

# Fighting Food Insecurity

*The Produce Box Project for Seniors*

## The Power of Partnerships



When it comes to helping Iowa seniors get the healthy food they need, partnerships make a difference.

So says Jennifer Colyer, who has witnessed the impact of individuals, community groups and government working together. “It’s great to see how every community is different,” says Colyer, former community health consultant for the Iowa Department of Public Health.

“No two projects look the same. That speaks to the value of knowing who is in your community, being creative, and being willing to try new things.”

Collaborations have resulted in successful Produce Box Project efforts across the state, providing fruits and vegetables to seniors who may not have access to or be able to afford fresh produce. Creative partnerships support other nutrition-based services for seniors, too. Here are a few key alliances and how they work.



Donations from farmers markets are an integral part of the Produce Box Project.

**Farmers markets.** Many of the Produce Box Projects across Iowa rely on farmers market vendors for donations of produce.

According to Emily Biddenstadt, Lee County Health Department community outreach coordinator, “Our farmers market starts at the beginning of May. Last spring we went the first week and introduced ourselves, gave the vendors the information they needed to donate leftover produce, and started picking up vegetables from them on week two.”

In Burlington, more than 30 farmers market vendors were willing to donate what they had left over each week. “The Milestones Area Agency on Aging had a team of volunteers who collected it, organized it and got it ready to distribute the next morning,” Colyer says.

## Iowa Senior Hunger Partnership

**Community gardens.** “We call it a community garden, but everything grown in this garden goes to the food pantry,” says Biddenstadt, referring to a garden laid out three years ago by the local Scotts Miracle-Gro Company. “This year, the coordinator called a couple of times and said, ‘We have an abundance of tomatoes and cucumbers that we can’t get rid of today. Can you take them to your meal sites?’ We were able to share.”

With the help of a grant, the Lee County Health Department started another garden at the Lee County Conservation Site. “I do not have a green thumb,” Biddenstadt says. “Thankfully the conservation site and the Iowa State Extension office in our county partnered with us, and we got four raised beds built.”

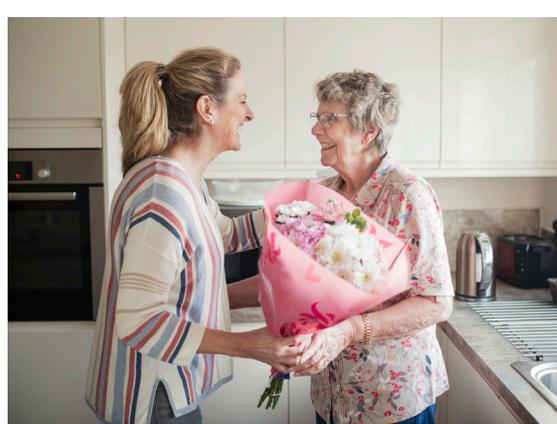
That garden turned into a 10-week youth garden camp during the summer. “We had about 12 kids per session,” Biddenstadt says. “It ended up being beneficial for all ages because the produce went from youth to seniors. We’re hoping to get one or two more raised beds built before next summer, so we can add to the garden.”

**Food banks and pantries.** According to Colyer, communities that partner with food banks historically have had bigger reach for their Produce Box Projects, distributing fresh fruits and vegetables to seniors through meal sites and home delivery programs.

“It makes sense,” she says. “Food banks already have a network in place. And if a food bank is involved, it allows for more consistent delivery or distribution of fresh produce throughout the year. It’s not restricted to the growing season during the summer.”



**Community gardens contribute much-needed fruits and vegetables to food pantries.**



**Individuals make an impact on senior hunger. Get involved!**

Janet Buls, program coordinator for the Northeast Iowa Area Agency on Aging, has seen that play out in Waterloo, where the Northeast Iowa Food Bank supplies fresh produce for seniors all winter. “One week they brought in eight cases of bananas; another week it was 16 cases of fresh mushrooms. They have a huge network of donors, and they have the ability to get the food to consumers.”

**Individuals.** Many people think churches or food pantries will take care of senior nutrition needs, but individuals can make a big impact, says Sandi Iwen, a nutrition/healthy aging specialist at Elderbridge Agency on Aging in northwest Iowa.

“It doesn’t have to be hard,” she says. “Sometimes it’s a simple thing, like if you have a little extra food of your own and you take it to a neighbor. Or you drive a senior to the food bank.”

What’s the best way for individuals to connect to needs in their community? “You can donate produce directly, usually to a food pantry,” Colyer says. “Area agencies on aging may be able to put people in touch with a local meal site or home delivered program geared to the senior population. Lifelong Links is also a resource for seniors.”

**Grocery stores and community services.** Innovation will play a role in meeting the needs of seniors in the future, says Tim Getty, regional nutrition services coordinator at the Heritage Area Agency on Aging in Cedar Rapids. Heritage has helped spearhead a change in traditional congregate meal sites, he says.

In Marion, for instance, the Heritage Area Agency on Aging, Marion Public Library and Marion Parks and Recreation Department joined forces to provide meals for seniors catered by Hy-Vee.



**Community resources play an important part in defeating food insecurity among seniors.**

“We want to reinvigorate the senior dining program with more of a café concept,” Getty says. “We serve restaurant quality food that meets the nutrition guidelines, and we serve it with real plates and silverware, a menu and salad bar.”

The menus meet dietary guidelines and are approved by a dietitian, says Getty. “They are diabetic-friendly, low carb and low sugar.” Changes like these address the generational expectations of younger seniors who may not relate to the term “congregate meal site.”

Those generational differences prompted a test program in northeast Iowa, says Buls. “We did a trial pilot program last summer called Making Meals Easy. Folks came together and prepped freezer meals with meat, vegetables and whole grains to put in a slow cooker. A 70-year-old may be too busy to cook, but if 10 people are all prepping together, it’s a social event. It was incredibly popular.”

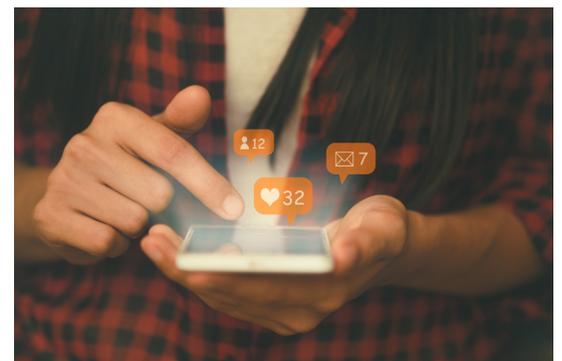
**Advertising and social media.** Building public awareness of the needs of seniors and the programs available can also benefit from partnerships, says Getty.

“The City of Marion has been such a great partner with us,” he says. “They gave part of their web page to market senior services, and they’re acquiring two billboards for a new program. Many different partners are pushing programs on social media. If we didn’t get that donated, we couldn’t do it.”

Social media is also effective in Lee County, says Biddenstadt. “We do a lot of promotion on our Facebook page for Live Healthy Lee County. That’s the way one of our food producers found out about us. Also, I try my best to put something in the newspaper, reminding people when we’ll be at the farmers market to pick up donations.”

These partnerships and others add up in helping address seniors’ need for affordable, accessible food, says Doris Montgomery, state coordinator of the Iowa Nutrition Network at the Iowa Department of Public Health.

“It isn’t as hard as we think it will be to make a difference,” she says. “If we can reach out to other coalitions already doing this work and encourage each other that we’re making a difference, partnerships can happen at all levels.”



**Social media helps build public awareness about programs for seniors.**