

COMMUNITY ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATION AND HUNGER RELIEF



A program of Colorado State University



OVERVIEW

Our Most Unusual Year

The pandemic challenged us to prioritize our programs that could respond to the biggest needs. It tested our willingness to put a pause on programs that were not feasible. It brought new appreciation for the value in working together to meet our goals of increasing access to and consumption of healthy food, especially fresh fruits and vegetables.

So while we dearly missed our public education programs for school children and the community, we let them go in 2020 to focus on what was most important. We changed our farm plan to accommodate the challenges our food pantry partners were experiencing – a 40% increase in demand and a shrunken volunteer force. Mother nature put up some resistance with a spring freeze that wiped out the peach crop and mid-summer fires that affected the quality of the apples. But generous CSU colleagues stepped in to provide thousands of pounds of organic winter squash and pinto beans for food assistance programs.

We gave guidance to commercial farmers and backyards gardeners who were galvanized to integrate giving into their growing plans. Zoom connectivity allowed us to bring our community's knowledge to new initiatives across Colorado State University addressing food security. Finally, we were in awe of our community partners who had to respond to emergency food needs, while simultaneously collaborating to implement long-range food system changes set forth in the *Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger*. Quite a year.

2020 marked the fourth year of the Community Alliance program at the CSU Western Colorado Research Center. While the pandemic disrupted our farm-to-school and public education programs, our farm interns, volunteers, and research center staff persevered to respond to the surging need for healthy food in 2020. Take a look at our program by the numbers...

2020

- 78,645 pounds of fruits & vegetables
- 29 varieties, including organic
- 540 volunteer hours
- 49 volunteer events

Cumulative

- 349,361 pounds fruits & vegetables
- 2,672 volunteer hours
- 192 volunteer events
- 14 interns, 7,168 paid hours
- 2,631 K-12 students, 8,249 hours

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Farm-to-Foodbank Program Continues

At the core of the Community Alliance program is our farm to foodbank program, in which fresh produce grown as a part of our agricultural research and training program, is directed to community food pantries and meal programs across Western Colorado. The produce allows us to support community-driven efforts to increase the amount of nutritious food available to people experiencing food insecurity.

The farm-to-foodbank program provides post-secondary interns hands-on experience and training in small-scale vegetable production. Our interns follow that food into the charitable food system, obtaining learned-experiences in how our community, including the agricultural sector, responds to food insecurity.

The start of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 correlated with the start of our greenhouse season. Our tenacious intern and AmeriCorps Service Member, Meredith, (below) was able to pivot the farm-plan in response to the changing needs of food pantries. We grew bigger items that required less bagging by already strapped food pantry volunteers. We planted more winter squash that did not



need to occupy valuable cooler space. We kept our plantings to fruits and vegetables that most people are familiar with preparing knowing the pandemic meant food pantry clients received a pre-packaged box and could no longer choose their produce.

Together with our dedicated staff and volunteers, we produced and distributed 78,645 pounds of fresh produce starting in May and lasting until January.



Food Bank of the Rockies Purchases

Food Bank of the Rockies (FBR) serves partner agencies across Colorado and Wyoming. As a part of their commitment to increasing the availability of fresh produce, FBR purchased all the produce we distributed to its Palisade warehouse and partner agencies. Delivering directly to agencies reduced the storage burdens on a very full FBR warehouse and gave our interns valuable experience in filling custom orders.

Importantly, through this relationship, we are better able to serve the agricultural community by identifying potential barriers to food bank sales and advocate for changes. Farmers can only truly be a partner in responding to food insecurity when they are compensated for their product.

With our funding streams tightened this year, the purchases enable us to to operate at the same level next season. Thank you FBR!

Our Wonderful Volunteers

With a few modifications to our routine, we were able to safely involve volunteers in planting, weeding, and harvesting this year. Easily the best part of our day is working alongside dedicated volunteers who enjoy working in a (big) garden and care about people having access to nutritious food. We adore our returning and new volunteers who are so generous with their time and talents.

Colleagues from the CSU Western Campus with Extension, Colorado State Forestry, and the Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory were the first to step up to volunteer – making us realize that we could handle the program this year. We enjoyed harvesting with Alpine Bank employees as a part of their corporate service program. We look forward to building on these partnerships in the future.



Area Eagle Scout, Keedon, next to four portable hand-washing sinks he built and donated to keep our food and volunteers safe.

New AmeriCorps Partnership - serving the Western Slope

We were thrilled to be a host site for the Mountain Roots Healthy Futures AmeriCorps Service Program and to lend support to other AmeriCorps Members serving in Gateway, Delta, and Grand Junction. AmeriCorps combines federal, state, and private funds to use “national service to address critical community needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment.”

AmeriCorps Members served our community in 2020 by building the capacity of area nonprofits and schools to do more good work. Our two Service Members, Meredith and Grace, ran our farm-to-foodbank program but also volunteered in their free time with area nonprofits and even donated blood. These smart, committed women produced



a lot of food while also expanding our capacity to work with our community. As a result of their service, our 2021 Service Member will be doing a joint project in nutrition education with us, Tri-River Extension, and the Community Food Bank.

We are proud of our 2020 Members who have gone on to work in areas of public health and fruit and vegetable production.



AmeriCorps Service Member interns, Meredith Prescott (left) and Grace Sonderman (right) lead the farm-to-foodbank program. New AmeriCorps logo (bottom).

CSU Responds to Food Insecurity

CSU faculty, staff, students, and Extension Agents launched many projects in response to the increased food insecurity and disrupted supply chains as a consequence of the pandemic. Faculty and staff built tools to measure food insecurity, helped farmers pivot their business models, and supported community initiatives, such as the Pueblo Food Project, to address food insecurity.

Staff and students from CSU **Agricultural Experiment Stations** across the state grew and distributed over 65,000 pounds of potatoes, organic winter squash, apples, pinto beans, mixed vegetables and freshly milled whole grain flour grown as a part of research or service projects.

CSU Extension brought together Agents across disciplines to launch a new



project, Grow & Give, that organized, facilitated, and inspired backyard and community gardeners to donate over 47,000 pounds of produce to neighbors and hunger relief organizations across the state.

It is clear that CSU, as the state leader in discovering and teaching new ways to grow food, is also committed to ensuring that people are able to equitably access that food.

To learn more about CSU's response to food insecurity, visit our [website](#).



OARS staff preparing organic winter squash for delivery (above). SWCRC research associate, Emily Lockhard, milling heritage wheat for donation (below).



Volunteers at Community Food Bank

Community Response to Food Insecurity

Hunger Free Colorado estimates that food insecurity **tripled** during 2020, with disruptions to employment and school-based meals. In Mesa County, the need for services reflected these estimates. Food assistance providers responded quickly by completely changing their operations to keep everyone safe and expanding people's access by including options like home delivery.

New collaborations formed and a new nonprofit, Mutual Aid of GJ, formed to ensure the community's needs were met.

The organizations rose to the challenge to meet the need, meanwhile continuing their commitment to work together on long-term systems change as outlined by the Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger.



CONTACT US

About Us and Looking Ahead

The mission of the Community Alliance is to improve the health of our community by increasing access to fresh produce for individuals experiencing food insecurity and provide public education to help increase the consumption of healthy food.

We work collaboratively with our community to:

- Increase access to healthy food by producing and distributing fresh fruits and vegetables to food assistance programs through our **Farm-to-Foodbank** program;
- Provide post-secondary students **experiential education** in small-scale vegetable production and community-based nutrition intervention programs;
- Build healthy food environments by providing opportunities for volunteerism and **civic engagement** around healthy food and collaborating with community development initiatives that improve our charitable food system; and
- Integrate civic service with hands-on learning in agriculture and food systems, healthy eating and food insecurity for area K-12 students through our **Farm-to-School** program.

Looking ahead to **2021**, we are doubling our commitment to increasing food access and healthy eating by **co-creating** nutrition intervention programs with area food pantries and helping implement the *Mesa County Blueprint to End Hunger*. This focus provides amazing opportunities for our interns to learn from experts in our community. We thank our partners.

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