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Senior Meal Programs: Feeding a Crowd with Local Foods

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Case Study

Senior Meal Programs: Feeding a Crowd with Local Foods

by Gordon Walker and
Elyse Thierry

Educational Objectives

1. Examine reasons for an institutional meal program to consider incorporating local food.
2. Identify potential community partners who might assist in moving such a program forward and the mutual benefits.
3. Describe the possible changes that an institution's local food program can foster in the community at large.

Background

This is a story about one of our most basic needs and pleasures, food. Not the processed, homogenized, flavorless parodies that so many associate with institutional meals, but beans that literally snap when you break them, tomatoes that taste of summer, and eggs fresh from hens who can stretch their wings and feel the sun on their

backs. This type of fresh local food, and assuring community access to it, was on the minds of staff at the Jefferson Area Board for Aging (JABA) when in the fall of 2007 the agency set out to add locally grown ingredients to the meals that the agency serves.

As the area agency for aging (AAA) in Charlottesville, Virginia, JABA serves close to 200,000 meals annually to its five-county clientele of senior citizens. The nutrition program, which has been one of JABA's core services since the organization's inception in 1975, produces hot meals for our eight Community Centers and our assisted living facility Mountain-side Senior Living in Crozet, as well as a portion of our home-delivered meals. JABA has always striven to maintain a healthy nutritional balance in its meals. In recent years, as research continued to reveal the higher nutrition and lower toxic chemical contents of local produce, the agency began to explore the feasibility of giving our clients access to these health benefits by incorporating local produce into the existing meal program.

Why Local Food?

There were several motivators behind JABA's move towards local food, chief among them the higher nutritional value. Produce given time to ripen on the vine has a more robust nutrient content than produce picked early and ripened during transport to distant markets (George et al., 2006). Poor access to fresh food, an especially prevalent problem in less affluent neighborhoods, contributes to a plethora of ailments, including chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes. Poor health, in turn, is a drain on the quality of life and productivity of individuals in their communities, as well as our national healthcare system. Adding to the argument for "going local" was growing public concern about the use of chemical fertilizers and insecticides, along with the environmental hazards of industrial agriculture and long-haul sourcing

Local economies stood to gain, as well. According to the Virginia Cooperative Extension, in the Thomas Jefferson region of Central Virginia, the area which JABA serves, \$50,660,480 in community

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food dollars could be generated if each household in the region spent only \$10 per week of their food budget on local food and farm-based Virginia products (Bendfeldt and Love, 2009). That \$50 million would stay within the local economy, helping small farmers to hold onto the family farm and preserving the natural beauty of the countryside, a major attraction for tourists whose dollars further aid the local economy.

Where to Start

To frame the project appropriately and to guide in development of a plan of action, JABA turned to a valued resource it had helped publish and has used to great advantage, the Viable Futures Toolkit (VFT). A product of the Viable Futures Center, the Toolkit offers concrete examples that address how decision-makers of organizations can attend to needs of an aging population with strategies that support all generations. JABA has come to rely on the VFT to identify where and how community challenges and opportunities are likely to uncover multiple stakeholder and constituents' interests.

From the beginning, JABA had made two major commitments: first, to start where it could within its own organization, and second, to see what it could do to bring about the community infrastructure needed for greater local food production and distribution. The team then applied the Viable Futures Toolkit's seven-step worksheet to each goal, beginning with step one: assess your community's strengths and needs, and prioritize next steps. Moving in that direction, JABA

staff went out to have conversations with local farmers, consumers of local produce, and local institutions with meal programs to learn what it would take to start incorporating locally sourced produce into meals. The team found that a number of local food programs and events already existed but that the majority supported individuals and families, not large meal programs. JABA also discovered a growing desire by restaurants and institutions to tap into the local food market

During the community research phase, JABA worked with a group of interested local individuals and organizations to pinpoint major challenges to the program; for instance, the potentially higher cost of local food, the scarcity of institutional meal programs using local food in the area from which to learn, and the lack of a year-round supply, along with the absence of a satisfactory infrastructure to ensure product availability. In addition, because nutrition is a core service of every AAA, JABA wanted the system it would develop to be replicable, allowing other interested organizations to benefit. (This last goal was recently achieved through the publication of a teaching case study and instructional video developed by, and available from, JABA.) With the obstacles clearly defined, JABA and our increasingly enthusiastic supporters were able to prioritize the next steps and begin finding solutions.

Potentially Higher Cost

JABA chose to launch carefully, setting a goal of incorporating 20% local food into its meals, with the initial focus on a defined segment

of the food program, starting with the kitchen at our Hillsdale facility (an adult care center) that prepares 18 percent of JABA's total meals. These modest parameters allowed the nutrition manager to meet with a few farmers and coordinate plans to buy enough vegetables to accommodate one entree a week at Hillsdale as an initial experiment.

Upfront communication with the board was essential to achieve buy-in on the possible additional cost. JABA's nutrition program manager and CEO were, and remain, passionate about adding local produce to the diets of our clientele. These factors combined to assure management's commitment to added costs and to establish cost conditions. To help underwrite costs, JABA pursued multiple funding sources. A USDA grant provided early support, as did a small grant from a local foundation. Eventually, costs came down as farmers were quick to help a program serving predominantly persons of low income. Patience and persistence played their roles, as well. Because the nutrition manager spent numerous hours one-to-one with local farmers, she was able to make gleaning arrangements for the donation of unsold produce at local farmers markets.

We quickly learned that most large food distributors did not want to deal with the extra work or supply vagaries that come with purchasing from smaller farms. While the nutrition manager was developing excellent relationships with the farmers, the latter differed in their abilities to supply the needed volume and in their preferences of delivery and payment methods. Our

answer was to set up payment systems to match each farmer's needs. JABA's finance department established a petty cash account for the nutrition manager to use for farmers who needed payment on delivery. All of the others submitted invoices to be paid through our normal process.

Delivery presented another problem. Traditional canned and prepackaged foods are designed for shelf life and can sit at a kitchen backdoor until the staff has time to attend. The possibility of perishable produce going to waste because no one was there to put it away required coordinating deliveries by farmers with staff availability.

Farmers and staff were not alone in needing help to adapt. Incorporating local food into institutional meal programs is new. The rules and regulations that organizations such as the health department work with to protect consumers have not yet adapted. Collaboration and conversations with the health inspector throughout the program's development were critical to retaining momentum.

Learning Curve

In return for its many health benefits, fresh produce demands more preparation time than does opening a can and emptying its contents. Constant communication, collaboration, and hands-on involvement between the nutrition manager and the kitchen staff strengthened JABA's capacity to do the extra work involved. As they worked together, they noted how using more fresh produce changed the meal preparation process and found

ways to make the process more efficient. The nutrition manager shared her findings with the kitchen manager at JABA's assisted living facility, Mountainside, which enabled him to increase the use of local food in his menus.

Seasonal Challenges

Virginia's four-season climate presented perhaps the most visible challenge. While a 20-percent goal for local food was fairly easy to achieve during harvest month, winter was sure to come. Space limitations made freezing large quantities of local produce for winter use difficult. To compensate, the kitchen focused on sourcing meat locally during the winter and worked to exceed the 20-percent goal during the growing season in order to achieve the desired year-round average. Work is now underway to develop flash freezing and canning to provide further options for year-round local food.

Community Benefit for All Ages

A welcome expansion of the original program has been the emergence of initiatives within the community that are giving youth a healthy head start on aging. Heading the list is a three-prong approach of 1) food stamps, 2) gleaning, and 3) local currency; together, they are improving local food access for residents in public and subsidized housing. For the food stamp (SNAP) recipients, JABA brought together farmers markets, USDA, and city officials to enable SNAP benefits to be redeemed at the market through the addition of electronic balance transfer (EBT) technology. The EBT

machine can also be used for debit card purchases. This will mean more sales and more income for farmers. A grant from the Wholesome Wave Foundation helped move the EBT program forward.

JABA arranged its gleaning program through a partnership with the Charlottesville Farmers Market, which qualifies farmers for tax deductions and tax credits for leftover produce they donate to JABA at the end of the market day. Lastly, JABA received a matching grant from the Charlottesville City Market to conduct a pilot program which offered locally designed currency to persons of any age living in public housing so they might purchase food from the farmers' market. The currency is also distributed by agencies serving children, youth, and families. This program started small and was funded the first year by JABA and the City of Charlottesville. Plans are to increase the amount of local currency in 2010, as well as the number of recipients.

The list of offshoots from JABA's local food initiative goes on. A number of degree programs at the University of Virginia now incorporate into the curriculum student projects at JABA to study nutrition and the ongoing process of developing the local food system. JABA initiated a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in the form of an internal farmers market on Mondays. Employees within JABA make purchases using payroll deduction, bringing local produce home to their families, while making money for the senior meal program. Teens were drawn into the effort when JABA partnered with

the culinary program of a local technical school to have students come to the Hillsdale kitchen for on-the-job trainings. Also, JABA's nutrition manager and CEO serve on the steering committee for a Community Obesity Taskforce facilitated by the local public health department. There is no question that JABA's local food activities and its role as a catalyst for local food expansion have brought more people to the "aging table," thereby expanding JABA's base of partner organizations.

Case Study #1

Walter L. is an 83-year-old male with mild cognitive impairment, arthritic knees and hands, and high blood pressure exacerbated by borderline obesity. His youngest son, with whom he lives, brings him to JABA's Adult Care Center (ACC) in Charlottesville three days a week. While he enjoys the music programs, he prefers quietly watching to joining the various organized exercise options. He particularly looks forward to lunch and snack times. His doctor has advised him to lose weight, but a hardscrabble childhood left Walter with a love of heavy food in large portions and a reluctance to leave anything on his plate. Doing without or with very little was a constant during Walter's early rural upbringing; however, his family always managed to maintain a kitchen garden that kept fresh vegetables on the table during the growing season.

When JABA began adding local produce to the ACC's meals, Walter was among the first to appreciate the difference in taste, at one point telling the staff that he had not tast-

ed a real tomato since he left home to find work in the city when he was 16. Although still prone to overeating, he prefers the new minimally processed offerings to heavier fare. Group discussions about the local produce have spurred happy memories of working in his family's garden. He is moving more, as well. He has taken an interest in helping with the raised garden beds in the ACC's courtyard. When the Hillsdale kitchen needed to prepare several bushels of beans for freezing, he volunteered to snap beans despite his stiff fingers. The combination of fewer calories, less salt, and more exercise is starting to pay dividends. His doctor reports a modest yet significant decrease in his blood pressure. At the ACC, Walter is more content and involved, stating that his days at JABA are the best of the week.

Case Study #2

Cassandra M. is a 22-year-old, single mother, and SNAP recipient who lives with her young daughter in city-subsidized housing within a five minute walk of Charlottesville's downtown. Cassie works part-time at a local hospital, to which she travels by bus. A self-professed lifelong "city girl," Cassie's food shopping experience has been limited to small stores offering little in the way of fresh produce. The selection that is available is often unappealing and expensive. She uses the SNAP food stamp benefits she receives to buy familiar basics. She and her daughter enjoy walking to downtown Charlottesville on Saturdays. The farmers market has intrigued them both and Cassie has noted the greater variety and quality of food,

as well as the often lower price. However, because she could not use her SNAP card at the market, she had not shopped there.

In the fall of 2009, Cassie became part of a pilot program developed by JABA and the City Farmers Market that gave and tracked the usage of locally designed currency usable only at the Charlottesville farmers markets by individuals of all ages living in public housing. Cassie reported she enjoyed finally being able to shop the market and that her daughter has approved of the fresh items (with the exception of Brussels sprouts!). By the end of the pilot, she had begun to ask questions of the vendors about how to prepare the less familiar produce. The farmers were also pleased with having new regular customers and the ease of the system. Vendors' experiences with the pilot program have led to ready acceptance of JABA's plans for an EBT/debit card system at the downtown market.

Conclusion

JABA continues to increase the amount of local food in its meal program, fulfilling one of its core mandates of providing quality nutritious meals to older adults in Central Virginia. The program's success goes beyond the doors of JABA's Hillsdale kitchen, highlighting the power of community-based nonprofits, such as AAAs, to act as catalysts for change. By bringing others concerned about the wellbeing of our citizens, economy, and environment under the aging-well tent, each AAA can be viewed as a contributor to economic development, one who offers a handshake in partnership rather than

asking for a handout.

Study Questions

1. What are some of the challenges facing institutional feeding programs seeking to incorporate local food into their current meal system?
2. Is it helpful for aging service organizations to define aging as a lifelong process when identifying its client base?
3. Can nutrition programs for older adults set an example for incorporating local food into institutional feeding programs?

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George, J., Porter, C., & Weger, A. (2006). *Factors affecting the nutritional value of food: A report for farmers' markets of Nova Scotia*. Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada: Saint Vincent University.

Resources

Jefferson Area Board for Aging (JABA): www.jabacares.org

Programs: Feeding a Crowd with Local Foods, a case study and instructional video: www.viablefuturescenter.com

Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning, American Planning Association (APA), an excellent and thorough report on local food systems: myapa.planning.org/poicyguides/food.htm

Viable Futures Center; the Viable Futures Toolkit: www.viablefuturescenter.com

About the Authors



Gordon Walker has been the chief executive officer of the Jefferson Area Board for Aging since 1982, presiding over all its activities and those of its nine subsidiaries. JABA's affiliated entities, including nonprofit and for-profit organizations, provide home healthcare, housing and community center development, and assisted living management. He is an adjunct professor in the School of Nursing at the University of Virginia. He has served as president of several local and state nonprofit organizations and was chair of the Albemarle County School Board.



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