Many Ways for Getting Fresh into the Food Bank

By Alex Arroyo

The Bellingham Food Bank has been serving food insecure clients since 1972. One of their primary goals is to promote fresh produce and healthy foods to clients. For 7 years, the Bellingham Food Bank operated a 3 acre farm dedicated to growing fresh produce for distribution through the food bank. The successes and challenges of the farm served as a stepping-stone to diverse and more efficient methods of F2FB - methods that supply fresh produce while also strengthening the local agricultural industry and community.

Mike Cohen, the Executive Director of the Bellingham Food Bank took time to discuss the food bank’s produce purchasing program, as well as how purchasing is one of several strategies utilized to get as much fresh produce as possible to food bank clients.

What were some of the major successes of the Food Bank farm?

In 2004, the food bank was offered a 3 acre parcel for an extremely cheap lease. It was an exciting prospect to have a farm growing food exclusively for the food bank, so we couldn’t say no. We hired a young, energetic farm manager, got committed volunteers (yet most of whom were older, which made some farm tasks prohibitive), and started growing food. More than 40,000 lbs of produce was delivered to the food bank the first season!

What influenced your decision to transition those funds toward a produce purchasing program?

After several seasons, all involved came to understand that farming is extremely hard work. The project only had a budget to pay one person full time (not including overtime). With long days during growing/harvest season, and demanding physical labor, the operation of the farm was draining to our one full time employee. As more real challenges were emerging with the farm, the leadership of the food bank knew it wouldn’t be sustainable in the long-run and began to think of other ways for sourcing fresh produce. In about 2010, we began to transition to a purchasing model and ran both projects side-by-side for a time. This allowed us to do cost comparisons between running the farm and purchasing produce from local farms at wholesale rates. Our research showed that it made a lot more sense to take advantage of the rich agricultural industry of Whatcom County and pay farmers to do what

USE A VARIETY OF INITIATIVES TO GET FRESH INTO THE FOOD BANK

• Large amounts of fresh produce can come into the food bank by pursuing a variety of strategies
• Enables community members to be involved in a variety of ways

Produce Purchasing

• Support farmers to do what they do best - grow great produce!
• Invests money into local economy
• Consistent and reliable source of fresh food

Gleaning!

• Working with farmers to rescue produce from the field and reduce on-farm wastage

Partner with Gardeners in your Community

• Offer seeds or plant starts to gardeners in your community. They can grow vegetables and donate all, or some, of what they harvest!
they do best. The funds that were used to operate the farm are now used as part of the ‘Food Bank Fresh’ produce purchasing program.

**Can you tell me more about the Food Bank Fresh program?**

With the ‘Food Bank Fresh’ program we work with farmers across Whatcom County who grow food specifically for the food bank throughout the year. Each winter, we meet with our Food Bank Fresh farmers to determine what we want them to grow for us during the upcoming season. We pay each farm in the winter for food they will grow and deliver all spring, summer, and fall. Because we pay them up front, they give us a really good deal. Currently, we work with 12 growers and receive over 80,000 lbs of fresh, beautiful produce each year.

Funding for the purchasing program comes primarily from unrestricted donation funds of the food bank, as well as grants from the ‘Not Yet’ Foundation and Whatcom Community Foundation. We spend about $80,000 per year on the program.

**Has it been effective to have a number of initiatives for getting fresh produce to the food bank?**

The purchasing program works really well as part of a suite of strategies for getting fresh produce into the food bank. We have a robust on-farm gleaning program led by Max Morange, with 6-8 gleans per week at the height of growing season; we glean from farmers markets; and we partner with gardeners around Bellingham who donate produce that they grow. Between these efforts, the food bank brings in over 300,000 lbs of produce annually! It takes effort to coordinate delivery and distribution - some produce comes in on a schedule, other sources require more work and are less predictable, and take work to make it ready for clients – but the end result is entirely worth it.

We are super motivated to increase the amount of fresh food available to our clients and work hard to communicate to our community that food banks should provide more than canned veggies, rice, and beans. We give out seeds to home gardeners, distribute garden signs promoting growing food for the food bank, and publish online growing guides with information on how to start a garden.

We strive to create a different idea for what a food bank can be to the local community. And we have definitely seen a response from community members, who are showing increasing interest in volunteering, helping glean, and growing food for the food bank.

For more information about the Bellingham Food Bank, visit: [http://www.bellinghamfoodbank.org/](http://www.bellinghamfoodbank.org/)

For more information about starting or developing your farm-to-food bank initiative, please email [growingconnections@northwestharvest.org](mailto:growingconnections@northwestharvest.org), or contact Laura Titzer at 206.923.7423