



Common Ground setting up a delivery of fresh local produce.
Photo courtesy of Common Ground Producers and Growers.

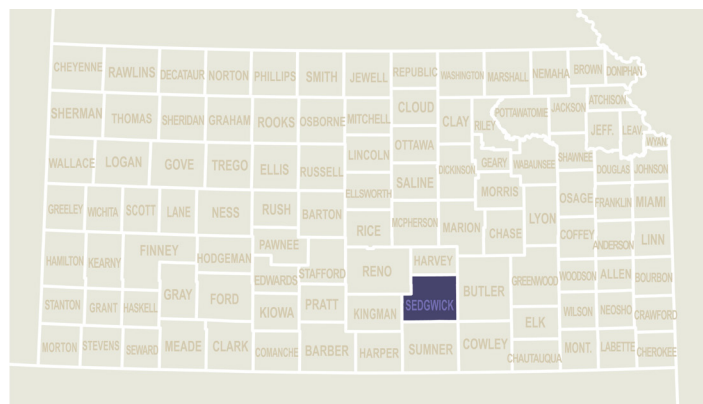
Background

Over the years, Wichita has seen the closure of several grocery stores, leading large pockets of the city with low access to healthy, affordable food. Although city leaders and community members have taken a strong interest in this issue, opening a new grocery store has been a slow process.

Recognizing the critical needs of her community, in 2014, Donna Pearson McClish founded Common Ground Producers and Growers, a nonprofit mobile market that works with a network of local producers to move fresh food into the areas that need it most. Its guiding mission: “All are fed. No one is hungry.”

For Donna, the concept of a mobile market was nothing new: her father, who started the family’s urban farm over 50 years ago, also worked with growers to assemble and distribute food to the Wichita community. According to Donna, “We’re just continuing the legacy of the family.”

Today, the mobile market serves locations in Sedgwick, Butler, and Harvey counties.



About the Community

CITY POPULATION* 397,532

COUNTY POPULATION*† 523,824

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME* \$57,540

MEDIAN AGE* 35.5

CHILDREN LIVING BELOW POVERTY LEVEL** 17.5%

FAMILIES LIVING BELOW POVERTY LEVEL** 9.2%

LOW INCOME & LOW ACCESS TO GROCERY STORE†** 10.6%

PEOPLE 65+ WITH LOW ACCESS TO A GROCERY STORE†** 2.7%

CHILDREN WITH LOW ACCESS TO A GROCERY STORE†** 7.4%

The Issue

When the mobile market started, Donna worked with her 16-year-old grandson, KJ, to gather fresh food from local growers, assemble it into boxes, load up a van, and deliver to various neighborhoods around Wichita. They made their rounds twice per month during the growing season, setting up in the parking lots of senior centers, community centers, churches, and other locations. As word of mouth spread, more and more delivery sites were added to their route – until eventually, the mobile market was visiting 35 locations each month.

Then, in March 2020, the pandemic hit. Demand for Common Ground increased exponentially, and new delivery sites were added seemingly every day. When schools closed, producers like Hiland Dairy had an oversupply of food, which Common Ground rescued and distributed. Instead of only operating seasonally, Common Ground shifted to year-round food distribution to seniors and underserved communities. “We were constantly on the go during the pandemic,” recounted Donna. For example, their Seniors First Program provided fresh food boxes to seniors in target zip codes, free of charge. At the height of the pandemic, Common Ground was making 150-200 Seniors First Program deliveries per week – in addition to their typical route.

And it wasn’t just food: recognizing the isolation that many seniors faced during this time, Common Ground also instituted wellness checks with a therapist – Keisha McClish Coutts, Donna’s daughter – who accompanied food deliveries. They also coordinated with other organizations to provide services alongside the mobile market. This included the Wichita State University Office of Engagement, Storytime Village, a local healthcare provider, and more.

It soon became obvious that to keep up with the community’s needs, Common Ground required additional capacity.

Partnering with local producers to overcome food insecurity

A crucial element of Common Ground is its commitment to working with local growers and producers; the mobile market is part of the larger urban agriculture movement that is dedicated to building food sovereignty, improving health, and creating economic prosperity in urban communities.

With firsthand experience working on an urban farm, Donna and her family firmly believe in paying farmers a living, equitable wage. “People don’t understand what it takes to get the food in the ground and the food to your table,” she said. This ties into another hope: that more youth will get involved in farming. “As we grow older, we’re going to have to pass this baton to someone.”

The Kansas Healthy Food Initiative has supported several growers that sell to Common Ground, including The BaM Group, Johnson’s Farm, and Pearson’s Farms. These projects received funding for materials and equipment to expand production and sales to retailers like Common Ground.



Left to right: Randy Coutts, Keisha McClish Coutts, Donna Pearson McClish, David Pearson.

The Process

TIMELINE

1968

Robert C. and Addie Williams Pearson purchase a 40-acre farm in Wichita.

2014

Common Ground Producers and Growers begins operation.

2020

In August, Common Ground receives a Sedgwick County CARES grant to purchase additional delivery vehicles.

Common Ground also becomes one of seven projects nationwide to receive the USDA's first-ever Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Implementation Grant. The grant is used to purchase a centralized walk-in cooler and conduct outreach.

2021

In March, Common Ground receives grant funding from the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative (KHFI) to build capacity of its producer network.

In addition, electricity upgrades are completed at Pearson's Farms, allowing the walk-in cooler to become operational.

In 2020, using federal pandemic relief funding through a Sedgwick County CARES Grant, Common Ground purchased vehicles to expand its fleet to four delivery trucks. That same year, Common Ground became one of seven projects nationwide to receive the USDA's first-ever Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Implementation Grant. Common Ground used this award to lease a walk-in cooler, which also required the installation of a new electrical system. The cooler – located on Pearson's Farms – is a centralized aggregation center that improves efficiencies and extends the shelf life of produce. In addition, the USDA grant allowed Common Ground to hire staff, cover travel expenses, train youth workers and farmers, and expand Common Ground's network of growers.

Next, in March 2021, Common Ground received funding from the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative to build the capacity of several local producers that supply food to the mobile market. The grant was used to purchase wash stations, harvest wagons, irrigation supplies, and other materials to improve the cultivation and distribution of fresh produce. Common Ground continues to expand its farmer network in order to increase fresh food offerings at the mobile market.

Today, customers have a variety of convenient options to purchase fresh, healthy produce from Common Ground. Not only does the mobile market physically meet people where they are, it also accepts numerous forms of payment. In addition to cash, debit, and credit cards, Common Ground is an authorized SNAP retailer and participates in Double Up Food Bucks, a program that matches fruit and vegetable purchases dollar for dollar. The market also accepts vouchers from the Kansas Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, which helps low-income seniors purchase healthy food at farmers' markets. Finally, customers can also order food online – which Common Ground will deliver.

Currently, the Common Ground team primarily includes Donna and Randy Coutts, who oversees food delivery and logistics. The mobile market also utilizes numerous volunteers. Still, given the growth of the market in recent years, additional support is needed. The duo aims to hire additional staff as Donna transitions away from day-to-day operations and focuses more on behind-the-scenes management of Common Ground Producers and Growers.

According to Donna and Randy, one of the most rewarding and important aspects of the mobile market is their educational programming. For instance, Common Ground worked with a chef to teach delicious, fun, and healthy recipes using their produce. As a result, they have heard firsthand that customers have started incorporating healthy alternatives in their diets. "In the world we live in today, it's easy to get somebody to take a bag of chips, as opposed to a bag of spinach because of the marketing and advertising and the things that come with processed food," Randy said. "But once they've had exposure and an opportunity to get an understanding of how to cook it...it doesn't take long for most people to realize there might be something about this healthy eating that's different and better for me than the processed food."

Donna and Randy acknowledge that there is still a long way to go before they reach their mission – that all are fed and no one is hungry. "Every day that you're out, you almost always encounter someone who you automatically want to add to the list – there is that much need for fresh produce," said Randy. But this is also what propels them to continue adding programs, partnering with organizations, and staying connected with the community.

Lessons Learned



Do your research.

If you're thinking of starting a mobile market, see one or two in action first. Before opening Common Ground, Donna visited several mobile markets and noticed that each was unique. She learned that to be successful, Common Ground Producers and Growers also needed to be tailored to the community's specific needs.



Have a heart for serving people.

Running a mobile market is not easy. To make an impact, operators need to think long-term about the bigger picture. "It's easy to say, 'Oh, I'm going to do it!' But then what happens when it's not as glamorous and there aren't the resources?...It's all about your heart." – Randy Coutts



Find partners in your community with aligned missions.

When tackling such large and intersectional issues, no one can do it all alone. Common Ground recognizes this and has worked with many partners over the years to provide educational programming, expand their offerings, and reach more communities.

Project Successes

Common Ground Producers and Growers has filled a critical need in the Wichita community and beyond by bringing healthy, local food to underserved areas. By building deep relationships with community members, local producers, and partners, they have also identified and addressed other needs beyond food. Using KHFI funding to support their network of local producers, Common Ground is building the urban agriculture movement and creating sustainability in the mobile market.



Customers in line for Common Ground delivery.
Photo courtesy of Common Ground Producers and Growers.

KHFI Impact



Expanded capacity of local growers to supply healthy, fresh produce to the mobile market.



Supported delivery of healthy food at 70+ locations in Wichita and surrounding areas.



Increased healthy food access in underserved and low-income communities.

Icon Credit: Umer Younas, Made, and Danil Polshin from the Noun Project.



2430 E. 33rd Street North Wichita, KS



UrbanAgLife

commongroundpg.com

This success story is written by Erica Blair and Rial Carver for the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative. Published 08/22/2022.

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