Skagit County is located in the Northwest region of Washington State. The average farm size was 89 acres in 2007 (USDA), and many small farmers struggle because of the high cost of business and the loss of land, according to Skagit County Community Action Agency. In connection, the agency addresses community needs for low income individuals, including food access and nutrition. How can the needs of low income individuals who need access to food and nutrition also be met with the needs of small farmers?

Twenty percent of all Skagit residents rely on food banks (Skagit County Community Action). In order to provide fresh produce in those food banks, Rita Ordóñez, the Community Food Access Manager at the Skagit County Community Action Distribution Center explains, “One of the goals is to develop a business plan for the distribution center. We’re looking to increase access to local foods for low-income consumers, while at the same time improving markets, storage and distribution for local farm products.” One of the ways that Skagit County Community Action supports small farmers is by renting freezer space to accommodate the needs of small farmers, fostering relationships with them, and generating revenue for the food bank.

Skagit County Community Action also has a small purchasing program. They make small purchases from farmers, which creates a mutually beneficial relationship. What they have found is that by creating this mutually beneficial relationship, farmers tend to give more produce. For example, they worked with one farmer by purchasing bins of corn and she later donated a truck load of cucumbers. Skagit County Community Action also provides tax receipts for donations. The purchasing program is funded by Bite of Skagit, which is fundraiser where people come and listen to music and eat good food.
In addition, Skagit County Community Action has an AmeriCorps VISTA member working at the program. In other words, they have a dedicated person working on the program and creating relationships with farmers. Also, the VISTA member conducts data such as tracking donation pounds, number of purchases etc., and organizes the data into graphs. This data is showcased on their board, and goals are set. With this dedicated individual putting time into fostering relationships with farmers as well as compiling data, their donations have increased significantly.

While having a VISTA member, the purchasing program, and the emphasis on mutually beneficial relationships with the farmers, Skagit County Community Action has other avenues in increasing pounds of produce. For example, their Victory Garden’s program utilizes surplus food from local gardeners. Skagit County Community Action provides markers that are put in the gardens supporting the organization.

This past season, they received a USDA grant to do planning under the local food promotion program. This year they will collaborate with stakeholders in the process, and create a business plan for their distribution center. They want to utilize their infrastructure to be able to assist farmers in new markets by storing their items. “How can we expand the work we are doing and get more food to clients and to develop better resources to serve both sides?”, explains Ordóñez. The Skagit County Community Action Agency will continue to build their farm to food bank programs by cultivating relationships.

Citations:


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