

SHARING PRODUCE AND PROMOTING HEALTH IN THE PEACH STATE

When the local farmers market was canceled at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a thoughtful idea by a **Fort Stewart** soldier proved to be a game-changer for the community. **By Chris Duyos**



Rebecca Myers loves vegetables. As a garrison command sergeant major at Fort Stewart, Georgia, she would often head to the nearby town of Hinesville every Thursday and pick up a week's worth of produce at the farmers market. But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. in March 2020, the market was shut down. Myers instantly recognized how important access to local, fresh produce was to the community, so she decided to find a way to continue the market while staying COVID-safe.

"When I was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood [Missouri], one of the local farmers markets... had a stand where you could pick up a box of assorted vegetables," Myers said.

Inspired by that, she reached out to the Liberty County Chamber of Commerce.

Myers and the chamber established a program where people would pay \$25 for a box filled with produce (and, for an extra fee, additional products from

other vendors, such as meats, herbs and crafts) to be picked up from the chamber's parking lot at the end of the week. They distributed a form online to gauge interest, expecting about a dozen people to sign up. But as word of the produce subscription boxes spread via social media and word of mouth, orders poured in from hundreds of local residents.

To help with logistics, Myers reached out to her fellow soldiers. She ran Fort Stewart's Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers program. With one of the initiative's core values being volunteerism, she had little difficulty enlisting soldiers to sort, pack and carry boxes in the muggy Georgia summer.

"What's good for Hinesville is good for Fort Stewart and vice versa," Myers said.

With over 20,000 soldiers at the base, and roughly three-quarters of them and their families living in adjacent communities, the program was a win-win for civilians and military, creating a way

for both to continue receiving healthy, local food when the farmers market was closed.

For those who live in Hinesville, the subscription box program was invaluable.

"I work in the health care industry, so I didn't really want to be around a lot of people [when the pandemic began]" said Susan McCorkle, a Hinesville resident for nearly 50 years. "It was really convenient to go by, pick up the box and still have that convenience of getting farm-fresh foods each week."

She even discovered new products she wouldn't have bought otherwise, such as local artisan soap, McCorkle said.

The subscription box program lasted for eight weeks, serving roughly 200 to 300 people each week. All leftover items were donated to families in need.

Today, the farmers market is back up and running, but the resourceful collaboration between Fort Stewart and the Liberty County community during a difficult time won't soon be forgotten. 🍌

Clockwise from top left: Volunteers help fill the subscription boxes. City of Hinesville photo by Rebecca Myers / While the contents of the box changed weekly, Hinesville residents could expect a mix of organic fruits, vegetables and artisan products such as soap. City of Hinesville photo by Rebecca Myers / Volunteers transport subscription boxes to cars. Photo courtesy of Liberty County Chamber of Commerce / Hinesville residents could expect a box filled with bananas, pineapples, corn, and other kinds of produce. City of Hinesville photo by Rebecca Myers

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