There is an abundance of agricultural activity in Okanogan County, a quality beneficial for increasing fresh produce in local food programs. The Okanogan County Community Action Council (OCCAC) has helped support the area through its food program and initiatives such as its “Food for All” program. Lael Duncan, Executive Director of the OCCAC, says the area has struggled in the past with low funding, but the community has plenty of skill with growing and canning, with those skills being passed down generationally. Striving to bring more self-sufficiency to people, the OCCAC has promoted square foot gardens that allow residents to grow food themselves. The OCCAC itself has around a dozen small gardens, which have provided them with around 600 pounds of fresh produce in a year. Individuals may not always realize where their food comes from, so educating them using these gardens, along with other outreach measures, is important to establish a connection between people and produce.

Okanogan County not only contains plenty of farmland, but also a large variety of crops. According to Peggy Doyle, Executive Director of The Dinner Table, farmers used to plant one or two main crops but have since diversified their fields to make a living. Places such as Harvesting Autumn orchard donate a variety of fresh produce to local emergency food programs. The owner of the orchard, Autumn Carroll, who helped start the Food for All program at OCCAC, says consumers at farmers markets are drawn to purchase produce when there is a good cause behind the grower. The relationship between his orchard and food banks is mutually beneficial, as harvesting excess produce from crop yields reduces waste and prevents plants from providing smaller yields the next year. Only one crop was left not gleaned the previous season and Peggy hopes that there are enough food bank volunteers in the future to glean all the extra produce in upcoming seasons. During the 2016 harvesting season, The Dinner Table partnered with Catholic Charities, using grassroots volunteer efforts to bring produce from farms to food banks with minimal financial resources. The partnership built a diverse base of volunteers able to transport produce across the county. With word of mouth networking, Peggy believes other rural communities can succeed with similar efforts. Utilizing another networking opportunity, they also experimented with trading between counties, which helped to provide a more equitable distribution of produce across multiple areas.

### Lessons from Okanogan County

**Connect Food Programs to Growers and Consumers**

- Communicate often with other food programs and growers. Growers will then have a better idea what to give and food programs can make trades with each other. It also shows growers that their work is valued in the community.
- Find volunteers to glean whenever possible. It increases supply for food programs and reduces waste for growers.
- Reach out to schools and provide educational materials about how food is grown.
- Encourage the development of square foot gardens to help people grow produce. This develops consumers’ connections to their food and increases their self-sufficiency.
- Ask growers to emphasize their food program contributions at farmers markets. People like to purchase food that has a cause behind it.
However, fresh produce distribution in rural areas like Okanogan can be a problem due to transportation and storage issues. As a part of our Growing Connections project, Catholic Charities Spokane (CCS) dedicated funding to the area to coordinate an initiative responding to the issues, spearheaded by Brian Estes (now of LINC Foods). In 2016, CCS invested ten thousand dollars in procuring over five tons of produce from small farms in Okanogan County. The organization also acquired a Harvest Node—a repurposed shipping container that can serve as a storage space for food programs across the community. Growers or gleaners can drop off produce at the Harvest Node and food banks will be allowed to pick up produce. Once a location is selected for the container in the Okanogan area, it will be a centralized point for growers and emergency food banks, intended to increase the produce available to participants of food banks.

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