

Challenge Workforce Solutions is a forty year old nonprofit vocational services agency. What began as a workshop has developed into a social entrepreneurially focused effort that creates its own businesses as well as placing and supporting individuals in employment opportunities in a two county area. The Challenge businesses are expected to offer employment as well as generate income to support the mission. Serving up to 800 individuals each year Challenge clients represent a broad cross section of the population including those with psychiatric issues, substance abuse problems, developmental disabilities, economic barriers, and physical disabilities.

One of the Challenge business operations is Finger Lakes Fresh, a hydroponic greenhouse that grows and distributes leafy greens year round. The facility employs up to 26 individuals. To build on its success we have just begun construction on a regional food hub.

Finger Lakes Fresh Food Hub will be a production facility that collaborates with local farmers and producers, providing them with services and expanded markets for their products, and makes local produce available year-round. The Food Hub will purchase products from local farmers and producers, wash, sort and package for bulk and retail, and utilize our marketing experience and distribution networks to sell the produce under the Finger Lakes Fresh brand.

An 18,000 square foot facility in the Village of Groton will serve as a central food processing and packaging center, as well as providing storage and rental space for local farmers. Contracting with multiple local farmers will enable the Finger Lakes Fresh Food Hub to source a wide variety of locally field-grown food products including root crops, herbs, and other fresh produce. The business will add value to these local products through packaging, branding, and processing to extend shelf-life, before selling through our existing broad distribution network. This collaboration makes local products available year-round and enables a larger presence in schools and colleges, institutional settings, restaurants and retail stores throughout New York State. This project is a cost-effective and efficient approach that will benefit farmers, distributors and consumers in the Southern Tier Region.

- **Revenue**

This project is expected to generate over \$2.4 million in annual sales by year three - increasing the profitability of participating producers and creating a revenue stream to support Challenge's social mission goals.

- **Producer & Distributor Advantages**

By bringing produce from many producers together under one roof, the Food Hub creates a convenient & efficient marketplace for major distributors to buy local produce, adding stability to farmers' seasonal sales and opportunities for increased production.

- **Adding Product Value Through Processing**

We will wash, sort and package products, as well as offer dehydration to extend shelf-life and allow for longer storage and year round access to healthy local foods. Our equipment will also include tortilla machines, enabling us to produce corn and wheat tortillas.

- **The Food Bank Connection**

The Food Hub will also create an infrastructure to connect local farmers with the Food Bank of the Southern Tier, bringing healthy foods from local farms/producers to low- income populations.

- **Job Creation**

This project creates many new agriculture jobs in rural communities for disadvantaged youth and adults including new immigrant populations and individuals with disabilities.

- **Job Training & Support Services**

A range of training and support services will be available through Challenge to allow access for workers with disabilities, refugee populations, public assistance recipients and other groups with barriers to employment.

Construction on the Food Hub will be complete in the fall of 2013 allowing it to begin production with our fall harvest. Financing for the project was a combination of economic development funds, agency investment, and some foundation support. Additional information can be found at our web sites: www.fingerlakesfresh.com and www.aboutchallenge.org.