

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, November 2, 2020

Contact: Katie Schmitt, Volunteer Marketing Coordinator, Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens, Inc.

Email: katie@foodpantrygardens.org

Phone: (320) 292-4791

From Garden to Steamer Bag – Community Collaboration Expands Impact of MAFPG

MADISON, WIS. – Access to high quality produce that is appealing, fresh and convenience is critical to our community's health. During the COVID-19 era when stress, social chaos and visits to local pantries increased by about 65 percent, the Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens (MAFPG) explored how to begin light processing of their locally grown produce to facilitate healthy eating by those in need. Finding the time to prepare a fresh head of broccoli can be an overwhelming meal preparation task for a single mom just trying to stay afloat – a major contributor to why some of the fresh produce from our emergency food system does not end up in the mouths of those who need it most.

It is hard to argue about the convenience of a steamer bag of fresh-cut broccoli or cauliflower florets ready to microwave compared to the unprocessed produce. As such, MAFPG developed light processing logistics for distribution of nearly 800 steamer bags of broccoli, cauliflower, and green beans the Gardens grew and harvested. Produce was cut by MAFPG volunteers along with the culinary teams from UW Health and Promega Corporation. Steamer bags were donated by Festival Foods and were packed by MAFPG volunteers, UW Health dietetics interns, and others in multiple community locations including the Lussier Community Education Center and Middleton Community Church. Labels with cooking instructions in both English and Spanish were donated by a local printing company. The steamer bags were distributed to nine different area food programs.

"We are grateful to be in a position where we can support organizations who are doing the important work of feeding our neighbors, and we look forward to continuing our work together," shared Kerra McConnell, catering experience partner with Promega.

The light processing efforts continued through the end of October and were coordinated by MAFPG board member and volunteer Development Director Dr. Brian Arndt, a UW Health physician in the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health.

"Food insecurity is a major contributor to poor health, and unfortunately it has only become more prevalent in the COVID era," offers Arndt. "Advocating for nutrition security in our own community by systematically addressing and intervening on the social determinants of health is definitely within my scope as a family physician. One of my professional goals is to write fewer prescriptions for insulin and start writing prescriptions for produce from a fresh food pharmacy. These efforts definitely get us closer to that vision becoming a local reality. It's been incredibly satisfying to support the local emergency food system by weaving together community connections, contributing healthcare perspectives, leadership, personal financial support, and volunteerism."

Madison-based Sub-Zero Group and Sun Prairie-based Compeer Financial provided financial support that made it possible for MAFPG to build a small onsite walk in cooler at Forward Garden, MAFPG's largest growing operation located at the 15-acre Pope Farm Homestead in the Town of Middleton on Old Sauk Road.

“That cooler has been the hub connecting multiple spokes on the wheels in our produce’s journey and contributes to a refrigerated shelf life of about a week from the day it’s packed,” says Arndt. “There are so many pieces to put together in this puzzle, but the many hands involved have certainly made for a lighter lift. It’s been great to hear from our pantry and food program partners that this is often their first produce to go. MAFPG is certainly evolving from what we’ve traditionally been known for in Dane County over the last 20 years, but we are all in as we transform to help support the consumer demand for this lightly processed fresh local produce by engaging additional community partners along the way well beyond the COVID era.”

As a local non-profit, Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens has provided more than two million pounds of high-quality produce over the last two decades for the Dane County emergency food system. This production has been supported by more than 10,000 volunteers and numerous community partners. In a typical season, MAFPG gleans produce from area farms and grows in their own garden network up to 100,000 pounds of fresh and culturally relevant produce such as okra, collard greens, cilantro, tomatillos, hot peppers, bitter melon, Asian eggplant, and more. Despite physical distancing and other COVID-related restrictions that limited production in 2020, over 600 volunteers tended to the produce logging 5,000 volunteer hours, growing more than 60,000 pounds of produce and gleaning an additional 20,000 pounds from area farms and markets. To support the impact and mission of the Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens, visit www.foodpantrygardens.org or follow MAFPG on Facebook or Instagram. Volunteers are always welcome to help plant, grow, harvest, process, and distribute produce from April through October.