

DEVELOPING A HEALTHY FOOD HUB IN RURAL NEVADA:

COMMUNITY-BASED STRATEGIES FOR ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION AND FOOD SUFFICIENCY

By Quest Lakes

A gale force wind was blowing and it was beginning to snow, but fifth graders at Dayton, Nevada, elementary school were excited to be outside working in their organic garden, harvesting the potatoes and garlic to make soup – part of their teacher's health and nutrition lesson for the day. USDA Rural Development's Kelly Clark captured the student's excitement in photographs as she toured the school garden to see how the USDA's Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative funding was being used by a rural Coalition called Healthy Communities, to implement organic school gardens in seven schools in the Lyon County, Nevada, school district. Her photos ended up on the cover of the USDA's new Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Compass.

The organic school gardens are just one part of a coordinated effort by Healthy Communities Coalition, a collaboration of hundreds of community volunteers and dozens of local, state, federal, and tribal agency partners, to solve multiple challenges in a rural three-county region of Northern Nevada. Much of the region is designated a "food desert" by the USDA – an area lacking access to fresh produce. To complicate matters, the region was hit hard by the economic collapse and has had one of the highest unemployment rates and home foreclosure rates in the nation for more than three years, and requests for food assistance from area food banks has increased exponentially since 2008. At the same time, a recurring theme from community members and staff from local schools, social service and health care agencies was the desire for affordable, accessible, fresh, local produce.

USDA NIFA Grant Kick-Starts Community-Based Solutions
In a stroke of good luck, Healthy Communities was awarded a USDA Community Food Projects Grant in 2010, and the combination of training for Coalition staff and funding for effective projects to address local hunger, sparked a chain of events that addressed most of the food challenges at once, but from several angles. The Coalition partnered with diverse groups to create a unique "healthy food hub," one of the first in Nevada, that promoted ties between local farmers and under-served communities in a system of mutual support that increases sustainability and profitability. Far from competing with any of its many partners, the Coalition simply assists with coordination between local food suppliers and local food consumers with the added goal of bringing everyone together to solve the significant food insecurity issues in the three-county region. This "developing healthy food hub," includes community and school gardens and hoop houses, volunteer-powered food pantries, and food aggregation, distribution, and coordination among community volunteers and many agencies that are working to run emergency food distribution until food insecurity issues are solved.

Access to Resources and Training

In his essay, "Fish, Pies, the Commons and Economic Development," Ed Whitfield uses the metaphor of fishing to describe the need for both training AND access to resources. Whitfield writes, "...that brings me to the 'great fish lie.' You have all heard it: 'Give a person a fish, they eat for a day; teach a person to fish, they eat for a lifetime.' It's a vicious

PICTURED: TEEN INTERNS AT THE FIVE-ACRE DAYTON COMMUNITY GARDEN. PHOTO BY WENDY MADSON OF HEALTHY COMMUNITIES. USED BY PERMISSION.



lie...Knowing how to fish will not feed you at all. You have to also have access to a water hole – lake, ocean, river or stream – someplace where fish can be found – and even then, you need access to some fishing...tools and equipment ...” Keeping this philosophy in mind, the Coalition’s first step in creating a food hub was addressing the shortage of residents trained in sustainable gardening practices, and an absence of the essentials needed to produce more local food.

The Coalition addressed these complexities immediately by coordinating training in sustainable agriculture in the high desert climate, and access to land and water and basic equipment and gardening materials. Local organic farmers Steve and Marcia Litsinger began training adults and teens in organic gardening, composting, and hoop house construction. The Coalition began connecting people to the land where they could develop community gardens. The result: over a period of two years, community members, farmers, schools, nonprofits, businesses, and the Coalition’s garden center, Community Roots, have helped implement and maintain seven organic school gardens, five community gardens and composts, and five community hoop houses. The impact on reducing local hunger and increasing food security and self-reliance has been immediate and meaningful. During the summer of 2011, one of the community gardens produced about 7,000 pounds of produce that was donated to local food pantries. This is a timely development – the amount of food available to food banks from national and regional sources has dwindled, at the same time that the percentage of residents in this rural Nevada region requesting food pantry assistance has shot up to about 20% of the population.

Food Hubs and Economic Revitalization

Another piece of the puzzle involved connecting small local farms to new markets that were difficult for them to access on their own. The Coalition began connecting the region’s farmers and food distributors to new markets like food co-ops, farmers markets, garden centers, local restaurants interested in “Farm to Table” concepts, and social services and food pantries that want to infuse fresh, local food into their programs. The farmers are also coordinating their planting schedules and choice of crops with an eye to promoting variety in local produce, and reliable supplies of locally produced foods. The result is a rapidly developing, interrelated system that promotes economic revitalization, regional food sufficiency, and access to affordable good nutrition.

The Food Hub/Food Security Connection

The Coalition’s unique food hub includes two “volunteer-powered” food pantries where people in need of the service help operate the pantries with scaffolded management and Coalition staff oversight. Excess fresh food from the community and school gardens and farmers’ markets is incorporated into the food boxes packed at the pantries, so that people have more access to nutritious food. This system not only helps solve hunger issues, it does so without the use of taxpayer dollars.

Visions for the Future

The Coalition is organizing a Multi-Sector Regional Food Sufficiency Council including representatives from community groups, nonprofits, food banks, USDA, social services, school districts, groceries, etc. so that food pantries can more efficiently coordinate regionally and share assets, distribution routes, partners, etc. The Council might also take the lead in infusing local food into the Human Services/Social Services sector. The first steps will be mapping assets and then problem solving to close gaps in service and overcome high food distribution costs in a rural region that covers thousands of square miles.

Light Processing and Distribution Under a Central Food Hub Label

The Coalition is also working with local, state, and federal partners to create community space and equipment for local food to be stored, lightly processed, packed, palletized, and possibly even sold under a regional healthy food hub label with a shared market plan, all while allowing small farms to maintain individual identities.

Mobile Farmers’ Markets, Food Co-Ops, and Nutrition Programs

The Coalition is working with governmental partners to access and distribute EBT (Food stamp) machines, WIC (Women Infant and Children nutrition programs) technologies, and USDA senior food coupons and market the ability for farmers, food co-op members, and farmers’ markets to use them. Another goal is to fund a mobile farmers’ market/ fresh produce truck that will serve both low-wealth areas with produce provided at a lower price point, and higher-wealth areas with produce at a higher price point, so that farmers can actually make a living with their high quality, locally grown, organic produce. These projects will make nutritious food accessible to people of all financial means.

Developing a healthy food hub has allowed people in this rural section of Nevada to beat back an alarming, rapid increase in hunger and to craft an effective, collaborative strategy to reverse an economic downturn of historic proportions. The newly formed connections and informal networks of support and kindness have bloomed in surprising ways. People of all ages and from all backgrounds are working together to create “food secure communities” with more access to local, healthy food, and greater economic opportunities for local farmers, ranchers, and food entrepreneurs. ●

Resources

Wealth Creation and Rural Livelihoods community of practice (WCRL)
www.ruralwealth.org

Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Compass
<http://www.usda.gov/documents/KYFCompass.pdf>

Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) Center for Rural Entrepreneurship
<http://www.rupri.org>