

Bennington College | \$15,000 Awarded to Local Organizations Addressing Food Insecurity in Bennington County

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Bennington College Awards \$15,000 to Local Organizations Addressing Food Insecurity in Bennington County

Bennington, VT: Bennington College [has awarded](#) three grants of \$5,000 each to implement and support community-proposed initiatives that explore and expand food systems in Bennington county.

Project proposals from [Willy's Variety Store](#), [Shires Housing](#), and [Project Against Violent Encounters \(PAVE\)](#) were selected among applications from community members to Bennington College's **Community Resource and Strategy Fund**. This fund supports catalyzing, collaborative projects that further understanding of local food systems and leverage innovative solutions to address food insecurity in Bennington County.

The Community Resource and Strategy Fund is made possible by the College's [\\$1 million, three-year grant](#) from the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#) to collaboratively explore and address the systemic causes of food insecurity in Bennington County. Applications for the next cycle of the Community Resource and Strategy Fund will be accepted beginning on September 15, 2020.

"We are so pleased that the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant is able to fund these important projects that respond to food insecurity in the town of Bennington," said [Susan Sgorbati](#), Director of the Center for the Advancement of Public Action at Bennington College. "Each project has a different focus and is meeting the needs of our residents in different ways. We look forward to seeing the results of their programs."

Your Store Next Door

Residents with limited transportation often shop at grocery stores near their homes. Willy's Variety Store, located in Bennington's northeast neighborhood, is one of the few walkable options for groceries in the area. However, small groceries often cannot carry the inventory to meet a household's food needs without additional investments in infrastructure.

This Community Resource and Strategy grant will supply materials for store improvement—including a reach-in cooler, produce display racks, reusable bags, and collapsible grocery carts—to improve Willy's operation, increase customer satisfaction, and allow the store to supply a more diverse, nutritional range of products. As a capstone to these improvements, Willy's plans to host a public event showcasing the changes and building community within the town of Bennington.

This project will be led by **Liza Reif** and **Mary Ellen Devlin**, co-proprietors of Willy's; along with **Laura Brundage**, Vermont Department of Health; and **Kathy O'Reilly**, Bennington Hunger Council Co-Chair.

Applegate Community Health Empowerment Initiative

With dozens of impediments—including socioeconomic class, geography, and relative cost of food options—cooking healthy meals can be unrealistic or downright daunting for many limited-income residents of Bennington County's Shires Housing. This project empowers community members to plan and cook meals in a social environment by providing space, equipment, and support for food prep, including vacuum sealing and canning.

This Community Resource and Strategy grant will expand the needs of the current classes offered by Shires Housing/Support and Services at Home (SASH) to include buying necessary equipment, supporting their garden project for residents, and sustaining their cooking programs offered at Applegate Apartments' Community Center, which is already well-utilized by residents as a monthly Vermont Foodbank location.

Capitalizing on existing partnerships, this project will collaborate with the Vermont Foodbank, which will supply groceries for all workshops, and the DREAM Program, which will promote the workshops among youth participants.

This project will be led by **Becky Arbella**, Shires Housing/SASH Implementation Manager; along with **Madison Kremer**, Development Assistant & Communications Specialist at Shires Housing; **Emily Cohen**, Senior and Adult Programs Manager at Vermont Foodbank; **Kayla Daughtry**, DREAM Program Director, **Cynthia Veazie**, Property Manager at Applegate Apartments, and **Brenda Churco**, Assistant Property Manager at Applegate Apartments.

Sowing Seeds for Food Sovereignty at a Domestic Violence Shelter

Many of PAVE's domestic violence shelter clients face financial abuse. Without access to money or vehicles, they rely on the cheapest, most convenient food. Furthermore, in fleeing their homes, survivors do not have access to all the tools required to cook fresh food.

Through this Community Resource and Strategy grant, PAVE plans to build a garden at one of their domestic violence shelters. The garden project will serve as a food education tool for shelter residents, a space to hold communal dinners, and a workshop for GBICS Food Fit programs. This project will influence lifelong nutritional habits, as well as create a healing space to facilitate recovery from trauma.

This project will be led by **Nadia Lucchin**, PAVE Executive Director; along with [Tatiana Abatemarco](#), Bennington College faculty member, **Dane Whitman '16**, owner of Grey Oak Garden Design, LLC; and **Cindy Krautheim**, GBICS Food Fit Coordinator.

About Food Insecurity in Bennington County

Food insecurity—an inability to access enough healthy food to meet basic needs because of financial constraints—is a serious problem across the state of Vermont, and particularly in the Bennington region.

Hunger Free Vermont [reports](#) that one in ten Vermonters, and 15% of children under 18, live in food insecure households. These numbers [are higher](#) in Bennington County, where nearly 14% of the population lives at or below the poverty line, and 85% of public school students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Vermont Foodbank network partners provide food to 12.6% of all

residents of Bennington County, over half of whom [report](#) having to choose between paying for food and paying for utilities.

Addressing food insecurity in Bennington County involves overcoming challenges specific to life in a rural community, including fewer employment opportunities that provide a living wage; a lack of health insurance; the threatened erosion of government assistance programs for food, home heating, and healthcare; a lack of reliable public transportation, making it difficult to access nutritious food; and isolation, resulting in loneliness and disengagement, with substance abuse playing an increasing role.

These stressors of poverty can be accompanied by a lack of knowledge about health and nutrition, as well as limited cooking skills, resulting in poor diet. These “social determinants of health” have a significantly negative impact on physical and mental health.

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