



Dialogue for Democracy

a statewide public forum connecting communities and education

Washington State University Team Action Plan

Team members:

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Community to be impacted by team:

Whitman County, WA

Issue Focus:

Increased food security and nutrition for low-income residents through collaborative community-based education, practical gardening and food preparation projects, jobs skills training, and economic opportunity development.

Framework for Action:

- **Statement of Purpose:**

The Palouse Food Project aims to provide improved methods of linking food production and delivery systems through the strategic alignment of community and educational resources to better serve the low income populations in Whitman County. This project will provide an opportunity to link the two cultures as earlier described for the benefit of addressing food insecurity and sustainable food production.

We are proposing the parallel development of: a dynamic, strategic plan for increasing the food security of residents of Whitman County through new and existing local production and delivery systems; and a network of community gardens constructed, maintained and promoted through education-based initiatives.

The foundation of the Palouse Food Project is the collaboration of many agencies to address the food security needs of low-income residents of Whitman County. Using the loosely adapted adage “Rather than just give a person a tomato for a meal, teach her to grow many --that she will never go hungry” the PFP strives to provide fresh organic food through the local food bank, senior meal sites and school systems as well as to cultivate a love of gardening and a taste for nutritious food products throughout our community.

By learning about food security issues and community-based solutions as well as developing practical skills in organic gardening and marketing of produce, WSU and K-12 students will gain marketable job skills and life-long awareness of the food security needs of the community. Providing resources to help develop production of specialty foods and finding market opportunities through local retailers provides entrepreneurial opportunities to motivated individuals. The re-creation of the Farmers Market will bring fresh organic produce that is difficult to access in our county and provide local gardeners and craftspeople an opportunity to market their goods. The additional option of EBT units and WIC coupons for payment at the market will aid low-income families in making healthy food purchases. This is a valuable opportunity to explore and align our county resources to meet the nutritional needs of all residents and to nurture the development of entrepreneurial projects.

- Principal Goals:

Goal 1. Improve access to high quality, locally produced food for low-income residents in Whitman County.

Goal 2. Link local production and delivery of nutritional food to job skills training and economic development.

Goal 3. Enhance community awareness and response to food systems and nutritional issues.

- Key Spheres:

Whitman County, a rural area spanning 2,059 square miles in southeast Washington, is the backdrop for “two cultures” that are vastly different --- the world of mechanized, dry land wheat and dry pea farming and the academic world that revolves around Pullman, Washington, the home of Washington State University. Employment for low-income residents, who comprise over 25% of the county’s population (Census, 2000), is limited to minimum-wage farming and ag-related labor or employment at low paying service jobs. People are often denied more lucrative employment by a highly educated labor force in Pullman.

Whitman County bears a close resemblance to many other no-growth rural counties. For example, the county reported a net loss of 109 persons between the 2000 Census and July 2002. Local schools report 15% to over 60% usage of USDA school lunch programs, however, only two out of ten school districts offer a summer food program. Roughly 4.4 percent of the total population, or 1,800 persons, access the Basic Food (Food Stamp) Program - compared with the 25% poverty statistic. As reported by the Washington Children’s Alliance (2002), typically rural counties report much lower participation in food assistance programs than their urban counterparts. Whitman County, nestled in the corner of a state that ranks 5th in the nation in food insecurity (USDA, 2002), demonstrated a 38% increase in food bank participation over a 3 year period (2000-2003). This is because in a conservative rural area it is still

considered less stigmatizing for people to access food from a food bank rather than apply for public assistance.

For this proposal the most compelling and resolvable issue is the absence of a coordinated food system between the farming communities---that lack access to grocery stores with low-cost, quality food products---and the university community that has an abundance of food resources and human resources to help in eradicating local food insecurity. The history of this county, not unlike other rural counties containing “urban villages” with more abundant resources, is one of virtually no population growth, very slow assimilation of change, the denial of persistent problems, such as hunger, poor nutrition and related health issues, and the limited, if nonexistent sharing of information and food resources between the small towns and larger trade centers.

These additional statistics show the incidence of poverty and rural food insecurity in Whitman County. Over the past 10 years county personal income has remained stagnant compared with increases at both the state and national levels. Whitman County currently reports \$15,298 in per capita income as compared with \$22,973 for Washington State (Office of Financial Management, 1999). Likewise, median household income in Whitman County was reported at \$28,584 while the state average is \$45,776. Of the 15, 247 total households in the county, roughly 30 percent have less than \$15,000 annual household income. Census data (2000) shows unemployment in Whitman County to be 10.8%, not including full-time university students. The majority of the unemployed reside in the farming sector and small towns with few employment options simply because their housing is affordable. Pullman, in comparison to other places in Washington, ranks within the top five areas that report persistent housing affordability problems. A typical profile of Whitman County poverty: rural white females with less than \$20,000 household income, a disabling condition or persistent unemployment, sedentary lifestyle and poor diet speaks to the food insecurity in this rural area. A random mail survey of 1500 Whitman County Households in October 2003 (Community Action Center ‘Quality of Life’ Survey) summarizes the problem: roughly 10% of respondents answered that they had been concerned about having enough food for themselves or their family in the past year.

Student participation in community service projects such as the Palouse Food Project is on the rise at Washington State University. The Community Service Learning Center has witnessed a dramatic growth in student participation in recent years in both curricular and co-curricular service learning. Participation grew 16% between 2001-2002 and 2002-2003, and a further 65% to date in 2003-2004. Faculty interest in providing meaningful learning experiences for students has also grown, demonstrated by a 22% increase in academic service learning courses in the last two years.

Low-income individual and family interest in gardening has been documented carefully through a recent point-in-time survey (April, 2004) of Women, Infants and Children, Pullman Food Bank and My Family enrichment program clients. In fact the response to the survey was overwhelmingly positive. Out of 32 respondents, 26 or 81% are interested in receiving fresh produce because of the cost to their household. Only 5 of these households had received fresh produce last year through the food bank which is consistent with the relatively small amounts of produce available. Exactly half of respondents (12) who use the Pullman Food Bank are interested in planting a garden at the Koppel Farm. Out of 32 respondents, 22 or 69% are interested in growing vegetables in a container garden and 21 or 66% are interested in a scholarship program for rent, water and tools at Koppel or another community garden for the summer.

As for interest in self-employment, eighteen survey respondents or 56% of respondents were interested in selling surplus produce at a local farmer’s market. Several of those who said no were elderly individuals or couples. Finally, the data on clients who currently garden tell the story: only 6 respondents or 19%

currently garden, mostly due to living in small, multi-family apartments or not having the tools and materials. This information validates the need for gardening instruction and access to materials to assist in changing the habits and lifestyle of low-income individuals and families in Whitman County.

- Key Steps:

Conduct a Community Food Assessment to identify the needs and weaknesses throughout the county food system. Utilize the results to develop innovative ways to provide access to food, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, to all communities. Apply special attention to the needs of elderly, homebound and children.

Continue and expand the involvement of Washington State University students in the Palouse Food Project through a variety of service learning experiences. Faculty, students and staff of the Community Service Learning Center currently manage and maintain two 20' x 20' garden plots at Koppel Farm. Produce harvested from these lots is distributed to low-income residents of Pullman and adjacent communities through the Pullman Food Bank at Community Action Center.

Involve Pullman School District (K-12) in the Palouse Food Project through community garden programs at Koppel, Tukey and Higgins Farms, and utilize the land and greenhouses available to the Pullman schools. Include other county school districts in planning and implementing community garden projects.

Involve low-income families in growing their own produce in existing community gardens or in their family garden to increase opportunities for high-quality food and to encourage self-employment by selling surplus harvest through farmers markets.

Develop food based marketing and entrepreneurial opportunities for low-income people in the county.

Re-establish a weekly farmers market at Koppel Farms and explore expansion into outlying communities.

Hold annual spring and fall events at Koppel Farm for the purpose of education and promotion of the Palouse Food Project Assist K-12 students in developing a business plan for producing and marketing cut flowers, seedlings and other products to provide vocational job skill training.

Implement “farm to table” and nutritional education for P-6 grade children.

Continue Hunger and Homelessness Awareness activities on the WSU’s campus. Expand educational efforts to county school districts.

Provide training on organic gardening practices, food preparation, marketing and finance to low to moderate-income people.

Promote the Palouse Food Project throughout the county.

- Key Stakeholders:

Center for Entrepreneurial Studies at WSU

Community Colleges of Spokane

Community Education and Training Center

Community Food Security Coalition

Food Research and Action Center

HeadStart/ECEAP

Higgins Farm

International Programs at WSU

Kiwanis of Pullman: Key, Builders Club

Moscow Food Coop
National Association of WIC Directors
National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness
Neill Public Library
Oral Health Coalition/Community of Hope
Palouse Alliance
Pullman Chamber of Commerce
Palouse Clearwater Environmental Institute
Palouse Conservation District
Palouse Discovery Center
Second Harvest Food Bank
Whitman County Library
Whitman County Master Gardeners
Windermere Realty Community Projects
WorkSource
WSU Cooperative Extension