

# TRANSFORMING ACCESS TO LOCAL FOOD

BY SARAH TILT



Photos courtesy of the Livingston Food Resource Center

Like many communities in Montana, Livingston and Park County have seen a spike in population which has caused housing and land prices to skyrocket and is creating equity challenges. The Livingston Food Resource Center is working to provide nutritious food, create local economic growth, and support the overall health and well-being of Park County.

Currently, LFRC is working with Hopa Mountain, a Bozeman-based nonprofit that supports rural and tribal leaders as they work to improve their communities. A diverse collaborative that includes Hopa Mountain, the Montana Food Bank Network, and LFRC cooperatively launched Local Food for Local Families to connect producers and food pantries, thereby increasing access to locally grown Montana agricultural products.

“The Local Foods for Local Families initiative is going to have a major impact on connecting food pantries and their clients with ranchers and farmers across Montana,” says LFRC Executive Director George Peirce. “Accessing local foods can be challenging, especially for smaller organizations who might be partially or completely volunteer driven. By sharing resources as a collaborative, we can break down those barriers and make access easier and equitable, all while promoting economic development in Montana.”

By bringing Montana food pantries together, Local Foods for Local Families aims to increase purchasing power, lower the costs, and provide more nutritional food to those in need. It also helps to create a more sustainable and equitable food system in Montana and open new channels for communication and learning.

Local Food for Local Families was created during the COVID crisis. Food pantries are vital players in food accessibility and Montana is particularly fortunate to have growers, producers, and processors who supply nutrient-rich food.

During the early days of COVID, when restaurants closed, many producers were left with excess food that had been intended for the restaurants. With grant funding, Hopa Mountain was able to purchase the food and share it with pantries.

“Food pantry leaders want to provide local, healthy food to the families they serve,” says Bonnie Sachatello-Sawyer, Hopa Mountain executive director. “Through the Local Food for Local Families initiative, food pantries, producers, and food hubs are working together to source, aggregate, and distribute locally grown agricultural products. These leaders understand the economic importance of purchasing Montana-grown food and ensuring that all Montana families have access to nutritious food staples.”

Programs like Local Food for Local Families are successful because of the number of partners who come together to solve an important community—and, in this case, state-wide—challenge. These programs go beyond serving those in need and have the capacity to change and increase the ability for everyone to eat locally more consistently.

“If our missions overlap in any way, we should be partnering,” says Peirce. “Our community thrives when we work together for good.” 🌿

*To learn more about the Livingston Food Resource Center, visit [livingstonfrc.org](http://livingstonfrc.org). To learn more about Hopa Mountain, visit [hopamountain.org](http://hopamountain.org). You can also read “Nourishing Those in Need” or “The Communal Philosophy of Good Bread” at [ediblebozeman.com](http://ediblebozeman.com).*

**Sarah Tilt** is the executive director of One Montana, a nonprofit working to support private land stewardship and working lands, sustain our cultural heritage, and connect our urban and rural communities. One Montana’s campaign, The Montana Way, is an effort to educate and provide resources for all Montanans to steward our private and public resources and continue traditions for the next generation.