

## Local group forges a path to food access

By ANDREA SUOZZO

ADDISON COUNTY — Among the fertile fields and vibrant agrarian culture of Addison County lives a portion of the population that cannot afford to buy food produced just down the road.

"One of the disconnects has been that we have so many farms in this community, and we've got so much food being produced here, but it's not available to the people who need the food the most," said Jeanne Montross, executive director of Middlebury-based Helping Overcome Poverty's Effects.

While federal and state organizations like WIC and 3SquaresVT do play a part in addressing hunger, providing food and financial help to people struggling to afford meals, Montross said that there's a growing understanding that local efforts must play a role as well.

Montross said a move at HOPE to seek out fresh, unprocessed foods and local produce in the past years has been a struggle, especially with limited resources and high demand for

the organization's resources. But she's been working with local stores to access their older produce, and Montross has been able to get a supply of more plain canned and dried foods that offer more nutritional value than many processed foods.

Starting last year, the organization also maintains a community garden out back of its Boardman Street headquarters. A county gleaning project started several years ago by a Middlebury College student allows HOPE to arrange with farms to clear fields of produce that would not sell at the market. From October 2010 through September 2011 the organization collected 30,000 pounds of squash, potatoes, apples and other produce through gleaning.

Montross is not alone in taking steps toward a more inclusive food system. She is working with a group trying to devise new ways to include all members of the community in the local food system.

Just this year, Rep. Will Stevens, (See HOPE, Page 9)

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I-Shoreham — also a vegetable farmer at Golden Russet Farm and a major supporter of the gleaning project — convened a group to discuss ways that those in agricultural and food professions can address hunger issues.

"We wanted to see if we could deal with some of the issues with hunger through the farm economy we have now," said Jay Leshinsky, who runs the garden at Middlebury College and serves as the president of the board at Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, which pledged to help fund a project the group undertakes.

Though the project is still in its nascent stages, HOPE plans to contract with local farmers to provide produce, then process the produce into soups and stews to be served at the food shelf.

Montross said one goal of this project will be involving food shelf users in as many aspects as possible, and in delivering the soups and stews with recipes for learning. Eventually, she hopes to extend the processing and storage capacity of the food shelf, and to be able to offer opportunities for food shelf users to participate in the harvesting and processing of their own food.

Montross said these sorts of contracts are the best way to go: to get food with local roots to the food bank and to make sure the grower is compensated for it.

"What we really want to do is to change the whole paradigm of how we feed people who don't have food," said Montross. "Instead of saying, 'Here's a bag of food, you don't know what's in it,' what we want to do is start getting people involved in deciding what kind of food they eat and making connections with the farmers."

Food systems scholar Jesse McEntee taught a course at Middlebury College this winter examining local and national food systems and emergency food distribution strategies. He said inclusive approaches to changing eating habits tend to be more effective than simply giving nutrition instructions, since there are more factors to what people choose to eat than knowing what foods are "healthy."

"Food is a very complex subject — it's not just a metabolic need. It's also a really important symbolic resource," he said.

One of the persistent questions that his students had, said McEntee, was how to reconcile the emerging local foods movement across the state with the persistent issue of hunger and malnourishment.

McEntee said this question isn't a new one, but that many Vermont organizations are leading the nation in their efforts to incorporate those affected by food insecurity

issues into the solutions. The Vermont Food Bank, for example, has a working farm that creates jobs for the organization's clients and brings in fresh food during the growing season.

"It's really about reframing this as not so much a hunger issue, but a food justice issue," he said. "It's the idea of a grassroots response to hunger by the people who are experiencing hunger."

This, said Montross, is what she hopes to move toward: involving people in the food system, and giving them the skills and the inspiration they need to make sure they are eating a healthy diet.

"Our problem here in Addison County is not so much starvation as it is malnourishment," she said.

"When you look at what's available for people's food dollars, there's a financial incentive and a physical comfort to buying inexpensive food that will fill you up," Montross said. "That's not the food you want to be feeding children whose organs and brains are developing. That's not the kind of food that you want working people to be eating so that they're prepared to go to work and be productive."

As HOPE embarks on its new journey, Montross said she's already heard good feedback from food shelf users on the wider range of produce and gleaning programs already in place. And she said she is optimistic that more and more people throughout the community will help to make local foods available to all.

"I think as long as we keep bringing attention to the issues they will start to change," she said.

### Food insecurity by percent of population:

<b>United States:</b>	14.5%
<b>Vermont:</b>	13.8%
<b>Addison County:</b>	12.8%

U.S., Vermont: 2008-2010 average, United States Department of Agriculture  
Addison County: 2009 data, Feeding America