

CHS provides hunger relief regionwide

March 5, 2024

Community Hunger Solutions, (CHS) VEDA's food recovery program, has had a busy year working to alleviate hunger in our communities, according to the impact numbers for 2023. CHS sources excess fresh produce and dairy products from farms in our bountiful Driftless Region and distributes this nutritious food to pantries, meal sites and food banks where many elderly and low-income families who are struggling with hunger, go for help.

CHS partners with more than 20 food pantries and meal sites in Vernon, Monroe, Crawford, and Grant counties, serving at least 2,000 elderly and low-income families per month. These communities include Viroqua, La Farge, Viola, Westby, Hillsboro, Ontario, Soldiers Grove, Gays Mills, Boscobel, Cashton, and Wilton. For some of these partners, CHS is the only source these pantries can obtain perishable items from, and they are thrilled with the quality and variety of items CHS delivers.

In 2023, Community Hunger Solutions distributed over 68,000 pounds of produce and nearly 90,000 pints/pounds of dairy to these sites! Program Manager Jeannette Burlingame says, "Fresh produce is donated from Harmony Valley Farm, Driftless Organics and through partnerships with other local farmers. Dairy resources, including donated eggs, cheese, milk, yogurt, and cottage cheese come in weekly from Organic Valley. GoMacro also contributes many varieties of their nutritious bars and Hunger Task Force provides CHS with dry goods and produce."

In the summer of 2023, CHS continued aggregating Viroqua's Growing Forward Together Garden produce for Parkview Manor residents, providing a carefully curated list of items for residents of the apartment building. Garden coordinators also provided educational opportunities for a variety of community members through the McIntosh Memorial Library. The garden is made possible by funding and coordination through FoodWise Vernon County.

CHS brought on a new partner in CouleeCap Sparta and Norwalk, and now serves these communities when CouleeCap volunteers pick up donations each week. Hunger Task Force of La Crosse is also a valuable distribution partner. CHS regularly sends them excess dairy and vegetables, allowing local resources to be delivered north and west, even into Minnesota!

"Distribution efforts wouldn't be possible without the consistent support of volunteers" Burlingame stated. "CHS is blessed with a loyal base of dedicated and hard-working volunteers who help sort produce, bag coffee, sort dairy, put together orders, clean the warehouse, and even deliver orders to pantries and meal sites when pick up or delivery

can't be arranged otherwise.” CHS is happy to have also welcomed Thoreau College students back for a once monthly shift. Volunteers donated a total of 800 hours of time in 2023. That's the equivalent of over \$14,000 in labor.

Sue Noble, Executive Director of VEDA says, “All of this work is coordinated by Program Manager, Jeanette Burlingame. She communicates with the pantries and oversees tracking and recording all donations coming in and going out.” The staff expanded when Lauren Rentenbach joined the CHS crew in July last year. Her primary role is as van driver and volunteer coordinator, but she's a forward thinker who also contributes to the future vision of CHS.

“Community Hunger Solutions is truly a community effort, funded entirely by grants and generous donations. With funds raised this year, CHS was able to purchase a replacement vehicle that increased our delivery capacity and reliability,” stated Noble. Financial donors for 2023 include: Organic Valley, Bader Philanthropies, Kickapoo Valley School, Living Faith Food Pantry, Westby Co-op Credit Union, Dairyland Power Co-op, Vernon Electric Co-op, CCF Bank Tomah, Citizens First Bank, Farmers State Bank, Bank of Ontario, Bank of Cashton, Royal Bank, Peoples State Bank, Viroqua Area Foundation, Kwik Trip, Viroqua Food Co-op, Delta Dental Foundation, and many local community members.

Community Hunger Solutions also joined Sparta Kriskindlmarkt as a nonprofit food vendor in December 2023, generating nearly \$1,400 for the program. Special thanks to all the volunteers that braved the winter weather to work the booth for these events.

Mark your calendars for July when CHS is the “Give Where You Live” organization for Viroqua Food Co-op in 2024. Thank you to all who voted for us to receive this valuable donation.

Looking forward to 2024, CHS plans to continue serving current partners, looking to improve that service through offering a wider variety of perishable options, while focusing on the mission to connect locally produced foods with community members who face barriers to accessing nutritious food. For more information check out the website at <https://www.community-hunger-solutions.org> or find CHS on Instagram.

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