Upper Valley MEND (Meeting Each Need with Dignity) is located in Leavenworth, and provides services for the residents and transients of their community, seeking to meet client needs in ways that honor their inherent dignity and integrity. The organization has programs for food, clothing, affordable homes, health care, and a family home for adults with disabilities. MEND’s Community Cupboard food bank is one of the organization’s oldest programs.

Upper Valley MEND has a gleaning project called Community Harvest, which has been very successful at collecting produce from small scale market farms, larger commercial orchards, and backyard fruit trees. Upper Valley MEND organizes volunteers to glean crops that are unmarketable to grocers and farmers markets. Beth Macinko, Gleaning Coordinator at Upper Valley MEND, attributes their successes to cultivating relationships with local donors, farmers, orchardists, gardeners, while widely promoting the program to the larger community.

Community Harvest also gleans from two weekly farmers markets and implements two gardening projects: plant-a-row and seed distribution. The plant-a-row project encourages local gardeners to donate a row or more of produce to the food bank. The seed distribution program solicits seed donations from various Washington seed companies, then volunteers create seed packets for clients. Seed packets are distributed to clients of the food bank, and Beth said, “People really look forward to picking out some seeds every year.” Providing clients with the means to grow their own food means that even if their local food pantry is only open one day a month, they will have more access to fresh produce.

GLEANING: COMMUNICATION

For gleaning projects to be successful, communication is key. Tips for maintaining working relationships with growers include:

- Be approachable and available to growers.
- Be consistent. One person from your food bank should be the main contact for the grower.
- Be mindful of the grower’s needs and schedule. Check in with growers at farmer’s markets, where the grower is going to be anyway.
- Meet with the farmer before bringing gleaners to the farm. Get to know what the grower is comfortable with: either helpful or invisible presence on the farm, navigating fields, etc.
- Touch base with growers in the off-season (winter) to assess interest in working with you again.
Upper Valley MEND has encountered some challenges, such as when they shifted host organizations for their gleaning projects. The change was challenging, said Beth Macinko, because the program was both brand new and established. The important thing was to maintain relationships from the old site as well as expand the donor and volunteer base in the new community, Upper Valley. The Community Harvest program emphasizes good communication and consistent development of relationships with growers, understanding the different seasons and when it is most appropriate and convenient to connect with growers.

Upper Valley MEND engages their clients with the growing process with their seed program and nourishes relationships with the community to increase the amount of fresh produce available to their clients.

Resources:
For more information about starting grow a row and seed distribution projects, see Rotary First Harvest Resource Guide articles Seed Distribution and Plant a Row, and Empowering Self Sufficiency.
For more information about establishing a good pattern of communication with growers, see Growing Connections Resource Guide, especially Guide 1, Building Farmer Relationships, and Rotary First Harvest Resource Guide article Donor Relationships in Leavenworth and Smart Steps to Farmer Relations.

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