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Hope Farm Responds to Covid-19 Crisis Providing Fresh Produce for the Community

Loch Sheldrake, NY (November 12, 2020) Countless heroes stand out for the essential help they continue to provide throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Some wear badges or scrubs, while others grow our food or work in markets or kitchens to prepare our meals.

During the recent health crisis, dedicated farm workers at Hope Farm in Loch Sheldrake, NY, have remained socially distanced while tending the land and harvesting much-needed organic, locally sourced produce to keep many local residents fed. Located on the college campus of SUNY Sullivan in Loch Sheldrake, NY, the farm is a collaborative effort with SUNY and New Hope Community, a nearby human services organization serving adults who have intellectual and other developmental disabilities. The people at New Hope Community are empowered to live their best lives and pursue their dreams, and Hope Farm provides the perfect setting.

Through New Hope's Day Habilitation Without Walls (WOW) program and its Supported Employment Program, men and women focus on their abilities and put in a rewarding day's work at the farm. Thanks to the collective efforts of community volunteers and staff, the farm has proven its weight in gold – rather, in potatoes, tomatoes and garlic – just three of its bumper crops this growing season. Crops harvested are also picked up at the farm weekly by New Hope's 42 residences and their main campus Community Bistro and contributes to many healthy and delicious meals.

"Hope Farm is just one of the ways we provide unique opportunities for personal growth and self-direction. The people we serve can choose from a wide variety of educational, therapeutic, and recreational activities," said Debra J. McGinness, Chief Executive Officer, New Hope Community. "They love being able to eat what they grow, right off the vine, and feel proud to share these foods with others in the community," she added.

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Sprouting Hope and Independence

Megan VanGorden, who joined the farm as manager in January, has drawn on her training, experience and work ethic to help her adjust to the unforeseen challenges. She has had support from Farm

Associate Anthony Martinez, Farmer/Horticulture Assistant Sophia Fidecaro-Gonzalez, supported work employees Tara and Dean and a small group of volunteers – Josh, Scott, Tina and Jay, who stepped up to fill the Covid staffing void. Early in the season, they even relied on NHC’s horse barn staff for food deliveries. “Everyone was so helpful and welcoming when I started here. We knew what we had to do to get the farm in shape and we did it. Farming is time sensitive and we had to get the crops in the ground,” she pointed out. That meant operating for a time without the New Hope Community residents, who were required by state mandates to pause from their off-campus jobs and activities on the farm, to control the possible transmission of Covid--19.

“When the supported work program employees came back after self-quarantining, they were so excited to be there and were super focused on their jobs,” VanGorden observed. “The farm is a community-oriented place and a way for them to gain skills, pursue their interests, and engage with the greater community. It is a valuable resource for them and for the community. I feel so grateful to be a part of it!”

Feeding the Community

In addition to donating food to community food programs, produce grown on the farm is used by students of the College’s Culinary Arts Program to prepare meals, and is served in New Hope’s residences and on-campus Community Bistro. The same high quality produce is also delivered to local food pantries and community nutrition programs which have seen heightened demand in recent months. They benefit from donations of over 30 varieties of organic produce, ranging from nutritious carrots and kale, to eggplants, cabbages, and assorted fresh micro-greens and herbs.

The farm team’s hard work throughout the pandemic has produced an abundant harvest. “So far, this year, 9,900 lbs of organic produce has been harvested and approximately 1,000 lbs has gone to area food pantries where it is needed now more than ever,” VanGorden explains.

Each week, NHC volunteers deliver crates of fresh produce to St. Peter’s R.C. Church Food Pantry in Liberty, NY. People from all walks of life rely on the pantry to fill their cupboards and feed their families. Church Pastor, Rev. Ed Bader has been impressed with the program and the key role it plays in feeding his parish and the community. “The Farm volunteers are just delightful and we are blessed to have the fresh food they bring us. The families really appreciate it. Last week we had corn on the cob that was delicious!”

At the Sullivan County Federation for the Homeless, in Monticello, NY, which provides free lunches and pantry items, the demand for meals has already surpassed last year’s, due to lost jobs. By September, more than 44,000 meals had been served.

“We are seeing people we have never seen before – people who had worked in the service industry or in day care who no longer have a paycheck coming in,” explained Kathy Kreiter, Program Administrator of the Federation. “We appreciate the support of New Hope Community, and the farm fresh produce, which can be costly for people to buy. People on a tight budget are making difficult choices - do you feed your kids mac n cheese or choose the healthy, more costly option?” explains Kreiter. “The collard greens are always a hit, as are the tomatoes, but everything we get definitely goes.”

Hope Farm is ready to adapt to the emerging challenges of the pandemic, although the harvest will scale back seasonally as it moves into greenhouses for the cooler weather. “We know these are uncertain and difficult times for many of our neighbors who are struggling to feed themselves and their families,” says

McGinness of NHC. “It has been a privilege for us to be working with these amazing local agencies all spring and summer long to provide nutritional support to the community, and we will continue to be there for our neighbors.”

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New Hope Community is a not-for-profit human services organization providing supports for individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. Established in 1975 to serve as a nurturing and caring alternative to large institutions which were found to have violated the most basic human rights and conditions, New Hope Community has become recognized as a leading provider in the human services field. In January 2020, New Hope Community merged with Select Human Services, Inc. (SHS) of Pleasantville, NY, a not-for-profit voluntary agency providing services in Westchester, Putnam and Dutchess Counties. New Hope Community’s breadth of services includes clinical and nursing care, residential services, day programming, community habilitation, self-direction, support brokers, service navigators, education, recreation and leisure activities, a robust supported employment program, summer programs for youths, and so much more. New Hope Community has always maintained a person-centered approach toward enhancing the lives of people with disabilities and actively advocates for individual choice in a person’s efforts to live, work and participate fully in his or her community. New Hope Community and SHS, combined, provide services to over 1,000 people and employ more than 1,200 staff.

Learn more at www.newhopecommunity.org