

# Hunters Helping Out

*The Venison Donation Coalition helps meet the needs of those less fortunate.*



By Ellen Bidell

We have all seen pictures of hungry children—rail thin with swollen bellies and pleading eyes. The urge to help these children touches many people. But the problem of hunger isn't one that is confined to poor and developing countries. Nearly one in seven American households didn't have enough food to meet their needs at some point in 2009, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Even though plenty of good food is grown in New York State, one of every eight New Yorkers reports trouble feeding his or her family. More than 2.1 million people in New York use emergency food programs like food pantries each year.

One New York-based group has a way for you to help right in your own community.



James Clayton

The Venison Donation Coalition, Inc. (VDC) is a nonprofit organization that coordinates and funds venison (deer meat) processing and distribution to feed those in need throughout New York State. Created by a group of hunters in 1999, the coalition is supported by sportsmen's organizations, food banks,

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businesses, the NY Farm Bureau, DEC, USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service, civic and religious organizations, and individual citizens.

The program allows hunters to donate venison to be distributed by food banks to food pantries and soup kitchens that feed people in need.

The Coalition's mission is to transform a renewable natural resource into nutritious food for those less fortunate. Because donated deer must be professionally processed, the VDC has coordinated a program where legally tagged and properly field-dressed deer can be taken to participating processors...at no cost to the hunter.

Since 1999, the Coalition, based in Bath, NY, has coordinated the collection, processing and distribution of

more than 413 tons of venison—equal to more than 3.3 million servings of healthy, low-fat, high-protein meat—for distribution by regional food banks. They work with 110 meat processors in 50 counties throughout the state.

Hunters donated an average of 75,000 pounds per year for the past eleven

years, averaging more than 350,000 meals each year. Depending on its size, one deer can provide up to 160 servings of venison. The Coalition uses money from individuals and food banks to pay meat cutters to process the donated deer. The venison is processed and packaged according to state law, and the meat is picked up by food banks for delivery to soup kitchens and food pantries throughout New York. From there, it ends up on the tables of thousands of families, providing wholesome meals and an important source of protein.

VDC is truly a collaborative effort. In addition to the hunters, processors, food banks and pantries, the New York Resource Conservation and Development Councils (NYRCDC) play a role as well. The NYRCDC are



Greg Fuerst

not-for-profit organizations that help groups like VDC carry out activities that conserve natural resources and enhance the standard of living in the community. It is their job to pay the bills and provide bookkeeping for the Coalition.

According to Joanne Dwyer, Director of Food Industry Relations and Business Development Representative for the Regional Food Bank of Northeastern New York, the Food Bank has participated in the program since 2002. They work with 1,000 non-profit programs in 23 counties of northeastern New York.

“Venison has tremendous nutritional value and we are always in need of protein sources for our clients. Last year, we distributed 5,594 pounds of venison, and 6,600 pounds the year before. Venison works well in all kinds of cooking and sometimes we provide recipes and cooking tips for clients. We are very grateful to have the opportunity to participate in the program,” Joanne Dwyer explained.

The hungry aren’t the only ones in need. State funding for the program has dwindled from \$100,000 annually from 2000 through 2005 to \$11,000 in 2009. Because of this decline, donations to sustain the program from people like *Conservationist* readers are more important than ever. While the Coalition receives \$10,000 per year on average from deer hunters, its share of processing costs in 2010 was \$40,000 (food banks pay the majority of these costs). Without significant additional donations each year, the Coalition faces an uncertain future.

According to VDC President Greg Heffner, “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.”

This year, food banks will play an even larger role in the venison donation program to help offset some of the costs.



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The Food Bank Association of New York State is a non-profit organization representing the eight regional food banks located across the state. According to John Evers, Executive Director, the Association was recently awarded a grant from the NYS Department of Health to help administer the program. The five-year grant will help defray the cost of processing venison.

So when you’re buying your hunting license this fall, consider supporting this important program. DEC’s license sales system is set up to receive donations to the VDC. You’ll be helping to feed your neighbors and supporting a good cause, all while enjoying your pastime!

**Ellen Bidell** is a citizen participation specialist in DEC’s Albany office.



## HOW YOU CAN HELP

- You can make a cash donation at any Town Clerk’s office or anywhere hunting and fishing licenses are sold. Just tell the licensing agent that you’d like to contribute to the Venison Donation Program. The money is deposited directly into the Venison Donation Fund, and ninety-five cents of every dollar donated goes toward processing deer into venison to be distributed to food pantries.
- You can also send a check payable to the Venison Donation Coalition, Inc., 415 West Morris St., Bath, NY 14810 or donate online through their secure website: **[www.venisondonation.org](http://www.venisondonation.org)**.
- All donations are tax-deductible.
- For more information, call (866) 862-DEER.