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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Activating the Food Is Medicine Ecosystem:

## A Framework for Stakeholder Partnerships

Food Is Medicine (FIM) has gained remarkable traction as a nationally recognized strategy for preventing, maintaining, and treating diet-related chronic disease. As FIM has become embedded in health-care delivery, policy, and financing, the partnerships that enable this integration have grown increasingly complex. Many programs extend far beyond food provision. As organizations take on additional roles, new stakeholders enter the space, and program participants play a more active role in shaping interventions, traditional boundaries between sectors are blurring. The result is growing complexity around interdependence and coordination.

Milken Institute Feeding Change's report, *Activating the Food Is Medicine Ecosystem: A Framework for Stakeholder Partnerships*, addresses a central strategic challenge: cultivating a shared, systems-level understanding of the design, governance, and sustainability of intersectoral partnerships. Grounded in 43 interviews, two sector-specific working sessions, a 40-person roundtable, and the input of six paid advisors with lived experience receiving FIM interventions, the framework is built on perspectives from across the ecosystem. **To improve program participant experience, empower local communities, and advance FIM as a durable pillar of health care, this strategic framework highlights opportunities within three core areas to enable stronger partnerships across sectors.**

## Designing Partnership Architecture

**Clarifying partnership architecture establishes a foundation for understanding how collaboration can be activated and what is required to support it over time.**

- **Clarified roles and responsibilities** benefit all stakeholders. Building on Feeding Change's previous work, an updated FIM stakeholder map highlights functional responsibilities rather than assigning prescriptive roles, serving as an active governance tool for organizations and partners to address ecosystem complexity.
- **Selecting and evolving partnership structures** is a dynamic, strategic task, not a one-time decision with a one-size-fits-all solution. Report recommendations offer guidance for selecting, calibrating, and evolving partnerships through four model structures: learning and advocacy collaboratives, shared implementation models, operational backbones, and direct partnerships. To design partnerships that align stakeholders effectively, collaborators must understand these structures, the pressures that shape them, and the implementation gaps that organizations encounter.

# Optimizing Funding Partnerships for Collaboration

**Funding acts as an enabling and structuring force within strong FIM partnerships.**

- **Examining existing funding mechanisms and the partnerships they shape provides insight for designing more effective future funding strategies.** Recommendations reflect lessons from both community-anchored and health care-anchored hub models and can apply to future federal Section 1115 waivers or other program design decisions.
- **When working within the funding frameworks that exist,** implementers benefit most from treating funding as a strategic choice because no single funding source serves all program needs. This section helps implementers evaluate their options across public, private, and philanthropic sources and decide when braiding funding builds resilience versus when it adds unnecessary complexity.
- **Future FIM funding depends on durable, multi-sector partnerships,** with mechanisms explicitly designed to enable coordination across partners with different roles, capacities, and constraints. Funding models that prioritize shared accountability, flexible coordination, and cross-sector partnership will be essential to embedding FIM as a core component of health care.

## Building Shared Understanding and Long-Term Value

**Prioritizing and capturing long-term value—without sacrificing FIM's community roots—strengthens health outcomes, program outcomes, and community well-being.**

- **Market and movement identities are essential to long-term success.** The movement ensures that FIM remains anchored in equity, dignity, and community-led priorities, while the market enables scale, adaptation to health care's operational realities, and enduring financing pathways. This section offers guidance for designing partnerships, incentives, and governance structures that protect community roots while building a sustainable market.
- **Successful FIM collaborations anticipate, surface, and design for tensions** inherent in intersectoral work. By aligning first on strategy, partners can identify strategic and operational tensions early rather than reacting to problems after they escalate. Shared definitions of success, decision-making processes, and accountability create conditions for more effective problem-solving as programs scale.
- **FIM programs create substantial community value and strengthen local social networks.** Incorporating community connection into program design and evaluation allows FIM initiatives to reflect the full range of value they create. This section concludes with suggestions for evaluation with specific, measurable outputs and outcomes, recognizing that capturing community voice through formal metrics is central to building shared value.

This strategic framework offers practical recommendations to help stakeholders approach collaboration, whether establishing new partnerships, refining existing models, or preparing for future growth. The future of FIM depends on the strength of the relationships that support it. By taking a deliberate approach to forming those relationships, stakeholders can ensure that FIM advances with momentum and durability. Thoughtful partnership design, strategic resource alignment, and adaptive partnership structures will be essential to success across the ecosystem.

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