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Food Hubs Create Healthy, Affordable Options For Communities

By [Mónica Ortiz Uribe](#)

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Mónica Ortiz Uribe
Bees feast on flowers at a family farm outside Española, New Mexico.

ESPAÑOLA, N.M. — Eating healthy can be tough, not to mention expensive. For many, fatty fast foods are more accessible than a nutritious meal. But communities across the country are trying to change that.

In northern New Mexico, locals are working to create a new food distribution center.

Along the main drag in Española, N.M., motorists will drive by a number of fast food restaurants including Sonic, Dandy's Burger, Stop and Eat Drive In, and Home Run Pizza. The list only gets longer the further you go.

Española sits in the shadow of New Mexico's two wealthiest cities, Santa Fe and Los Alamos. But here 26 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and diabetes-related deaths are nearly twice the national average. Ironically, this region is home to a rich agricultural tradition dating back hundreds of years.

At the Sanchez family farm just outside town, a couple of chickens escape their coop. Lucia Sanchez, 34, takes pride in tending the land here as a fifth-generation farmer. But over the decades many family farms like hers have shrunk.

"You know it takes a lot to run a farm and an income outside of the farm is really what has sustained farms in northern New Mexico," Sanchez said.

Sanchez is a prime example. She's the planning and zoning director for Rio Arriba County. She rises with the sun to plant asparagus before leaving for work. Not many young people do that anymore. And the produce that grows here doesn't always stay here.

"We are seeing all of our local produce exported out of our communities and sold down in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, where there's a large demand and a market for it," said Todd Lopez, president of Siete del Norte, a community development group that works in northern New Mexico.

Local produce is more expensive and often people can't afford to buy what their neighbors grow. It's a frustrating reality that Lopez and his team are trying to change. His organization is starting a local food distribution center, or food hub.

The Northern New Mexico Food Hub will be housed in an old Ford dealership in the neglected city center. Organizers have received more than a million dollars in federal and state grant money to start out. The food hub will purchase local fruits and vegetables in bulk and sell it to area restaurants, stores, even hospitals and schools.

"It opens up the door to an entirely new market for our local farmers," Lopez said.

Organizers said that buying large quantities of local food and distributing it nearby will help keep the cost down. It can also give local producers a more reliable source of income. The food hub will also feature an on-site location grocery store, a cafe and an after school arts program for youth.

"This is more than just a food distribution center, this is really a movement," Lopez said. "It's an incentive to bring back prosperity, health, well being to this community."

Food hubs are taking off across the country. The U.S. Department of Agriculture counts 300 — double the number six years ago. A study by Michigan State University shows that on average food hubs generate \$3 million in annual sales and create 20 jobs.

For many in Española, this is welcome news.

At a roadside vegetable stand a farmer scooped a pound of sweet peas into a bag for Trish Trujillo. She's a mother of two who works the night shift cleaning floors at Los Alamos National Laboratory.



Mónica Ortiz Uribe
Lucia Sanchez and her father manage their family farm outside Española, New Mexico.



Mónica Ortiz Uribe Salvador Corona Chavez sells sweet peas at a roadside stand in Española, New Mexico.

"I really can't cook dinner for my family anymore and so they were eating out a lot," Trujillo said. "You see a huge weight difference and a lot of health issues."

When she can afford it, she buys produce from local growers. Trujillo is happy her family is excited about the sweet peas she will bring home.

"My kids they are like, 'Buy me my own bag,'" she said. "I bought a bag for me, a bag for my husband, a bag for the kids."

The food hub in Española won't be up and running until renovations are completed on the main building. Meanwhile organizers at a satellite facility are already moving local food to area stores and markets.

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Galvan-Vargas Ruth Ann · Works at Northern 505

Food Hubs are a excellent idea for Espanola and surrounding communities. Good Job!!!!

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Carol B Backus · Manchester, New Hampshire

What a great project, Todd Lopez. Thanks for sharing, Babs.

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Richard Backus · Harvard University

Fantastic!

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Noor Singh Khalsa · The Ohio State University

They forgot to mention the Espanola Food Co-op, where we can buy locally-grown produce:
<http://www.espanolacommunitymarket.org/>

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