

IMPACT VOLUNTEER

Catherine Howley

HUNGER TO HELP

BY KRISTINE HANSEN
PHOTO BY PHIL KIDD

Since its founding during the 1970s, Hunger Task Force has provided and advocated for access to healthy food for people in need through the Milwaukee metro area. But what most people don't know is a significant portion of the fresh produce the organization distributes free of charge to children, families, seniors and veterans in need comes from its 208-acre farm in Franklin. In 2012, the non-profit began farming there on land it leases from Milwaukee County, and currently harvests half a million pounds each year.

The harvest includes 70 varieties of fruits and vegetables. There are also 50 acres of fruit trees and an acre of pumpkins. Above all, the food grown on this farm must be easy to cook with, even with limited resources, and correlate with cultural diets, too, to best serve its population.

Retired pharmacist Catherine Howley is one of the 5,000 volunteers each season working at the farm between April and October. (Seven farmers and three seasonal farmhands are available to provide guidance.) Tasks include planting, weeding, harvesting and processing produce. Some harvesting and planting work is done by hand while in other instances machinery is used in the fields. Within 24-48 hours of harvest, the produce is at a distribution site.

Howley heard about the farm from one of her patients when she was a pharmacist. "I was always asking people if they were eating well," she recalls. "The better you eat, the more effective your system is — which means eliminating sugar as much as you can."

This fresh-produce approach to a food pantry piqued her curiosity. After all, she'd grown up in a farming family and continues to be an avid gardener. Tinkering with the soil is her passion she likes to be active.

When she retired in 2022, she became a farm volunteer. "When you're on a farm, you can be outside," says Howley, who searched for a volunteer gig that operated as a well-oiled machine so it wouldn't feel so much like a stressful career. She could show up for her shifts, make new friends, and enjoy the sunshine.

"I ask a lot of questions," she says. "That's how you learn things. It's really fun to meet people and the volunteers are from a variety of backgrounds. Everybody who comes here, they don't have an agenda, they just show up."

What she also found was a deep level of commitment among staff. "It has a lot of science and data behind it," she says. "They're as passionate about nutrition as the people I worked with in health care."

Like Howley's career in pharmacy, there's a connection between the farm and its recipients, so much so that each year Hunger Task Force sends a survey to its network partners to learn what produce they'd like to see at their local food pantry, homeless shelter, meal site or low-income senior center.

In the past couple of years, this included new trials of Napa cabbage, bok choy and jalapeno peppers. Recently, there was a call for celery, which Hunger Task Force's farm had never planted. This past spring, Howley and other volunteers transplanted the celery plants — seeded earlier by staff — in a hoop house on the farm. "Nothing comes here as a whole plant," quips Howley.

Similarly, all of the produce that's distributed strives to be in the same condition as what's sold at farmer's markets and at grocery stores, tying into one of Hunger Task Force's core values: dignity. This is also about equity: everyone deserves fresh, delicious food.

"There's this beautiful food that goes out to people that need to have nutrition," Howley says. "If you're eating good, nutritious food, you're getting vitamins and minerals that you can't get in a bag of chips." **MKE**

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Right: Catherine Howley inside a hoop house currently growing celery and jalapeno peppers at the Hunger Task Force Farm in Franklin. Once the vegetables are ready, they're transported to the warehouse and distributed in smaller trucks around the county.

