



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

George Winner

Vension Donations Make a Difference

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The locally based Venison Donation Coalition sums up the core of its mission this way, "With the downturn of the economy, budget cuts throughout the country, and increased layoffs, more and more Americans are feeling the crunch and being left hungry. Those going hungry are families, children and single parents and the donation of venison can help feed these people."

The Venison Donation Coalition is a foundation supported by sportsmen's organizations, of course, but also by corporations, government agencies, civic and religious organizations, and individual citizens. I'm grateful every year around this time to call attention to its work.

In government, particularly in an era like the current one defined by limited resources to address seemingly infinite demands, we're always searching for ways to encourage individual citizens to contribute to the overall quality of our communities.

So with another deer hunting season underway, I'm pleased to highlight a program the State Legislature helped establish more than a decade ago, one that continues to benefit local communities today. It was 17 years ago, in fact, when an area "Hunters for the Hungry" program was prepared to donate 400 pounds of venison for distribution to the needy and discovered that state law prevented them, and other similar groups operating in central and western New York, from doing so. The law in 1993 deemed it illegal to distribute, for public consumption, meat from animals that were not slaughtered under qualified supervision to ensure that the meat was safe to eat. As a result, "Hunters for the Hungry" programs operating throughout New York at that time were being told they couldn't donate over 10,000 pounds of venison to food banks and other organizations providing meals to the unemployed, shut-ins, senior citizens and other needy citizens.

It just didn't make any sense that hunters weren't allowed to donate perfectly healthy, nutritionally sound food to those who needed and would appreciate such a good meal. So the Legislature quickly acted to establish a program to address the appropriate health concerns and allow the donations to be made before the meat spoiled.

The venison donation program that resulted is now coordinated by the Bath-based Venison Donation Coalition, a broad-based partnership that includes a range of area supporters. Established in 1993 (and then made permanent several years later), the

program has allowed sportsmen and women to donate venison and other game to food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and additional not-for-profit organizations and charities that feed the poor.

Sportsmen and sportswomen were provided the opportunity to demonstrate and respond to their concern for the state's neediest citizens, and their response has been overwhelming. Today the Venison Donation Coalition operates in most of the state's 62 counties. Countless needy citizens have enjoyed nutritious meals as a result. Since 1999, in fact, the Coalition has coordinated the processing over 337 tons of venison -- equal to more than 2.7 million servings of highly nutritious, low-fat, high-protein meat.

It's an admirable effort. While it may not readily come to mind as a community development mainstay, it surely is. You can't underestimate the spirit of commitment and giving it encourages. We will continue to develop infrastructure, promote tourism, improve schools, protect citizens, and do anything and everything possible to enhance our economic standing, but along with these fundamental responsibilities is a responsibility to the quality of life for everyone. That's what's important, appropriate and meaningful about the ongoing work of the Venison Donation Coalition.

So as the 2010 hunting season continues and as we celebrate this holiday season, it's worthwhile to remember the Venison Donation Coalition. It can only remain successful through the commitment of the hunters, sportsmen's federations, farmers, meat processors and others who guide its operation. Credit for its success goes, as well, to the civic groups, employers, community leaders and individual citizens who have donated financial and promotional support that also help fuel the program's ongoing expansion.

Anyone seeking more information can visit the Venison Donation Coalition web site at www.venisondonation.com. Or call, toll-free, 1-866-862-3337. You can write to the Venison Donation Coalition at: 415 West Morris Street, Bath, New York 14810.