A KY EXCEL SPOTLIGHT

GLEANKY

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Instead of being thrown out, excess fresh produce is delivered to agencies for families in need.

Families receive fresh produce

One in six Kentuckians does not have enough to eat or access to fresh, nutritious food that is necessary for a healthy and active lifestyle. That's about 750,000 people. Hunger and food waste are two important issues in the United States, where 40 percent of the food, or 300 pounds per person, is thrown away, annually. If this food were not wasted, but offered to families who lack the resources to purchase nutritious food, at least 4 million more Americans could be fed daily. That's an amazing statistic.

Three friends in the Lexington area—a gardener, health professional and committed hunger advocate—were faced with their own gardens producing more food than they could use. There was no infrastructure in place to transport this extra food to people who needed it. The friends decided there must be a way to tackle the dual problems of hunger and food waste. As a result, GleanKY was founded in 2010, and partnered with the Lexington Farmers' Market to gather excess produce from farms, orchards, farmers' markets, grocery stores and supermarkets.

GleanKY Executive Director Stephanie Wooten explains, "Volunteers pick up produce that can't be sold but is otherwise perfectly edible and deliver it to more than 60 hunger programs throughout Fayette County and nearly 20 more in Scott, Franklin and Madison counties. GleanKY is neither a food producer nor a food preparer, but it's a system to link them and solve two issues at once."

GleanKY has two requirements for any agencies receiving produce through them.

- The produce is donated for the use of hunger programs, families and individuals, so it cannot be sold.
- The agencies must serve families or individuals who experience food insecurity.

According to Wooten, 96 percent of GleanKY's partner programs reported an increase in the nutritional value of the meals they provide after partnering with GleanKY and 76 percent of their partner programs reported being able to serve more people after partnering with GleanKY.

Key to Success

Helping those in need and protecting the environment can go hand-in-hand.

A spokesperson for the Lexington Rescue Mission said there is no room in its budget to buy fresh produce. If GleanKY didn't donate food, the mission couldn't afford to have produce in its program.

"We are so happy and blessed by [GleanKY] bringing food to us. Some people around here don't have enough money to buy things for eating. It's a wonderful idea if they can keep helping people who really need the food," said one GleanKY recipient.

In 2015, GleanKY achieved impressive results with 216,513 pounds of food being gleaned, 2,404 volunteer hours used, 618 gleaning trips made, 60 agencies served, 418 volunteers participated and 38 sources provided excess produce for the program. Total receipts to GleanKY were $147,511, but administrative costs were only $15,015. Ninety percent of the monetary donations supported gleaning for the hungry and undernourished.

Wooten recalls GleanKY filling a need for the Cardinal Valley community.

“The mother of a student at Cardinal Valley Elementary School advocated for the needs of the school’s children,” she said. “At the same time, the pastor of Lexington Calvary Church of the Nazarene was searching for ways his church could cultivate relationships with the community. Both were deeply concerned by the acute lack of resources available for area families, many of which were single-parent homes or had limited resources.”

Through a partnership between the school’s PTA, the church and GleanKY, the Cardinal Valley food pantry was founded in late 2013. Many households in Cardinal Valley do not qualify for certain government and community systems of assistance, so buying fresh produce was not always possible when a choice had to be made between produce or paying utility or medical bills.

The Cardinal Valley food pantry received 15,800 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables from GleanKY in 2014, with a majority of the gleaned produce having come from the newly opened Costco. Receiving produce from GleanKY brought $15–$30 of healthy food into area homes on a weekly basis.

Cardinal Valley residents were hesitant at first, but now when they receive their produce every week, they are grateful. Receiving fresh produce has also helped individuals with diabetes who have not been able to purchase the nutritious foods they need.

Besides being dedicated to helping people in need, GleanKY is a member of KY EXCEL, the Commonwealth’s environmental leadership program that began in 2006.

Volunteers pick excess produce for GleanKY.

GleanKY van and produce to be distributed.