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UWEX AmeriCorps*VISTA Success Story

By Melissa Gullickson, VISTA Member

During my time as an AmeriCorps Vista at UW-Extension, Eau Claire County, I worked on several projects and had a summer full of successes. When sharing with family and

friends that I was serving as a VISTA this summer, I received a few strange looks and lots of shoulder shrugs. It seemed as though they couldn't understand why I didn't just go get a "regular job" and make use of my recently acquired Bachelor's degree. They responded to my news with questions like, "well, how does that help you get out of poverty", and "haven't you experienced enough poverty, don't you just want a job that pays the bills". But for me, the living stipend was more money than I previously had been supporting my family on (my daughter and me). And what was most important to me, the reason I chose to be an AmeriCorps VISTA rather than finding full-time employment, was that I knew my personal experience with poverty and hunger issues would be an asset to the projects and I knew that I would gain valuable experience, and form essential community bonds with others currently in the field that I hope to pursue a career in.

Spending much of my life in poverty has given me a unique perspective that, I believe, was of value to the projects with which I was privileged to work on during my time as an AmeriCorps VISTA. Even though my service has ended, I still feel compelled to be a part of these projects and intend to remain involved with the Food Security Research Project and the Token Program at the Farmers' Market on a volunteer basis. My supervisor at UW-Extension, Nancy Coffey, has been such a blessing in my life and I am truly grateful for the opportunity to work with her on these projects. It is my hope that I am able to collaborate with her on projects in the future and to learn from her passion to serve our community. I truly admire all she does and I am honored to have been a small part of it for these past months.

During my service, I created a presentation to be presented to the Board of Directors at the Boys and Girls club in mid-September. The presentation showcases several of the projects that UW-Extension is doing in collaboration with the Club, the Phoenix Community Garden, Eau Claire North River Fronts Neighborhood Association, the UW-Extension Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program, and the Eau Claire City-County Health Department-WIC; this presentation will be made available and submitted as part of my AmeriCorps success story and it will be linked to the ECC Extension website.

Since my service officially ended, I have remained involved with the Food Security Research Project and the QUEST/Debit Token Program at the Downtown Farmers' Market. I also assisted Nancy Coffey at a UW-Extension Scholarship Action Team focus group and wrote an article promoting the Token Program for the fall newsletter for the Eau Claire Community Foundation. I plan to assist with future Food Security Research Project focus groups and recruitment, and I will continue assisting at the Farmers' Market through the end of the market season as well as next season, whenever I am available to do so. In September, I will present with Nancy at the *Swipe Out Hunger* conference in Steven's Point, Wisconsin. Our presentation, *Making an Impact Through Community Collaboration*, will allow me to share my experience with the Food Security research project and the Token Program at the farmers' market.

I will now briefly describe those projects for which I had direct involvement and will discuss in greater detail, the two projects I was honored to be involved with that were not showcased in the power point presentation.

Eau Claire County Food Security Research project



This project is a collaborative effort between the Department of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, the Eau Claire County Hunger Prevention Coalition, and UW-Extension-Eau Claire County. The purpose of the study is to better understand how parents with children cope with food hardship. We asked individuals who have not had enough money to buy food for themselves or their children sometime during the past twelve months, to share their stories with us. This information will be useful for food assistance program staff, the media, and community members. It will also help the researchers gain a better understanding of food hardship in Eau Claire County.

For this project I helped to organize, promote, and recruit participants for the project's pilot focus group. I later facilitated the focus group and transcribed the audio recording. I then worked with Nancy Coffey, UW-Extension, to organize a Hmong focus group at which I recorded the session, took notes on nonverbal interactions, and then worked with community partners to ensure an accurate verbal translation which I then transcribed. Since my service officially ended, I continue to work on this project and will be facilitating several focus groups in September and October of this year.

It is so important that our communities become aware that food insecurity can touch anyone's life and at any time. Sadly, communities often turn a blind-eye to these issues and that is why it

is imperative to get these personal experience stories to go with the statistical quantitative data that is collected by various agencies in the community.

A recent study conducted in Minnesota revealed some astounding statistics, which I used to create a “*Not-So-Fun Facts About Food Insecurity*” handout for the project. Facing food insecurity at many different points in my life, I can say that I have fallen into each of the following statistics at one time or another; which is why I feel so passionate about this project. Some of the statistics that really spoke to my heart were:

- * Food insecure families are more likely to eat fast food...
- * Parents, especially mothers, tend to restrict their own intake so enough food will be available for their children...
- * Food insecure families are more likely to serve unhealthy foods...
- * Unhealthy foods tend to be less expensive...
- * Food insecure households may be making less healthy decisions to make their food dollar stretch...
- * Low-income families often do their daily shopping at small corner stores or convenience stores in their neighborhoods and can pay from 150% to 400% higher prices than if they were able to shop at a grocery store...
- * Within two weeks after receiving their food benefits, families already had less than a quarter of their monthly food dollars left...

The Token Program at The Eau Claire Downtown Farmers’ Market



Research has shown that sixteen percent of all U.S. adults and twenty-five percent of all U.S. children face food insecurity and studies have shown that food insecure families have less access to fresh fruits and vegetables.¹ Eighteen percent of Eau Claire County residents rely on the FoodShare (QUEST card) program to help feed their families.² What this means for the Token Program is that thousands of Eau Claire county families now have the ability to utilize their FoodShare dollars to access the healthy, affordable, locally-grown produce, meats, and other prepared food products found at the Downtown Farmers’ Market. By spending FoodShare dollars at the Downtown Farmers’ Market, customers are putting federal dollars

directly into the community and benefiting our local economy.

For this project, I worked with my supervisor and another AmeriCorps Vista to launch the pilot program on July 21st, 2012. We were able to recruit local 4-H members and adult leaders to

¹ Bruening, Meg RD, MPH, Richard MacLehose, PhD, Katie Loth, RD, MPH, Mary Story, RD, PhD, and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, RD, PhD, MPH. Feeding a family in a recession: food insecurity among Minnesota parents. *American Journal of Public Health*. March 2012. 102:3

² Source: WI Dept of Health Services, FoodShare unduplicated recipients by calendar year for 2012 <http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/em/rsdata/fs-undup-recipient-by-cy.htm>, ECC & US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, ECC, WI 2010 to determine total county population

assist with transactions at the market, and I was responsible for training the volunteers on procedures and policies as well as how to run the point-of-sales machine. I arrived at the farmers' market on Saturday mornings to set up our table, and train volunteers. I would then stay at the market and help the volunteers when necessary. I was also responsible for tracking sales, paperwork, and prepping for the next week's market, and transmitting the data from the point-of-sales machine.

The Token Program is proving successful in its mission and as of August 25, 2012, had sold \$2,371 in tokens; \$1,527 (64%) of that being QUEST card purchases. The Token Program also allows debit card users to pay a \$1 surcharge to purchase tokens that can be used as cash at the Downtown Farmers' Market; this \$1 surcharge is being used to assist in sustaining the program.

A program evaluation survey was conducted at the market to obtain feedback from patrons. We surveyed twenty six program participants and of those surveyed, eighteen participants used a QUEST card. Of the QUEST card customers who responded, 61% (11 of the QUEST card respondents) were at the market for the first time, 89% (16 of the QUEST card respondents) say they are now eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, and 78% (14 of the QUEST card respondents) said they plan to visit the market five or more times this season.

The Token Program has received an abundance of verbal support by market patrons and vendors. Some customers have stated that they use the debit transaction option because they want to support the program and many who use their QUEST cards have expressed thanks for being able spend their FoodShare dollars on fresh, local, food. Others have commented that they would like to see the program expand to other communities, and at the winter farmers' market. We fully anticipate another successful season when we return next spring and are excited to see the program evolve.

The WIC (Women, Infant and Children program) Mini Farmers' Market



The Boys and Girls Club of the Greater
Chippewa Valley in partnership with
Eau Claire WIC and UW Extension.

The WIC mini market is an indoor farmers' market supplied by the Phoenix Community Garden and serves as an easy, convenient way to buy fresh produce using WIC Farmers' Market Vouchers. Team members of the Boys and Girls Club first go to the community garden to harvest and prepare the produce for sale. The produce is then taken to the WIC clinic and sold at the Mini Farmers' Market. The market is set up and run by members of the Boys and Girls Club, an AmeriCorps VISTA, and a member of the UW-Stout Dietetics program. Market volunteers handle the transactions,

prepare samples, and share knowledge about healthy eating. Leftover produce is then donated to families at the Boys and Girls Club, and all proceeds from the Mini Market go to the Boys and Girls Club. The market just completed its second season of operation.

For this project, I collaborated with the AmeriCorps VISTA from the Boys and Girls Club and assisted the members in harvesting and preparing the produce for sale. I then helped transport the produce to the clinic. Leftover produce is then donated to families at the Boys and Girls Club. Proceeds from the Mini Market sales go to the Boys and Girls Club.

The market has now completed its second year of operation and generated about \$139 in profits for the club. In addition to harvesting produce for sale at the Mini Market, I worked with the Boys and Girls Club VISTA to coordinate dates to have members come to the garden for weeding/work days, which was done in return for the produce donations from the Phoenix Garden.

What's Cookin' with the Boys' & Girls' Club and Community TV



UW-Extension's Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program, AmeriCorps VISTA, and members of the Boys' & Girls' Club worked together to create three instructional cooking shows with the help of the wonderful crew at Eau Claire Community TV. The videos were produced to later be used to help Eau Claire County WIC participants learn creative ways to use the community garden produce purchased at the WIC Mini Market. The kids were able to be featured both on camera and behind the scenes. They were able to assist in the control room and operate the cameras. This project allowed the kids to learn about food safety, and how to be creative when cooking healthy. And they learned that eating healthy snacks can be fun too.

For this project, I worked in collaboration with Mary Foy, the Boys & Girls Club AmeriCorps Summer VISTA, and we worked with the kids to prepare and rehearse at the Eau Claire County Extension office. Mary then transported the kids to Community TV where we met to tape the shows. Eleven Boys & Girls Club members were able to participate in this project, though there was interest shown by several other members, we had to limit the number of members involved to accommodate the limited space at Eau Claire Community TV.