



Organization Background

Colorado State University (CSU) operates Agricultural Experimental Centers across Colorado to support local farmers and conduct research into the efficient and safe food production. The CSU Orchard Mesa Research Station (OMRS) in Mesa County, Colorado grows nine acres of apples and peaches for research and education, with only a small portion of the produce required for academic use. In 2009, OMRS began collaborating with grass-roots organization Grow Another Row to involve the community in harvesting the fruit for hunger relief. The volunteers harvested and donated over 33,000 pounds of produce in eight years. In 2015, OMRS expanded its community outreach as more volunteers participated in harvests and educators began using the orchards, fields, and gardens at OMRS as an outdoor classroom. These experiences revealed the potential to develop a program that increases the amount of food for hunger relief while engaging the community in meaningful ways. With this shared vision, CSU, the Western Colorado Community College, hunger relief organizations, educational institutions, and individual volunteers have come together to form the Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief (Community Alliance).

Goals

The purposes of the Community Alliance are to significantly increase the amount of high-quality fruit and vegetables for hunger relief and to integrate the acquisition of that food with an innovative service learning program that combines education in agriculture and nutrition with meaningful service and civic engagement. Specifically, the Community Alliance will:

- provide nutritious fruit and vegetables at a scale (~66 tons per year) that makes a meaningful impact on local hunger relief efforts and provide service, civic, and education engagement opportunities that strengthen our local community;
- provide education in commercial vegetable production to agricultural students from the Western Colorado Community College with a unique service learning internship; and
- enhance K-12 STEM education with service learning programming.

Projects

The Community Alliance is initiating four projects: community orchard harvests; vegetable production; K-12 STEM enrichment and service learning, and nutrition education.

Community Orchard Harvests: The activities of the Community Alliance will center around the CSU Orchard Mesa Research Station (OMRS). CSU is committed to donating 100% of the available orchard fruit grown at OMRS to hunger relief. Previous community harvests have shown that volunteers can safely and efficiently harvest the fruit and the OMRS orchards are an ideal outdoor setting for civic engagement. Working through hunger relief agencies, employee groups, social groups, religious organizations, and schools, the Community Alliance program coordinator will engage members of the community to participate in the community harvests. Fruit will be sent home with volunteers and directed to hunger relief programs, giving people the opportunity to both participate in and benefit from the community harvest projects.

Vegetable Production: Seasonal fresh vegetables are among the hardest foods for hunger relief agencies to acquire. In a mixed model of entrepreneurship and service learning, students and paid interns in the Western

Colorado Community College (WCCC) program for sustainable agriculture will plant and manage 12 acres of commercial-scale vegetable plots at OMRS and the CSU Fruita Research Station. The students will establish a program of direct sales with WCCC Dining Services, currently managed by Sodexo, and the Mesa County Valley School District #51 Nutrition Services Department. Proceeds from the sales will be reinvested in equipment and supplies to expand production. Students will also coordinate with the Food Bank of the Rockies to grow the vegetables most desired by hunger relief agencies. This unique service learning internship is substantively equivalent to farmers delivering small-scale, customized product to a client such as a farm stand or restaurant, and delivering large-scale produce to a commercial distributor. However, the program has the intrinsic reward that student effort positively affects the health of their school and the local community. The vegetables will be indistinguishable from first quality produce available commercially. By meeting all USDA and FDA standards for food quality and safety, the food delivered through the Community Alliance will reflect the need for equal treatment of people regardless of need. The vegetable fields will also be a site of community engagement through volunteer harvests and K-12 outdoor learning activities.

K-12 STEM Enrichment and Service Learning: The infrastructure at OMRS lends itself to use as an outdoor classroom for STEM education enrichment with orchards that do not require ladders for harvest, commercial-scale vegetable plots, and a quarter-acre Service Learning Garden. Since food production at OMRS is designed to support agricultural research and education without pressures of financial return, OMRS can support K-12 STEM enrichment opportunities unlike private commercial growers in the county. Area educators will guide and direct the curriculum, CSU Extension agents working in the areas of nutrition and K-12 STEM can supply lessons, and the Program Coordinator will organize the visits. Programming might include a school class field trip during spring bloom orchard to learn about plant life cycles and the importance of fertilizing insects in agricultural production. In the fall, students will harvest fresh fruits and vegetables and make direct deliveries to hunger relief agencies as a part of a service learning project. Students from the John McConnell Math and Science Center, Riverside Education Center, home-school groups, and youth clubs and organizations can participate in longer, more developed STEM programming, from planting to fall harvest.

Nutrition Education: Community fruit and vegetable harvests provide an outdoor activity centered around healthy food and healthy eating. Community Alliance member organizations have shown success in combining educational outreach with an engaging activity; therefore, for community groups that are interested, the Community Alliance will invite Mesa County agencies, educators, and health advocates to offer fun and educational programming on nutrition, such as cooking lessons, during community harvests. In addition, the CSU Tri-River Area Family Consumer Science Extension Agent will develop produce-specific educational “recipe cards” that will be distributed with the donated produce. These cards will help address the potential barrier of people avoiding produce in a hunger relief package because they do not know how to prepare it. The cards will also contain general nutrition education information that has been peer-reviewed by CSU educators.

More Information

To find out how you can get involved or to get more information about the Community Alliance for Education and Hunger Relief, please contact Amanda at 970-462-2113 or amanda.mcquade@colostate.edu. You may also visit our website at <http://aes-wcrc.agsci.colostate.edu/community-alliance>.