

The Vermont Youth Conservation Corps' Health Care Share:  
An Immunization for the Future  
*Public Health, Education, and Leadership for an Agricultural Economy*

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**Organization: The Farm at VYCC**

The Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) *teaches individuals to take personal responsibility for all of their actions*. We believe youth can and must learn how to address the complex challenges and tremendous opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All VYCC programs provide the skills and knowledge that youth need to effect change and incorporate the values of hard work and service into their lives.

Using a time-tested model, small groups of youth guided by skilled young adults work and learn together as they complete high priority projects in the community. As a program of the VYCC, the Farm engages more than 100 youth in educational and employment opportunities each year. Many of these individuals are identified as economically disadvantaged. They are introduced to transferable skills and training in sustainable agriculture, civic engagement, and personal nutrition. The Farm at VYCC provides them with the tools to become leaders in a growing food systems movement.

**Project: The Health Care Share**

Background

In 2012, The Farm at VYCC partnered with Central Vermont Medical Center (CVMC) to pilot the Health Care Share (HCS), a food security initiative that provides farm fresh produce and poultry to families in need. In 2013, the University of Vermont

Medical Center (then Fletcher Allen Health Care), joined the program. Medical providers identify patient and employee families who are unable to afford or access fresh, nutritious food. Families enrolled in the HCS receive a weekly allotment of fresh produce, information on food storage and preparation, and increased access to nutritional counseling.

The HCS relies on a constellation of local partners passionate about effecting change in our communities. Medical centers, public schools, and corporate volunteer groups along with the Vermont Department of Labor, Vermont Foodbank, and Hunger Free Vermont all provide support for the HCS. These combined efforts and interests build a program that benefits both the community and the individual. In addition to providing food insecure families with high quality produce and poultry, this reciprocal relationship supports youth education and employment on the Farm.

### Outcomes to Date

Since 2012 the Farm at VYCC has:

- Delivered over 9,000 free weekly shares
- Grown 200,000 pounds of produce
- Distributed 119,370 pounds (nearly 60 tons) of produce through the HCS
- Distributed 1,920 pastured poultry, equaling 8,640 pounds, through the HCS
- Involved 300 youth in education and workforce development
- Hosted 1,330 volunteers
- Hosted 16 AmeriCorps VISTA member terms
- Taught 14 “The Learning Kitchen” classes to 140 individuals

### **An Immunization for the Future**

The Health Care Share uses a “radically proactive” approach to food insecurity. It connects families to local agriculture directly at their doctor’s office, thereby blurring the lines between food and medicine. By empowering individuals and communities through food and personal nutrition, the HCS is a public health initiative for vulnerable populations. The HCS utilizes five elements to foster immunity: youth education and

workforce development; leadership development for Vermont's sustainable agricultural economy; increased access to local foods; preventative health care and nutritional education; and market development.

### 1. Youth Education and Workforce Development

The Farm at VYCC works closely with public schools, other non-profits, and the Department of Labor to offer job training and academic programs for Vermont youth. Each year, approximately 100 young individuals gain skills and knowledge about career options through programs focusing on agriculture, nutrition, food security, and community development. The majority of youth engaged are at-risk and identified as economically disadvantaged. The impact of the Farm's educational programs is summarized in this statement from a parent:

Olivia said to me in 7th grade, 'Mom the day that I turn 16, I am dropping out of school. I hate it.' Attending VYCC as an alternative to traditional classroom learning is what helped her turn the corner and feel hope for the future... and ignited something in Olivia that was dormant... This October, on her 16th birthday she handed me a brochure for Sterling College and said, 'Mom, this is where I am going to go to college.'

All youth on the Farm receive shares and bring the "fruits of their labor" home to their families, along with a variety of knowledge and skills to utilize this food effectively. Youth enrolled over the past three years have demonstrated a clear capacity to share nutrition information, as well as the food they help grow, with their families.

### 2. Leadership Development for Vermont's Sustainable Agricultural Economy

The Farm at VYCC offers volunteer and employment opportunities for young adults interested in sustainable agriculture and food systems development. These individuals are immersed in the Farm's agricultural leadership development program, and benefit from personalized education and professional networking. Alumni of this program have gone on to play an active role in Vermont's food systems, pursuing careers at the Vermont Foodbank, Green Mountain Farm Direct, and the Vermont Farmers' Food

Center in Rutland. Former Food Security VISTA Caelan Keenan describes her year of service in the following:

At VYCC I'm able to attack a really terrible problem—food insecurity—in a state that has so much food to give. I'm learning how to educate and engage with youth in a way that makes them want to engage back. I've learned that people are looking for a way to get their hands dirty on a problem we all want to fix.

### 3. Increased Access to Local Foods

The Health Care Share addresses two key barriers in Vermont's local food accessibility: transportation and familiarity. By distributing shares at medical centers located along regional bus routes, the HCS allows participants to access local food using public transportation. The Farm addresses potential variability each week through regular contact with medical site supervisors and HCS participants, with pick up hours and locations designed to meet participant needs. Each share includes a newsletter with nutritional information and recipes, as well as stories and photos from the Farm to keep participants fully engaged with their food. The shares allow participants to build familiarity with vegetables that appear regularly, while also introducing them to more nuanced seasonal varieties.

### 4. Preventative Health Care and Nutritional Education

What may be most compelling about the program's ability to improve public health is its dual approach to access. Not only do patients experience easier and more regular access to healthy, fresh food, but medical providers experience consistent access to patients. By participating in the HCS, Vermont's medical centers gain an effective system to distribute fresh, local produce, education, medical services, and outreach directly to low-income individuals and families. Dr. Hannah Rabin of Richmond Family Medicine describes the impact of the HCS on two of last year's recipients.

One family is an old Vermont farming family. They grow meat, and at some point in history probably grew vegetables for themselves but don't do that anymore. Their diet really lacked vegetables, and the Health Care Share made a huge difference in their nutrition. Another family has been living out of their car and the Health Care Share has been a real lifeline.

The Health Care Share also provides participants with personal nutrition education through The Learning Kitchen (TLK), one of Hunger Free Vermont's educational programs. TLK is available to all HCS participants, youth and adults alike. Through a series of six lessons, participants receive hands-on instruction in meal planning, budgeting, shopping, and cooking. TLK empowers individuals to make healthy choices through nutrition education, emphasizing the importance of regular physical activity, and improving cooking skills.

#### 5. Market Development for Vermont Farms

The Health Care Share fosters farm-to-institution sales and increases access for a demographic that has traditionally struggled to procure local food products. This will be of great assistance to Vermont farms seeking to develop new markets. In Rutland, a pilot HCS model, set to begin in the summer of 2015, will create a steady revenue stream for area farms by connecting them with the Rutland Regional Medical Center. The HCS acts as a catalyst for institutional market development by exposing nutrition directors and hospital chefs to local produce, which is now regularly used in hospital cafeterias. In fact, at CVMC, the HCS inspired the Nutrition and Food Services Director to create an on-site weekly "farm stand" using vegetables from the Farm at VYCC. This provides employees with a convenient opportunity to purchase local vegetables every week.

#### **Conclusion**

The compelling nature and public health potential of the Health Care Share exists in its innovative, interdisciplinary approach to food security. At the junction of youth development and food access, where public health, education and sustainable agriculture intersect, the Health Care Share serves as a case study of what "prevention" can mean for the state of Vermont. Through the Health Care Share, the Farm at VYCC addresses today's hunger, creates a more informed public, and builds tomorrow's food systems leaders.