

EagleTribune.com, North Andover, MA

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Letter: Community agriculture fights hunger, disease

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To the editor:

Thank you for the recent article titled "Uprooting the middleman: Community supported agriculture lets people buy directly."

As manager of Groundwork Lawrence's CSA (one of the CSA programs mentioned in the article), which is run in partnership with Farmer Dave's of Dracut, I often hear people praise the CSA model, while simultaneously and understandably bemoaning the significant up-front financial investment on the part of the customer. In hopes of combating this, Groundwork Lawrence (GWL) has come up with several ways to ensure that the high-quality, farm-fresh produce offered in the CSA program is accessible to as many members of our community as possible.

In 2008, GWL established a fund to subsidize the cost of CSA shares to individuals and families experiencing financial hardship. Through this Share-a-Share program, individuals, churches, corporations, and foundations can make a tax-deductible donation to help us extend the benefits of the CSA to those who would otherwise not be able to afford it.

Last year, thanks to the generosity of 2009 CSA members and the greater GWL community, we were able to raise \$3,000 for the Share-a-Share program; this funding was used to buy food for several Lawrence families and countless individuals through the Neighbors In Need (NIN) food pantries, who dispersed over 5,700 pounds of donated fresh produce to those in need. GWL's partnership with NIN meant that the individuals and families who rely on food pantries to meet their daily food needs received fresh produce in their pantry bags in addition to the canned and boxed goods they typically receive.

In addition to the Share-a-Share program, GWL's CSA also accepts SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps) for payment of CSA shares. GWL works with SNAP beneficiaries to set up an affordable payment plan often combined with a subsidy made possible by the Share-a-Share Program.

Lastly, even for those who do not receive SNAP, GWL offers payment plan options, striving to make the CSA a possibility for all members of our community, despite income level.

Fresh, healthy produce is one of the simplest and most effective defenses against the diet-related diseases so prevalent amongst low-income families in Lawrence. Studies show that rates of Type II diabetes in Lawrence are 76 percent higher than those observed more widely across the state, while coronary heart disease and obesity also plague this population.

Moreover, fresh, healthy produce is a nutritious way to combat the staggering rates of hunger in Lawrence.

Compared with more affluent residents, low-income Lawrencians face a persistent need for food, or assistance to meet their daily food needs; while one in seven Lawrence families is a SNAP/Food Stamp recipient, several hundreds more qualify for but don't receive them; in sixteen low-income areas of Lawrence, one child in three lives in a family unable to meet its basic need for food, and the prevalence of hunger can be nearly six times greater than the statewide average; and 82 percent of Lawrence children enrolled in school are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

Anyone interested in becoming a member of Groundwork Lawrence's CSA or interested in helping us provide healthy, fresh food to Lawrence's low-income families, can learn more and make a donation to the Share-a-Share program by visiting www.groundworklawrence.org/csa, or calling 978-974-0770.

Janel Wright

Groundwork Lawrence

Lawrence