



Food Hub to Strengthen Local Food Movement

“The food hub will create a new market for growers while providing nutritious whole foods to schools and other institutions.”

Dana Rieth
PartnerSHIP 4 Health Dietitian



Expanding Farm-to-School initiatives in west-central Minnesota just got a lot easier thanks to a planning and equipment grant awarded by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture to Lakes Country Service Cooperative (LCSC).

For the past several years PartnerSHIP 4 Health (PS4H), the local public health arm of the Statewide Health Improvement Program in Becker, Clay, Otter Tail, and Wilkin counties, and LCSC have been leading efforts to expand the local Farm-to-School program. However, many schools have only been able to dabble in local foods because establishing relationships with local farmers is time consuming and securing a sufficient volume and delivery of a particular product is a major challenge.

A solution to deal with these concerns was needed. A food hub was considered as it establishes the relationship with the growers and acts as a central source for the aggregation of the high volumes of foods needed to meet demands of institutions.

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture grant will enable LCSC to spearhead the new food hub initiative. “We are excited about this opportunity because there are 37 school districts serving 31,700 students that can be potentially impacted by the hub,” states Dana Rieth, Dietitian for PS4H and LCSC. Schools will be able to order foods online and have them delivered by LCSC making this a one-stop shopping experience.

LCSC is well positioned to guide the food hub into a model worth replicating across the state. They have extensive experience in building partnerships and serve school districts in a nine county region under a cooperative purchasing program. LCSC provides ongoing training to school food service directors and has a warehouse that provides workable space for farmers to drop off their products to be aggregated, stored and shipped to customers.

This year LCSC offered a cycle menu which meets the USDA requirements for the National School Lunch Program. This menu is designed to incorporate many locally grown fruits and vegetable products and thus guides food service staff to purchase locally foods when possible.

The grant from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture allows for a feasibility study and purchase of start-up equipment. The feasibility study will begin in December 2013 followed by recruitment of growers, securing of commitments from schools in the region, and development of a sustainable business plan. The equipment portion of the grant will allow for the purchase of a walk-in cooler, stainless steel worktables, scales, food delivery boxes and refrigerated delivery truck.

The food hub will be guided by an advisory board made up of representatives from LCSC, PS4H and UMN Extension and primarily serve schools with the hope of expanding to healthcare facilities, senior housing, and restaurants.

The food hub is good for institutions in that it will result in greater supply consistency and variety. It is also a great opportunity for area growers. It creates a new and stable market for growers while allowing for the participation of additional growers. It accommodates those growers who wish to specialize in just a few crops.

The food hub is an innovative approach that will increase access to a variety of nutrient dense whole foods. This will in turn improve the nutritional health of students in the region as well as create new markets for local foods leading to improved local economies.

