

Community Supported Agriculture Increases Food Access for Veterans in Minnesota

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Veterans and their families collect fresh produce from local farmers before participating in a cooking demonstration in rural Minnesota.

At a Glance

In Minnesota, five organizations are partnering to increase access to nutritious food for veterans in the rural counties of Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd, and Wadena. The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) awarded the Region 5 Development Commission (R5DC) a grant to launch the VetCSA program, which sources healthy foods from low-income farmers and delivers them semimonthly to 50 local veterans and their families. The food shares include chef cooking demonstrations, nutrition education, and referral services.

Public Health Challenge

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) determined that food insecurity is “a critical concern for the well-being of our nation’s veterans.”¹ The rural five-county region of Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd, and Wadena is home to 14,700 veterans. While agriculture is a primary economic driver for the region, many of the veterans in this area experience food insecurity. Compounding the health impacts of food insecurity, the region’s remoteness can cause social isolation resulting in mental health issues for many veterans.

¹Cohen, A, Rudolph, J. Thomas, s., Archambault. E., Bowman, M, et al. (2020) Food Insecurity Among Veterans: Resources to Screen and Intervene. *Federal Practitioner*, 37(1):16-23.

²The Reserve component includes both national guard and reserve Service members.



Approach

In 2019, R5DC received a grant from MDVA's Support Our Troops license plate fund to provide free, community supported agriculture (CSA) food packages semimonthly for one year to 50 local low-income veterans, widows and their families. Program participants were taught how to properly prepare the CSA items through hands-on cooking classes and interactive demonstrations. The Regional Beyond the Yellow Ribbon and County Veteran Service Officers helped identify program participants, and Sprout, a local nonprofit kitchen and food hub, served as the hub for food collection and distribution. When possible, food for the CSA packages was sourced from local veteran farmers.



Result

Several of the veterans who participated in this program said that they now feel better prepared to shop for healthy foods and make healthier meals. After learning about new types of produce supplied in the CSA boxes, participants reported buying them and even trying different produce items from the grocery stores and farmers markets. All the respondents on the post-program survey indicated that the program benefitted themselves and their families and felt it should be offered to other families in the future. One unexpected outcome of the program was the increased social connectedness between the program participants. By picking up the CSA boxes in a central location and joining the cooking demonstrations together, several of the veterans told program staff that their sense of community belonging improved.

“The program got us to eat things we had never tried before. It also got the kids excited to help in the kitchen.” -Anonymous Post-program Survey Respondent

What's Next

At the recommendation of the Building Healthy Military Communities (BHMC) pilot, R5DC plans to expand eligibility for the next cohort to the region's 3,500 active duty and reserve component service members.² An additional 50 Service members and their families will be included in this cohort, and recruiting will focus on the Camp Ripley area, the Minnesota Army National Guard's largest military camp in the state.

FIND OUT MORE:

Contact Tiffany Kovaleski, BHMC State Coordinator, at 612-787-2556.

Visit <https://minnesotanationalguard.ng.mil/building-healthy-military-communities>

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