

Athens County

Fresh, Healthy Foods are Transforming Pantries

Summary

Community leaders in Athens County believe everyone has a right to healthy food. Issues of food injustice are being solved by health organizations, local non-profits, food producers, pantries and other invested community members. Access to healthy food is necessary for good health no matter who you are or where you live. Improving systems that provide healthy food for those in need can be solved through building skills, increasing production and distribution, and maintaining a commitment to equitable opportunities of good health.

Challenge

Athens County residents who rely on food pantries do not have the same food options as others in the community. Food pantries can only offer the food that has been made available to them, limiting the amount of healthy food distributed. Food pantries depend on donations offered by local businesses, low-cost items through the Southeast Regional Food Center, and the good will of their neighbor's donations. Here in southeastern Ohio, the Regional Food Center serves almost 124,000 households each year. These centers (or food banks) are supplied by USDA farm surplus, the "rescue food" from regional manufacturers of processed food, and bulk food lots that are purchased at a reduced rate. Local food pantries are run by volunteers who have limited resources but big hearts. The need for food is always greater than the amount of food available, especially for healthy, fresh produce and whole grains. Among the greatest challenges to local food pantries is dealing with storage, refrigeration, and the lack of experience among their patrons in preparing fresh whole foods.

Solution

To help food pantry patrons eat a healthier diet, the Healthy Communities Coalition in Athens County, led by the Creating Healthy Communities (CHC) Coordinator and in partnership with Live Healthy Appalachia, provided nutrition and cooking workshops for three rural food pantries. The food pantry workshops for patrons included information about how what we eat affects our health, how to stretch food dollars and how to prepare healthy meals. Pantry coordinators also received training on storage, sanitation and distribution of produce. The CHC grant provided funding for workshop speakers and necessary cooking equipment for participants. The Athens Foundation funded healthy food for four weeks after the workshop. Community Food Initiatives, a local non-profit, provided almost 4,000 pounds of produce for the 40 families that participated.



Your Involvement is Key

Appalachia has a long history of neighbors helping neighbors. We have experience in relying on our own resources to make the positive changes that need to happen.

- Local businesses and concerned citizens can support their local food pantries or Regional Food Center by providing regular donations of money and time.
- Local farmers and home gardeners can donate a portion of their yield to their local pantry or Regional Food Center.
- Some pantries are even starting their own gardens and planting orchards.



Results

As a result of the food pantry coordinator training and food pantry workshops for patrons:

- Two of the three local food pantries increased their use of the Donation Station. The Donation Station is a program managed by Community Food Initiatives that collects monetary and food donations at the Athens Farmers Market. Money collected at the Donation Station is put back into the local economy by purchasing produce at the farmers market and donating it to local food pantries.
- Half of the food pantry participants increased their consumption of fruits, vegetables and whole grains.
- All of the participants reported liking something new that they tried and most continued to prepare recipes they sampled in the workshops.
- Among food pantry patrons who volunteered for health screenings, more than half reduced blood pressure and glucose levels several weeks after the initial workshop presentation.
- The Regional Food Center has increased their commitment to consistently offer fresh and whole food items.

“I try different foods now, like tofu and different lettuces, and I lost 6 pounds! I really enjoyed the program, and I learned a lot.”

- Chauncey Participant

Future Directions

A long-term strategy for strengthening local food pantries is to support the Regional Food Center, which receives state resources based on how much food pantries report distributing to their communities. Currently, more food is being distributed than is being reported to the Regional Food Center. Improving reporting strategies will increase Regional Food Center resources. The Regional Food Center is working with Community Food Initiatives to act as a food hub that can collect and distribute local food and expand educational workshops to pantries in the region. Engaging business

partners to encourage employees to make regular donations to the Regional Food Center through paycheck deductions can also provide a system of ongoing support for local pantries.



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