

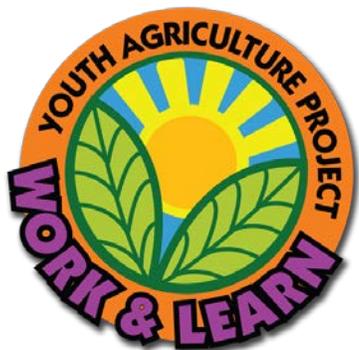
Bringing Locally Grown Food to Southwestern Vermont Medical Center

By Abbey Willard, VAAFM Local Foods Administrator

Laura LaCroix, Executive Chef at Southwestern Vermont Medical Center in Bennington loves the partnership they've established with The Tutorial Center, also located in Bennington, to have fresh, nutritious, and locally grown produce delivered to the hospital each week. "If I can highlight that it is local, they will know and they will eat it," claims Laura of the hospital's Coffee Shop Café patrons.

The Youth Agriculture Project (YAP) started at The Tutorial Center in 2006 as a way to engage students in food preparation and physical outside work and now has evolved into a truly successful farm to institution success story. Throughout the past growing season, 17 at-risk youth who experience home life factors that suggest traditional school environment can be tricky are enrolled in the YAP program. The program offers work readiness skills and opportunities to positively reengage in education through providing food to a local customer. According to Jack Glade, Executive Director of The Tutorial Center, the YAP program exposes students to the institutions in their community and offers possibilities for job shadowing and future food industry employment. He loves to see how participation in the YAP program "somehow lights the fire about what their future could be."

When the option to collaborate with YAP to get more local food into the hospital became available, Laura and others had reservations about streamlining labor and ordering simplicity but the prospect of healthy, fresh, and locally grown food encouraged them to participate. The online ordering proved to be easy, the delivery provided by YAP was similar to service that the hospital was accustomed, and only a bit more labor was required to wash the local greens. "If I put in my order on Monday and they don't have it, I know immediately. This helps me plan menus and I know exactly what will be delivered on Tuesday." Laura comments, "You also can't beat the improved quality, taste, and presentation in home-grown food."



Serving healthy food is not a new concept for the Southwestern Vermont Medical Center. About 80% of the food served in the 423,575 meals prepared annually is from scratch, including all soups, entrees and sides. They even have their own kitchen herb garden to provide the copious amounts of herbs used to flavor dishes and soup broths in place of salt. Laura has found she can cut down in some areas to keep costs affordable and allow the hospital to feature local items. The hospital cannot currently afford to only serve local products so she has to know where local can

be best used and best seen on the menu. This is why she has chosen to pilot the local items at a high profile and high traffic café located at the entrance to the hospital.

For next season, the hospital would like to increase participation to have the YAP provide 40-50% of their fresh vegetable needs in a few areas. To be able to accommodate this growth in production, The Tutorial Center will need to expand the program by investing in storage infrastructure, increased staff time dedicated to the program, consider leasing a refrigerated truck and making other equipment purchases. Students would also need to increase their role in product delivery, inventory and financial management, which would make for an outstanding student internship opportunity. The Tutorial Center sees this pilot expanding as a regional YAP Food Network that would include additional institutions, more agricultural land in production, and definitely new area producers.

The key to success proclaims Jack is “understanding the capacity of what each side can do and functioning within those limits. We need to continuously discuss what the hospital can manage and what production the farms can provide.” Jack acknowledges The Tutorial Center could not maintain YAP on its own and it is the relationship network with regional farmers that is important. Currently local produce for the hospital is grown at two Tutorial Center locations, in Bennington and Manchester, as well as by two independent growers in the community.

For now, YAP is working hard to support the local producer network and happy to know that the hospital is a steady and growing partner. The program is developing, in small steps, so as not to overpromise what they are capable of providing, while maintaining a longer term vision that this can be a viable food system.