

Curbing hunger—one neighborhood at a time

Foodlink's Curbside Market program

By Arlene Hisiger



Mitch Gruber and Flo Clemmons



Inside a Curbside Market

Crimson tomatoes mingle with avocados, the color of dark jade, while buttery corn niblets shyly peek out from behind their lime-hued jackets.

Thinking supermarket produce aisle or farmers market?

Think again. The above is but a sample of fresh produce made available through one of Foodlink's programs. The nonprofit regional food hub and Feeding America food bank, an organization most of us associate with food drives, bridges the food gap in myriad ways.

Founded thirty-six years ago by local anti-hunger activist, Tom Ferraro, Foodlink's mission, according to its website, is "to end hunger and to leverage the power of food to build a healthier community."

"Every year, our food bank receives twelve to fourteen million pounds of donated product," says Terra Keller, Foodlink's chief of staff. This food comes from a variety of sources: retail chains like Wegmans, manufacturers such as Li Destri and Mott's, USDA-supplied commodities, and Foodlink purchases.

Curbside Market

Foodlink's Curbside Market program, which affords people who live in neighborhoods without supermarkets, groceries, or farmers' markets a way to integrate fresh fruits and vegetables into their daily diet, may well be one of their most innovative and accessible programs.

"The produce purchased by Foodlink for the Curbside Market is purchased with a focus on fresh, healthy, and, for most of the year, local produce," says Chief of Operations Mitch Gruber.

Foodlink's Curbside Market program goes beyond the current food truck trend—it's a veritable mission on wheels.

The Process

Monday through Friday, Curbside trucks arrive at six or seven locations per day with

wares available to the public for purchase at wholesale prices. In the city, Curbside Market trucks mainly stop at affordable housing sites, subsidized housing facilities, federally qualified health centers, and a smattering of YMCAs, and in rural communities the trucks stop at several community hospitals.

Program benefits

Regularly and efficiently bringing fresh food products directly to an underserved demographic is itself a laudable accomplishment, yet Gruber points to two program value-added components not easily detected by those unfamiliar with the process.

"While most food banking is about donating and distributing food," he says, "Foodlink's Curbside Market program is a whole different project. And for us, it is the most adventurous project that we can run, because the buying and selling of fresh produce is all about social enterprise."

"The most exciting part of the whole thing," he continues, "is that we are equipped by the federal government to accept SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] benefits, formerly called food stamps. Additionally, we work with New York State so that every time someone spends \$5 of their SNAP benefits, they get a \$2 incentive paid for by the state. The result is that not only are we taking fresh produce directly into these poor neighborhoods, we're also maximizing their food dollars."

Site visitation

The majority of people surveyed at the Trillium Health Center site this past June, a mix of regular clients, Trillium employees, and neighborhood residents, pointed to convenience and affordability as reasons for shopping at the Curbside Market. Thirty-one-year-old Trillium employee Justin Wilson notes that while he always tries to shop healthy, the Curbside Market truck

"pushes [him] in that direction."

This past July, a new "all the bells and whistles" food truck was added to Foodlink's current cadre. Its enhanced aesthetic and state-of-the-art design was made by the same manufacturer of ninety percent of the food trucks in Rochester.

Any discussion of the Curbside Market program would not be complete without mentioning its manager, Flo Clemmons, the figurative and literal driving force behind it. Whether maneuvering the sizable food truck onto a site or quoting produce prices in response to customers' rapid-fire questions, she exudes competence, offset by soft brown eyes and a wide, welcoming smile.

"I'm a community outreach person," Clemmons modestly gives as the reason she was drawn to the Curbside program. For Clemmons, it's not only about selling fresh and affordable produce—it's about education. She aims to spread the word about the program and to use her position to guide clients, especially those using SNAP benefits, who may not be particularly savvy about finance, to better manage their household food budgets.

But education is a two-way street. One young woman taught Clemmons just how valuable the Curbside Market program is. Formerly wheel-chair bound due to obesity, she lost more than one hundred pounds as a direct consequence of her purchases. Clemmons recalls, "One day she showed up and declared 'I'm here' and got out of her wheel-chair and climbed up on the truck!"

"I was only able to accomplish this because you come to my facility," the woman told Clemmons, "and make it affordable for me to eat healthy."

For more information visit foodlinkny.org.

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