

LINKING ELDERERS WITH LOCAL FOOD FOR BETTER HEALTH

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BACKGROUND

Nationally, seniors' access to locally grown, nutritious food has been decreasing. There is strong evidence to suggest that this trend is detrimental to the health and well-being of seniors*.

Barriers preventing seniors' access to local, nutritious food in rural regions of the United States have been identified. These barriers include:

- **Financial** cost to get to and/or pay for locally grown food. This exacerbates geographic isolation, lack of public transportation and the ever-increasing cost of fuel and owning/operating a vehicle.
- **Resistance** to the additional knowledge and energy required to prepare unprocessed food. Also resistance to change lifelong dietary habits.
- **Stigmas** attached to need-based food assistance programs.
- **Lack of information** about the local food resources.

Hardwick, Vermont has received national attention for trying to create a local food system that supports its citizens. However, little attention has yet to be given to the **seniors** in the community who are not benefiting from Hardwick's food resources.

PROJECT FOCUS

Our task was to investigate the local food resources and to understand the barriers preventing vulnerable (low income and/or disabled) seniors in the Hardwick area from accessing local food.

METHODS

Comprehensive Interviews:

- Local food experts, community health workers, Hardwick area seniors

Purposive, Snowball Sample Design:

- Contacts provided referrals, who in turn offered additional referrals

RESULTS

CURRENT LOCAL FOOD RESOURCES FOR VULNERABLE SENIORS :

- 1) **Farmers markets-** some take 3SquaresVT food coupons (formerly food stamps) and/or Farm to Family Program coupons
- 2) **The Community Supplemental Food Plan-** program that adds donated locally grown produce to the food boxes participants receive monthly
- 3) **Community Gardens-** made accessible to seniors
- 4) **The "Farm to Table" Program-** subsidizes fresh, local produce delivery to the "nutritionally at-risk"
- 5) **The Hardwick Area Food Pantry-** receives donations of local beef from an area farm
- 6) **The "Grow an Extra Row" campaign-** encouraging farmers to grow more for those in need
- 7) **The Vermont Foodbank Gleaning program-** collects local food that would otherwise go to waste
- 8) **Meals on Wheels and Vermont Senior Centers-** some in the state use local, fresh produce
- 9) **Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT)-** has a Senior Farm Share Program that subsidizes the cost of Community (CSA)



Farm Stand, Riverside Farm in East Hardwick, VT



Door sign, Hardwick Area Food Pantry

DISCUSSION

Current programs in Vermont have opened the door to improving the accessibility of fresh, nutritious, locally grown food to Hardwick area seniors. However, there are still many seniors who are not eating local food. One aspect that could be improved upon is the awareness of the current programs by the people that provide them. It is our assessment that existing resources can only be fully utilized, supported, and expanded if people are thoroughly aware of them. Additionally, there are successful efforts occurring in other areas of Vermont that are not yet happening in Hardwick. For example, the Hardwick area Meals on Wheels program is not currently using locally grown food in its meals. This Hardwick program (and others) could be changed using the lessons learned from other Vermont towns.

CONCLUSIONS

•There is a wealth of local food resources in Hardwick BUT:

- More can be done to link these resources to local seniors
- More can be done to link these resources to each other



Loretta Sullivan, Hardwick resident

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Build a resource map and contacts list to aid in further connecting shared efforts and knowledge.
- Make specific recommendations about actions to take to increase the access of local foods to Hardwick seniors.
- Follow-up on the progress of these recommendations in successive projects.

*Arcury, T.A., Quandt, S.A., Bell, R.A., McDonald, J. & M.Z. Vitolins (1998). Barriers to nutritional well-being for rural elders: Community experts' perceptions. The Gerontologist, 38 (4), 490-498.