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In Coal Country, Farmers Get Creative To Bridge The Fresh Produce Gap

In coal country, thousands of miners have lost jobs. While there aren't any easy solutions, in West Virginia, two farmers are doing what they can to keep wealth in their community and provide healthy food to more people.

In the parking lot of the Five Loaves and Two Fishes Food Bank in McDowell County, squash and basil are growing in 18 tall white towers without any dirt. It's a farming method called hydroponics. The vegetables sprout from tiny holes as water and nutrients flood the roots.

Joel McKinney built this hydroponic garden because it produces a lot of food yet takes up just a little space.

"So like for right here I can grow 44 plants, whereas somebody growing in the ground can only grow four," McKinney says. "So I want to do as much vertical space as I can and really amaze people with the poundage of food, because I'm growing up instead of out."

McKinney sells lettuce to the local high school and makes about \$800 every three weeks.

He also gives away some of his produce to the food pantry, which is run by his parents. And along with a handful of other farmers, he has started a farmers market outside the food pantry. The goal is to raise the profile of local farming in the community and help small farmers make extra income.

When the market starts back up in the spring, it will accept benefits from SNAP — the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps — to help encourage purchases from low-income residents.

"People have the ability to grow their own food. I want to help them learn to market their product and earn some money," he says. "Like people who quilt or make necklaces, the same thing with growing food — people have just never seen it as a marketable skill."

With so many coal miners out of work now, the number in need of food has soared.

McKinney's mother, Linda, who runs Five Loaves and Two Fishes, sometimes brings food directly to people's homes — especially if she hears there are children going hungry.

"And when you take them food, you will find out it's not just food that they need," Linda McKinney says. "There are a lot of individuals that are so desperate. These individuals are just surviving."

Farmer Sky Edwards has tried to start a farmers market in McDowell County, W.Va., but so far it hasn't been successful. So he travels 60 miles round trip each week to sell vegetables in Bluefield, W.Va., where residents have more cash to spend on groceries.

In this West Virginia county, many have given up trying to find a job. And the unemployment rate is almost three times the national average.

This is a major problem, says John Deskins of West Virginia University's Bureau of Business and Economic Research. He says McDowell County has had an economic collapse comparable to the Great Depression.

"We're talking about tremendous, tremendous losses in a relatively short time frame," he says. "We've seen major declines in coal production, major declines in coal employment. But then that spills over into the rest of the economy, right? These coal mining jobs are good, high-paying jobs."

Families have to make choices: Do they pay rent or buy fresh food?

Bradley Wilson teaches geography at West Virginia University, and he says at least a quarter of people in the state struggle to afford groceries.

"In places like McDowell, that's compounded by a lack of access to the very kind of food environment necessary to live that healthy lifestyle as stores like Walmart disappear, or businesses close up shop because the population is declining," Wilson says.

Walmart closed its supercenter in McDowell County this past January. Many residents now have to travel over an hour to buy groceries. Not all of them own a car.

"And even when they go grocery shopping at the beginning of the month, they have to pay somebody to take them," says farmer Sky Edwards.

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Kristin McCartney is a registered dietitian who works with the Family Nutrition Program out of West Virginia University. She says poor access to grocery stores is one reason so many West Virginians eat unhealthy diets. But it's not the only challenge in encouraging better eating habits.

"There's still a struggle in West Virginia to get people to eat vegetables. We're one of the lowest states [in terms of] vegetable consumption," says McCartney.

That's why, at the market in Bluefield, Edwards often shares cooking tips with customers. Late this summer, I watched as he explained a recipe for roasted squash to a customer.

Edwards has also bought a truck to start a mobile farmers market in rural McDowell. He wants to make it easier for people in his community who don't have cars to access fresh produce. He's also planning to accept food stamps at his truck when it gets up and running.

"You have to make it easy for people to eat better," he says.