



PioneerCare focused on local foods

“Our residents just love the fact we’ve made a commitment to increasing the use of locally produced whole foods. Gardening has served such a rich tradition in their lives”

Karen Bush
Food Service Director, PioneerCare



PioneerCare in Fergus Falls has taken a creative approach to expand the use of local foods in their facility. Karen Bush, dietitian and food service director, knows the nutritional benefits of fresh, local fruits and vegetables and has made it a priority to use them. An advocate for plant-based diets, Karen is also a member of the Fergus Falls Community Food Partnership, a group that has been instrumental in efforts such as strengthening the Fergus Falls farmers market, and making connections of institutional buyers and growers in the region.

In the spring of 2013, PioneerCare received a garden grant from PartnerSHIP 4 Health. The grant, offered to nursing homes and assisted living organizations in Clay, Becker, Otter Tail and Wilkin counties, allowed them to build and plant raised bed gardens on the outdoor patio of each household in the nursing home. Residents have been involved in planting, weeding, harvesting, and eating the produce.

In one of the gardens, kohlrabi was planted and grew successfully, creating conversation among residents and staff. Some residents reminisced about growing and eating kohlrabi, while others had never seen kohlrabi before.

In addition to growing their own food, PioneerCare also purchases locally grown food from area farmers.



Local Dirt, a virtual food hub website, is used by PioneerCare to purchase farm fresh produce weekly from Lida Farms and Feel Good Gardens.

Each farmer delivers directly to Pioneer Care and offers PioneerCare the opportunity to try specialty produce, including heirloom varieties and other unique products, as well as other favorite seasonal vegetables.

The chefs at PioneerCare appreciate the quality of the local produce and incorporate it into resident meals and the staff cafeteria. Some items have also been used in catering and fundraiser events. Residents appreciate the taste of fresh, locally grown foods. One resident reported that “there is nothing better than a fresh-picked, juicy tomato on bacon, lettuce, and tomato (BLT) sandwich.” BLT sandwiches have been a favorite menu item and have been served frequently while the tomatoes have been in season. Karen has also noticed that residents are consuming more fruits and vegetables.

Next year Karen plans to expand the use of local foods. She intends to plan the menu around what is planted in the gardens and around the items that residents have most enjoyed this year. She also envisions that PioneerCare could be a delivery-site for community supported agriculture (CSA) for employees and the general public.

What started out as small patio gardens has enabled PioneerCare to incorporate healthier local options for residents, staff and now the community. Fresh fruits and vegetables are making a comeback at PioneerCare, providing a boost to local economies and paving the way for other organizations in Fergus Falls to consider using local foods.

