

SHARING THE BOUNTY

A replicable community solution to hunger in America is flourishing right here in the Driftless Region

Charlene Elderkin, Marketing & Membership Manager

Every Thursday afternoon during harvest season, Daniel Chotzen and a small group of staff and volunteers head out to a local farm. The fields are beautiful and the harvest is plentiful. "I come from a city environment," says Chotzen, "so it's still magical for me to go to these fields in the beautiful countryside and pick something off the vine. It's an experience of the Driftless I wouldn't have otherwise."

But these vegetables won't be delivered to the Co-op or found in a CSA box. The produce harvested is considered "seconds" (this does not denote an inferior product – sometimes it simply is not marketable because the harvest was too plentiful). The workers box up the food and deliver it to the Food Enterprise Center, where it gets sorted, then distributed to 13 food pantries within 20 miles of Viroqua, as well as two food banks serving 16 Wisconsin Counties. This food, which would have rotted in the field, is now available to those who would not otherwise have access to fresh, organic produce. This is the impressive work of Community Hunger Solutions (CHS).

Shockingly, 40% of all food produced in America is thrown away. Of that 40%, an estimated \$3 billion worth of quality

produce is abandoned in U.S. fields each year. Contrast that with the fact that 50 million people are food insecure, meaning that at some point throughout the year they struggle with not having enough to eat. Rescuing some of this nutritious food and getting it to food pantry recipients is the challenge that Community Hunger Solutions has undertaken.

Vernon County has a poverty level equaling the national average of 15% (compared to 12.5% for Wisconsin), where almost 50% of school-age children qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Our community has responded in a number of ways to address poverty and food insecurity with organizations like Couleecap, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Living Faith Food Pantry and Bethel Butikk Food Pantry. But you may be less familiar with the quiet, but profound contributions of Community Hunger Solutions.

Community Hunger Solutions is a project of the Vernon Economic Development Association (VEDA) and is led by Operations Coordinator Daniel Chotzen and Farm-Food Coordinator Gary Thompson. What has developed over the last few years is a replicable community solution to hunger in America – one that was initiated and is flourishing right here in our own Driftless Region. Its components are:

- a rich farming area
- growers that welcome a "seconds" market
- a centralized food hub
- strong relationships with local food pantries and regional food banks
- local harvesting and educational support



Daniel Chotzen, Operations Coordinator of Community Hunger Solutions harvesting beans at Driftless Organics

These are the foundations for simultaneously mitigating the huge problems of farm waste and food insecurity in our country today. "Of course, the fruitful coalition of these elements depends on a high level of community support," said Chotzen. "For this to occur, it certainly doesn't hurt to have our fertile soil, abundant sunshine, adequate rainfall, and a strong local food movement led by a well-run natural foods store like the Viroqua Food Cooperative!"

BRIEF HISTORY

The foundational work of the Valley Stewardship Network (VSN) was key to the development of the current organization run by Community Hunger Solutions. (To get a full picture of the extraordinary contributions VSN has made to the local food system and local food security, download the Five Year Assessment Report from their website: <http://s.coopl/wq3m>)

In 2007, VSN formed the Farm & Food Initiative (FFI) to respond to local food security issues. VFC General Manager Jan Rasikas served on the FFI Advisory Committee and then-Produce Manager, Dani Lind served on the FFI Steering Committee. One of their tasks was to complete a Vernon County Community Food Assessment – a daunting task that took 18 months to complete. The FFI study found that many low-income residents lacked access to local produce, while most vegetable farmers were



CHS Harvesters at Driftless Organics

shipping produce outside the area to urban centers. And only the cream of the crop was shipped, leaving the remainder in the fields.

In 2009, FFI started a summer program for volunteers to “glean” local farm fields for vegetables to give to food pantries. In 2012, VSN was part of a grant to pay workers with varying abilities to be a part of the summer harvesting team led by Nicole Penick and Rose Brubaker. This proved to be a win-win as the workers, most of whom had never done farm work before, gained skills and experience while becoming the steady workforce to supplement volunteers. The wages of these workers have continued to be paid through grants, with additional funding provided by the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR).

In 2013, VSN handed off the gleaning program to Everybody Works!, the local nonprofit that provides vocational support to people with disabilities. Two of its Board members, Gary Thompson and Daniel Chotzen, took responsibility for the project.

At the end of 2013, it was discovered that in addition to food being left unpicked in the fields, thousands of pounds of already harvested produce was being discarded for a lack of markets. The gleaning project began purchasing bulk quantities (with funds provided by Second Harvest Foodbank of Madison) from local farmers who needed additional markets.

VEDA’s Executive Director, Sue Noble also served on the Second Harvest

Foodbank Board. She facilitated a partnership where large bins of perfectly delicious and usable “seconds” produce brought in by local farmers could now be stored at the Food Enterprise Center, VEDA’s food hub in Viroqua.

The food was then picked up by Second Harvest’s semi-truck that already stopped down the street at Wal-Mart three days a week. By the end of 2013, the project was distributing 4 times more purchased produce vs. gleaned seconds and in 2014, it was over 12 times more!

In 2014, Vernon Economic Development Association adopted the project, now called Community Hunger Solutions. VEDA serves as the fiscal agent under whom CHS operates and provides the program with financial administration, grant writing assistance and organizational mentoring. VEDA’s Food Enterprise Center provides the infrastructure – with docks, coolers and synergy with other produce tenants – to aggregate, store and distribute the food efficiently and effectively. “It fits well with VEDA’s focus to improve the quality of life in our region and increase the business capacity of area farmers by providing access to new markets,” said Noble.

In 2014, VEDA assisted CHS in obtaining \$70,575 in grants from Wal-Mart, United Way and Coulee Food Coalition. What it was able to do with these funds is impressive. CHS purchased over 153,000 lbs. of produce at an average of 15¢ per lb. Along with the 12,000 lbs. brought in from its weekly harvesting and donated produce, the total amount

of produce delivered to pantries was 165,223 lbs. – over four times more than was procured in 2013. That’s 137,686 meals at a cost of 55¢ per meal for almost entirely organic, freshly grown produce. CHS also expanded its services to La Crosse County through a partnership with Hunger Task Force of La Crosse, who received 50,000 lbs. of this produce to distribute to 60 meal sites.

Getting the fresh produce to the food pantries isn’t the end of the story. Often pantry clients don’t recognize or know how to prepare less familiar vegetables. To address this need for nutrition education, CHS used its funding to hold 20 cooking demonstrations, create a 73-page Resource Guide for food pantry personnel, and recipe cards to encourage pantry recipients to take home, cook and eat this healthy food. By the end of 2014, CHS had distributed 30 Resource Guides and 10,000 recipe cards! “I don’t know what to do with kohlrabi,” thanks to such resources, has progressed to “Where’s the kohlrabi?”

CHS also held a half-day workshop in conjunction with UW-Extension that provided an opportunity for local pantry volunteers to go over the Resource Guide, to network and to receive food safety information. “I’m always encouraged by the helpful volunteers at the local food pantries. They always have smiles on their faces and serve with joyful attitudes,” said Thompson. “It has been a pleasure to develop lasting friendships with individuals as we partner in serving those in need of hunger relief in our communities.”

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CHS unpacks gleaned food at VEDA’s Food Enterprise Center



CHS sorts gleaned food for recipients before delivering

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CHS is hard at work, yet again. Its ambitious, but achievable goal for 2015 is to procure 360,000 lbs. of produce that would provide 300,000 meals. Thanks again to grants from Wal-Mart and Coulee Food Coalition, it has a good start on funds to purchase farmers' seconds and provide more educational support for food pantries. Organic Valley is also generously donating excess produce from its produce warehouse in Cashton to add to food resources CHS is distributing. As more funding becomes available, two other food banks have expressed interest in receiving fresh produce, which serve 14 other Wisconsin Counties.

CHS is thankful for local individuals, businesses and organizations like the Viroqua Food Co-op, Empty Bowls and Viroqua Foundation for their continued support. CHS is also appreciative of the generosity of many local, organic farms that have welcomed CHS Harvesters these past years. Such farms include: Driftless Organics, Keewaydin Farms, Small Family Farm, Second Cloud on the Left, Ridgeland Harvest, Knapp Creek Farm, Thimmesch Family Farm and Turkey Ridge Apple Orchard. "Without our partner farms, we wouldn't be able to do the work that we do," said Gary Thompson. "Our success in response to local hunger issues is fully dependent on the many community partnerships that we've been able to establish. This is a true testament of a community supported local foods movement!"

"As the oldest of eight children I grew up as a charter member of the 'Clean Plate Club' and always believed food was precious," said Chotzen. "But in the last few years as part of this program, being able to experience vegetables growing organically in this beautiful region, I can only say that I believe this food is precious beyond compare. To help get more of it to more people is my dream job."

*Daniel Chotzen, Gary Thompson
and Susan Noble contributed to this article*

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- **Harvesters:** volunteer on Thursday afternoons to spend time in the fresh air and sunshine – and take home a free bag of produce.
- **Gardeners:** "Grow a row" for the food pantry, or donate excess produce.
- **Tech-savvy folks:** maintain and expand Facebook page and website at: www.community-hunger-solutions.org
- **Graphic design work:** create resource guides and recipe cards.
- **Foodies:** cook and provide samples to taste on site at local food pantries.
- **Businesses, organizations & individuals:** make tax-deductible contributions to Community Hunger Solutions.*

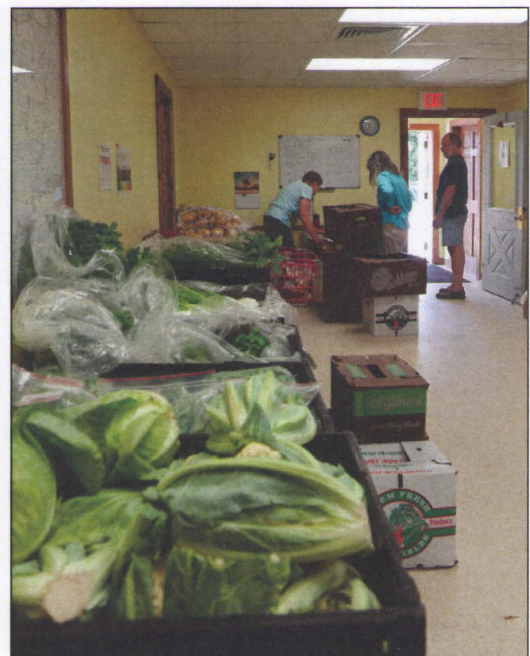
For further information on how to contribute or receive fresh produce, please contact Gary Thompson at: 608-637-3650, 608-632-2163 or email: gary@community-hunger-solutions.org

For information on volunteering to harvest on Thursday afternoons until the first frost, please contact Daniel Chotzen at 608-606-1910 or email: daniel@community-hunger-solutions.org

* Tax-deductible donations can be sent to: VEDA/ CHS, 1201 N Main St, Suite 6, Viroqua, WI 54665



*CHS Food-Farm Coordinator, Gary Thompson
delivers produce to Marv and other volunteers at Living Faith Food Pantry*



*CHS produce gets weighed (per lb.)
then sorted as it arrives at Living Faith Food Pantry*