Notes from the Field
Providence NEW Hunger Coalition

During the 2014 growing season, the Providence North East Washington (NEW) Hunger Coalition in Stevens County participated in an exciting pilot produce purchasing program. The Washington Food Coalition in partnership with Rotary First Harvest and its Harvest Against Hunger program, with support from the WSDA, gave money to three sites around the state to purchase produce directly from local growers in order to provide food banks with high quality nutritious food. This was a win-win situation for both growers and food banks.

The NEW Hunger Coalition was given $4000 to purchase locally grown food. They contracted with five local growers and over the growing season received a total of 11,730 pounds of produce, both purchased and donated. Besides dollars, the program offered growers flexible delivery times, help with harvest, and transportation assistance. Other growers, observing the success of the pilot program, expressed willingness to grow food for the food banks in the future.

In addition to the purchased produce, growers donated large amounts of food. Many growers would rather donate their excess or non-marketable produce than see it go to waste, and once they saw the face of hunger in their communities, they wanted to support the efforts of food banks. Growers are also eligible for tax deductions for donating. The support offered by the NEW Hunger Coalition helped increase donations from local growers because systems were already in place to make donating easy. Two growers - Front Porch Farm and Colville Corn Maze - actually donated more over the season than what was purchased.

If you are considering purchasing from local growers for your food bank or organization, keep the following in mind:

- Contact the grower in the winter months so they can plan planting to accommodate bulk purchases.
- Consider pooling your resources with other food banks in the area and then share the produce.
- Understand that farming is an unpredictable business and crop failure could happen. Build some flexibility into the contract.
- Make sure that all aspects of an arrangement are discussed with the grower prior to signing the contract, from price and payment, methods of coordination, transportation, and cold storage needed.
However, the success of the program didn’t only derive from the amount of produce purchased or donated (which was astounding for the first season), but also the relationships built. Growers became aware of the extent of hunger in their communities and of their abilities to help, as well as the constraints and difficulties faced by hunger relief organizations. Food bank directors and volunteers gained insights into the agricultural landscape, from high production costs to variable weather and growing seasons.

The Hunger Coalition and affiliate organizations are already seeking opportunities to build on the foundation established in 2014. In efforts to improve upon the lessons learned during the first season, the Harvest Against Hunger program will strive to secure more assistance in transportation from local food banks, and to further engage food bank clients to join the harvesting process.
For more information about establishing grower-food bank relationships, see:
Growing Connections Resource Guide, especially Guides 1 and 4, and
Rotary First Harvest Resource Guide.
For more information about the pilot produce purchasing program, see:
Rotary First Harvest Purchasing Pilot Report.

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