Over the past 50 years, the economic vitality of rural areas has been in a dramatic decline as the strength of local cycles of exchange were outcompeted by large, corporate enterprises in our increasingly globalized world. In Washington state, there are programs already in place that can support rural economic development while also enhancing local food security!

The decline in economic vitality resulted in increasing rates of hunger, malnutrition, homelessness, lower quality education, and reduced access to affordable healthcare in rural communities. These aspects are all interrelated and solutions to one require thinking about solutions for all aspects.

While emergency food programs and caring, passionate people from across the country have responded to this growing crisis by seeking to promote exceptionally nutritious food and access to affordable fresh produce, solutions to root causes have remained elusive. Additionally, rampant unemployment and rising costs of living make it difficult for families to make ends meet. Research from Feeding America shows that, increasingly, families are not only visiting food pantries to meet temporary, acute food needs, but are a part of long-term strategies to supplement monthly shortfalls in food. “Emergency” has become the norm.

In Washington state, there are programs already in place that can support rural economic development while also enhancing local food security. Your food program can support local farmers by buying produce from them and keeping money within your community. Advertise and support your local farmer’s market. Utilize WSDA and WSU Extension resources on rural development and small farming.

Buying fresh food from local farmers keeps money within the community and supports a stronger local economy. Farmers’ ability to earn a living from growing local, organic food can be enhanced by improving direct-marketing strategies, reducing obstacles to selling to institutions, and lowering certification costs. Emergency food providers receive funds through a state Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) that can be utilized for operational costs and purchase of food, among other potential uses.

There are over 100 Farmers Markets across Washington state that provide important venues for farmers to connect with consumers and earn a profit.
selling high quality produce. Additionally, the state Department of Health has partnered with the Washington Farmers Market Association to fund healthy food incentive programs to increase the access and availability of fresh, highly nutritious food to low-income individuals and families. These programs - called Fresh Bucks, Double Up Bucks, Gimme Five, and others - incentivize the use of food benefits (including SNAP/EBT, WIC, and Senior Vouchers) at farmer’s markets through matching funds. This promotes greater access to fresh, nutritious produce for low-income shoppers by subsidizing the cost of local, organic fresh food. These incentives also increase the portion of federal and state aid dollars spent on locally-grown food, keeping those dollars within the community.

The Washington Department of Agriculture has resources and support for small farm and direct marketing activities. Their mission is to increase the economic viability of small farms in Washington state, build community vitality, and improve the environmental quality of the region. Additionally, WSDA is partnering with WSU Extension on a grant to investigate ‘Farm-to-Community’ activities and ways that local growers can connect with institutions and community organizations for produce purchasing and contracting.

Growing Connections, a program of Northwest Harvest, also works to address the lack of access to highly nutritious, fresh food by promoting local connections between growers and food programs across Washington state. These relationships can develop beyond simply a traditional donation or gleaning-based dynamic and can result in contracted purchasing, plant-a-row, volunteer work parties on local farms, and a greater sense of community.

There is a desperate need to bring economic development to rural areas. By improving the economic sustainability of agricultural enterprises, rural communities will become more vibrant and increasingly able to provide for themselves in a robust way. Support the many small farmers in your community and region of Washington by purchasing from them, highlighting their efforts, and building relationships with them. There is vast untapped potential in growing connections between emergency food providers and local sustainable agriculture!

Useful Links:
WSDA Small Farms and Direct Marketing: http://agr.wa.gov/Marketing/SmallFarm/
Northwest Harvest Growing Connections: http://www.northwestharvest.org/growing-connections
VIDEO ‘Healthy Food Incentives at WA Farmer’s Markets’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjihQI7UJM5

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