

Support a Health-Promoting Community

By: Donna L. Hollinger

It's 11:45 a.m. on a Saturday.

A group of hungry men, women and children waiting at the Free Lunch Program in downtown Iowa City continues to grow. In the basement of the Wesley Center, volunteers pull casseroles out of the oven, finish salads, and check the milk supply. The menu for this day is eclectic: hamburgers and cheeseburgers, egg salad sandwiches, au gratin potato and ham casseroles, liver and onions, stir fried vegetables, assorted salads and desserts. From noon to 1 p.m., meals and conversation will be served to approximately 100 people.

Less than a mile away, the Iowa City Farmers' Market is winding down from a busy morning. The crowds are thinning out, but late comers hurry to see what produce offerings might be left to purchase. Vendors tear down their stands and pack up, planning to return again next week with a fresh food supply.

In North Liberty, needy families, thankful for Saturday hours, visit the North Liberty Community Pantry. Here local residents can fill their grocery baskets with fresh bread, produce, frozen food items as well as canned and packaged foods. Being able to choose their own groceries is a plus for pantry patrons and cuts down on food waste up to 50 percent.

Three different venues with one common thread: community support for healthful eating. Why is the community important? In a recent *Preventing Chronic Disease* editorial, public health researchers Joseph Betancourt, MD and Joan Quinian, MPA point out that while taking personal responsibility for one's health habits is certainly important, it has its limitations. Environment is key especially for vulnerable population segments such as individuals with limited resources.

Interested in supporting healthful eating in our community? Consider the following.

Frequent local farmers' markets. Having access to fresh fruits and vegetables is a health advantage not all communities enjoy. Fortunately, a variety of local options exist.

- **Iowa City Farmers' Market** - <http://www.icgov.org/default/?id=1108>
- **Sycamore Mall Farmers' Market** - <http://www.sycamoremall.com/events.htm>
- **Coralville Farmers' Market** - <http://www.coralville.org/index.aspx?NID=250>
- **North Liberty Farmers' Market** - <http://northlibertyiowa.org/city-services/departments/recreation-department/special-events/>

Join a CSA. Members in a CSA (community supported agriculture) partner with farmers by paying in advance for a season's worth of locally grown, fresh produce. Produce is delivered weekly during spring and summer -- less frequently for fall/winter shares -- to drop sites and picked up by members.

Volunteer or donate to a local hunger relief organization. Figures from the State Data Center of Iowa show that food insecurity is on the rise in Iowa increasing almost 50% in the last decade. Not surprisingly, food insecurity is associated with a multitude of health issues such as poor nutrition, depression, increased risk of diabetes and pregnancy complications. Some local agencies include:

- **Coralville Ecumenical Food Pantry** - Phone 337-3663
- **Free Lunch Program** - <http://www.icflp.org/>
- **Johnson County Crisis Center** - <http://www.jccrisiscenter.org/index.htm>
- **North Liberty Community Pantry** - <http://www.nlmethodist.org/pantry/>
- **Table to Table** - <http://www.table2table.org/>

Participate in community food drives. Food drives usually offer convenient drop-off points: grocery stores, places of employment, homes. Also, they can be an easy way to teach children about sharing with others by letting them select food items to donate. A local Thanksgiving in July community-wide food drive takes place July 26-31. For information, see <http://www.thanksgivinginjuly.org> .

Opportunities abound. What might you do?

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