



CENTER FOR FOOD SYSTEMS AND COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

Virginia Tech's Campus Kitchen continues serving community throughout the Pandemic

A story about adaptations in food recovery at Virginia Tech in times of COVID-19. This short vignette is part of our "Virginia Food Systems and COVID-19 Story Collection Project" that aims to highlight, collect, and share stories of hope and resilience in our food system amidst the pandemic. Find out more about this project and view our entire series on [our website](#).

November 11, 2020

By Rachel Hall

When the dining centers at Virginia Tech close their doors for the evening at the end of each day, there is leftover food that can no longer be sold to students. Instead of throwing that food in the trash, Dining Services employs Campus Kitchen to recover that food waste and redistribute it to local community partners. The Campus Kitchen program is a partnership between VT Engage: The Center for Leadership and Service Learning and Virginia Tech Dining Services. According to their website, Campus Kitchen "works to increase food access and to reduce food waste by redirecting unserved food from on-campus dining centers to hunger relief agencies in the New River Valley" (https://engage.vt.edu/programs/campus_kitchen.html).

Since the program began in 2015, it has recovered over 200,000 pounds of food. Prior to COVID-19, the majority of food was diverted by Campus Kitchen Leaders and student volunteers. However, because of COVID-19, students left campus abruptly in late March. This created a gap in services provided by Campus Kitchen because they lost their volunteers. The work was quickly taken up by a small group of VT Engage staff and Dining Services employees.

Over the summer, Dining Services staff began working more closely with Campus Kitchen in the role of diverting excess food from dining centers to local community partners. Campus and Community Engagement Coordinator, Kas Church, says she would like to see this change become permanent because it streamlines the process of food diversion. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Campus Kitchen has been forced to become a more efficient version of itself. Having Dining Services staff handle the packaging of food waste instead of Campus Kitchen staff means there are fewer people in the kitchen. Another change introduced in response to COVID-19 is prepackaging a majority of foods being distributed. This change keeps students and workers safe during the pandemic. The food now spends less time in the open air with fewer hands involved which makes it easier to contain food safety risks.

However, these packaged foods have had other unforeseen consequences to the food recovery process. Because food is being packaged in individual servings, the food being distributed takes up more space in coolers and vans. The increase in packaging makes it difficult to transport and store food so there has been a decrease in the amount of food that can be recovered. This is especially troubling because the pandemic has resulted in more people experiencing food insecurity.

Despite the challenges that COVID-19 has presented, community members are still taking up the work to care for one another. People are tired but remain dedicated to community service in a time of need. It's inspiring that even as our community is hurting it is also healing. By remaining flexible and focusing on the way we are connected we can find ways to rely on one another in times of need.



A Campus Kitchen volunteer loads produce into a vehicle. Photo courtesy of VT Engage.

Resources

Virginia Tech Engage (2020). The Campus Kitchen at Virginia Tech.
https://engage.vt.edu/programs/campus_kitchen.html