

SECOND HELPINGS: GROWING STRONGER COMMUNITIES SESSION TAKEAWAYS

From Seed to Scale: Building and Expanding Food Bank Agriculture Programs

Speakers:

- Margaret Burn, Lowcountry Food Bank (SC)
- Donna Vick, Second Harvest Food Bank (TN)
- James Hoffer, Dayton Food Bank (OH)
- Kristen Sommerfield, Inter-Faith Food Shuttle (NC)

Session deck: <https://growingstrongercommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/From-Seed-to-Scale-2025-FINAL.pdf>

Overview

Whether you're starting your first garden or running a small farm, the steps to grow your impact are rooted in strategy, planning, and relationships. This session offered tips on going from the earliest stages—assessing space, resources, and community needs—to scaling production, diversifying crops, and integrating agriculture into your organization's mission. It focused on three food banks that went from small plots to thriving multi-acre operations.

Core Principles for Success

- **Start small and build systematically** - Perfect one acre before expanding
- **Make activity visible** - Position projects where stakeholders see engagement
- **Just ask** - Partners, donors, and experts want to help but need invitation
- **Leverage in-kind contributions** - Seeds, equipment time, expertise often come free
- **Document everything** - Track volunteer hours, in-kind gifts, and outcomes
- **Create full-circle narratives** - Show how waste becomes next year's harvest
- **Build wraparound services** - Workforce development means more than jobs
- **Stay flexible** - Let programs evolve based on community needs
- **Play the long game** - Internal resistance can transform into championship

The Partnership Ecosystem

Donna Vick (Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee) transformed 23.6 acres of gifted land into Project Grow with just \$16,000, no agricultural degree, no staff and no owned equipment. Her first-year approach: take soil samples, make a plan, start with two acres and ask for help from as many people as you can. She produced 2,400 pounds with 520 volunteer hours.

By year three, after doubling to four acres, she grew 7,200 pounds with 1,100 volunteer hours and was consistently under budget. For her, successful programs rely on strategic partnerships starting with your 'inner circle' - food bank staff (material handlers, truck drivers, volunteer coordinators), current donors looking for meaningful engagement, local farmers willing to provide expertise and equipment, etc.

Useful Resources

- **NRCS (Natural Resource Conservation Services):** Donna calls them "the hidden gem in agriculture"—they provide expert consultation
- **FFA and agricultural students:** Built raised beds, started transplants from seed
- **Seed companies:** Often eager to donate and support food bank initiatives
- **Contract farmers:** Can handle heavy lifting (tilling, cover crops, lime application) in exchange for growing row crops on unused acreage
- **Corporate sponsors** (Lowe's built fencing, John Deere tractor came from corporate sponsorship)

- **Universities** for interns and educational partnerships
- **Community colleges** with horticultural programs

Donna's tractor story: After two years of budget uncertainty, she mentioned the \$60,000 need to multiple donors. Within one evening, she received three separate \$60,000 commitments—from a grant, and two separate donors. "You just have to ask. Just ask, start your inner circle, and build it out."

Securing Internal Buy-In Through Visible Activity

James Hoffer (Food Bank of Dayton, Ohio) started as a volunteer with a milk crate garden, strategically placing it where the CEO would drive past daily. The constant visible activity—people showing up even in July heat, carrying buckets of water to the bathroom—gradually shifted leadership from skepticism to support.

Key lesson: Create momentum through consistent, visible engagement. Position your project where decision-makers will see it regularly. Let activity speak louder than proposals.

Revenue Generation: Composting as Sustainability Model

James transformed waste into opportunity by creating a commercial composting operation that processes around 300 tons annually on approximately one acre. An investment of around \$250,000 (including \$110,000 for the composting machine) has been covered through Ohio EPA grants and Kroger's Zero Hunger Zero Waste Foundation.

How it works:

- Hot composts of food waste mixed with yard waste in a 20-foot repurposed shipping container
- Feeds finished compost to worms
- Sells worm compost extracts, teas, and finished product (more nutrient-dense than standard compost)

Unexpected opportunities:

- Public drop-off program: Started with 50 buckets expecting 20 people, now serves 500+.
- 2024 Small-Scale Compost Facility of the Year award
- Paid research partnerships on biodegradable packaging with Ohio State University
- One of their (surprisingly) most popular volunteer activities is de-packaging spoiled produce for composting (e.g., taking the small sticky labels off avocados, etc): "People rally around it because they see the full circle—nutrition that otherwise goes to waste."

Scaling Strategically: The Volunteer-Powered Model

Kristin Sommerfeld (Farm manager, Interfaith Food Shuttle) manages 8-10 production acres with 1,000 unique volunteers contributing over 6,000 hours annually. Sixty-five "core volunteers" come 2-3 times weekly.

Interfaith Food Shuttle's farm works with its culinary and distribution teams to design crop plans that "fill the actual holes" rather than producing what's already abundant. They grow 25+ species annually with 3+ varieties each. "Let your program evolve as it wants to," says Kristin, "and as you're hearing community needs. Sometimes scaling could mean scaling back to meet the needs of your community."

Best Practices

- Regenerative organic approach (crop rotation, cover cropping, composting, low till)
- Pollinator gardens throughout the farm
- GAP certified as best practice (though not required for donated produce)
- All crops started on-site in greenhouses
- Groundwater ponds for irrigation

Key lesson: Mechanize bed prep and planting for efficiency, and leverage volunteers for tending and harvest—the more delicate, skill-building work. This saves staff and volunteer bodies while maintaining high production. Equipment often comes through corporate sponsorships and grants rather than operating budgets.

Why Growing Programs Matter:

Beyond the Pounds

Donna's three-year impact is impressive in many ways:

- Volunteer hours: 6,000+ documented (\$67,000 value)
- Funds raised specifically for the project: \$124,000
- Pounds produced: 12,300+

But she emphasizes the deeper value: "Are we doing this for the numbers, the engagement, the pounds? We're really doing it because we want to grow a community. We want to invest in the land to make it better for food production and to bring people to the table and educate people."

Donor cultivation through farm tours became a major engagement tool, with development staff using Project Grow reports and photos in cultivation pieces.

James on the composting revenue opportunity: "It's a way to be the best possible steward of that food as a resource, and then share that knowledge and the byproduct with our community."

Innovative Workforce Development

Dayton's Prison Partnership: James employs four currently incarcerated women from a nearby maximum-security prison at \$12/hour (versus the typical \$2.50/day prison wage). Money goes into a protected trust, enabling financial stability upon release. The wraparound approach includes:

- At least two years of employment providing job skills
- Financial coaching
- Daily shared lunches to help reintegrate participants
- Part-time (20 hours/week) structure allowing skill development
- One former participant now works full-time at the food bank

James addresses concerns about exploitation directly: "We're putting wraparound services all the way around it, and we're paying them a higher wage than what they could get elsewhere. All the job skills we're giving them are part of rehumanizing."

His observation: "There is a prison close to every food bank in the country—where hunger exists, there is mass incarceration."

Other Workforce Sources

- Court-mandated community service hours
- High school and university service requirements
- Community college horticultural programs (students as paid interns)
- AmeriCorps and other such programs
- Corporate and community partner volunteer days

Key Insights from Q&A

On starting a program: Spend time learning from existing models but adapt to your context. Donna visited universities, other food banks, and CUL2VATE in Nashville before developing her approach.

On composting infrastructure: Dayton's one-acre footprint achieves 90% diversion of food bank spoilage, proving significant impact doesn't require massive space.

On farmer partnerships: Tennessee's Farm to Food Bank model has farmers bid quarterly by volume and cost per pound. Purchase agreements provide guarantees that help farmers plan, creating stability when funding allows rather than only buying surplus.

End thought: Perseverance Pays Off

Moderator Margaret Byrne's closing story: Eighteen years ago, when hired to bring more produce into her food bank, the director of operations resisted. When a grapefruit shipment went bad and acid ate through the concrete floor, he declared: "You're never going to bring more produce in this building. Produce is not what we do."

That director was Ron Pringle—now a champion of agriculture programs at Interfaith Food Shuttle.

Her lesson: "People change. People grow. It's a long game, y'all."