

## 4-IN-3 CO-OP DEVELOPMENT MODEL:

# THE FOUNDATION FOR A NEW FRAMEWORK

The third wave of food co-ops organizing in the early 2000s underscored the need for a development model to help communities develop new startup food co-ops successfully. The Four Cornerstones in Three Stages Model was developed by Cooperative Development Services and its affiliated team of food co-op consultants (later known as CDS Consulting Co-op and now Columinate) and was first shared with the co-op community in 2006. FCI has used this model as a core component of our toolbox of resources and technical assistance. Nearly 180 new food co-ops have opened since the model's inception.

In August, 2024, FCI chatted with Marilyn Scholl and Kevin Edberg, two of the individuals who developed this model to learn more about its origins, evolution, and impact.

### Q: Tell us a bit about how the model developed and by who?

**Marilyn:** In any conversation about where this model came from, I can't say Bill Gessner's name enough. In the early 2000's we were starting to get calls from people who wanted to start food co-ops, and realized we needed a framework to help people see the whole process. Bill had developed a model for strengthening and growing existing food co-ops and we built the model from elements of his work. Kevin, Bill, Denise Chevalier and I worked together over several months developing the 4-in-3 Model.

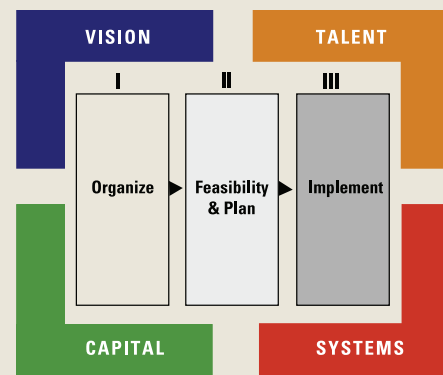
### Q: What kind of impact did this development model have on the newly emergent startup community?

**Marilyn:** We needed something that allowed folks to see the whole and the parts. Having the model gave us a lot more confidence to say we have an idea of what it takes to start a food co-op, and it helped the startups who were coming forward to be able to approach co-op development in a more systematic way.

**Kevin:** There was a confidence in individual projects and helping them get rooted, and over time, that evolved into a community of startups.

### Q: Faye, what has this model meant for FCI and startups?

**Faye:** I can't overstate the impact of the model on startups and



### Four Cornerstones in Three Stages

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**Kevin Edberg**  
Cooperative  
Development  
Services



**Marilyn Scholl**  
retired,  
Columinate  
(formerly CDS  
Consulting Co-op)



**Faye Mack**  
Food Co-op  
Initiative

for FCI. Food co-op organizers are volunteers trying to better their communities, but do not have expertise in all the critical areas needed to succeed — like grocery, business development, community organizing, governance, and more. The model provides them a path to follow and a holistic view of everything they're supposed to be doing. This has enabled more people to see that it's possible for them to open a food co-op. I think it's allowed more startups to actually open their doors, and to do so with a viable business plan that will support their success.

### **Q: How has the model changed over the years?**

**Kevin:** One of Bill's tremendous contributions was adding metrics to the model. We started refining the metrics that marked moving from stage to stage, which evolved from the experience of the startups using it.

**Marilyn:** There weren't formal changes in the words, or in the cornerstones or stages, though FCI and others had started to explain things in different ways where the model didn't quite capture it perfectly. But there were things that we knew needed to be tweaked, but once you start where do you stop? So, we hadn't taken on a big revision yet.

### **Q: Faye, what are you hearing from our current startup community that led to the development of the new Framework?**

**Faye:** In the last few years, we and other co-op developers had identified that some of those needed tweaks that had reached a critical point. At the same time, we were hearing from startups that they weren't seeing themselves in the model. Some of the guidance and some of the metrics were too rigid or didn't apply to their communities. When people don't see themselves in the model, they are less likely to use it, and we knew that much of the model was still really important to startup success. That feedback led us to say, "Now is the time." We took a deep look to make sure that we're reflecting current best practices, because a lot has changed over the last 20 years, especially in the last five years or so.

When the 4-in-3 Model was developed, it centered the needs of the co-ops that were organizing at the time. The majority of them were in predominantly white, more affluent communities, who wanted access to natural foods. Today, the communities we are supporting are more racially and ethnically diverse, may have less disposable income, and many are in historically redlined areas or very rural communities that don't have reliable access to grocery stores. Thanks to their leadership, and, in particular, to the leadership of Black cooperators, we have learned that while there are universal stages and components needed, the paths through them are different for different communities. We need a new framework that centers those communities and can serve everyone who's trying to open a food co-op today.

### **Q: Faye, what process did FCI go through to update the framework?**

**Faye:** JQ Hannah, FCI's Director of Programming, launched a formal process in mid-2023 and developed a first version that we then introduced to cooperators and co-op developers at the 2023 Up & Coming Conference. The response was positive and enthusiastic. We then spent the next nine months working with partners in co-op development, including NCG, consultants from Columinate, seven roots, our Peer Group facilitators, and Angela Sayles from Institution of Financial Unity to further refine the framework.

We now have a framework that we believe is universal for anybody who's trying to start a food co-op. We'll be presenting the framework at Up & Coming again this year to start training co-op organizers on it, and to gather input from them. After the conference, we will start to further develop each of the pieces and to start developing resources that can guide communities through the framework in the ways that will serve their vision and their community.

The framework is designed to evolve. The innovation that drives co-op development forward comes from the startups themselves. We see it as our responsibility to learn from what they're trying, identify what is working and not working, make updates and changes to the framework when needed, and figure out how to help other communities utilize those strategies for success.

**Q: Marilyn and Kevin, what are your wishes for this next generation of startups?**

**Marilyn:** Feasibility is critical. You can't give a co-op to a community but you can help a community build one. The problem of access to food hasn't changed. Just because the market can produce cheap food, it doesn't mean that people will have access because of issues like food apartheid and access challenges in rural communities. There are certainly communities that need access to good quality food, and the market isn't going to give it to them. I hope we can support models and public/private partnerships that work for these communities so they can build successful co-ops.

**Kevin:** There is empowerment in a community that comes from the experiences of organizing a food co-op. That can help them take on other issues that are important in their communities, so the goal can be expanded from "How do we use cooperation to address our grocery needs?" to "How do we use cooperation to address our other community needs?" I hope we can work with these communities to say "what's next?"

**Q: Faye twenty years from now what do you hope the impact of this new framework will be?**

**Faye:** My hope is that the framework provides meaningful support to all communities, especially communities who are coming to this idea of a cooperative because they're seeking to build power within their community and autonomy over a fundamental need like access to good food. My hope is that this framework helps them take that first step to begin, and then provides a clear path forward, the way that the 4-in-3 model did for so many. Ultimately, I hope that this framework helps more communities open their own successful co-ops.

*Thank you to Bill, Kevin, Marilyn, Denise and so many others for spearheading the 4-in-3 Model. It has served startups well for decades and we are honored to build upon its foundation to meet the needs of co-ops today.*



**Bill Gessner, 1947–2019**

*Bill's memory was very present in our conversation and we're grateful for his wholehearted support for the startup co-op community.*



FCI will be revealing the NEW **Food Co-op Development Framework** at the 2024 Up & Coming Conference, September 12–14. More information will also be coming in future editions of FCI's eNews... stay tuned!