

Faulty exhaust fan blows good fortune to Berkshire Food Project

Foundation's \$50K grant supports kitchen upgrade for community meal site

BY BRAD JOHNSON

When Kim McMann assumed her new role as executive director of the Berkshire Food Project on Sept. 18, 2017, one of the first things she got was a bit of bad news.

"Darlene [Ellis], our kitchen manager, mentioned to me that the kitchen exhaust fan was not working," McMann recalled.

Over the next two years, that non-functioning fan has served as a catalyst for a host of grant-funded improvements to the organization's kitchen facility and operations within the First Congregational Church in downtown North Adams.

And that, by extension, has enhanced the Berkshire Food Project's overall role of addressing food insecurity and the social isolation of those who experience it.

"Our mission is both feeding people and reducing social isolation," said McMann.

The community-supported nonprofit organization fulfills that mission primarily through the free lunch that it prepares and serves every weekday to any and all who stop by between 11:30 a.m. and 1 p.m.

McMann explained that the day's lunch is served buffet style from noon to 1 p.m., while the preceding half hour is for coffee, pastries and socializing. She added that packaged meals left over from the prior day's lunch can be picked up during that first half-hour.

"That's good for people who can't make it for lunch because of work or other commitments," she said.

Started over 30 years ago by Williams College students in response to the closing of Sprague Electric and the resulting large-scale loss of jobs in the northern Berkshires, the



Kim McMann, executive director of the Berkshire Food Project, stands by the new exhaust system installed as part of a major renovation of the kitchen the organization uses within the First Congregational Church in North Adams.

Berkshire Food Project has played a vital role in the community as a place where people can find a free meal that is served in a welcoming environment of compassion and respect.

"In many cases, we are the first place people go when they are facing food insecurity," said Jim Mahon, chairman of the Berkshire Food Project's board of directors. "There are no barriers, no paperwork to fill out. All you have to do is show up to join us for a meal."

A professor of political science at Williams College, Mahon has been a board member for 20 years and has served as chair since 2001. He

noted that the Berkshire Food Project initially served two meals a week, and expanded to three meals in 1991. In 2004 it began serving lunchevery weekday in recognition of the fact that some people rely on the Berkshire Food Project for their only meal of the day.

Operating on a shoestring budget, the Berkshire Food Project last year served nearly 36,000 meals through the efforts of its small staff and much larger corps of volunteers.

"It's a small organization in the sense of staffing – we only have four people," said McMann, who succeeded longtime executive director Valerie Schwarz when she retired in 2017 after 24 years with the organization. In addition to McMann, the staff includes Darlene Ellis, kitchen manager; Caitlyn Johnson, assistant kitchen manager; and Barbara Worthington, outreach coordinator (whose position is paid for through the Senior Community Services Employment Program of Elder Services of Berkshire County).

"But we also have volunteers who work in the dining room and kitchen, as well as picking up food and doing many other tasks," she added.

McMann estimated that there's currently a pool of about 100 active volunteers, with a core of some 40 "regulars." In the dining room and kitchen alone, these volunteers put in over 1,000 hours each month to keep the community meal site running smoothly.

"Right now we're serving about 110 lunches a day and prepping for 140," she said. "And we could not do this without our volunteers."

She explained that prepping for a greater number of meals than are actually served on a given day is done by design to ensure that there is always enough on hand to meet the day's demand. However, those excess meals are never wasted; rather, they are packaged, stored and distributed as takeaway meals the following day. "Some people take them for their kids' dinner or for use over the weekend," she said.

Those coming to the community meal site do so for a range of reasons. McMann and Mahon noted that many simply don't have money to buy enough food, while others may not have the ability or facilities to cook for themselves. Some live alone and come to the Berkshire Food Project for human connections.

There are also people who come specifically to provide those connections for others experiencing social isolation, and to gain a better understanding of how they can support those living with food insecurity.

"We encourage everyone in the community to come have lunch with us," said

McMann. "We want a diversity of people and interactions here. We provide this space where other people who may not need a free lunch can learn about the barriers some of their neighbors are experiencing."

This type of interaction promotes connections and networking that can sometimes have a big impact for individuals. "There are life-changing moments that can take place here,"

"When that fan broke, it opened a whole can of worms."

said McMann, noting that conversations at the lunch table may lead to sharing of information about job opportunities,

educational programs, or other resources or services available to help people living with food insecurity.

That role of connecting people with other resources is also shared by staff and volunteers. "There's the recognition that we are always a source of referrals," said Mahon. "When we see somebody new come in, we often ask how they're doing to find out what other needs they may have."

Kitchen upgrade

The Berkshire Food Project leases its space within the First Congregational Church, with a portion of the rent covered by the church as an in-kind donation to the organization.

This favorable arrangement has allowed Berkshire Food Project to operate at an affordable cost at a central downtown location.

However, working with a kitchen installed many years ago in a 150-year-old building can have its drawbacks, which McMann discovered when the kitchen's exhaust system put a crimp in the otherwise smooth operations of the Berkshire Food Project.

"When that fan broke, it opened a whole can of worms," she said, explaining that – in the process of exploring options for replacement of exhaust system – they learned that a host of other issues with the kitchen would also have to be addressed.

"Basically, we had to bring everything else up to code," she said. "Any time any work is done, any [existing] issues with code compliance must also be remedied. And we had some things that had been grandfathered in over the years."

For example, the existing exhaust system followed a meandering path through various interior spaces above the kitchen to an exterior vent – a situation prohibited under current building code. So, McMann noted, it was not enough to simply repair the exhaust fan. Rather, the entire system had to be replaced.

She found, however, that there was no clear path to doing this, given the configuration of the building and the kitchen within it. "There was no way of doing what needed to be done without moving things around and making a lot of other changes," she said.

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Over the course of the next year, McMann and her board explored options for upgrading the kitchen and came up with a ballpark estimate of \$36,000 – a figure well beyond the organization’s means.

This necessitated a search for funding for the project. Facilitated by Richard Alcombright, a vice president at MountainOne Bank and former mayor of North Adams, the Berkshire Food Project was brought to the attention of a family fund administered by the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation. “The family picked us to receive funding for the project,” said McMann, noting that the benefactors have remained anonymous.

This good news got better when the family fund offered to not only cover the \$36,000 cost of the project, but to provide a fair bit more to handle additional expenses. “They said there were bound to be over-runs, and they were willing to give us a total of \$50,000,” said McMann. “But they also wanted our board to be invested in this.”

To meet that stipulation, board members and other friends of the organization contributed another \$5,000 to the project for a \$55,000 total. “This was the largest [capital project] we’ve ever had, and there were real issues we had to take care of,” Mahon said. “We were more than willing to pitch in on this.”

The kitchen renovation got underway in January and continued in stages over the next several months. Early on in the process, the kitchen had to be shut down for a week to allow work to be done. McMann said a grant from National Grid allowed them to provide a catered lunch during that process.

In addition to the new exhaust system, the project included installation of energy efficient LED lights, and a new HVAC unit to keep the kitchen cool on hot summer days. “No longer will we have days when the kitchen is simply too hot for preparing food when we are in the middle of a heat wave,” said McMann.

An overall reconfiguration of the kitchen space also led to some logistical challenges and space shortages. Some of these were solved by the donation by Williams College of some stainless steel tables and bakers racks from the former Williams Inn, which was replaced this summer by a new Williams Inn built across town (*August 2019 BT&C*).

The Berkshire Food Project also benefitted from a countywide fresh food grant administered by Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation that provided \$2,800 for shelving and bins. “This really helped to increase our capacity to accept and store fresh produce during the growing season,”



Berkshire Food Project staff members gather in front of a billboard near Uno Park in North Adams promoting the free community meal that is served each weekday by the organization. From left, they are: Kim McMann, executive director; Caitlyn Johnson, assistant kitchen manager; Barbara Worthington, outreach coordinator; and Darlene Ellis, kitchen manager. The billboard (provided as a community service by MASS MoCA) not only helps get the word out to individuals who may be experiencing food insecurity, but also helps raise the Berkshire Food Project’s profile among potential supporters in the community.

said McMann, noting that the organization had occasionally found it necessary to turn away some donations from area farms due to lack of safe storage space.

Giving thanks

With the kitchen project completed, McMann said the Berkshire Food Project is looking forward to its biggest day of the year – the annual Thanksgiving meal. This is held not on the holiday itself, but on the Monday before Thanksgiving, with a lunch seating and a later dinner seating. (This year’s meal will be held on Nov. 25.)

McMann noted that they traditionally see the highest turnout of the year at this meal. “Last year we served a combined 282 meals at the two seatings, and had another 90 takeouts,” she said.

Until recently, turkeys for the meal had been provided to the Berkshire Food Project through its membership in the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts. “But they are no longer getting turkeys because most of the member agencies didn’t access them via the Food Bank,” McMann explained.

As such, the organization is seeking donations of the 12 to 18 turkeys needed for the upcoming Thanksgiving meal. (For information

or to arrange a donation, call 413-664-7378 or email info@berkshirefoodproject.org.)

Leading up to that holiday, the Berkshire Food Bank has also launched its annual letter campaign to raise funds for the coming year’s operations. “We are supported in large part by the local community through donations,” said McMann.

She noted that the organization has a rough operating budget of \$175,000 per year, of which about \$75,000 is in the form of in-kind donations of food and services that it receives. The remaining \$100,000 goes toward staff salaries, rent, food purchases, transportation and other expenses.

The organization receives between \$10,000

and \$15,000 in funding through the Northern Berkshire United Way, and another \$2,000 to \$3,000 through a federal grant. The rest of its operating budget comes directly from the community through individual donations.

For Mahon and other board members, this dynamic presents an ongoing challenge. He said the community’s continued support of the Berkshire Food Project through the years can be viewed as a clear reaffirmation of its role and mission. But the reliance on individual donations is also a source of perpetual uncertainty for the organization.

“Most of our donations come from the annual letter campaign, which primarily is directed to past supporters of the organization,” Mahon said. He added that they also receive unsolicited donations from people who have learned about and want to support the organization.

“We’ve had some extremely generous donations over the past few years,” Mahon said. But, he added, there is no assurance that the same level of generosity will be repeated on an ongoing basis.

“Our whole budget process is a little bit anxiety producing,” Mahon commented. “It’s the kind of thing you find yourself lying awake at night thinking about.”

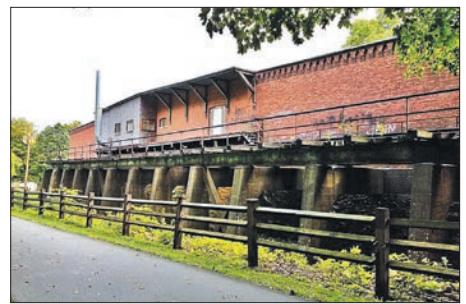
To address that, Mahon said the organization is working to expand its donor base beyond the closed loop of past supporters. He noted that the simplicity and importance of the organization’s mission resonates with many people once they are introduced to the Berkshire Food Project.

“On a personal level, that’s what has kept me and others involved in this for so many years,” he added.

Although on staff for just a few years, McMann shared a similar view about the organization she leads. “I’d say we’re a small organization, and a very lean organization,” she commented. “But we’re also big in terms of what we do to address food insecurity in our community. It’s great that so many people recognize and support that.”◆

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