



REGION FIVE
Development Commission

VetCSA Program Report

JUNE 2020



Funding for R5DC's VetCSA Program provided by the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) through the Support Our Troops (SOT) license plate fund grant program.
minnesotaveteran.org/sot

Project facilitation and coordination provided by Region Five Development Commission.
regionfive.org

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Overview

R5DC Final Report for VetCSA Program

Purpose of grant: To provide healthy food shares, cooking demonstrations and nutrition education to 50 veterans twice monthly for one year.



MDVA SOT Competitive Grant

Grantee Name: Region Five Development Commission
Grantee Address: 200 1st Street NE, Suite 2, Staples, MN 56479

Date of Report: June 2020 (Final Report)
Grant Period: May 2019 - May 2020

Acknowledgements

We are so grateful to MDVA'S SOT program for funding this program.

We would like to thank our participants, education coordinators, food demonstrators, partners hosting pickup sites, and our local growers and farmers for making this program a success.

Veterans and families, we appreciate your service and participation in this program. Thank you for sharing your stories with us!

Summary of Grant Outcomes

R5DC shares a summary of grant outcomes as they relate to the original work plan.



Background

The Region Five Development Commission (R5DC) mission to “enhance the vitality and quality of life in Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd & Wadena Counties” is met through programs like the VetCSA. The VetCSA program was delivered through a partnership of Sprout MN, our region's food hub, the County Veteran Service Officers and R5DC.

Our shared commitment to provide twice-monthly CSA shares of locally grown foods (aggregated from over 100 low income farmers) accompanied with chef cooking demonstrations, nutrition education and HIGH touch communication and referral services to 50 low-income Veterans was very well received.

Program Evaluation

Our form of evaluation prefers to report out the typical types of quantitative outputs such as:

- Dollars leveraged: **\$57,200**
- Number of acres: **3,750 acres**
- Number of pounds: **30,650 pounds**
- Number of meals: **25,542 meals to fill the missing meal gap**
- Number of growers: **51**
- Number of veterans served: **50+**

But beyond these measures we also observe and collect qualitative data including stories of veterans and families, new skills, new social networks, any new policy changes or built structures as result of program. We collect this information from program participant survey responses at the beginning and ending of the program and through weekly interaction with our Veteran - all to inform us on how/if the program is expanding the sock of rural wealth in multiple forms of capital, using the WealthWorks model of Eight Forms of Wealth¹.

¹Wealthworks Capitals, Aspen Institute, Washington DC | wealthworks.org



Defining 8 Forms of Wealth

Individual capital is the stock of skills and physical and mental healthiness of people in region.

Intellectual capital is the stock of knowledge, innovation, and creativity or imagination in a region.

Social capital is the stock of trust, relationships, and networks that support civil society.

Cultural capital is the stock of practices that reflect values and identity rooted in place, class, and/or ethnicity.

Natural capital is the stock of unimpaired environmental assets (e.g. air, water, land, flora, fauna, etc.) in a region.

Built Capital is the stock of fully functioning constructed infrastructure.

Political capital is the stock of power and goodwill held by individuals, groups, and/or organizations that can be held, spent or shared to achieve desired ends.

Financial capital is the stock of unencumbered monetary assets invested in other forms of capital or financial instruments.

Livelihoods & Inclusion Check: In addition to building multiple forms of wealth, regions adopting a rural wealth creation approach to economic development intentionally work to improve the livelihoods of low-income and other marginalized populations.

Local Ownership and Control Check:

Economic development “sticks” in a community when there is an opportunity to build local ownership and control over assets and stocks of wealth. Work with stakeholders to determine how to measure wealth creation, keep the issue of local ownership and control in mind. Ownership and control applies to physical assets that are easy to understand and count and more abstract ones, such as stocks of knowledge or community traditions. Even where assets are not fully owned by people and organizations within the region, there may be opportunities to control how assets are used.

Scan the QR code using your smartphone camera to learn more about Wealthworks.



VetCSA Program Capital



Individual

Cooking skills were gained. Knowledge of healthy eating habits were explored. Information of military and veteran connected events in the region were shared.



Intellectual

Lessons, demonstrations, videos, recipes and just sharing of personal methods used of various food items increased the intellectual capital significantly. Many individuals commented on learning new ways to cook with common items as well as expanded their information gathering on their own with learning new ways to cook with somewhat uncommon items. As a result of this program, the participants learned of new ways to obtain similar foods they received in the CSA boxes. Some frequented farmers market type facilities (Sprout Marketplace) during monthly vendor shows in the winter months, while others visited local Food Cooperatives to where the various producers of the items were located to purchase directly from them – which is additional financial impacts/capital that the project did not track but still worth mentioning.



Social

Several relationships were formed as a result of bringing the participants and their families together. A couple of widows learned they lived not far from each other and made it a point to meet prior to the VetCSA distribution. One gentleman learned their relative was neighbors with another one of the participants. One participant also provided copies of a book he had authored to the rest of the group who took part in the CSA demonstrations.





Cultural

The culture surrounding our military community does not dissolve once the veteran has completed their military career. Pride, respect and honor are all common aspects found when the participants gather to tell stories of their time in service, various places they've been and how the new foods they get to try might be incorporated into their menus. Seeing the widows light up when veterans would share stories embodied how the military culture has life long impressions and brings comfort throughout the life of the service member and their loved ones.



Natural

Knowing the items were all locally grown and/or produced was found to be an important piece that the participants really appreciated. The program offered a new market opportunity to local farmers/ranchers that allows the land they use to remain an environmental and financial asset.



Built

Physical infrastructure was not built as part of this program, however, previous investments of the Sprout's mobile market that delivered some of the VetCSA's was use of a built asset as was use of the pick up sites – built infrastructure - were leveraged to make the program possible.





Political

Local, regional and state political figures have been following the progress of this program and have shown increased interest in the success. Everyone can agree that our veteran community deserve healthy foods for physical and mental wellbeing. An opportunity to try new items in a cost-effective manner is key. Political figures putting this option as a priority will help to ensure changes in policies surrounding food equity in rural Minnesota.



Financial

The veterans and widows benefitted greatly from the VetCSA program. The financial hardship faced by those living in poverty standards make the thought of wasting money on food unbearable. Most of the participants expressed they did not wish to see their "gifts" go to waste. Many, while having the experience of growing up in rural parts of America and having served overseas, have not had opportunities to try unique or uncommon vegetables. However, when given new vegetables, along with information about what it is, how to prepare it and alternative cooking methods, participants showed great interest, and several indicated their desire for more. Many stated they would now be in search of new items at the markets. But this opportunity also allowed them the freedom to try new things and not feel quite as guilty for getting rid of the item if they didn't particularly care for it.

Though not impacting strictly veterans, the growers who produced the foods for the CSA shares had new opportunities to expand their market to individuals who may not have otherwise been able to benefit from their goods. By having an increased demand in their services/goods during an off growing season, this provided income to the growers they may not have seen. **"Providing this VetCSA as a year-round program allowed Sprout to source from numerous growers, including meat and grain producers – many of which are also Veterans"** – Arlene Jones, Executive Director, Sprout Food Hub.





Challenges & Lessons Learned

One of the lessons learned early on in this project was that of the physical pick up location sites. In order to serve the most amount of veterans we leveraged our relationships with our partners to utilize their space for pick-ups. However, many of the veterans live in very rural areas which made the transportation to the higher density sites more challenging, especially in the winter months. One gentleman shared that while he thoroughly enjoyed the food he received, he wished to only pick up once per month during the winter because he was having difficulty with the costs associated with driving 30 minutes. One family, while very grateful, indicated they did not wish to participate in the program after the first couple of pick ups due to the amount of driving it required.

This program commenced right through the Coronavirus pandemic and social distancing requirements. Logistics of the pick-up sites changed and the cooking demonstrations and nutrition education were delivered via videos and phone calls. The R5DC lead point person; Staci Headley made many "no touch" home deliveries into remote areas of the region and other team members stepped up to man the pick-up sites. One of the Sprout team members is a veteran and made the commitment to continue to safely aggregate the commodities from growers and pack the CSA's. The R5DC and Sprout team were collectively determined to finish the program and care for "their veterans".

At the onset of this program, staff had intended the veteran participants meet the low-income guidelines as established by USDA Rural Development (<https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/RD-GRHLimitMap.pdf>) which define the average low-income threshold for a two-person household in our five-county region as \$58,100/year. However, MDVA advised that the program must use the same income guidelines of the State Soldiers Assistance Program (SSAP), that follow the Federal VA pension rates. This threshold is significantly lower (\$22,584/single annually or \$26,772/family annually). Utilizing this income guideline to qualify veterans for this program proved to be incredibly challenging.

For example, veterans may not earn dollars in income every month; however, they own a significant amount of land or assets and, therefore, they do not qualify as "low income." Additionally, we know there were several who met the SSAP guidelines but were not aware of the program for one of several reasons: 1.) They are not a "high touch" individual and do not regularly see their VSO to be informed of the program or 2.) The individuals do not have the available income for miscellaneous costs such as broadband services and therefore did not see the promotion or receive emails asking for participants. We validated this from other participants who had informed their friends, neighbors, and relatives about this wonderful program. Others wished to participate as well, but they had not learned about it until the program was already full. Others wished to participate as well but they had not learned about it until the program was already full.

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Veterans living in remote, rural areas, pickup time duration, frequency of pickups and location of pickup sites were some of the challenges faced.

Many of our veterans live in very rural areas of central Minnesota. They do not need or have a desire to leave their small towns. Making this program attractive by offering the free, healthy, locally produced food, education and demonstrations was imperative. Having centrally located pick up sites that made it convenient for the majority of participants, while being mindful of the coordination it required with our food hub, as well as coordinating the chef for the cooking demonstrations and covering the education piece proved to be a bit of a balancing act.

Another lesson learned during this program was the time duration and frequency of the pick-ups. The pick-up slot was two hours long. For future program opportunities, this time will likely be shortened by at least 30 minutes. While the participants appreciated the wide window of time to pick up, there often would be an influx of pick ups at one time with several others picking up 30-40 minutes later. Therefore, not everyone was able to partake in the cooking demonstrations or education provided. Handouts, copies of "how-to" and recipes were provided to everyone, but it does not reach the same impact level desired.

During this program and through the military connected work that R5DC is engaged in, partners such as MN State Coordinator Tiffany Kovaleski with Building Healthy Military Communities (BHMC) came forward to support when and where needed. Thanks in part to the collaboration efforts undertaken for successful implementation of the VetCSA program, a natural offshoot was to coordinate and convene what is now called the Regional Military and Veteran Exchange (RMVE). R5DC staff, along with BHMC bring all the social service providers, workforce developers, employers, Yellow Ribbon community members, military points of contact, VSOs and service club representatives in the region together for a two-hour meeting held at Camp Ripley. Common areas of focused efforts to assist the military connected is the main objective though an education component and time for networking is built into the meeting. People who have attended indicated they found significant value in the meetings. It provided the non-military connected an intentional opportunity to learn how they can be of service with other organizations to the military community.

Final survey results indicate the participants connectivity and sense of belonging to their community and to other veterans increased overall.

All respondents indicated the program benefitted themselves or their family.

All respondents indicated they'd recommend the program be offered to other families in the future.



Testimonials

"I am a Vietnam veteran and really appreciate the VetCSA program. The produce, meat, eggs and other food is a great addition to our diet. I'm very impressed by the dedication and honest concern shown by your staff. I can tell Staci likes her job because it shows in the way she does it. I would certainly encourage you to continue this valiant program. Thank you for your time and effort spent in our communities."

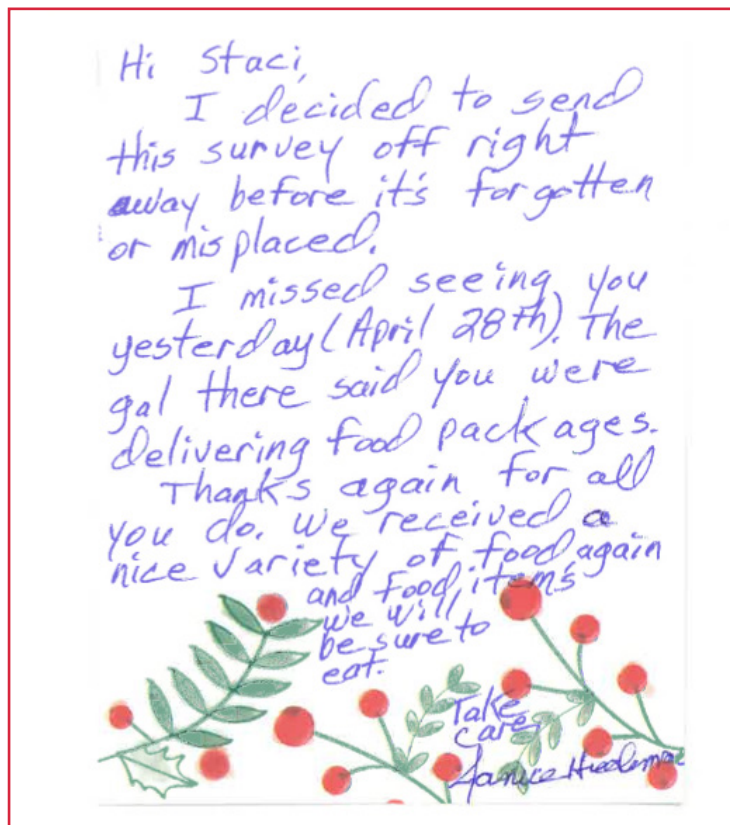
Ray Hiedeman, Vietnam 66, 25th Div. Cu Chi

Thank you for a wonderful program! And especially for bringing it to our door the last few weeks! We appreciated it all so much!

Maggie & Al Garin

You have been super! Always organized, on time and smiling. Thank you very much!

Sylvia Tappe



Scan the QR code using your smartphone camera to watch the VetCSA Program video.



Testimonials from Veterans/Program Participants

"We thought the food demonstrations and sampling was great - very helpful! Pick up time and location is perfect for us. We hope to see this continue. Thank you so much! This helps us out a lot."

Staples Pickup Participant

"We want to thank you for the opportunity to be a part of the VetCSA program. It has been a great encouragement for our family to incorporate wholesome, nutritious foods into our meals. Pickup day has been fun! We are always excited to see what new foods are in the boxes to try. We thank you again and hope this program will remain and bless others the way that it has blessed us!"

Chad & Courtney Wellman

"This program encourages families to prepare and eat wholesome nutritious meals. Our family has tried several new healthy foods from the boxes that we now incorporate into our weekly meals."

Little Falls Pickup Participant

Participant Comments from the Exit Survey

- Thank you for the introduction to many new foods that we have never tasted!
- Loved that the food was locally grown and harvested.
- Met many nice people doing this. Just wish it wouldn't have ended the way it has.
- Appreciated the deliveries to my house - thank you so much!
- My vote is the same as my husband's. he says "fantastic."
- We hope to see this continue. Thank you so much - this helps out a lot!
- We are grateful for everything you have given us. I have used everything you have given us and shared with my brother.
- It has introduced new ideas for meals and brought items we don't usually get.
- This program encourages families to prepare and eat wholesome nutritious meals. Our family has tried several new healthy foods from the boxes that we now incorporate into our weekly meals.
- Very good program – receiving many good food items
- Healthy food and helps out on grocery bills
- Excellent food products and recipes for them
- Good nutritional information
- It was very nutritional and tried different foods
- Access to healthy food & recipes

Testimonials from Veterans Service Officers

"The Veterans CSA program is one of the best efforts to help low income Veterans with healthy fresh food. Fresh food is not only nutritious but is good for health and mental wellbeing. The Veterans that have participated in this program love the variety of different food, allowing them to try new things. The second part is the comradeship the Veterans, spouses, and widows have when they are picking up their food baskets. They are given food demonstrations which helps them prepare the food, and also have some time to see each other and share their comradeship with each other."

David Anderson
Wadena County

"I just wanted to let you know that the veterans and widows really appreciated the program. I was glad to pick up their CSAs and they told me that it helped out a lot because the drive to Staples from Long Prairie was so much due to finding someone to drive them and didn't have enough gas. They also mentioned that some foods were interesting and they did try it. I hope this program continues due to the COVID19 and food is becoming very limited to veterans & their family members and widows. Our office also provides other programs thru the county, state or federal and VA benefits. Thank you so much."

Teresa Sorensen
Todd County

"Many Morrison County Veterans and families found great joy and benefit in the VetCSA program for Region 5. Having classes and food pick up at Sprout in Little Falls, MN was absolutely perfect. The set up was wonderful for food preparation, seating and education. The support personnel for the project were so kind and accommodating. If an individual could not pick up their food, it was delivered directly to the Veterans door step. No one was ever forgotten or left out. The program gave fulfillment to people by providing a fun, healthy, colorful ambience of décor and fresh food items. The program was quite impressive. Everyone learned something they didn't know before. People lost weight, became healthier, and made friendships that could last a lifetime.

Often as Veterans and spouses grow older, they are stuck at home more. VetCSA is providing a great opportunity to get out, meet people, learn and become healthier. Two ladies from Morrison County named Irene and Diane, not only became friends, but hope the program will keep going in the future. They miss seeing everyone each week. They will also miss the outstanding fresh home grown food they received. Little things like making your own spices, or how to use them in foods you would never imagine, was remarkable insight. Awareness of how to live a healthier life and knowledge of how to get there were great objectives that were definitely met. Morrison County Veterans were thankful to everyone who made this program so successful and special. There are high hopes for VetCSA to continue or prosper in the community."

Kathy Marshik
Morrison County

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Chad & Courtney Wellman



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