

## Vermont Youth Conservation Corps /Hospital Partnership Serves Up Local Food

by Abbey Willard, VT Agency of Agriculture Local Foods Administrator

The Farm at Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) is piloting a new initiative which not only offers personal development and agricultural experience to corps members, but also helps Vermont communities reduce the effects of hunger, malnutrition, and obesity. The Farm at VYCC was established in 2009 as an organic vegetable garden selling community supported agriculture (CSA) shares, and has since grown to three greenhouses, five cultivated acres, and also includes pastured poultry production and processing.

One exciting component of VYCC farm's nutritious food sharing is a partnership with the Central Vermont Medical Center (CVMC), called "Health Care Shares." This program offers donated CSA shares to food insecure individuals and families. Area physicians, dieticians, and other health care professionals initiate the process by offering food security assessments to patients and employees in which they identify hunger, malnutrition, and obesity issues. Based on survey results, eligibility criteria, and employee and patients' willingness, selected participants receive a 12-week "Health Care Shares" CSA from June through September. Each week, VYCC farm corps members provide participants with a \$20-\$30 value share box which includes healthy, nutritious vegetables and pastured chicken. Since mid-June this year, approximately 145 weekly Health Care Shares have been distributed.



"This was a focus shift for the farm," says Paul Feenan, Food and Farm Program Coordinator at VYCC. "When this year started, the farm was growing and offering free market CSA shares." Since a core mission of VYCC is youth education and development, it seemed to Paul and others that the farm needed redirection to best fulfill this obligation.

"This is where Central Vermont Medical Center administration and staff deserve a lot of recognition. Without their commitment to the Health Care Shares concept, this program wouldn't be happening. We are very grateful for their participation and enthusiasm in the program," exclaims Paul as we sit in the beautifully restored meeting space at the Monitor Barn in Richmond, where the VYCC and the farm are headquartered.

Stakeholder roles were developed during the course of planning meetings between VYCC and CVMC staff which began in February, 2012. Over a few short months, logistics around eligibility criteria, packing and delivering shares to various health care facilities,

and distribution to the 140+ participants were organized. “It was an interesting start up”, admits Paul. “We were seeking donations for the Health Care Shares while also recruiting participants through food security assessments. We just had to believe, for this first year, the numbers would match up. And thankfully they did.”

The Health Care Shares program provides more than just education opportunities for VYCC corps members and nutritious food for needy families; it is also building community and resiliency in our food system. The program utilizes donations procured from doctors, nurses, hospital administrators, and supportive community members to subsidize the cost of the CSA shares. Corporate and private contributions have gone toward the purchase of on-farm poultry processing equipment and other infrastructure needs, and the Department of Labor provides payment for the corps members and a crew leader who, along with help from Americorps/VISTA members, collectively provide the farm labor. Green Mountain Coffee Roasters and Ben & Jerry’s employees have been involved, too, through community service, as they help with the Health Care Shares harvest.

Curriers who zip between CVMC, the Plainfield Health Center, Waterbury Medical Associates, and Barre Internal Medicine participate by delivering shares to participants each week. Shares not picked up are donated, incorporated into nutrition education workshops and cooking demonstrations, or roll into the food service system at CVMC. Nothing goes to waste, and few valuable educational opportunities are overlooked.

In addition to technical farming practices, farm corps members also learn about business management, entrepreneurship, and time management. In this way, The Farm at VYCC is an incubator model for new and young farmers. VYCC hopes this year’s group of six will choose to stay at the farm for another year or enter into an apprenticeship at another farm next season and, eventually, will go on to become farm owners themselves.

This year’s Health Care Shares program will wind down at the last boxes are delivered in mid-September. However, the VYCC crew plans to conclude the season with a holiday market basket chock full of storage crops and chicken. Paul acknowledges the holiday season can be tough, so a final CSA share full of healthy local products will be really special.

Governor Shumlin met with VYCC farm corps members earlier this month at the Waterbury Farmers’ Market during National Farmers’ Market Week. They expressed their enthusiasm and motivation for helping others, and the enjoyment of harvesting produce and eating fresh vegetables. Over the course of this summer, corps members have been busy planting, cultivating, weeding, watering, harvesting, and processing at the VYCC Farm. When asked, corps members, themselves, claimed to be eating better and appreciated the opportunity to share healthy, local food with other families in their community.