

Hidden in Plain Sight: Community Food Security Needs

The New River Valley Glean Team was formed ten years ago to address community food security, a food system need that is often hidden in plain sight. This short article is part of our “Virginia Food Systems and COVID-19 Story Collection Project” that aims to highlight, collect, and share stories of hope and resilience in our food system amidst the pandemic. Find out more about this project and view our entire series on [our website](#).

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Car keys and the checkbook are commonly misplaced around the house and discovered later hidden in plain sight. The food security needs of individuals and households in our communities may similarly go unnoticed and be hidden in plain sight. Margaret Wheatley (2009, p. 29) suggests that “most significant social change starts with a simple conversation among friends.” For the New River Valley Glean Team, the community initiative to address food security can be traced to a single survey question asked as part of a community conversation ten years ago: “What is the most pressing issue facing communities in the New River Valley?”



Recent gleanings from area gardens. Photo courtesy: New River Valley Glean Team

Community food security was identified as the answer to the survey question. This result surprised members of the Justice and Peace Committee of St. Mary's Catholic Church who started the conversation, because they had not noticed any abject poverty in their community. However, people's struggle to be food secure as defined by the ability to consistently access enough nutritious food for individuals and households throughout the year for an active, healthy life was actually there. In response, volunteers planted gardens as an initial attempt to improve access for individuals and households struggling with food security and harvested 1,000 and then 2,000 pounds of produce during the first two years.

After digging into available data for a grant application, John Galbraith, a member of the Justice and Peace Committee and co-founder of the New River Valley (NRV) Glean Team, discovered the complexity and nuances of community food security. He shared his view that solving food insecurity is like peeling an onion, "You peel the outer layer of the onion and gain some understanding only to discover other layers to peel back the underlying issues" (J. Galbraith, personal communication, August 6, 2020). The discovery process showed that food insecurity was real and that community members did indeed struggle with food security and the ability to access enough food all the time for an active, healthy life. However, the issue was hidden in the plain sight of most community members.

Hamm and Bellows (2003, p. 40) wrote that "community food security is achieved when all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes self-reliance and social justice." The NRV Glean Team and the Thrive Network was formalized to ensure all people in the New River Valley have adequate access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food.

The NRV Glean Team aims "to feed and nourish the hungry in our community by assembling people and organizations to gather and recover excess food from local farms and other



Coordinated Potato Drop-Off Event in Christiansburg. Photo courtesy: New River Valley Glean Team

establishments, and to distribute these foods to those in need as well as to organizations that serve the hungry” (NRV Glean Team website). Their mission is based on the historical practice of gleaning that encouraged farmers and landowners to leave the corners and edges of their fields unharvested so widows, orphans, and other community members could glean the remaining crops as a form of community care and mutual aid. The team works to take fresh food where it is in surplus and move it to where it is in need. They deal with fresh fruits and vegetables because it has a high nutritional value compared to starchy, salty, and sugary processed foods.

The NRV River Glean Team manages large gardens and works with area fruit and vegetable growers and Virginia Tech’s Kentland Farm to glean fresh produce such as corn, apples, squash, peppers, pumpkins, turnips, and more that might be excess, slightly blemished, or just otherwise unfit for the commercial market. Today, the New River Valley Glean Team works with two area food banks and 34 food sources that provide fresh produce to households and communities in Pulaski, Giles, Floyd, and Montgomery counties and the town of Radford.

For the past three years, over 100,000 pounds of fresh produce were distributed to these 36 food providers. The NRV Glean Team coordinated two potato drop-off events in collaboration with the Society of St. Andrew, the largest gleaning network in the U.S. based in Big Island, Virginia. About 42,000 pounds of Maine or North Carolina potatoes are shared at each event with food providers from all over Southwest Virginia and nearby parts of West Virginia. The NRV Glean Team also works with Cooperative Extension in SW Virginia and in western states to provide seeds so that those in need can grow their own food. Area stores are asked to donate unsold seeds, and the Glean Team saves seeds from their crops, which are given to school and community gardens and to individuals in need.

Now, the community food security need is greater than ever due to COVID-19. Food pantries, soup kitchens, and emergency food providers have experienced a 30 to 40% increase in participation across the four-county region. The NRV Glean Team invites participation from volunteers who support and advance their mission to be a good neighbor as they serve the food security needs of the community and work closely with area farms.

Additional Information and Websites:

New River Valley Glean Team https://localwiki.org/bburg/New_River_Valley_Glean_Team
New River Valley Glean Team Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/NRVGleanTeam/>
Society of St. Andrew <https://endhunger.org/virginia/>

References:

- Galbraith, J. (2020). Personal communication. August 6, 2020.
- Hamm, H.W. & Bellows, A.C. (2003). Community food security and nutrition educators. *Journal of Nutrition Education Behavior*. 35:37 – 43.
- Wheatley, M. (2009). *Turning to one another: Conversations to restore hope to the future*. (2nd ed.). Barrett-Koehler.