

Notes on Listening Session with Charitable Food Providers and Representatives of Agriculture Producers

Organized by Lancaster County Agriculture Council and Central Penn Food Bank
with the Assistance of Commission Ray D'Agostino

December 4, 2020

Those attending: Dr. Scott Sheely, Corinna Wilson, Commission Ray D'Agostino, Rob Barley, Josh Scheinberg, Jeff Stoltzfus, Dr. Gregory Martin, Greg Kirkham, David Lapp, Vanessa Philbert, Kim Sullenberger, Brad Peterson, Feleen Nancarvis, Harry Crissy, Tom Beresnyk, Dan Siewert, and Ron Frederick

On behalf of the organizers, Scott Sheely, Corinna Wilson, and Commissioner D'Agostino welcomed those attending stressing that this session is a follow-up to work that was previously published in a White Paper by the Ag Council on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and their implications for the future as a part of the Recover Lancaster project of the Commissioners. The goal of the meeting today is primarily information sharing and the identification of gaps that exist in the connection between the charitable food and the agricultural production networks.

The representatives of the charitable food network who were in attendance presented an overview of their operations.

- Speaking for the Central Penn Food Bank, Corinna Wilson noted that the Food Bank provides services to over 1,000 agency partners in 27 counties in central PA with roughly 100 partners in Lancaster County. The Central PA Food Bank is a member of the Hunger-Free Lancaster County, which is made up of 40 nonprofit, faith-based, government and corporate partners. HFLC works with the seven food "hubs" in Lancaster County, as that term is used by the United Way of Lancaster County. The CFPB is one of 12 Feeding American food banks in PA. The Food Bank has been closely connected with the federal Farmers to Family food box program, other USDA and PDA programs (PASS), food donations from corporate partners, and financial donations from corporations and the public that are used to buy food. It is also part of a seven-state wholesale purchasing collaboration based at the Philadelphia Shipyards, known as the Mid-Atlantic Regional Cooperative (MARC) It has more of a wholesale role rather than providing food directly to consumers.
- Vanessa Philbert and Kim Sullenberger provided information on the food programs of the Community Action Partnership of Lancaster County, which is one of the food hubs in Lancaster County. CAP services 37 food pantries, three community meal sites, and one shelter along with direct food distribution at the Crispus Attucks Center. It serves roughly 2,500 meals

weekly to some 1,200 families. It participates in most of the USDA and PDA programs. CAP has made a conscious attempt to include more shelf-stable meats and fishes in its offerings to consumers and includes fresh product when available. It has increased its freezer capacity recently with the purchase of a new freezer. The program has seen an increased need in the last two-three weeks rivaling any other period during the pandemic. CAP has more of a wholesale role in the system.

- Power Packs provides meals through 11 school districts in Lancaster County and 5 school districts for a total of 65 schools touching 800 families in the two counties according to Executive Director Brad Peterson. The uncertain natures of schools operating in-person or virtually has added to the instability of providing service. **If schools are closed, transportation becomes a problem for those seeking services. The lack of refrigerator space outside of the schools is a problem in using other locations when schools are not available. Finally, volunteer shortages have been an issue as volunteers look to their own health needs during the pandemic.**
- Feleen Nancarvis, the Executive Director of Meals on Wheels of Lancaster County, spoke for the nine Meals on Wheels sites throughout the County. The Lancaster program offers 400 meals per day...a hot supper and a brown bag lunch. Most of their food comes from donations from US Foods, Kegel's, and other corporate donors. **Initially, there were lots of problems with the supply chain for the packaging materials for the meals. There has been a continuing volunteer shortage with the organization cycling through some 800-900 people over the course of the pandemic. Most of the programs around the County are still taking clients in spite of these difficulties.**
- Speaking for the Water Street Mission, Dan Siewert commented that the Mission serves 400-500 families each week at its location in western Lancaster City, 80% from the City itself. The need has varied throughout the pandemic. It relies on Feeding America, Blessings of Hope, USDA, and private donations of surplus food as sources of its food products. **Off-season fresh produce is a continuing problem as is the recruitment and retention of volunteers.**
- David Lapp, the CEO of Blessings of Hope, described that operation which is primarily wholesale in nature. Blessings has grown dramatically from serving around 100 partners primarily locally to more than 950-1,000 partners in the area from New York City to Washington, DC. It has a 44,000 foot warehouse in Lancaster County from which it distributes 150,000 meals per day. David comments that there is always surplus food available and that early on most of it was freely offered to Blessings with not much effort; he seems more effort now required to procure more food. **The challenge is to have the capacity to process, can, juice, and package that food which is donated. Blessings is looking into options including in-house processing of milk.**

In summarizing, Dr. Sheely noted the difference among the charitable food providers. Some more wholesale, some retail. Some more connected to government and corporate resources, some more reliant on private resources and donations. Some more regional, some more local. Commonly mentioned issues include lack of volunteers, not enough local processing of milk, meat, and other produce; cold storage; access of clients; availability of packaging materials; and procuring off-season product.

Several representatives from the agriculture production community then provided their insights on the relationship of agriculture to the charitable food system.

- Josh Scheinberg, the Eastern Regional Director for the PA Department of Agriculture, spoke to the overall success of the USDA and PDA programs for producers, processors, and consumers. PDA tried to support USDA programs as much as possible. Josh continues to network with Feeding PA and PASS. There will be a new round of grants from PDA to support the growth of local meat processors for which there is a substantial gap locally and statewide.
- Rob Barley, the Chairman of the PA Milk Marketing Board and a local dairy farmer, spoke to the willingness of local producers to donate milk. However, the volatility of milk demand has been tricky with producers sometimes not knowing until the last minute if milk will be available. There is definitely the need for processors who can do this spot processing; he encourages Blessing of Hope to explore it. Rob will also connect Bob Patterson with some storage resources through American Dairy Association Northeast.
- Jeff Stoltzfus from Penn State Extension reminded attendees of the complexity of the food logistics system. He counseled on connecting with the local produce auctions (which Central Penn and the Chester County Food Bank do) as a way to enter into the local produce food chain. The larger produce distributors are also great sources for surplus product (rather than the small producer who needs to get as much financially out of their product as possible).
- Harry Crissy from Penn State Extension reported on a project in which he is engaged to inventory and map cooler capacity around the state. He will continue to stay in touch with this group.

Dr. Sheely reposed the question to the group of ...What could we do locally outside of the existing government and corporate support that would fill the gaps identified in the supply of food product for use by the charitable food network?

- Greg Martin suggested that logistics and information seem to be key to making the system work better. Knowing when surplus product happens (May and June for eggs, for example) would provide more information for people who are procuring food.
- There are models out there such as the Fresh Fruits Farm in Maryland which produces two million pounds of food annually from an all charitable farming

operation that we may want to consider for implementation in Lancaster County.

- Having more local processing and packaging seems to be a no-brainer. These kinds of project may be good for grant funding.

In closing, participants were asked to communicate in one word their “take-away” feelings from this meeting: Encouraged, Collaboration, Essential, Keep Talking, Access, Hopeful, Thankful.

With that, the meeting was adjourned with thanks from the Ag Council and best wishes for the Holiday season.