or families served each week



Trying to shop for fresh, nutritious food that aligns with your values while still being affordable can feel like a balancing act—especially for parents, like Shawna Davian den Otter.

The Universal LINK Match program has helped Shawna stretch her family's food budget and shop at local farmers markets more often, stocking up on higher quality and ostensibly healthier food.

Shawna's kids understand more about where their food comes from and who is growing it. They've gotten to know many of the regular vendors. They enjoy the freedom of taking chances on unfamiliar vegetables. They've even been able to buy plants for their home garden!

*Donations to The Land Connection help set the table for food insecure households in our community!*

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# KIDS KITS

*Eating habits start young. But ensuring your kids get the nutrients they need can feel overwhelming. Kids Kits can help connect the dots.*

**Last year, TLC distributed 600 free Kids Kits and paid local farmers \$5,500 for ingredients!**

*Learn more about Kids Kits and how you can support this awesome program!*

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Each month, The Land Connection supplies families with free take-home kits containing all the ingredients they need for a light meal or snack chock full of nutritious, local foods. These kits do more than help keep bellies full—they get kids to try new things, they help teach eaters about where their food comes from,

and they bring families together around their kitchen table. Each kit comes with a recipe card to add to the parents' arsenal, as well as a tutorial video that showcases the farm where the food was produced and teaches kids new kitchen skills.



# NEIGHBORFOOD BUCKS

The COVID-19 pandemic hit everyone hard. Some found themselves struggling to pay for groceries for the first time, yet were unable to receive federal nutrition assistance because of their household income. Others were unable to successfully apply because of difficulty obtaining required documents and navigating through an unfamiliar system.

Recognizing these challenges, The Land Connection launched a no-questions-asked voucher program called NeighborFood Bucks to ensure that no one who came to the Champaign Farmers Market in need of food left empty handed.

***In just over a month of running the program, TLC distributed nearly 750 NeighborFood Buck tokens, each accounting for \$1 to spend on fresh, local produce and meat. Those tokens supplied food for more than 100 people in the Champaign-Urbana community.***

# FARMER TRAINING

*Two main principles guided The Land Connection's farmer training programming in 2021: collaboration and communion.*

After a year apart, new and established farmers alike were hungry for connection with others tending to the land—to learn, to share successes, to troubleshoot, and to commiserate

Take Farm Dreams, an online workshop series for aspiring farmers to discover what it would really take to start a farm business. The program, hosted in partnership with Food Works and Angelic Organics Learning Center, produced a waiting list for attendance.

For farmers looking to grow their business's online presence as consumers' shopping habits shift more and more toward the worldwide web, TLC offered a series of webinars on e-commerce platforms and strategies.

And learning shifted away from the computer screen for nearly the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic hit. In-person field days returned in the late summer, with the IDEA Farm Network's Tillage Tailgate and the Embarras Grazing Partnership's Regenerative Grazing Field Day bringing together farmers, researchers, and technical service providers to share their knowledge and experience on farm again—finally!

## 2021 BY THE NUMBERS:

- 35+ farmer training activities held in 2021
- 1,500+ farmers received direct training or services
- 1,400+ connected with the resources they need to grow and thrive

*Learn more about farmer training and how you can get involved in upcoming events!*

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When Anna Thomson and her sister, Laura, of Joyful Wren Farm—fifth generation farmers growing vegetables and raising laying hens on their family land—were starting to ramp up production, they had a question about the finer points of sales tax. After unsuccessfully putting the question to Google, they decided to reach out to The Land Connection for help.

That single email not only got Anna and Laura an answer, it led them into TLC's deeply rooted farmer community. Through the relationships they developed, the sisters got connected with other farmers doing interesting work locally.

This sense of network and connection has made all the difference for Anna and Laura, who returned to their homestead after a decade in the Pacific Northwest. Their family's farming knowledge had been lost as previous generations left farming or passed away. The connections offered by TLC's staff and programs mean that farmers don't need to feel like they are going it alone.

# FARMLAND ACCESS

*Most aspiring farmers work as extra help on existing farms for several years before having the opportunity to start farming on their own. Still, that experience doesn't always connect them with the network and resources they need to pursue their own farming enterprises.*

The availability and cost of land are the biggest hurdles, along with a lack of skills in putting together all the pieces. Then comes the question of soil quality, infrastructure needs, and finding a place to call home—all while competing against better-resourced farming conglomerates and developers.

Even those who are part of established farming families say the system is stacked against them.

**Give the next generation of conservation-minded farmers the tools they need to secure Illinois farmland when you donate to TLC.**

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Over the past year, The Land Connection has been bringing folks together and building momentum for the Illinois Farmland Access Initiative. Beginning farmer “listening sessions” held across the state allowed partners to learn directly from farmers what they need in order to thrive on Illinois soil.

But this is only the beginning. TLC will continue to connect and mobilize organizations and individuals across our state—from nonprofits to agricultural service agencies to direct technical service providers—forming a robust and user-friendly Illinois Farmland Access Hub.

In the coming years, TLC will deploy Farmland Access Navigators across the state to work one-on-one with farmland owners and farmland seekers in their land transfer journey.

These efforts will culminate in a statewide expansion of the Illinois Farm Link website to serve the entire state, helping farmland owners and farmland seekers find their perfect match.

None of the work we do at The Land Connection is possible without the tireless efforts of others working to strengthen the local food system and grow more resilient communities.



WE BELIEVE  
BLACK LIVES MATTER  
NO HUMAN IS ILLEGAL  
LOVE IS LOVE  
Women's Rights Are Human Rights  
SCIENCE IS REAL  
WATER IS LIFE

BLACK LIVES  
MATTER



# PARTNERSHIPS & COLLABORATIONS

*We'd like to thank the following organizations for their support of TLC's work. This list is not exhaustive and is presented in alphabetical order.*

American Farmland Trust  
Artisan Grain Collaborative  
Buy Black Chambana  
Buy Fresh Buy Local Illinois  
Champaign Center Partnership  
Chicago Food Policy Action Council  
City of Champaign  
City of Urbana  
Common Ground Food Co-op  
Embarras Grazing Partnership  
Experimental Station  
Farm Beginnings Collaborative  
Food Works  
Healthy Champaign County  
IDEA Farm Network  
Illinois Environmental Council

Illinois Farm Bureau  
Illinois Farmers Market Association  
Iroquois Valley Farmland REIT  
Land for Good  
Liberty Prairie Foundation  
Lincoln Square Mall  
MarketMaker and ConnectFresh Collaborative  
Midwest Grazing Exchange  
Organic Agronomy Training Service (OATS)  
ReGenerate Illinois  
Routes to Farm Alliance  
Savanna Institute  
Smile Politely  
The Conservation Fund  
University of Illinois Extension

A woman with curly hair, wearing a straw hat and a plaid shirt, is smiling and holding a large bunch of green leafy vegetables. She is standing in a garden with various plants and a wooden fence in the background. Another person is visible in the background, working in the garden.

# JOIN THE MOVEMENT!

## DONATE TODAY

206 N Randolph St. Suite 400  
Champaign, IL 61820

[www.thelandconnection.org/donate](http://www.thelandconnection.org/donate)

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