

Central Food Processing Facilities

2025 UPDATED ASSESSMENT BRIEF



CENTRAL FOOD PROCESSING FACILITY BACKGROUND

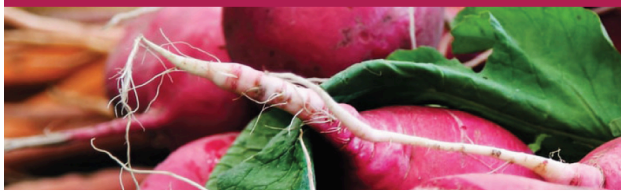
In 2020 - 2021, the DC Council funded the first study on District Central Food Processing Facilities. This project spanned over six months with interviews from over 60 food system experts throughout 2020, and made a strong case for Central Food Processing.

In 2022, the DC Council passed legislation to fund a deeper dive into Central Food Processing to assess detailed siting needs.

In 2023 - 2024, the DC Food Policy team at the Office of Planning convened agencies involved in District food procurement to work with our consultants to shape this next chapter of the District's work towards Central Food Processing.

Central Food Processing Facility For Washington, DC

Impact On The Region, Operational Best Practices, and Facility Infrastructure prepared for DC Office of Planning and the DC Food Policy Council



A central processing facility would promote health equity, the local food economy, and sustainability in the District by:

- 
Enhancing consistency of minimally-processed product for school and other institutional food
- 
Facilitating the purchase of regional product, year-round, by schools and others
- 
Supporting nutritional standards
- 
Providing space to store and preserve regional food throughout the year
- 
Providing equitable access to regional food
- 
Supporting producers in the region, including small, urban, emerging, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers, by providing guaranteed access to storage and sales channels
- 
Addressing key infrastructure gaps in the supply chain

APPROACHES TO A CENTRAL FOOD PROCESSING FACILITY

The 2023-2024 study evaluated specific meal and space needs and defined approaches that meet these four core needs that Central Food Processing Facilities could address:

- Increasing purchasing power of District agencies to save costs and create efficiencies
- Accelerating production, distribution, and consumption of high quality food
- Capacity and infrastructure that builds food resiliency for emergency preparedness
- Accelerate the District's social and economic equity goals across the food value chain

CORE FUNCTIONS



Production Kitchen

Support District agencies that serve food in institutional settings – schools, senior centers, after school programs, summer meals, homeless shelters, youth detention facilities, and the DC jail and justice-related facilities.



Aggregation & Storage

Aggregation and storage of available commodities, as well as for local farm products, to support the growth and sustainability of regional farm operations and to better connect the District to locally sourced products.



Processing

Minimal processing and packing of foods and meal components for DC agencies. Final meals would be prepared in kitchens onsite at schools, shelters, senior centers, and the DC Jail.



Education

As food service evolves so does the need for professional development of food service staff. One or multiple facilities can act as a training space, with classrooms, test kitchen(s), and a technology center to support the continuous improvement of institutional meals across the District.

SPATIAL REQUIREMENTS: CENTRAL PROCESSING BY THE NUMBERS

The study estimates that District agencies purchase a total of **45 million meals per year**. If one Central Processing Facility were to produce meal components for all District agencies, the facility would need approximately 170,000 square feet total, including:

170,000 sq ft
approx total

45,245 sq ft
sq ft of warehouse

61,650 sq ft
sq ft of kitchen

16,400 sq ft
loading dock

9,100 sq ft
sq ft produce processing

10,170 sq ft
sq ft for protein processing



DISTRIBUTED FACILITIES APPROACH

The study recommends that the District consider a distributed model with several smaller Central Food Processing Facilities located across the District that are part of a network and provide different functions. There are many reasons for this, but the lack of a single space with 170,000 square feet in the District is certainly one. By splitting into several Central Food Processing Facilities, this approach would:

- Allow the District more flexibility with respect to each site's particular size
- Be more flexible to future changes in the District's food needs
- Place sites closer to end users
- Distribute the economic and social benefits of food processing facilities by tailoring each facility to its neighborhood's economic development context and goals
- Provides flexibility for the District to start small and gather lessons learned as it builds multiple facilities over time
- Prioritize the highest impact areas that most align with food priorities.

30,000 - 60,000 sq ft could produce one or more of these meal elements that could serve multiple agencies that all use some of these products:

- Raw vegetables & fruits (washed, cut, bagged)
- Prepared (cooked or flash-frozen) vegetables
- Prepared (cooked or flash-frozen) fruits
- Center-of-plate items
- Baked goods
- Dairy production
- Grains, beans, rice, and pasta
- Full meals



In terms of prioritizing within those potential products, certain food elements could have the highest impact to align with other District food priorities:

- Fruits & Vegetables: Washing, cutting, bagging, cooking, and flash-freezing fruits and vegetables will enable increased local production as well as increasing consumption of plant-based foods
- Baked goods: Currently, breakfast foods do not have to meet the same dietary requirements as other meals and tend to have higher sugar and fat content: locally baked breakfast products could mitigate that to some extent.
- Dairy processing: Our region produces abundant, high-quality dairy, and doing more local processing could increase our local purchasing. Many dairy products, especially yogurts and milks, have added colors, sugars, or other sweeteners: locally prepared dairy could minimize those additives.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

In order to move forward with Central Food Processing Facilities, the District will need to move with programmatic work inside of several agencies and in inter-agency collaboration, while also identifying sites and funding sources for next steps at a District-wide level.

Programmatic Recommendations

- Food Policy team will continue to convene the interagency Central Food Processing Facility advisory board including key food procuring agencies
- Identify a lead agency to oversee the design and planning process, ideally an agency that could conceivably own or operate the Central Food Processing Facility
- Coordinate with interagency board, OCP and DC Food Policy Council's Sustainable Supply Chain Working Group's assessment of District food procurement to identify top priority for first Central Food Processing Facilities.
- Continue to work with the Office of Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development and Department of Government Services to assess potential District-owned and development-ready sites across the District for Central Food Processing Facilities
- Work with OCP and DGS to identify potential warehousing facilities and supports needed to pilot collaborative purchasing for dry goods
- Identify potential federal and philanthropic funding to complement local funds for a future Central Food Processing Facility

Policy & Funding Recommendations

- Fund at least one additional staff person and needed refrigerated van for DC Public Schools to pilot aggregated purchasing and central produce processing for the seven self-operating school kitchens with a hub at the Dunbar kitchen
- Fund a more detailed financial feasibility for such a facility based on current contract spending, potential capital costs, operating revenues, and operating expenses of a Central Food Processing Facility
- Move beyond Green Food Purchasing in legislation that would follow broader Good Food Purchasing values to incentivize local, sustainable foods
- Guarantee new construction and updates to schools, senior living, and carceral justice facilities are constructed to allow for more food preparation onsite from components prepared at a Central Food Processing Facilities

FULL REPORT

The full report from HR&A Advisors, *Approaches to a District Centralized Food System*, includes an assessment of the potential capacity needs based on District purchasing, an analysis of peer city facilities, detailed square footage analysis, and a SWOT analysis of a centralized vs. distributed approach. It also includes important site and facility specifications that will need to be considered as the District moves forward with planning for a Central Food Processing Facility.