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Lawrence-Douglas County Sustainability teams up with After the Harvest and Community Organized Gleaners to expand food recovery on farms

Agencies seek to partner with more Douglas County farms, recruit volunteers

LAWRENCE, KS – The Lawrence-Douglas County Sustainability Office is teaming up with After the Harvest, a Kansas City, Mo.-based produce rescue nonprofit, and Community Organized Gleaners (COGs), a grassroots volunteer group of experienced farmers, to expand food recovery on Douglas County farms. The goal is to rescue nutritious fruits and vegetables from farm fields after the marketable harvest and distribute them to Douglas County agencies providing food and shelter assistance to community members.

The USDA Office of Urban Agriculture awarded Douglas County a two-year Community Compost and Food Waste Reduction grant in fall 2020 to work on food resource recovery. Douglas County is one of only 13 communities in the country to receive the grant. Other grant partners in the gleaning project include: Moon on the Meadow farm, Just Food, Lawrence Community Shelter, Sunrise Project and KU Center for Environmental Policy.

With the grant, Douglas County hired Jamie Hofling as a food waste reduction specialist in February 2021 to oversee strategies related to food waste elimination within the Douglas County Food System Plan. She is working with After the Harvest and COGs to expand the farmer-volunteer gleaning network in Douglas County. By late spring, After the Harvest plans to hire a Douglas County coordinator for the program to work with Hofling. The goal is for After the Harvest to take over the program in September 2022 when the grant ends and to continue to provide Douglas County agencies with locally-gleaned produce through a Lawrence-based satellite expansion.

After the Harvest has rescued over 24 million pounds of produce for those in need since 2014. Zach Callaway, After the Harvest gleaning network manager, said that since the organization's focus now is primarily in the Greater Kansas City area, this partnership with Douglas County will pave the way to rescue more fruits and vegetables for those in need in the region. He said, "We think providing fresh produce that's essential for good health is particularly important during these times."

The multi-partner project is building on locally-based efforts launched last year by COGs. In 2020, they recovered 2,644 pounds of food from four local farms with the help of 35 volunteers between July and October. So far this year, volunteers have recovered 40 pounds of spinach from Moon on the Meadow. Food has been delivered to Just Food, Sunrise Project and the Lawrence Community Shelter.

Jill Elmers, owner of Moon on the Meadow farm, is excited to be a partner in the project. "Part of our farm mission is to provide all persons with fresh and local produce and collaborating with the gleaning program allows us to actively work towards this goal. Working with the volunteers and seeing what they can pick and gather from fields ready to be turned under is truly amazing and inspiring."

The partners hope to connect with more local farms and recruit more volunteers. "Food recovery requires the help of many hands," Hofling said. "We are actively signing up volunteer gleaners and drivers and reaching out to farmers for the upcoming growing season. Together, we can help people in need by recovering edible food from local fields."

If you would like to volunteer as an individual or as a group, please sign up on this Douglas County form - http://dgcoks.org/foodrecoveryvolunteer - which is located on Sustainability's Food Recovery Partnership webpage. If you are a local producer or farmer and are interested in the program, please contact Hofling at jhofling@douglascountyks.org. Go to https://aftertheharvestkc.org for regional gleaning information.

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