

The REPORTER

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VeggieVanGo produce program coming to RNeSU

Collaboration between town, school and food shelf made it happen

By LEE J. KAHRIS

BRANDON — A new meal program that distributes produce to families in need is coming to our area thanks to a collaborative effort.

The Vermont Foodbank's VeggieVanGo program has added the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union to its network and will start regular distribution next month from Oter Valley Union High School. The program organizes a bimonthly drop-off of fresh produce to a central location for families

within the supervisory union.

Rutland Northeast's participation in the program was the result of a group effort between the town of Brandon, RNeSU, and the Brandon Area Food Shelf.

RNeSU Superintendent Jeanne Collins said Brandon Economic Development Officer and Recreation Director Bill Moore approached the supervisory union with the idea.

"We thought it was a great idea," she said. "Especially with OV being right there on Route 7

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Veggie

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in the middle of the supervisory union, we felt like we had a great location to do this.”

Moore said the collaboration was just one more part of a town wide response to feeding local residents once the pandemic hit.

“The Brandon Rec Department during the initial pandemic response shifted gears to provide community support,” he said. “The need to connect Brandon-area folks to the VT Foodbank via their amazing food security programs, like VeggieVanGo, was apparent and we were happy to work with the Brandon Area Toy Project to engage the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union in this strategic partnership.”

Melissa Disorda of Brandon works for the Vermont Food Bank and is the VeggieVanGo Event Distribution Coordinator.

“The collaboration between a community based non-profit, a town, and a school system illustrates a creative approach to address food security,” Disorda said. “This level of collaboration is a first for the

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honored to partner with to bring fresh produce to the RNeSU community.”

*Melissa Disorda,
VeggieVanGo Event
Coordinator, VT Foodbank*

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The program operates in six other school districts statewide, including Barre City, Bennington, Brattleboro, Rutland, St Johnsbury, Windsor and Woodstock. There

are also drop offs at hospitals and Veggie Van Go special events.

How does it work? The Vermont Foodbank first collects the produce through donations and local farmers. The Vermont Foodbank then distributes roughly 2 million pounds of fresh food through the VeggieVanGo program each year. Food will be dropped off at the school, and families in need will drive by on the appointed days to pick up the food packages.

Food insecurity is a real concern within Rutland Northeast, Collins said, adding that the pandemic has exacerbated the issue locally as it has across the state. RNeSU has been feeding breakfast and lunch to all students who sign up, Collins said, whether they are in school or at home, through the free and reduced lunch program.

“We have seen firsthand the food crisis some of our families have faced this year, especially as we have been making and delivering meals to our students,” Collins said. “It makes perfect sense (to do this program), it’s wonderful.”

Dates and times of the Veg-

gieVanGo events at OV are not being publicized in order to protect the privacy and dignity of those who will be participating. Families within RNeSU will be informed as to the time and date of the OV VeggieVanGo events.

But the food drop offs are more than just an assembly line of people loading boxes into cars. They offer the chance for folks to visit with each other, observing social distancing,

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*Colleen Wright,
Brandon Area Food Shelf*

and to learn more about nutrition and healthy food choices with cooking demonstrations, taste tests, recipes and outreach.

Collins said the program will serve RNeSU families at least through the rest of the school year.

“We’re open to whatever the Vermont Foodbank can do,” she said, adding that the supervisory union itself will continue to offer meals this summer, and will be available to anyone 18 and under.

Volunteers will be needed to pull off the bi-monthly VeggieVanGo drop offs at OV.

Brandon resident and perennial volunteer Lesa Pratt is the local VeggieVanGo organizer and is in charge of amassing volunteers. Those interested in volunteering can call 802-465-8021.

Colleen Wright of the Brandon Area Food Shelf is a driving force in Brandon when it comes to feeding people. She said the collaborative nature of the program was a great fit for Brandon.

“It’s a real testament to the spirit of community in the Brandon area. Working together always results in a better outcome,” she added, “and the strength of our volunteer base makes programs like this possible.”