



## 2026 Community Food Systems Fellowship

*an initiative of Vital Village Networks at Boston Medical Center*

### Request for Applications

#### Fellowship Overview

##### Purpose

The Community Food Systems Fellowship is an 18-month leadership program that aims to increase opportunities for diverse local food system leaders to build their skills, capacity, and networks through a series of community design labs on participatory engagement and human centered design approaches, monthly learning sessions with other food systems leaders, and individualized technical assistance. Through these opportunities, the fellowship hopes to strengthen community engagement and leadership of caregivers/families, uplift strengths-based narratives, and foster collaborative leadership that scales community identified solutions and cross sector partnerships.

Vital Village Networks at Boston Medical Center approaches achieving a culture of health by ensuring effective implementation of community-based strategies, uplifting strengths-based narratives, and fostering sustainable community engagement and leadership. The Community Food Systems Fellowship is made possible by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF).

##### Award Information

Up to **10 community leaders** will be selected by December 2025 and invited to participate in the Fellowship program.

##### Key Dates and Deadlines

October 1, 2025 at 12 pm ET	<a href="#">Applications</a> Open
October 10, 2025 at 1pm ET	<a href="#">Optional Informational Session</a>
October 28, 2025 at 4pm ET	<a href="#">Optional Informational Session</a>
November 10, 2025 at 5 pm ET	Deadline for Fellowship Application
December 8-12, 2025	Finalist Interviews
December 2025	Selection of Community Fellows
January 2026 – December 2026	Fellowship Program - Part 1
January 2027 – June 2027	Fellowship Program - Part 2

##### How to Apply

We invite you to submit your Fellowship Application online by selecting this [APPLICATION link](#) to begin. Nominate a fellow at this [NOMINATION link](#).



### *Submission Options*

Applicants can submit their application responses for Sections 4 through:

- a) the online application portal
- b) pre-corded video or audio uploaded to the application portal, or
- c) scheduling a Zoom application intake session (option available through November 3, 2025)

If you would prefer to complete this application through a pre-corded video/audio or a Zoom application intake session, please contact [foodsystems@vitalvillage.org](mailto:foodsystems@vitalvillage.org) and share your availability through October 27, 2025.

### Contact Information

Please direct inquiries to: [foodsystems@vitalvillage.org](mailto:foodsystems@vitalvillage.org).

### Register for two Optional Info Sessions to learn more:

Register for the optional informational sessions at the following links:

- [October 10, 2025 @ 1pm ET](#)
- [October 28, 2025 @ 4pm ET](#)

Both sessions will include Spanish interpretation. To submit questions ahead of the informational sessions, please email [foodsystems@vitalvillage.org](mailto:foodsystems@vitalvillage.org).

### About the Community Food Systems Fellowship

The Community Food Systems Fellowship is an 18-month leadership program that seeks to increase opportunities for diverse grassroots, community rooted leaders to build skills, capacity, and networks. Emerging leaders who are committed to food justice and equity and are seeking advanced tools to measure and share the impact of local work are a good fit for the Community Food Systems Fellowship.

The fellowship is an opportunity to contribute to a living, collective fellowship roadmap for community-powered food systems and build capacity around participatory data to capture impact and narrative storytelling strategies. We encourage applicants who are committed to:

- working to develop resilient and equitable local food systems
- community leadership, engagement, and the leadership of caregivers and families
- food justice, nutrition justice, racial equity and social transformation
- developing skills to measure impact and success of local food systems
- developing collaborative leadership skills



We actively seek to spotlight community-powered food systems and inform and advance community leadership in local food systems. We are committed to supporting self determination of communities of color and the advancement of diverse community leaders. We encourage prospective fellows committed to justice and equity and improving local food systems to promote child, family and community wellness to apply. We invite stakeholders representing diverse voices across the food system (e.g. agriculture, labor and food chain workers, food service, public health, environmental justice, economy and entrepreneurship, education, early care and education, immigration, and arts, culture), to apply.

The Community Food Systems Fellowship is made possible by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to advance the vision that every child, regardless of race/ethnicity or family income, achieves equitable health, development, and education outcomes and mindsets, social and structural conditions, and systems contribute to these outcomes. Vital Village Networks at Boston Medical Center approaches achieving a culture of health by ensuring effective implementation of community-based strategies, uplifting strengths-based narratives, and fostering sustainable community engagement. We can more effectively identify root causes, mobilize neighborhood resources, and scale community identified solutions through comprehensive cross-sector partnerships between residents, nontraditional partners, and entities that provide services or make decisions on behalf of children of color and families.

### Community Fellowship Program Outcomes

Through this 18-month program, participating Community Food System Fellows will:

- Build meaningful relationships, foster connections, and co-create a peer learning space with other food systems leaders across the country
- Gain knowledge, skills, and resources in telling the story of your local food systems impact through narrative change and participatory storytelling
- Strengthen ability to use healing-centered, trauma-informed and resilience frameworks to advance local food systems work
- Build capacity to leverage data to tell the story of your work and impact, including developing and implementing a participatory research plan
- Build and strengthen engagement with local stakeholders, including parent and caregiver leaders in your local community
- Together, work collaboratively with the fellowship cohort to refine a roadmap of collective actions to advance community powered food systems.



## Program Details and Requirements

The fellowship will involve a series of interactive virtual meetings and peer learning sessions to support their local efforts and refine a roadmap of collective actions to advance community powered food systems centered on healing, resiliency, and parent and caregiver leadership.

Community Fellows will receive a \$2,500 stipend to honor time for participating in fellowship meetings and activities, including participation and presentations at Vital Village's annual National Community Leadership Summit. Fellows also have the ability to apply for \$2,500 of innovation pilot project funds, which would be dispersed after the first 12-month of the fellowship program, after a proposal development and action planning period that will take place in the first half of the program.

Participation in the Community Food Systems Fellowship is structured around two parts and includes the following requirements. While unforeseen circumstances arise, we ask that participation fellows commit to consistent participation in all fellowship activities to the best of their abilities to ensure a rich, collective learning experience for all fellows.

### ***Part 1: Intensive Peer Learning, Skill Building and Co-Design – January - December 2026***

- **In-Person Fellowship Program Launch (2 days):** Formal kick off of the fellowship program, tentatively scheduled between February 11-13, 2026, final dates/times and location to be confirmed with finalists in December 2025. Fellows will have an opportunity to meet and get to know other fellows in the cohort and introduce the program goals, structure, and learning opportunities. Fellows will also participate in the first of two Community Design Labs, focused on an introduction to community co-design and engaging in a co-design process to shape the fellowship experience.
- **Community Design Labs:** Participation in two sets of Community Design Labs in February 2026 and October 2026, focused on a facilitated co-design process to shape the fellowship experience and identify areas of collective action and momentum around key fellowship goals into a collective group project. These interactive sessions will build on the collective roadmap developed by the 2022-25 fellowship cohorts to develop a collaborative learning tool or resource to share with other leaders in the field. Meeting dates include:
  - **Design Lab 1: During In-Person Fellowship Program Launch, February 2026**
  - **Design Lab 2: During Fellowship Fall Retreat % 2025 National Community leadership Summit, October 2026**
- **Monthly Group Learning Sessions:** Three-hour virtual learning sessions will take place once a month and include active peer-led components to support learning, and capacity and knowledge building around key topics. Sessions will include generous breaks to support wellness and accessibility.



Examples of topics discussed in past fellowship meetings and sessions include but are not limited to:

- Foundational program topics
  - Participatory approaches to research, situated ethics and consent, data planning, collection, and analysis methods
  - Data storytelling for social change
- Additional topics, identified based on fellows interest, such as:
  - Local food systems equity assessment tools
  - Community engagement strategies
  - Healing centered strategies
  - Parent and caregiver leadership
  - Collaborative leadership and sustainable leadership pathways
  - Digital media and narrative storytelling training

Monthly meetings will be held from March 2026 to December 2026, on the **3rd Wednesday of the month from 2-5pm Eastern**, with the exception of June (Cross-Cohort Project Showcase) and October 2026 (Design Lab 2 and the National Community Leadership Summit), as well as December 2026, which is scheduled earlier in the month due to holiday schedules. Fellowship meeting dates are listed in the 2026 Fellowship Calendar below.

- **Bimonthly individual check ins:** With members of the Vital Village Networks team . These regular 1-hr check in's will be scheduled at a regular time block to be confirmed at the start of the fellowship.
- **In-Person Fellows Retreat and National Convening (3 days):** Participation in a community leader convening and project presentation or session during the 2026 National Community Leadership Summit, planned for October 2026 in Boston, MA. The convening will focus on key areas of community capacity building. Fellows will also participate in the second of two Community Design Labs, focused on identifying areas of collective action and momentum around key fellowship goals to develop a collective group project.
- **Peer Groups with Alumni Mentors:** Fellows will be grouped by shared interest, geography, or focus, and matched with an alumni mentor. Groups and alumni mentors are encouraged to meet quarterly to deepen connections and learning with one another.

***Part 2: Self-Directed Project Implementation with Individualized Coaching/TA Support - January - June 2027***

- **Individualized coaching and technical assistance support,** for innovation pilot grant and



collective project implementation, to take place during the final 6-month of the fellowship program.

- **Regularly scheduled working group meetings:** Fellows will meet at least 3-4 times during the final phase for hour-long working group sessions focused on their collective project and pilot grants.
- **End of Fellowship Cross-Cohort Showcase:** Fellows will present their final cohort's collective project, and share reflections and learnings, in June 2027 in a final session joined by alumni, partners, and other invited stakeholders.

There will be optional opportunities for connections with fellowship alumni and other informal group gatherings that emerge due to interest and capacity from each fellowship cohort.

### 2026 Fellowship Calendar: Overview of Key Dates

Please consider these dates as you apply for our 2025 program. While unforeseen circumstances arise, we ask that participation fellows commit to consistent participation in all fellowship activities to the best of their abilities to ensure a rich, collective learning experience for all fellows.

Date	Time	Session
<b>Tentatively February 11-13, 2026</b> <i>(final dates and location to be confirmed in December 2025)</i>	In-person, two-days, 9am-5pm ET	Fellowship Launch and Welcome  Community Design Labs, Part 1: <i>Co-Designing the Fellowship Experience</i>
<b>March 18, 2026</b>	2-5pm ET	Monthly Fellowship Learning Session
<b>March 2026</b>	Regular time block with fellows to be scheduled	Bimonthly Fellows Check In's
<b>April 15, 2026</b>	2-5pm ET	Monthly Fellowship Learning Session
<b>May 20, 2026</b>	2-5pm ET	Monthly Fellowship Learning Session
<b>May 2026</b>	Regular time block with fellows to be scheduled	Bimonthly Fellows Check In's
<b>June 2026</b>	Forthcoming	2025 Fellowship Cohort Showcase
<b>July 15, 2026</b>	2-5pm ET	Monthly Fellowship Learning Session



<b>July 2026</b>	Regular time block with fellows to be scheduled	Bimonthly Fellows Check In's and MidPoint Reflections
<b>August 19, 2026</b>	2-5pm ET	Monthly Fellowship Learning Session
<b>September 16, 2026</b>	2-5pm ET	Monthly Fellowship Learning Session
<b>September 2026</b>	Regular time block with fellows to be scheduled	Bimonthly Fellows Check In's
<b>October 2026</b> ( <i>final dates to be confirmed</i> )	In-person, three days, 9am-5pm ET	<i>Fellows Retreat and Community Design Labs, Part 2</i>  <i>VVN National Community Leadership Summit and Fellows Retreat</i>
<b>November 18, 2026</b>	2-5pm ET	Monthly Fellowship Learning Session
<b>November 2026</b>	Regular time block with fellows to be scheduled	Bimonthly Fellows Check In's
<b>December 9, 2026</b>	2-5pm ET	Monthly Fellowship Learning Session - Part 1 Wrap Up
<b>January - June 2026</b>	As scheduled	Individualized coaching, technical assistance and office hours. Additional meetings scheduled as requested / needed will be scheduled, including group working sessions for the collective project.  Regularly scheduled one-hour working sessions.
<b>End June 2026</b>	TBD afternoon ET	Fellowship Showcase and Celebration

### Application Process and Award Information

Vital Village Networks will accept applications for Community Fellows from September 30, 2025 through November 10, 2025.

Informational sessions will be held on [Thursday, October 10, 2025 at 1pm ET](#), and Tuesday, [November 5, 2025 at 4pm ET](#), to provide an overview of the fellowship program and interview



process. Interested applicants have the opportunity to submit questions to [foodsystems@vitalvillage.org](mailto:foodsystems@vitalvillage.org) in advance of both sessions. The session will be recorded and the video link shared upon request.

If you would like to submit your application responses through a Zoom application intake session, an option that is available through October 27, 2025, please email [foodsystems@vitalvillage.org](mailto:foodsystems@vitalvillage.org).

Applications will be reviewed by a Selection Committee. Finalists will be invited to participate in a virtual interview in December 2025.

Selected Community Food Systems Fellows will be announced in early December 2025.

Key application and selection process dates include:

- **Optional Informational Session 1:** Thursday, October 10, 2025 at 1pm ET: [Register here](#)  
(Note: Spanish interpretation will be available)
- **Optional Informational Session 2:** Tuesday, October 28, 2025 at 4pm ET: [Register here](#)  
(Note: Spanish interpretation will be available)
- **Deadline for Fellowship Application:** November 10, 2025 at 5:00 PM ET
- **Virtual Interviews with Finalists:** December 8-12, 2025
- **Selected Community Fellows Announced:** December 2025

### Innovation Pilot Project Funds

Selected fellows will be able to apply for an innovation grant to support participatory research and co-design strategies connected to their local food systems efforts, in partnership with a local community-based organization, coalition, or group. During the fellowship, fellows will be asked to submit a proposed budget and budget narrative for up to \$2,500 for approval. Funds can be used towards the following categories, as established by funding requirements:

- **Participant incentives and engagement:** incentives for participants and honoraria for community champions that participate.
- **Local Travel:** local travel for data collection or to offset participant expenses.
- **Project costs to support innovation pilot:** such as research expenses, data collection or analysis costs, online survey technology, project space.

A budget template and sample budget will be shared during the fellowship program.

### Total Fellowship Awards

Up to **10 fellows will be selected**. Through this application, leaders can express interest in the Community Food Systems Fellowship.





### Eligibility Criteria

All applications will be screened for eligibility prior to their review.

- The fellow must be based in the United States or one of the US territories
- The fellow must have an established partnership with a nonprofit organization, coalition, network, group, cooperative, business, or institution that has a strategic focus on local food systems.

### Selection Criteria

In reviewing Fellowship Applications, reviewers will consider the following selection criteria:

- Commitment to developing resilient and equitable local food systems
- Commitment to community leadership, engagement, and the leadership of caregivers and families
- Commitment to food justice, nutrition justice, racial equity and social transformation
- Commitment to addressing inequities, e.g. racial, ethnic, geographic and economic, in your community or state.
- Interest in developing skills to measure impact and success of local food systems
- Interest in developing collaborative leadership skills
- Ability to leverage the Fellowship Cohort experience to build community capacity
- History of effective collaboration and partnership with organizations, groups, or cooperatives within local food systems.

### Equity, Inclusion and Diversity Statement

Consistent with Vital Village Networks and RWJF's values, this project embraces equity, diversity, and inclusion across multiple dimensions, such as race, ethnicity, gender, geography, disability, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. We strongly encourage applicants to demonstrate an awareness and inclusion of the perspectives and experiences of children, families and communities most affected by inequities. We believe the more we include diverse perspectives and experiences in our work, the more successful we will be as we strive to build a Culture of Health, enabling all in our diverse society to lead healthier lives now, and for generations.

### How to Apply

Applicants interested in the Community Food Systems Fellowship must complete an [online application](#) by **5:00 p.m. Eastern on November 10, 2025.**

The application is available here:

<https://connect.vitalvillage.org/community-food-systems-fellowship-welcome>. If you would like to submit your application orally, please email [foodsystems@vitalvillage.org](mailto:foodsystems@vitalvillage.org) to schedule an oral application intake session and share your availability through October 27, 2025.



Two informational sessions will be held on **October 10, 2025 at 1pm ET** and **October 28, 2025 at 4pm ET**, and applicants may submit questions ahead of time to [foodsystems@vitalvillage.org](mailto:foodsystems@vitalvillage.org). Both sessions will offer Spanish interpretation. Please register for the Optional informational sessions at these links below:

- [October 10, 2025 @ 1pm ET](#)
- [October 28, 2025 @ 4pm ET](#)

Vital Village Networks will invite finalists to participate in a virtual interview scheduled from December 8-12, 2025. Please direct questions to [foodsystems@vitalvillage.org](mailto:foodsystems@vitalvillage.org).

### Key Dates and Deadlines

September 30, 2025 at 12 pm ET	<a href="#">Applications</a> Open
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January 2026 – December 2026	Fellowship Program - Part 1
January 2027 – June 2027	Fellowship Program - Part 2

### About Boston Medical Center Vital Village Networks

Vital Village is a network of residents and organizations committed to maximizing child, family, and community wellbeing. Since 2010, Vital Village has fostered partnerships between residents and organizations aimed at improving the capacity of communities to optimize child wellbeing, prevent early life adversities, and advance equity through coalition building, leadership development, participatory research, data-sharing, and advocacy. Through our grassroots local network in Boston, our national network of peer communities, Networks of Opportunity for Child Wellbeing (NOW), and CRADLE, our participatory research and evaluation lab, we cultivate stronger connections between residents and community-based organizations to co-design community systems-improvement efforts and address structural inequities.