

Integrating Food Access & Affordable Housing



Melanie Meisenheimer
Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow
Vermont Housing & Conservation Board
February 2015

Foreword

The work and partnerships of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) positions it at the nexus of the state's major local food, affordable housing, and anti-hunger stakeholders. With funds awarded from the Vermont Community Foundation, it has undertaken a Food Access and Affordable Housing Initiative to explore what more can be done, either through policy or programming, to improve access to affordable, nutritious, and local food for all Vermonters. The Initiative has focused on three target regions (Brattleboro, Rutland, and the Northeast Kingdom), where regional gatherings were convened to explore the possibility of new or deeper collaborations to address food insecurity in affordable housing communities.

Executive Summary

Vermont has come to pride itself upon its vibrant local food economy, but for the 13.4 percent of Vermonters who struggle with food insecurity, fresh, nutritious food can remain out of reach. Some of the chief obstacles to buying fresh fruits and vegetables for lower-income Vermonters include cost, transportation, and lack of knowledge or skills needed to purchase, store, or prepare fresh foods.

Vermont’s rural character can exacerbate these obstacles, making it especially difficult for service providers to reach lower-income households and vice versa. As a sector that serves approximately 24,000 lower-income individuals, Vermont’s affordable housing providers are uniquely positioned to help bridge the divide between lower-income Vermonters and fresh, local food. By partnering with other groups in their communities to make fresh food more affordable and accessible, affordable housing providers can not only improve the financial stability of their tenants, but also improve their quality of life and the health of their community.

This document offers recommendations and resources related to food access programming in affordable housing communities. It is informed by informational interviews with individuals working in both affordable housing and food systems groups, conversations with residents of affordable housing communities, and from the results of three regional brainstorming gatherings hosted by VHCB in Brattleboro, Rutland, and St. Johnsbury. It includes:

1. Best practices as well as examples of existing models from around the state of different types of food access programming including:
 - a. Gardens..... **7**
 - b. Edible Landscaping..... **12**
 - c. Cooking and Nutrition Education..... **13**
 - d. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Farm Shares..... **16**
2. Recommendations for reducing the waste of charitable food received by tenants of affordable housing..... **20**
3. Recommendations for ensuring food access programming enhances food justice..... **22**
4. A guide to working with affordable housing providers..... **24**
5. An index of contacts at organizations in Vermont which may offer support for collaborative food access programming, and of affordable housing contacts..... **26**

Food Insecurity in Vermont

For housing providers looking to improve both the quality of their housing and the quality of life of their residents, food access is a key issue to address. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's data, 84,000 Vermonters are food insecure, meaning they are unable to consistently provide themselves and their families with sufficient, nutritious food. This figure stands in jarring contrast to Vermont's statewide success in increasing local food production and consumption. Vermont agriculture has received attention nationally and internationally in recent years due to its successful development of community-based food systems. Vermont has the highest per capita number of farmers' markets, CSAs, and farm stands in the nation, and leads in the development of Farm to School programs and school gardens as well. VHCB's conservation efforts, its Farm & Forest Viability Program, other organizations such as the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont and the Intervale Center, and the state's Farm to Plate Strategic Plan have all played vital roles in increasing the production and consumption of locally grown food.

**13.4% or
84,000**
Vermonters are
food insecure.

Whether this fresh, locally produced food is actually available to all Vermonters, however, is a different subject. A 2010 poll by the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies found that cost and income were barriers to buying local foods for about a third of Vermonters. In



Vermont, as around the nation, there is a two-tiered food system. A diet based around fresh, local food is widely promoted as an 'ideal' diet for its health benefits and benefits to the state's economy, but it has also remained an exclusive diet. For those with the necessary resources, fresh and nutritious produce is readily available. For those who struggle with lower incomes, however, fresh food can remain out of reach.

Why integrate affordable housing and food access?

There is a close connection between housing security and food security. Both are basic needs that a family must account for, and the two can become competing priorities on a tight budget. According to the Vermont Foodbank's "Hunger in America 2014" report, conducted in partnership with Feeding America, 52 percent of households who are clients of the Foodbank were forced to choose between paying for food and paying their rent or mortgage at least once in the 12 month period measured. Based on the number of households and individuals the Foodbank served in those 12 months, that amounts to 12.8% of all Vermonters. A family's ability to pay for their food is directly related to their ability to pay for their housing - improving one will necessarily improve the other.

In 2013, **12.8%**
of Vermonters had to
choose between paying for
**Food
or Shelter**

The clearest obstacle to meeting both needs is poverty. In the sense that food insecurity is a problem because people don't have enough money available for food purchases, affordable housing is an obvious part of the solution. When families are no longer overburdened by housing expenses, they have more income available for food. However, there is a specific component of food security in which affordable housing providers can play an even larger role: food access. Vermonters' ability to actually obtain food - especially fresh fruits and vegetables - can be hindered by a host of obstacles. Among the most persistent of these obstacles, as identified by both individuals working in affordable housing and residents themselves, are the cost of food and difficulties in obtaining transportation, both of which can then be further complicated by a lack of knowledge and skills around the purchasing, preparation, and preservation of fresh food items.

Main barriers to fresh food access:

**Cost,
transportation,
& knowledge or
skills**

Affordable housing providers can work to make sure residents' housing is conducive to accessing fresh food by participating in a number of different food access programming options. Each programming type can help overcome one or more of the barriers mentioned above. Of course, not every option will be a good fit for all housing communities. The needs, abilities, and desires of

residents should always take precedence in efforts to improve food access. That being said, the programming types discussed in this document all have the potential to make affordable housing communities environments that are more conducive to obtaining and using fresh produce.

Collaboration between affordable housing providers and food access groups is an area that is ripe for expansion. While a few groups currently partner directly with affordable housing providers - like the Vermont Foodbank and Meals on Wheels programs coordinated by Area

93 % of surveyed food
access groups target lower-
income populations

81 % of those programs
are transferrable to affordable
housing sites

Agencies on Aging - there are many more organizations that could do so. Ninety-three percent of the food access groups surveyed in the three target regions responded that they offer programming that specifically targets lower-income community members. Of these groups, 81 percent felt those programs were transferrable to affordable housing sites. Those programs take a variety of forms and offer several possibilities for improving food access for affordable housing residents.

Best Practices

The following are a series of recommendations and best practices related to a selection of some of the most prevalent and promising types of food access programming available for affordable housing communities: gardens and edible landscaping, cooking and nutrition education, and CSA and farm shares.

Gardens

When community gardens are a good fit with the residents' interests at a housing site, they can simultaneously build a sense of community, improve residents' access to fresh produce, and enhance their ability to take control of their own nutrition. However, gardens also require leadership and a reliable support system to be sustainable.

Communal Plots: In a housing site with limited green space, one communal garden plot may make more sense than several individual plots which would further divide the amount of space available. A communal model can also lessen demands upon individual residents by diffusing the responsibility for upkeep and maintenance.

Complications can arise from the communal model, however. For example, conflicts can arise in decision-making (i.e. what plants to grow, organic vs. non-organic methods, and the distribution of harvested produce). Having an agreement and conflict resolution process in place, agreed to by all who wish to participate in the garden, can help smooth over these issues. It is also helpful to ensure that there is a team of residents willing to take on a leadership role in the garden.

Individual Plots: Where space, level of resident interest, and skill permits, individual plots that are the responsibility of a single household can be a good fit. Individual plots provide the maximum degree of self-sufficiency for residents who are both interested and able to care for their own garden.

Structure and Leadership: If a garden is reliant upon a handful of highly-invested residents, it will be very vulnerable to turn-over. Without a consistent source of support and leadership, a garden may thrive for a couple years and then fall apart. One avenue around this obstacle can be through ensuring garden maintenance is not dependent upon just a few volunteers. A "garden contract" can help distribute responsibilities among participants. Housing sites with smaller populations can also partner with local groups like schools, Boys & Girls Clubs,

community engagement programs at local colleges, and other community gardens to broaden the pool of those invested in the garden, with the added benefit of building connections to the wider community. Continuous education can also help bring new participants into the garden and form new leaders.

Education: Gardening is an intimidating concept to those who have little or no experience with growing their own food. Education can therefore help increase buy-in among residents by lessening the “intimidation factor,” and giving people the skills and confidence needed to tend their own gardens. This is an issue that ties into the need for structure and leadership in the garden. Leaders who can offer peer-to-peer education within the housing community are an invaluable resource. Additional support and educational resources are also available through programs like the Vermont Community Garden Network and UVM Extension’s Master Gardener and Master Composter programs.

Population-based considerations: The demographics of a housing community should always be considered in the design of garden projects. Housing sites that serve primarily elderly and disabled populations must take accessibility into account. Raised beds that minimize bending from the waist, close proximity to the physical housing units, convenient walkways, and easily accessible water sources are all factors that should be considered. For those sites that primarily serve families, incorporating education or other activities to engage children can help increase buy-in from the community, and instill an appreciation for and familiarity with fresh produce that will benefit children for the rest of their lives.



A Vermont Community Garden Network GROW IT! Community garden leadership workshop at Barre City Elementary. (Photo courtesy of GFGM)

Tools & Physical Resources: Basic considerations like soil quality and accessibility of water sources are important first steps in planning a garden, but they aren't the only physical resources necessary. The cost of tools and other necessary supplies can be prohibitive for many lower-income families and individuals. Providing a communal supply of tools that can be checked out or made available during specified hours is one way to reduce cost barriers. It is also possible to obtain small amounts of grant funding for purchases of necessary equipment through the Vermont Community Garden Network (VCGN) and other sources listed on VCGN's website at www.vcgn.org.

Case Study: Highgate Apartments, Barre, VT

Highgate's gardening program integrates a communal garden with individual plots, and is closely tied to the cooking and nutrition education classes offered through the Good Food Good Medicine program. Residents who want to garden can join the communal plot, where they can learn fundamental skills for growing a variety of crops and herbs in a more supported environment. After two years, residents can then request to have a contained bed installed in their backyard and begin gardening individually. This model works well for sites that have a good amount of green space available. Thanks to its integration in the Good Food Good Medicine program, the garden is supported by the same staff who also teaches cooking and nutrition classes at Highgate. The garden has become an integral part of the housing community, also serving as a location for community meals and children's activities in the summer, and being cited by property management as having boosted the site's "curb appeal."

What are the tenants saying?

Enthusiasm for gardening varies greatly, making it especially important to elicit feedback from residents when considering a gardening project. Some stated that they feel gardening is too much effort for too little pay-off, and one elderly resident stated that he "did more than my share of it in my time," and was no longer interested. However, others found gardening to be a very empowering activity because of the control it gave them over their own nutrition. As one tenant explained, "The difference is, it doesn't just bring the food, it lets us feed ourselves." One mother remarked that her teenage daughter consumed far more fruits and vegetables since they had started growing them. This variety of reactions makes it clear that tenants' input must be sought beforehand to determine whether there is sufficient desire for a garden project.

Good Food Good Medicine pairs its garden program with cooking and nutrition education (a topic also covered in this document) that also incorporates family herbalism. The addition of cooking education came from the realization that tenants often did not know how to make use of produce grown in Highgate’s garden. Lessons have a strong focus on seasonality, teaching participants how to maximize the benefits of their own gardens as well as the seasonal produce that is donated and available in stores. The class curriculum is therefore very flexible and can be adapted to the items available at the time. The focus on the connection between health and food is also helpful to participants, many of whom suffer from diet-related health conditions like diabetes and heart disease. Recipes prepared in lessons generally use donated or gleaned produce which helps keep programming costs down. Because Good Food Good Medicine is a year-round, multi-year class, residents who have been in the program longer can take on a “peer leader” role at Highgate and in the wider community, making the program both more sustainable and more diffuse in its impact. Contact instructor Sandra Lory at mandalabotanicals@gmail.com or Highgate Apartments Community and Social Services Coordinator Doug Hemmings at dhemmings@maloneyproperties.com for more information



Residents gardening at Highgate Apartments in Barre. (Photo courtesy of GFGM)

Note: While there is a lot of enthusiasm for gardening and the concept for “growing your own food” among nonprofits and funders in Vermont, garden projects should be approached with care. Gardens can be a great option where a strong desire among tenants already exists. However, there are also a number of class- and race-based concerns that can make gardening a very complex and contentious issue. From a food justice perspective, a food access project would ideally make food available to Vermonters in a way that makes the most sense for them,

and is culturally appropriate. In some cases, this will mean a more conventional, retail-based avenue like supermarkets or farmers' markets rather than gardening.

There can be a stigma attached to growing your own food for members of oppressed social classes and racial groups due in part to America's long history of exploiting these communities for agricultural labor, and subjugation through the denial of access to land and credit. It is one thing for Vermonters who can afford to buy fresh food in a supermarket or at a farmers' market, who have leisure time, and whose families have no negative histories with agricultural work to take up gardening as a hobby. It is another to establish a paradigm in which those who cannot afford retail food prices are expected to grow it for themselves instead. Gardening should be made a viable option for those who wish to pursue it, but nonprofits and affordable housing providers should also be careful not to rely too heavily on a "grow your own" ideal that will ultimately be unsustainable and ineffective if it ignores the needs and desires of the target population.

Is a garden a good fit for your housing site?

Here are a few questions to consider:

- ☐ Do residents want a garden? Are they included in its design and implementation?
- ☐ Are there residents who could serve as "leaders" in the garden?
- ☐ Is there accessible green space with appropriate water and sunlight?
- ☐ Will education be needed for residents to be successful at gardening?
- ☐ Do residents have their own tools, or are communal tools needed?

Edible Landscaping

Edible landscaping offers a lower-maintenance option for introducing food production onto the grounds of a housing site. By incorporating food-producing plants into the landscape design of a housing community, food access is built into residents' home environment. It can take several years for plants to begin reliably producing, but once established, they can offer a sustainable source of fresh produce. Since housing sites already have landscaping designs, using plants that can serve a purpose other than being ornamental is in many ways “low-hanging fruit” for affordable housing providers who would like to improve food access for residents.

Maintenance concerns: In order to be sustainable from a maintenance perspective, plants should be perennials and relatively low-maintenance. Examples of fruits that have been easily incorporated in landscape designs in Vermont include apples, pears, blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries.

As with gardening, it is important to take location into account. Plants located too far from where residents live will not be well-utilized, especially by elderly or disabled tenants. Those that are planted far from a watering source will be difficult to care for. Before installing edible landscaping, it should be ensured that funding is also available for maintenance. A senior housing site in Addison County has struggled with this problem as many plants that were originally planted in 2012 later died from lack of maintenance.

As edible landscaping is still a relatively new approach to institutional landscaping, long-standing models are few and far between. However, Vermont Edible Landscapes is in the process of developing an Edible Landscaping Toolkit in partnership with the Vermont Community Garden Network. The toolkit will offer a research- and experience- based set of guidelines and recommendations for communities that would like to implement edible landscaping.

Is edible landscaping a good fit for your housing site?

Here are a few questions to consider:

- ☐ Is there sufficient space for food-producing plants (fruit trees, berry bushes, etc.)?
- ☐ Would education be needed to ensure tenants can take full advantage of the plants?
- ☐ Are soil, sunlight, and water conditions appropriate for edible landscaping?
- ☐ Is there a system in place that would ensure edible landscaping is properly maintained?

Cooking & Nutrition Education

Education can be a crucial component of any food access initiative - even once folks have access to fresh produce, they may not have the knowledge, skills, or even the confidence to incorporate it into their regular cooking and eating habits. This is especially true for those experiencing intergenerational poverty. These adults are likely to have grown up relying upon the processed foods that have historically characterized charitable and government food aid, and therefore had little exposure to using fresh foods. Education can be paired with virtually any type of food access programming, helping to complement and strengthen each other.

Location: A common concern voiced by food and nutrition educators was the difficulties they faced in simply getting people to attend workshops. Considering the number of pre-existing claims families have upon their time, the surest way to improve attendance is to target a location where people already gather. This is where affordable housing has a clear role to play. Housing sites with community spaces or community kitchens are ideally positioned for hosting a learning series on cooking and nutrition.

Easier yet, cooking and nutrition education can be incorporated into pre-existing events or social gatherings that already draw people at a specified time, rather than attempting to get residents to sign-up for another obligation. A community meal, coffee hour, or other regular social gathering can include a taste testing, an interactive cooking activity for adults or children, a nutrition lesson, or any other educational component.

Duration: Cooking and nutrition curriculums are available for both short and long durations. Each has certain advantages. Short-term programs, like the six-week model offered by Hunger Free Vermont's The Learning Kitchen program requires less time from both instructors and participants, which makes it an easier commitment for all parties involved. However, year-

What are the tenants saying?

While not all residents will be interested in cooking or nutrition education, many see it as a useful opportunity. One tenant stated, "I need cooking lessons. I don't know what to do with a lot of that stuff," referring to fresh produce. Another tenant who participates regularly in cooking classes pointed out the health benefits of the knowledge she had gained, saying that classes "help us figure out what we can make to better ourselves instead of just taking prescription drugs." Cooking and nutrition education was also seen as a source of empowerment, with one resident stating that "It gives you confidence to try things on your own and makes people think outside the box."

round, ongoing programs like that offered by Good Food Good Medicine at Highgate Apartments in Barre, VT have an advantage in their ability to have a long-term impact on the way residents interact with food and cooking. The consistency requires a greater commitment in funding, time, and other resources, but the impacts are also arguably greater and more sustainable.

Seasonality: A curriculum that incorporates the seasonality of produce available in Vermont has a strong advantage. It not only allows participants to add variety to their diets, but it allows them to make use of produce items when they are available for the lowest prices, at the highest quality, and often from local producers.

Incentives: To increase participation in cooking and nutrition activities, incentives should be considered. Incentives can be tailored to not only make attendance more appealing, but also to complement the lessons being offered. For example, providing a bag of ingredients so residents can recreate a demonstrated recipe in their own homes serves a dual purpose: It encourages attendance while also making it easier for participants to practice the skills they learned. This is a first step toward ensuring knowledge and skills are translated into habits. Other possibilities include the provision of vouchers for use at a local farmer's market or farm stand, the promise of a snack or meal as a part of the lesson, or the provision of kitchen tools that participants may otherwise be lacking.

Population-Based Considerations: No matter the curriculum used, education must be responsive to the needs and desires of residents. This can be accomplished formally through surveys, or informally through a continued, open dialogue between instructors and participants. Lessons should be adapted to participants' skill level, available kitchen equipment, and needs. Many seniors, for example, can benefit from an emphasis on cooking for one, managing health-related dietary restrictions (low-sodium, low-sugar, etc.), or preparing food that is easy to chew. Families, however, may benefit from an emphasis on low-cost, healthy snacks for kids.

Curriculum should also take illiteracy into account in its lessons. The more interactive education is, the more effective it will be at reaching tenants who are illiterate or learning disabled. Smaller groups are more conducive to participatory learning. Childcare or the involvement of children in lessons for adults and families can make it easier for parents to engage in participatory activities.

Case Study: The Learning Kitchen, by Hunger Free Vermont



The Learning Kitchen offers a six-week curriculum that is designed to be easily replicable by different groups and in different locations.

Participants meet on a weekly basis to learn fundamentals of nutrition and tips on cooking balanced meals on a limited budget. Lessons focus on different food groups, and then participants prepare and share a low-cost dish as a group to put new skills and knowledge into practice. Classes can be organized for middle-school age children, young adults, or low-income adults. The host organization for a series can be an affordable housing

site. The housing site must help organize the series, but Hunger Free Vermont provides the curriculum, teaching aids, and limited funding to cover the cost of food for demonstrations. Some host organizations have found it worthwhile to raise additional funds in order to send participants home with a small supply of ingredients in order to recreate a demonstrated recipe in their own homes.

Brattleboro Housing Partnerships (formerly known as the Brattleboro Housing Authority) recently hosted a series at a family housing site in which eight tenants participated. Property Manager Chelsea Nunez says that the participants loved the series and that they all “found themselves paying more attention to labels, and making healthier decisions at the grocery store.” Brattleboro Housing Partnerships collaborated with the Brattleboro Memorial Hospital’s Community Health Team, part of the Vermont Blueprint for Health. Nancy Schaefer, a Community Health Team Health Coach served as the instructor for the series. Nunez explains that the classes were certainly needed as “This class was a first experience cooking anything that wasn’t partially prepared or heat-and-serve for some participants.” Another positive benefit noted was an increased occurrence of peer education. Participants shared ideas and recipes with each other, but they also shared what they had learned with friends, family, and neighbors.

Is cooking and nutrition education a good fit for your housing site?

Here are a few questions to consider:

- ☐ Are residents interested in cooking and nutrition education?
- ☐ Is there a community kitchen or community space where activities could be held?
- ☐ Do residents currently receive food they don’t know how to use?
- ☐ Are there any pre-existing events involving food (like community meals) that could also incorporate cooking and nutrition education?
- ☐ Do residents have unique dietary restrictions or needs?

CSA & Farm Shares

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farm shares fit well into Vermont’s statewide push to support local agricultural producers because they connect residents directly to local farmers. This model can help make the local food movement more inclusive of lower-income Vermonters. The terms “CSA” and “farm share” are used interchangeably and, in general, refer to a system in which shareholders pay a subscription fee to a local farmer at the beginning of the growing season in anticipation of produce they will receive on a regular basis for a specified duration. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ CSA model. Each program can vary widely, which makes CSA a fairly adaptable food access program for different affordable housing communities. The following are some of the characteristics that can vary among different CSA models:

Cost & Payment Method: One drawback to the traditional CSA model is its reliance upon upfront payments for the cost of a season’s share. These upfront payments are cost-prohibitive for those living on a limited income, so finding an alternative payment model and cost structure is key to making shares viable options for lower-income households. Currently, the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) offers subsidized farm shares for low-income seniors that are free to those who qualify, and reduced-price shares for income-eligible families. There are other ways to reduce the financial burden on residents as well. One option is to make it possible for tenants to pay for shares in installments and with 3SquaresVT benefits. With the use of an EBT point-of-sale (POS) machine, residents can pay for their farm share upon receipt, based on the schedule arranged with the grower.

In order to keep the cost of shares low, growers may consider offering a “basic” or “bargain” share that is smaller or includes more lower-cost items. Some growers have found success in subsidizing the cost of shares for low-income families through contributions from higher-income shareholders. Others have instituted a sliding fee system.

Location & Delivery: When seeking to address the food access needs of residents of affordable housing sites, location is always a key consideration. If enough

What are the tenants saying?

Reactions to CSA shares were generally positive, although the need for education to allow tenants to make the most of their shares also became apparent. In speaking to two elderly women who received free weekly shares in the summer, one woman stated that the program is “wonderful,” but another stipulated that “Half of what I received, I didn’t know what to do with.”

residents participate in the CSA, it can make sense for shares to be delivered directly to the housing site, especially if a community space is available for the drop-off. If there are a number of scattered sites within the area, one housing site can serve as the distribution point for neighboring properties. Some current CSA programs at housing sites rely upon a resident services coordinator to pick-up shares and deliver them to the housing site.

Level of Choice: Traditional CSA programs tend to offer shareholders a pre-selected assortment of produce based on what is available from the fields at that time. This system can also be adapted to offer residents more choice and control over their diets. Those living on a lower-income budget often find their choices limited in many aspects of their lives, so

Lower-income families find their choices limited in many aspects - maximizing choice makes food access programming more attractive and gives participants more agency.

maximizing choice when possible not only makes food access programming more attractive to potential participants, but it also provides a greater degree of dignity. “Choice” can be built into CSA shares by allowing residents to “shop” from the items available - picking items and quantities that work best for them within a set framework. It could also be provided through a voucher system that allows shares to be redeemed at a farmer’s market or farm stand at a specified dollar amount.

Population-Based Considerations: Because they are such a variable model, CSA shares can be greatly adapted to reflect the needs of the population in question. The quantity of produce included in a share can reflect whether a family, individual, or senior is participating. The types of items offered can also reflect population needs. For example, the types of produce offered in a share for seniors should take into consideration physical limitations like arthritis and dental problems, offering items that are smaller, easier to slice, prepare, and chew. Growers may also want to limit the amount of vitamin K-rich greens offered, which can interfere with anticoagulants commonly prescribed to seniors with heart conditions.

Recipients’ tastes and preferences should also be taken into account through regular feedback, formal or informal, that can be facilitated by housing staff who help coordinate shares. This will ensure higher participation and diminish waste. For produce that is less familiar, an informational card offering tips on storage and preparation can also minimize waste while offering a simple educational component.

Case Study: Boardman Hill Farm's Senior Share program at the Bardwell House in Rutland, subsidized by NOFA-VT:

This particular farm share program takes advantage of the Bardwell House's close proximity to the Downtown Rutland Farmers' Market. Bardwell House Senior Share participants are issued vouchers that they can take to the market across the street to 'shop' for their share at Boardman Hill Farm's market stand. The program lasts 10 weeks during the summer growing season, but residents can save their vouchers for use at the Winter Farmers' Market, when access to fresh food can be even harder and money may be even tighter. Greg Cox, owner of Boardman Hill, found the farm share program was a great way to act on his respect for "The Greatest Generation." He finds that in a good year, he has a lot of extra food, and expanding elderly Rutland residents' access to that food was a natural next step for him.

The shares are offered at no-cost to the income-eligible participants, thanks to subsidies offered by NOFA-VT with funds from the USDA's Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. Because shares are picked up at the farmers' market, this model eliminates the need for drop-off coordination at Bardwell House and it also encourages seniors to get out into the community. Cox explained that the level of choice incorporated into this model takes away the stigma of 'charity' food, and that the short trip to the farmers' market is both physically and socially stimulating for the seniors. However, Resident Services Coordinator Sherri Durgin-Campbell also stipulates that the choice model makes folks less likely to try new items. For more information, contact Greg Cox at coxveg@hotmail.com or Bardwell House Resident Services Coordinator Sherri Durgin-Campbell at sharon@epmanagement.com

Case Study: Food Connects' Neighborhood Market in Brattleboro:

The Neighborhood Market also takes advantage of a choice-based model in addition to a three-tiered pricing system. Full-priced market shares subsidize the cost of shares for lower-income families. Five local farms participate in the Neighborhood Market, which serves between 60-75 members per summer. Participants pick which size of share they would like and can pay on a weekly basis with 3SquaresVT benefits. Payments are asked for at least a week in advance to minimize losses to growers if shares are not picked up. Additionally, participants can opt out of the market if at any point it no longer works for them. As Market Manager Hanna Jenkins explains, "We do try to get a summer-long commitment from folks, but understand that in serving a low-income population that this sort of commitment can be challenging and hinder them from enrolling." The shares are distributed in a market-style format, with participants coming to the Green Street School during specified hours to pick-out their share items. The central location at a school is meant to help overcome transportation barriers, and also provides a social, community building component to the market. Jenkins explains that "We also

found that at the school many families make an afternoon out of it and spend time with other families, chatting, etc.” For more information, contact Hanna Jenkins at theneighborhoodmarket@gmail.com.

Are farm shares a good fit for your housing site?

Here are a few questions to consider:

- ☐ Do residents want to get fresh produce through a CSA model?
- ☐ Are sources of fresh produce limited near the housing site?
- ☐ Is there a local farmer who would be willing to offer low-cost or subsidized shares?
- ☐ If transportation is an issue, could the shares be delivered to the housing site?
- ☐ Could tenants use 3SquaresVT benefits to pay for shares?
- ☐ What size share would tenants need?

Decreasing Waste of Charitable Food

A number of charitable food programs have found success in either bringing food directly to their target population, using gleanings to divert excess crops that may otherwise be wasted to food-insecure Vermonters, or both. A few aspects that they generally share in common are that they are built around mobility, can be adapted to housing communities' needs, and can complement a variety of other food access efforts. However, charitable food has a special hurdle to overcome when it comes to ensuring that food is used rather than wasted: choice is greatly limited. Since charitable food, due to its very nature, doesn't always allow for extensive choice on the part of recipients, the way in which the food is delivered can greatly influence whether it is used or eventually wasted. This is an area where improvements are being made, but there is room for further advancement.

Education:

As discussed previously, education is a key factor in closing gaps in food access and food security. Based on interviews with resident services coordinators and residents, it seems that frequently a significant portion of produce received through the charitable food system goes to waste for two common reasons:

- In the case of some types of produce, people aren't familiar with an item they receive, and therefore don't know how to store or prepare it.
- Produce is sometimes distributed in such large quantities that residents cannot use it before it goes bad. This was especially true among elderly residents.

Cooking and nutrition education can help address both of these issues. If donating organizations, resident services coordinators, and food educators are able to communicate in advance of a delivery, "tip sheets" with advice on storage and preparation can be developed and distributed along with the food. In addition, especially unmanageable quantities of produce can be lightly processed (for example, sliced and bagged to be frozen), perhaps as a part of a cooking workshop, in order to extend its life. The Vermont Foodbank has begun offering a taste-testing and demonstration series in partnership with its member food pantries in order to encourage the use of fresh produce items. This model could inform the distribution of charitable food outside food pantries as well, with a focus on low-cost, simple recipes that incorporate produce items currently in abundance in the charitable food system.

Distribution considerations:

In some cases, distribution could be made more effective simply by ensuring someone - from the donating organization, the housing site, or a residents' association - is available to divide

produce into more manageable quantities. In some cases, resident services coordinators have already taken this task upon themselves, helping to divide large bags of potatoes into smaller bags, or slicing unmanageably large cabbages in half for elderly residents. Small considerations like tip-sheets, making sure produce is offered in a manageable quantity, and processing excess donations for future use can go a long way toward reducing waste of fresh food received through the charitable system.

Examples: The charitable food system in Vermont has made great strides in reaching underserved populations, as well as in harnessing potentially wasted local produce to serve lower-income Vermonters. The Vermont Foodbank has begun partnering with Support and Services at Home (SASH) coordinators - part of Vermont's Blueprint for Health initiative. SASH coordinators work directly with elderly and disabled residents of affordable housing communities, and a pilot program to serve families has also been started in the St. Johnsbury area. Through this connection, the Foodbank has been able to arrange 'produce drops' that distribute bulk quantities of excess produce directly to residents at affordable housing communities. This is a currently developing and expanding partnership. Charitable and semi-charitable food has also been brought to affordable housing residents, through programs like Meals on Wheels statewide, the Lunchbox mobile summer meal program operated by Green Mountain Farm to School (GMFTS) in the Northeast Kingdom, and the Good Food Bus operated by the Shrewsbury Institute for Agricultural Education (SAGE) in Rutland County.

Note: In the run up to implementation of Act 148, Vermont's Universal Recycling Law, even more resources and allies may be found in this pursuit. Preventing food from entering the waste stream is becoming a statewide priority. It's an area in which new partnerships with a focus on reducing food waste could open opportunities for funding and support for housing sites, especially in light of the fact that many food access programming options also help to reduce food waste. Additionally, housing sites will have an incentive to reduce the waste of food that comes into tenants' homes, as this will consequently reduce their organic waste disposal costs.

Ensuring Food Access Programming Promotes Food Justice

Does it just provide food, or does it promote Just Food?

Food justice takes the concept of food security a step further. Rather than simply ensuring that everyone has enough to eat, food justice seeks to advance social justice and self-reliance. It prioritizes the authority of community leadership and the need to dismantle barriers to food access that are rooted in oppression. It expects solutions to food insecurity to be equitable, sustainable, and community-driven. Here is a series of questions that can help determine whether a program addresses food justice as well as food insecurity:

Is the program driven by listening to the needs and desires of the community?

The leading authorities on the needs of lower-income Vermonters are lower-income Vermonters themselves. No one, no matter their experience in anti-poverty and anti-hunger work, has a better understanding of what the obstacles are to nutritious food than the people who face those barriers on a regular basis, and therefore, no one has a better sense of what solutions would work best.

Are community members integrated into program leadership?

Related to the previous question, the best way to ensure the voice of the community is heard is to make sure participants take part in program leadership, design, and implementation.

Does the program address structural barriers related to race, class, gender, or other forms of oppression?

This can be the most difficult question to grapple with, but also the most necessary to address in order to get to the root of food insecurity. If we consider food to be a basic human right and we recognize that the United States produces far more food than needed to feed the American population, then we have to ask why so many people are unable to obtain enough, nutritious food. Structural inequalities related to race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression have shaped the American food system since colonization, and they continue to impact people's relationship with it today. For example, indigenous populations and people of color have historically found that their customary foods may be considered inferior, or are simply unavailable in America. Recognizing this and working to improve access to these foods can help break down a structural barrier.

Is the program culturally appropriate?

Ensuring cultural appropriateness requires taking the time to understand the cultural context of the target population. One example of this could be designing a cooking and nutrition class curriculum that is flexible enough to honor the cultural and family traditions of its participants, and does not rely on assimilating participants into one version of what is considered a “good” diet. Making an effort to understand participants’ family histories and traditions not only indicates respect, but it makes for more just and effective solutions.

Does the program promote self-sufficiency, choice, and agency among participants?

Food insecurity takes away a person’s independence because they are put in the position of being unable to fulfill their own basic needs. Projects that simply shift this dependence to a new program do not address food justice. Emergency food assistance and charitable food are vital components of fighting food insecurity, but they should not be relied upon as the primary solution to the problem. Independence and choice are often lacking in the lives of lower-income Vermonters, and making sure these are incorporated into program design is an important step in ensuring that people can take control of their nutrition.

Guide to Working with Affordable Housing Providers

Partnerships between affordable housing providers and food access groups are a natural fit for several reasons:

- Affordable housing providers and food access groups serve an overlapping population
- Food security and housing stability are closely intertwined
- Food access programs like gardens, cooking classes, subsidized farm shares, and even charitable food are often more effective when they go to where their target population is – in this case, where they live.

However, the affordable housing world can be confusing and difficult to navigate without some background knowledge. This resource provides some information that can help other groups understand how they can approach collaboration with an affordable housing community.

Reaching Out

If you are affiliated with a food access program (community garden, cooking class, CSA, etc.) that you think would be a good fit for affordable housing residents, then reach out! Resident services coordinators don't necessarily have time or expertise to seek out these programs themselves, but they are interested in connecting their residents to as many resources as possible. Simply sending an email with a brief explanation of what your program offers, how eligibility is determined, and what - if anything - would be required from the housing site can be all it takes to start the conversation and build a new partnership.

Explanation of terms

Affordable housing: Eligibility for affordable housing is generally measured by a tenant's income to the Area Median Income (AMI), as determined annually by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Depending on the program, publicly funded housing is restricted to those who earn no more than the median income with restrictions as low as 50 or 60 percent of median. Nonprofit affordable housing varies in its restrictions. All affordable housing projects developed with funds from VHCB serve populations earning less than 100 percent of AMI, and generally targets those earning between 30 and 80 percent of AMI.

Housing with project-based rental housing: Housing units with accompanying rental assistance, meaning a household generally pays no more than 30 percent of its monthly income for rent and utilities. These are the sites that often come first into people's minds when thinking about "affordable housing," and they are most likely to be a good fit for hosting

collaborative food access programming. They may be managed by a non-profit or for-profit property management company, or a local housing authority. They can vary in size from just a few units to over 100 units.

Service-supported housing: Provides or coordinates services for residents who would otherwise be unable to live independently, often because of frailty, mental illness, etc.

Supportive Services: Services intended to enhance the quality and stability of residents' lives. Services can be related to health and wellness, as in the case of SASH, or focused on counseling, employment services, or any other basic need that is related to residents' ability to find and maintain quality housing.

Some people to get to know:

Property Manager: Property managers generally oversee multiple affordable housing sites and are concerned with the maintenance of quality housing. They may work for a nonprofit or for-profit property management company, or a public housing authority. Their level of contact with residents varies, but they can provide information on the site's resources and facilities.

Resident Services Coordinator: Not every housing site has a resident services coordinator, and in some cases multiple housing sites may be served by the same coordinator. Resident services coordinators are concerned with the well-being of tenants and with the coordination of supportive services. They can be a crucial liaison with tenants.

SASH Coordinator: SASH (Support and Services at Home) coordinators also generally work with multiple housing sites and are affiliated with property management companies or housing authorities. They work exclusively with elderly and disabled tenants (with the exception of a pilot Family SASH program in St. Johnsbury), so they are well-positioned to serve as liaisons with that specific demographic. They are concerned with the health and wellness of tenants, making them potential allies in food access programming.

Maintenance Staff: Maintenance staff is especially critical to gardening and edible landscaping efforts. They know the potential and limitations to the site's green space, and can be an important ally in ensuring the longevity of a project.

Resources

- Basic information on individual housing sites is made available online by the Vermont Housing Finance Agency's Directory of Affordable Rental Housing (DoARH) at <http://www.housingdata.org/doarh/>. DoARH includes information on the number of units in a housing site, its location, how many units are reserved for elderly or disabled tenants, as well as information on the owner and management of the property.
- Directories of SASH contacts in each county of Vermont are available at <http://sashvt.org/>

Contacts in Food Access

Gardens

Vermont Community Garden Network – Offers technical assistance to establish sustainable community-based gardens, as well as garden-based education, outreach, and farm-to-school programs.

Jess Hyman

jess@vcgn.org

UVM Extension Master Gardeners – Certified Extension Master Gardeners are trained in home horticulture practices, and share this knowledge through outreach and volunteer projects in their communities.

Heather Carrington

heather.carrington@uvm.edu

UVM Extension Master Composters – Vermont Master Composters are trained in backyard composting and share this knowledge through outreach and volunteer projects in their communities.

Heather Carrington

heather.carrington@uvm.edu

Edible Landscaping

Vermont Edible Landscapes - Works with clients to design, install, and establish agro-ecosystems. It is currently developing a toolkit to facilitate the use of edible landscaping that will likely be available at the end of 2015.

Meghan Giroux

meghan@vermontediblelandscapes.com

Cooking and Nutrition Education

Good Food Good Medicine - Good Food Good Medicine pairs garden education with cooking and nutrition education, which also incorporates homeopathic remedies. The program is located at Highgate Apartments in Barre, VT.

Sandra Lory

mandalabotanicals@gmail.com

Hunger Free Vermont - The Learning Kitchen - A six-week educational series in which participants engage in hands-on cooking and nutrition education activities that focus on balancing and planning meals with a limited budget.

Anna Kaufman

akaufman@hungerfreevt.org

UVM Extension-Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) - Free hands-on nutrition education that serves income eligible parents, caregivers and expecting mothers, children, and teens. County contacts can be found at <http://www.uvm.edu/extension/food/efnep/>

State contact: *Amy Davidson*

amy.davidson@uvm.edu

Vermont Harvest of the Month - Provides tools and resources to promote local, seasonal Vermont foods. Includes recipes, nutrition information, educational activities, and tips for storing, cooking, and promoting healthy foods. Website at <http://www.vermontharvestofthemonth.org/>

Becca Mitchell

rmitchell@gmfts.org

CSA and Farm Shares

Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont - NOFA-VT's Farm Share Program links food producers with low-income Vermonters through subsidized CSA shares. A number of housing sites in Vermont currently participate in the Farm Share Program.

Michael Good

michael@nofavt.org

Erin Buckwalter

erin@nofavt.org

The Neighborhood Market - A Brattleboro-area farm share program that seeks to incorporate lower-income households with a three-tiered pricing system and market-style distribution format.

Hanna Jenkins

theneighborhoodmarket@gmail.com

Mobile Learning Kitchens

Good Food Bus - Rutland County - Operated by the Shrewsbury Institute for Agricultural Education (SAGE), the Good Food Bus is a converted school bus that travels throughout Rutland County. It offers organically grown plants, organic vegetables, recipes, and cooking classes.

Joan Aleshire

joanaleshire@vermontel.net

Green Mountain Farm to School's The Lunchbox - Northern VT - The Lunchbox is a summer meal program and mobile learning kitchen that brings locally grown food and food-based education to communities in northern Vermont.

Kathryn Hansis

khansis@gmfts.org

Other

Vermont Foodbank

SASH produce distributions – The Foodbank has partnered with a number of SASH coordinators throughout the state to bring bulk quantities of produce directly to housing sites.

Alex Bornstein

abornstein@vtfoodbank.org

Gleaning Program – Distributes local produce to food shelves, meal sites, and senior centers.

Michelle Wallace

mwallace@vtfoodbank.org

Area Agencies on Aging

Regional offices can be found at www.vermontseniors.org

Senior Help-Line: 1-800-642-5119

Contacts in Affordable Housing

Brattleboro Area:

Brattleboro Housing Partnerships (Formerly Brattleboro Housing Authority)

Chelsea Nunez - Property Manager

cnunez@brattleborohousing.org

Lorelei Morissette - Resident Services Coordinator

lmorissette@brattleborohousing.org

Christine Hazzard - SASH Coordinator

chazzard@brattleborohousing.org

Continuum of Care (Collaborative partnership of key local players in the homelessness or low-income service or housing system)

Joshua Davis

jdavis@morningsideshelter.org

Emily Clever

emily@windstonprouty.org

Morningside Shelter

Joshua Davis - Executive Director

jdavis@morningsideshelter.org

Lee Trapeni - Shelter Manager

ltrapeni@morningsideshelter.org

Stewart Property Management

Nancy Crawford - Property Manager, Brattleboro, West Dover, Vernon

ncrawford@stewartproperty.net

Mike Kemp - Property Manager, Bellows Falls, Westminster

mkemp@stewartproperty.net

Windham-Windsor Housing Trust

Deb Zak - Asset Manager

dzak@w-wht.org

Tim Callahan - Director of Property Management

tcallahan@w-wht.org

Rutland Area:

Continuum of Care – Homeless Prevention Center (Collaborative partnership of key local players in the homelessness or low-income service or housing system)

Deborah Hall

Deborah@hpcvt.org

Dismas House of Rutland

Valerie Page - Co-Director

Valerie@dismasofvermont.org

E.P. Property Management

Sherri Durgin-Campbell - Resident Services Coordinator

sharon@epmanagement.com

Housing Trust of Rutland County

Elisabeth Kulas - Executive Director

ekulas@housingrutland.org

Laura McIvor - SASH Coordinator

lmcivor@housingrutland.org

Mandala House Transitional Housing

Cheryl McKenzie - Executive Director

Cam1958@gmail.com

Alicia Malay - Case Manager

aliciam221b@gmail.com

Rutland Housing Authority

Carol Keefe - SASH Coordinator

ckeefe@rhavt.org

Gail Gorruso - Property Manager

ggorruso@rhavt.org

Stewart Property Management

Carol Meagher – Occupancy Assistant

cmeagher@stewartproperty.net

The Northeast Kingdom

Alliance Property Management

Terri Lee Sunderman - Property Manager, Lamoille County & Hardwick
terri@apmvt.com

Covered Bridge Transitional Housing – St. Johnsbury & Irasburg

Steve Clark - Director
sclark@covered-bridge.org

Lamoille Housing Partnership (Lamoille County & Hardwick)

Jim Lovinsky - Executive Director
jim@lamoillehousing.org
Maxine Adams - SASH Coordinator
Maxine@lamoillehousing.org

Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA)

Joe Patrissi - Executive Director
jpatrissi@nekcavt.org
Brooke Brittell - Associate Director of Outreach Services
bbrittell@nekcavt.org

Northeast Kingdom Continuum of Care (Caledonia/Essex) (Collaborative partnership of key local players in the homelessness or low-income service or housing system)

Jan Rossier
jrossier@nekcavt.org

Orleans Continuum of Care

Kathy Metras
kmetras@nekcavt.org

Rural Edge

Trisha Ingalls - Director of Community Relations & Special Assistant to the CEO
trishai@ruraledge.org
Dan Haycook - Community Engagement Specialist
danh@ruraledge.org
Robin Burnash - SASH Coordinator, Caledonia County
robinb@ruraledge.org
Melinda Gervais-Lamoureux - SASH Coordinator, Essex County
melindag@ruraledge.org
Danielle Merchant - SASH Coordinator, Orleans County
daniellem@ruraledge.org

Summit Property Management

Donna Hill - Property Manager in St. Johnsbury
stj@summitpmg.com

*Melanie Meisenheimer can be contacted at mmeisenheimer@hungercenter.org
For more information on VHCB's Food Access & Affordable Housing Initiative, contact Ian Hartman at ian@vhcb.org
To request a printed copy of this resource guide, call the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board at (802) 828-5075*