

Teamwork and tech help bring food from farms to the hungry



Volunteers help at a recent harvest at Hurd's Family Farm in Clintondale.

Imagine us without the Bruderhof, who come from all over the county to help build playgrounds, donate beautiful furniture, their time, expertise, materials, and cookies by the score. Without Michael Berg, founder of Family of Woodstock, who knows where many of us would be. Without UlsterCorps — the volunteer-to-opportunity clearinghouse — countless projects, large and small, would have failed.

And over the last 10 years the Rondout Valley Growers Association has been using an array of tools and partners to help maintain our region's ability to feed ourselves and our neighbors with the best, most responsibly grown food in the world.

Advertisement



Now, what happens when you put those groups together? Magic, or maybe something like the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. Under the umbrella of the “Farm to Food Pantry Collaborative” these four groups have enabled donations and made deliveries to all corners of Ulster providing healthy local produce to the many programs helping to combat local food insecurity. The Farm to Food Pantry Program reclaims food donated from local farms and distributes it to food pantries and soup kitchens across Ulster. The idea is to bring local food to our “food deserts,” where access to fresh food is difficult and expensive. According to the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, which compiles statistics on regional food insecurity, approximately 10.8 percent of Ulster (19,630 individuals) is food insecure. That percentage rises to 16 percent of the county’s children.

FeedHV and the Farm to Food Pantry Collaborative are hosting a Harvest for Hunger series to span the county in a unique partnership to educate about different approaches to food insecurity. About 20 volunteers from Kingston Nissan harvested 1160 pounds of remaining apples at Hurds Family Farm in New Paltz in less than two hours. They worked hard and will next month, too, when Kingston Nissan employees then process those apples into applesauce at Ulster County Community Action Committee to showcase the process. Lastly, the dealership group will deliver the frozen applesauce to three different assisting feeding agencies in Ulster County where they will be able to learn more about their mission and daily operations.

Since the program began in 2009, over 563,000 pounds of produce from 33 different growers have been given out to 49 food pantries, shelters, and feeding program, including senior centers and low-income senior residences. Volunteers, recruited and coordinated by UlsterCorps, are essential. They help with weekly “gleanings,” or harvesting remaining crops left on the trees, vines or in the fields. Some of the bounty is donated straight to Ulster County-based assisting feeding programs. Some gets processed, also with help from volunteers, into frozen product and sauces, and donated to programs to have on hand in the winter. This collaboration has become so effective that many area pantries and feeding programs are now able to regularly offer fresh produce and processed product from local farms.

“Despite a very difficult growing season, over 92,000 pounds of produce has been donated and distributed through the Farm to Food Pantry Collaborative this year,” said Beth McLendon Albright, co-founder and director of UlsterCorps, as well as program director of volunteer services and food security at Family. “We are so

grateful to the incredibly generous growers who donate to the Farm to Food Pantry Collaborative, and to our wonderful volunteers.”

McLendon Albright said the program offers those who want to help a lot of ways to do so. “One of the things that many volunteers like about this program, is that while there are service opportunities every week throughout, and beyond, the growing season, volunteers can choose which opportunities work with their schedules and interests,” she said. “Most opportunities are also very youth friendly, ideal for families and school groups that want to volunteer together.”

But if some collaboration is good, more can be better. Enter Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley (CFHV), a grantmaker who helps individuals, businesses and organizations establish and administer funds that support vital causes and charities. It also provides technical assistance to help nonprofits operate more effectively. CFHV funds many of the assisting feeding programs as well as food rescues in the Hudson Valley region and got stakeholders in the region such as farms, food rescues, pantries, soup kitchens, gleaning organizations, restaurants and retailers talking to learn more about their needs.

The outcome of those conversations is FeedHV Community Food Network. It casts a coordinating net over organizations doing this kind of work to and seeks to widen and deepen its impact across the region by connecting existing donors, willing volunteers and in-need agencies.



Last fall, Community Foundations launched FeedHV, a web-based and mobile application powered by ChowMatch. The app links donors of prepared but unserved food and produce with nonprofit organizations with food assistance programs through volunteers who gather, harvest, transport, and process donated food. Over 50,000 pounds of food has already moved through the FeedHV network this year.

FeedHV is administered by Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corporation, which shares a similar seven-county footprint as the FeedHV app and has robust relationships with both farms and chefs specializing in Hudson Valley-sourced product. Both FeedHV and Farm to Food Pantry collaborative are funded by the Farm Fresh Initiative, through Local Economies Project, the Novo Foundation, the Ogden Foundation, the Bruderhof, and more. “FeedHV is a great new resource that has helped us connect us with additional growers such as Hepworth Farms [in Milton] and new volunteers, like the team from Kingston Nissan,” said McLendon

Albright.

Ulster County enjoys a special relationship among the players, much of which is due to Family of Woodstock's early vision of getting once-competing programs in Ulster to partner and share resources, explained Carrie Jones Ross, food security development manager with Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corporation and the FeedHV program administrator.

"There has been a lot of organizational collaboration going on in Ulster County that you don't often see," Jones Ross said. "This level of sharing resources and working together has had a tremendous impact on public health thanks to all the organization around recovering Hudson Valley grown fruit and vegetables and making them widely available to vulnerable people."



Another positive outcome from the collaborations and Community Foundation funding has been the creation of cold storage food hubs in four (soon to be five) points of the county, where feeding programs can remotely store their produce off-site and get it when they need it, thus exponentially increasing the amount of produce given to food pantries.

To learn more about FeedHV, please visit www.FeedHV.com. To learn more about UlsterCorps and the Farm to Food Pantry Collaborative, please visit www.ulstercorps.org or www.familyofwoodstockinc.org/collaborations/f2fp/

Subscribe to read more stories from [Kingston Times](http://KingstonTimes.com). If you find what we're doing valuable, consider making a [contribution](#). Your support ensures independent local journalism will thrive in the Hudson Valley for years to come.