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## Local food network still growing

Paul J. Nyden

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- The West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition met in Charleston on Tuesday to discuss, and promote, its growing network of farmers, students and local food marketers around the state.

Bekki Leigh, from the Office of Child Nutrition in West Virginia's Department of Education, said one of her goals is to see "youth and new farmers participate in the agricultural economy. We need to communicate with each other."

Leigh said her department has given \$225,000 in grants to 26 counties to help students start farming businesses and sell their products back to schools in their area.

"One student grew and sold sweet corn in Greenbrier County. Because he grew so much, he also sold it in Pocahontas and Kanawha counties," she said.

Another goal of her program, Leigh said, is to encourage schools and other institutions to buy locally grown healthy foods.

"We have had over 38 counties purchase our foods. Last year, local schools purchased \$350,000 of our foods. For the first four months of this [academic] year, schools bought over \$500,000 worth of our foods."

The Farm to School Community Development Group, Leigh said, hopes to "simplify the process of purchasing local food for institutions. We help people sell to schools."

"West Virginia's Road Map for the Food Economy," a colorful booklet just published by the Food and Farm Coalition, is available at

[www.wvhub.org/wvffc](http://www.wvhub.org/wvffc).

The booklet identifies groups around the state that work in local communities to identify government policy needs and to organize events that encourage and promote local food production.

The coalition organizes food growers, ranchers, educators, food processors, business owners, farmers markets and eaters to "make food a vibrant part of the lives of all West Virginians."

Groups that helped publish and promote the booklet include: the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, Blue Moon Fund, West Virginia Office of Healthy Lifestyles, Mid-Ohio Valley Health Department, BB&T Bank, WVU Davis College of Agriculture, JM Catering and the Kanawha County WVU Extension Service.

Dr. Jamie Jeffrey, a pediatrician at Charleston Area Medical Center who also helps run KEYS 4 Healthy Kids, said her group promotes healthy eating and living.

"Our motto is 5210. That stands for five servings of vegetables and fruit a day, two hours or less of [television] screen time, one hour of physical exercise a day and zero sweet beverages.

"When we started our [KEYS 4 Healthy Kids] Center, we found 49 percent of the children [we saw] between two and 14 were obese. Five years later, that rate dropped to 36 percent. Children between the ages of 2 and 5 have aligned with the national average."

The group, Jeffrey said, urges mothers to breast feed their babies and make sure all young children eat vegetables. The group also encourages schools to build gardens to help train students about local farming.

"A majority of [child] patients I see eat only one vegetable a day. And that is at school. We see adult diseases, like diabetes, in pediatric patients.

"Our goal is to increase the exposure of consumers to fresh, local food," Jeffrey said.

Gail Patton, executive director of Unlimited Future Inc. and president of Tri-State Local Foods, said, "Farmers aren't going to grow food if they can't make money."

Patton and her groups promote the development of local food markets like Wild Ramp in Huntington.

"We have 121 food producers and 90 percent of our customers live within a 50-mile radius of Huntington," she said. "Schools, houses and institutions are all customers.

"We also need farmers markets to increase distribution and profitability for farmers."

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