

THE GARDNER NEWS

Worcester food hub fast-tracked to Union Station through federal, state funding

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Worcester Telegram & Gazette

WORCESTER — After six years of being cramped in the Greendale People’s Church kitchen, the [Worcester Regional Food Hub](#) will be able to complete its planned move to Union Station with funds from a grant awarded to the organization through a partnership between the state and [federal governments](#).

The organization now has the resources to finish the planned expansion to a former baggage area at Union Station. With 6,000 square feet of new space, the food hub will continue to grow its mission and expand its services.

“That \$83,520 will help us complete our project at Union Station,” said organization director Shon Rainford. The group plans to use the funds to purchase a walk-in cooler, a walk-in freezer, electric pallet jack and a walk-behind forklift. With the new equipment, the organization can collect and amass more produce, and maintain it fresh longer for resale.

Through the food hub, local farmers can sell their products in the institutional marketplace, serving public schools, colleges and hospitals. The hub purchases product, aggregates the foodstuff and sells it wholesale to organizations.

“Smaller farmers may not grow enough or the markets for their products can be distributed too diversely” to make it worthwhile for them, Rainford said. “Our work is important,” he added, explaining that the organization supports local farmers economically by serving as a conduit into markets that are challenging to enter.

Using apples as an example, Rainford said one grower may not be able to meet the demands of an institutional client, but through the food hub and its ability to aggregate product, local farms can break into those larger markets.

The food hub purchases for resale hundreds of thousands of apples, hydroponically grown lettuces and seafood items from individual local suppliers, then amasses and sells them to its clients.

The funding awarded to the hub is just a portion of the \$1,483,479 awarded to different Worcester County farms and foodcentric organizations to help increase food resilience in the region.

The [Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts](#) is also slated to receive \$58,848.

“We’re very excited,” said Tuyet Tran, CEO of the coalition. The group coalesced around feeding the Asian community in the state’s central region almost by accident through a query from World Farmers in Lancaster about whether the group wanted to distribute traditional Asian produce grown on the farm.

“The first year we got 250 boxes, each weighing between 5 and 10 pounds,” Tran said. The group distributed the boxes among its constituents and had enough to include churches, temples and shelters.

“We realized food insecurity was an issue in the city,” Tran said. The organization's members started small urban gardens outside its headquarters in the Printers Building on Portland Street. Seeking growing space, the organization found that an old docking area in the building was available.

“We wondered, Can we grow mushrooms?” Tran said. The organization began to grow mushrooms, a traditional Asian food high in nutrients and vitamins, through a subsidy from the [Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts](#).

The group learned a lot through the project, including that mushrooms are difficult to cultivate. They need the perfect temperature, perfect humidity level and perfect air flow, Tran said. And if they are attacked by fungal spores, the whole cycle can be compromised and lost.

The group recruited a mycologist from Clark University to create the growing space and kept one of the professor’s students on the payroll.

Grown in three tents inside the building, the organization cultivates several varieties of oyster mushrooms (pink, golden, blue and white), shiitake and lion’s mane mushrooms. The funding will be used for processing the product. With a shelf life of about two weeks for mushrooms, the group will be drying out its surplus to extend its shelf life for up to two years.

Overall, Massachusetts farms and businesses were awarded \$2.9 million for 23 projects through the federal [Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program](#). The funds, administered through the state Department of Agricultural Resources, will be used to build resilience across the middle of the supply chain and strengthen local and regional food systems.

The recipients of the funding were revealed Monday, by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Marketing Service.

“Projects funded through the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure program are building strength and resilience in Massachusetts’ food system, diversifying agricultural markets, creating new revenue streams for small and mid-sized producers, and providing economic opportunities for local communities,” said USDA Marketing and Regulatory Programs Under Secretary Jenny Lester Moffitt. “USDA is grateful for Massachusetts’ support strengthening local and regional agricultural supply chains.”