**Feeding Westchester Proposal**

**for the New York State Health Foundation’s**

**Healthy Food, Healthy Lives Grant**

**Executive Summary**

Feeding Westchester is requesting a $20,000 grant from the New York State Health Foundation to help expand three of our vital hunger-combatting services. Food insecurity is a serious issue in Westchester County, as working residents are fighting a constant, daily battle against hunger. By providing extended access to fresh, affordable, nutritious food to neglected communities as a way of combatting food insecurity, this project falls under New York State Health Foundation’s Healthy Food, Healthy Lives program.

Almost 70% of food-insecure families live above the poverty line, which means they don’t necessarily qualify for federal nutrition programs, but they still can’t afford to eat. Even before COVID-19, one in five Westchester residents suffered from hunger. Compounding that fact, food insecurity has risen in Westchester by 50% since the start of the pandemic. One of Feeding Westchester’s proudest accomplishments is the confronting of this challenge head-on in 2020, by distributing double the amount of food initially planned prior to the pandemic.

When people are food-insecure, taking care of themselves becomes less of a priority. With their choices severely restricted, these people usually don’t have the opportunity to eat healthy foods, causing their health to deteriorate as a result. Many people also live in areas known as “food deserts,” where access to fresh, nutritious food isn’t an option, due to either a lack of grocery stores or transportation. Feeding Westchester, like the New York State Health Foundation, is on a mission to help improve the health of its underserved citizens by providing nutritious food.

Support from the New York State Health Foundation’s Healthy Food, Healthy Lives grant will allow us to provide approximately 60,000 more nutritious meals to food-insecure families in Westchester County. This goal will be achieved by extending the hours of the Mobile Food Pantry and the Fresh Market programs, and by increasing the number of households served by the Green Thumb program. Although the Mobile Food Pantry provided 2.9 million pounds of food, and the Fresh Market provided 1.9 million pounds of food in the fiscal year 2020, these programs still have inadequate availability for working residents. Expanding the hours of operation to evenings and weekends will better serve those who need our help. Also, by expanding the Green Thumb program, a weekly supply of fresh produce can be provided to 25% more households. The path to a healthy community starts with access to healthy food.

**Background and Accomplishments**

Feeding Westchester, founded in 1988, is the largest nonprofit hunger-relief organization in Westchester County. Its mission is two-fold: Combatting food insecurity in this particular area of suburban New York City, and preventing food waste, which in turn helps the environment. Feeding Westchester handles 95% of all emergency food distribution throughout Westchester County. As of June 2020, the organization provided 13.8 million meals to people in need in the span of one fiscal year, equaling 185,000 people served each month. Feeding Westchester also serves 156,000 children and 56,000 senior citizens throughout the year.

Even before COVID-19, between 2017 and 2018, Feeding Westchester provided 9.3 million pounds of food to county residents, with one in five Westchester citizens experiencing hunger.

Although COVID-19 posed a serious challenge, Feeding Westchester still managed to provide 18.4 million meals (or 22 million pounds of food) in 2020. This significantly exceeded its pre-pandemic plan to distribute 11 million pounds of food. In the fiscal year of June 2019-June 2020, Feeding Westchester provided 2.9 million pounds of food through its Mobile Food Pantries, 1.2 million pounds of food through its Fresh Markets (an extension of the Mobile Food Pantry program in food deserts), and 1 million pounds of food directly to kids through its dedicated children’s programs.

In 2021, Feeding Westchester serves an average of 225,000 people every month through nearly 300 community partners, meal programs and direct food distributions.

A large part of Feeding Westchester’s work is getting healthy meals into the hands of food-insecure families. Some of the programs Feeding Westchester operates are as follows:

* **The Mobile Food Pantry**. This is a 26-foot refrigerated truck that travels to underserved communities as a “market on wheels.” The Mobile Food Pantry offers nutritious food for those who aren’t able to access necessities like fresh produce, meat and dairy items. **2.9 million pounds of food are provided a year through Feeding Westchester’s fleet of eight Mobile Food Pantry trucks**.
* **Fresh Market**. An extension of the Mobile Food Pantry program, which offers fresh produce in areas where affordable, good-quality fruits and vegetables are scarce. **1.2 million pounds of food are provided a year through Feeding Westchester’s Fresh Markets.**
* **Green Thumb**. This program organizes and packs bags of fresh produce for weekly delivery to community partners and meal programs. **3,200 Westchester households are served by this program every week.**
* **The BackPack Program**. This program provides children with enough nutritious food for no less than six meals on the weekends through partnerships with local schools, daycare centers, libraries and other organizations. They are items that kids can prepare themselves even if adults aren’t around to supervise. A program like this can help set children on the path to academic and social success by nourishing both their bodies and minds. **156,000 children are served by this and other child-based programs a year.**
* **The Senior Grocery Program.** This program brings fresh produce and other necessary groceries to senior citizens’ homes (and those living with disabilities). **56,000 seniors are served by this program every year.**
* **SNAP Assistance.** Feeding Westchester provides information and direct assistance regarding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps). The organization employs a full-time coordinator who makes home visits to senior citizens and disabled members of the community, assisting these people with the screening and application process. **Feeding Westchester makes over 400 phone calls and 140 home visits to help seniors and disabled residents with their SNAP benefits.**
* **Nutrition Education.** Feeding Westchester provides resources (including Zoom workshops and online videos) dedicated to teaching low-income families about the benefits of eating fresh produce, and how to cook nutritious meals on a budget.

Feeding Westchester is a $16 million organization. This includes an $8 million operating budget, with the value of donated food amounting to another $8 million. There are 42 employees on staff, as well as 23 members of the Board of Directors, with nine serving on the Executive Committee. The organization is proud to partner with not only prominent corporate funders like Bank of America, Stop and Shop, Wells Fargo, ConEdison, JP Morgan Chase and PepsiCo Foundation, but local groups like the Jandon Foundation and the Giving Circle of Lower Westchester. Feeding Westchester is funded primarily through corporate/foundation/community and individual support ($3.5 million), with New York State government sources providing some support as well ($1.5 million).

**Need in Westchester County**

Despite its reputation as an affluent area, Westchester County has a significant low-income population. For the working poor, every day is a struggle against low, stagnant wages, and an ever-rising cost of living. Funds for groceries aren’t always a given for these families after paying for housing expenses and childcare. It’s also worth noting that more than 23 million Americans live in food deserts – and that includes heavily populated areas. In many cases, those residents don’t have a car or grocery store options within walking distance. People in those situations tend to then make unhealthy food choices.

From a survival perspective, experiencing food insecurity will ultimately have a significant effect on people’s physical, developmental and mental health. But the plain truth is that in many cases, households that are food-insecure may not necessarily qualify for federal nutrition programs. In fact, almost 70% of food-insecure families live above the poverty line. This level of food insecurity was a fact of life for many county residents even before COVID-19: Nearly 20% of Westchester children lived with food insecurity prior to the pandemic hitting in March 2020.

There are approximately 200,000 Westchester County residents who are unable to put nutritious food on the table on a regular basis. Although food insecurity has risen by 50% in Westchester County since the start of the pandemic, it remains a long-term challenge regardless of the arrival of COVID vaccines.

**Project Description**

Feeding Westchester is requesting a $20,000 grant from the New York State Health Foundation to help expand its Mobile Food Pantry and Fresh Market programs throughout Westchester County to reduce rising instances of food insecurity. The organization will do so by: 1) increasing the number of days and hours the Mobile Food Pantry and Fresh Markets service their current communities in need; and 2) expanding its Green Thumb program to increase distribution of fresh produce.

By providing extended access to fresh, affordable nutritious food to overlooked communities as a way of combatting food insecurity, this project falls under the New York State Health Foundation’s Healthy Food, Healthy Lives program.

The Mobile Food Pantry, a program that’s been in operation since 2014, is a 26-foot refrigerated truck that operates as a brick-and-mortar food pantry, providing fresh meat, dairy, fruits and vegetables to communities that otherwise wouldn’t have access to high-quality, nutritious foods. Feeding Westchester currently has a fleet of eight Mobile Pantry Trucks, making more than 500 stops a year. On a yearly basis, the organization has recovered more than 3 million pounds of fresh food – which would otherwise go to waste – that is then used for the Mobile Food Pantry and Fresh Market programs. These programs allow Feeding Westchester to serve neighborhoods where there are no direct service agencies available. A huge benefit of the Mobile Food Pantry program is that these trucks can usually carry more perishable food (e.g. fresh fruits and vegetables), although they do carry both perishable and nonperishable items. In addition, about half of the residents the Mobile Food Pantries serve are children.

Feeding Westchester’s Fresh Market is an extension of the Mobile Food Pantry program, providing fresh produce in areas where affordable, good-quality fruits and vegetables are scarce. At the moment, Fresh Market operations are extremely limited; although four locations exist, they are only open approximately once a month for two to three hours at a time.

Feeding Westchester’s Mobile Food Pantry currently visits two-to-four locations per day (except Sundays) for two hours per stop – averaging about a dozen stops per week. In many cases, their hours of operation conflict with the average work day, which ultimately clashes with the schedules of the people the Mobile Food Pantry benefits the most – working residents who are food-insecure. An expansion of the Mobile Food Pantry program would allow for the trucks to visit communities at their current schedule, as well as at additional times that are more convenient for people who can’t do their shopping until the evening or the weekends. While the Mobile Food Pantry does operate on Saturdays, again, it is only able to make stops at three or four locations in one day, thus severely limiting the amount of access available to food-insecure families, some of whom are only available to shop on the weekends, and who may not have a car at their disposal.

Westchester County covers an area of approximately 450 square miles, but on an average Saturday, the Mobile Food Pantry only reaches an area of about 15 miles. This is severely limiting to the thousands of food-insecure residents who live in the entire county. Expanding Feeding Westchester’s Fresh Markets operations will allow for yet another option for low-income families to obtain nutritious groceries. It is Feeding Westchester’s hope that by increasing the presence of both the Mobile Food Pantry and the Fresh Markets, the only things that will decrease are widespread hunger, poor health, and the stigma of being food-insecure. If the Mobile Food Pantry and Fresh Markets remain infrequent, obscure programs, then those who need them the most may be less likely to seek out the help these programs provide.

Forty percent of the food Feeding Westchester distributes is fresh produce, averaging about 6.6 million pounds distributed in the fiscal year of June 2019-June 2020. Through its Green Thumb program, volunteers pack bags full of fresh, seasonal fruits and vegetables for delivery to community partners and meal programs on a weekly basis. Approximately 3,200 Westchester households are served by this program every week, with each bag providing at least four types of vegetables and two types of fruits. Given the steady rise in grocery costs – up about 3.5% since the start of the pandemic, the need for good-quality produce in food-insecure households is great. Too often, food insecurity means having to choose inexpensive meals with low nutritional value, which can lead to a vicious cycle of poor diet and poor health in the long-term. In addition, those already suffering from chronic diseases like diabetes and high blood pressure can be adversely affected by hunger and food insecurity. Because a strong immune system begins at the table, and because food insecurity can often mean making unhealthy food choices, Feeding Westchester wishes to expand its Green Thumb program as a way of preventing disease and further health problems in the long-term.

Feeding Westchester’s initial plan for service expansion through New York State Health Foundation’s Healthy Food, Healthy Lives grant is as follows:

* **Mobile Food Pantry:** Feeding Westchester will extend operating hours during its weekly dozen Mobile Food Pantry stops. In addition to its regular daytime weekday schedule, the increased funding will allow the Mobile Food Pantry to operate during hours that are more convenient for working families. Specifically, in the evenings and on the weekends.
* **Fresh Market:** Feeding Westchester will extend operations at its four Fresh Market locations. They are currently only open once a month, for two to three hours. Increased funding will allow all four locations to open their doors twice a month, for up to four hours at a time.
* **Green Thumb**: Additional funding for the Green Thumb program will allow Feeding Westchester to increase the number of households served every week from 3,200 to 4,000. These needy families will enjoy a bag of four different types of fresh vegetables and two different types of fresh fruits.

Considering that nearly 70% of food-insecure families in Westchester County live above the poverty line, it is unlikely that the need for programs like the Mobile Food Pantry, Fresh Markets and Green Thumb will decrease anytime soon. But given how large of an area Westchester is, these programs are only serving a fraction of those in need. Not everyone has a car to get to the Mobile Food Pantry location, or a grocery store within walking distance. With funding to expand these programs to meet the needs of the community, Feeding Westchester won’t just be providing food to hungry families, but also helping to improve their overall health with nutritious meals. It will mean giving people a new lease on life, helping to reduce the stigma of food insecurity, and allowing these New York State residents to literally live their best lives.

**Evaluation**

Feeding Westchester will take a quantitative approach to gauge the success of all three programs by measuring the number of people newly served.

**Mobile Food Pantry:** Feeding Westchester plans to meticulously document the number of people served during both its regularly scheduled Mobile Food Pantry stops – as well as during its expanded operating hours. Customers will be required to fill out an information form whenever they visit a Mobile Food Pantry. The form will inquire as to how many people they are shopping for, in order to determine the number of households, as well as individuals, the Mobile Food Pantry is assisting. These numbers will then be compared to determine whether or not the additional hours are a worthwhile investment.

**Fresh Market:** Feeding Westchester also plans to document the number of people served during the extended hours at all four Fresh Market locations. As with the Mobile Food Pantry, customers will be required to fill out an information form whenever they visit a Fresh Market. The form will inquire as to how many people they are shopping for, in order to determine the number of households, as well as individuals, the Fresh Market is helping. These numbers will then be compared to the people served during the current Fresh Market operating schedule.

**Green Thumb**: At present, the Green Thumb program provides bags of fresh fruits and vegetables to 3,200 households a week. Increased funding will allow Feeding Westchester to procure additional produce. Feeding Westchester will then communicate directly with the community partners and meal programs who distribute bags of fresh produce through the Green Thumb program. It will be the partners’ responsibility to relay all instances of escalated produce-bag distribution to Feeding Westchester in order to accurately document the number of households newly served.

**Sustainability**

The Mobile Food Pantry, Fresh Markets and Green Thumb have been ongoing programs within Feeding Westchester for the past several years. But this proposed expansion does require continued fundraising once the grant period is complete. During New York State Health Foundation’s grant period, Feeding Westchester plans to reach out to like-minded foundations that are dedicated to local funding such as the Westchester County Foundation, the North Star Fund, the Elias Foundation, the Charles Frueauff Foundation, as well as additional Westchester-based organizations, to help keep the extended version of these programs alive well beyond the first initial grant period. Feeding Westchester is fully aware that Westchester residents have come to depend on these programs in order to survive. The last thing anyone wants is for the Mobile Food Pantries and Fresh Markets to increase their presence in hard-hit communities, only to then disappear after the completion of the Healthy Food, Healthy Lives grant.

**Conclusion**

By working together, Feeding Westchester and the New York State Health Foundation have a tremendous opportunity to achieve the same goal: Improve the health of New York State residents through nutritious food. According to the New York State Health Foundation’s website, “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Those who are food-insecure don’t have the option of maintaining a healthy lifestyle through their meals, so it is Feeding Westchester’s mission to make sure that they can. Through increased availability of fresh produce, dairy and proteins, hardworking Westchester families can make their health a priority again. More importantly, children can go to bed on a full stomach, giving them nutrients and energy that they need to succeed in school the following day.

Your support of a $20,000 Healthy Food, Healthy Lives grant will assist in accomplishing these objectives, ensuring that no one in Westchester County goes hungry. Our extended Mobile Food Pantry hours will allow working residents to obtain nutritious food at hours that are convenient for them. In addition, our Fresh Market expansion will provide much-needed grocery items in areas considered to be food deserts, and our Green Thumb program expansion will increase the number of households receiving bags of fresh produce by 25%.

The New York State Health Foundation, through its grant, will help Westchester residents like Anne, a veterinarian tech and nursing student, whose full-time income isn’t enough to feed her family. Anne doesn’t just rely on Feeding Westchester’s Mobile Food Pantry: She calls it a “godsend” that “helps me nourish myself and my son and incorporate healthy foods into our diet.” Westchester teen Paola also credits Feeding Westchester for making sure she and her parents never went hungry: “When my family moved to Westchester, my parents had a really hard time affording food. Having access to food programs was great because it meant having food for me and my family.”

By helping to provide healthy food, New York State Health Foundation truly will be working to create healthy lives.