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Nourishing Neighborhoods connects those in need to fresh, local produce

EVERETT, Wash., August 21, 2020 – Snohomish County is working with local farmers and distributors to connect people who sometimes struggle to access food with regular supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables, delivered almost to their doorsteps.

The Nourishing Neighborhoods program is part of the county’s response to the COVID-19 crisis, and is managed from the Snohomish County Emergency Coordination Center.

The new program has leveraged federal CARES Act funding to identify options for distributing food to places in the county where data suggest people have been particularly hard hit by economic disruption linked to the pandemic, and also have relatively limited access to grocery stores and food banks.

Since June, the program has provided roughly 2,700 free boxes of produce to community members at seven apartment complexes in Everett, Lynnwood, Marysville, Snohomish, Monroe and Bothell. Planning is underway to continue the program through the end of the year, a virtual press conference was told Friday.

The project built on the work that the county has done planning to get food and other resources to people after damage from an earthquake, severe snowstorm or other disaster reshapes the community into a collection of “population islands,” said Jason Biermann, director of the Snohomish County Department of Emergency Management.

“Nourishing Neighborhoods really became a way to get food – locally sourced food – more close to where some of these population islands are,” Biermann said.

Linda Neunzig, the county’s Agriculture Coordinator, said the program has addressed the uncertainty that farmers faced because of the pandemic’s impacts on their typical distribution networks and also addressed residents’ worries about access to food.

Nourishing Neighborhoods recognizes that “our food security is right here in the valley,” she said. It is making sure “the amazing produce, the fruits and vegetables that our farmers are growing right here in our backyard” gets directly to the people most in need, Neunzig said.

The county’s financial support for local farms has been wonderful, as has Nourishing Neighborhoods’ reach into the community, said Vince Caruso, owner of Caruso Farms in Snohomish.

“This program has been great because we are able to see our product go to all different demographics,” he said.

The program augments the community’s existing network of food banks and other food and meal distribution programs.

Nourishing Neighborhoods locations were identified in part based on mapping the [Social Vulnerability Index](#), a metric the federal Centers for Disease Control uses to describe the resilience of communities when confronted by disease outbreaks and other natural disasters. That information was paired with data about unemployment rates and low-

income housing. The analysis also factored in the distance to grocery stores and food banks. In general, Nourishing Neighborhoods distribution locations are a half mile or more from other places where food can be acquired – farther than many people can easily walk and carry back their groceries.

The Nourishing Neighborhoods effort has been staffed by county employees assigned to the community’s COVID-19 response, plus volunteer interpreters from the Snohomish Health District Medical Reserve Corps.

The goal is to regularly provide people at the distribution centers up to 25 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables. Food banks typically offer shelf-stable products such as pasta and rice, and a few provide dairy and meat.

Much of the produce distributed by Nourishing Neighborhoods has come from farms in Snohomish County and elsewhere in Western Washington. Fruit and staples that grow in Central and Eastern Washington have been sourced from in-state farmers, and packaged for distribution through local food processors and vendors.

Nourishing Neighborhoods has been able to support jobs and the local economy by purchasing goods from local farmers and vendors, returning some employees to work. Farmers also have transitioned to selling Nourishing Neighborhoods product that was intended for restaurants prior to the pandemic.

In addition to fruit and vegetables, the county has provided two face coverings for every person in the families receiving food boxes. To date, that has meant distribution of roughly 5,000 face coverings.

A video of Friday’s press briefing can be found here: <https://youtu.be/pZy58INjou8>

The transcript is available here: <https://bit.ly/3aMZfVe>.



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