



Partnering to build community A Story of Success



Case Study Highlights

Partner: Massachusetts Opportunity Council (MOC)

Opportunity:

Enhance community and bring healthy food to neighborhoods in need

Process

- Mission fit
- Complimentary programs and services
- Partnership agreement
- Shared funding
- Shared resources
- Captive audience

Results

- Residential, community, and container gardens for at-risk children, families, and elderly across Fitchburg
- Inter-generational exposure to cultural traditions and educational opportunities
- Renewed sense of pride in targeted neighborhoods
- Beginning of healthier communities

“The gardens have bestowed benefits beyond just encouraging the families to eat better and save money – the gardens have impacted the neighborhood as a whole and created a point of pride within the public housing community.”

Bob Hill

Opportunity

It's amazing what can grow when two like-minded organizations with similar missions work together in pursuit of a worthy goal. The Montachusett Opportunity Council (MOC), a Fitchburg, MA-based non-profit community action agency, wanted to construct several community gardens for low-income residents and families but lacked the gardening knowledge to make it all happen. It turned to Growing Places to provide that expertise and a collaborative plan to implement several community gardens was put in motion. Leveraging the strengths of their respective organizations, Growing Places and MOC worked side-by-side to identify families in need, enlist volunteer support, and install the gardens. With a high population of at-risk youth, elderly, and families in transition in Fitchburg, the gardens were a welcome addition that not only promoted healthy eating but also enriched the community by providing healthy outdoor activity and a sense of purpose and hope.

Educational gardens for children and families

The first site MOC targeted for community gardens was Health Alliance Hospital's Burbank Campus in Fitchburg. Lezli Lee, Program Coordinator of MOC's Community Partnership for Children, knew the gardens would be easily accessible to many young families with children in the neighborhood already receiving MOC's services and would serve as a hands-on example of how to enhance health and nutrition. The garden would also provide a powerful educational resource for the community, engaging children in all aspects of growing food.

Sheila Lumi, Community Coordinator of North Central MA for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), was instrumental in recruiting local families with children to participate. "One of the best ways to get children to relate to fruits and vegetables and make healthy choices is to expose them to nutritious foods as early as possible and teach them where the food comes from". Six families currently participate in the MOC Community Partnership Gardens and there are plans to expand the gardens next year.

A new prescription for seniors

Food insecurity—the inability to obtain available food—and malnutrition among our seniors is concerning because of age-related factors such as decreased mobility, health issues, and isolation. MOC approached three



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senior housing locations owned by the Fitchburg Housing Authority—Daniel Heights, Wallace Towers, and Fitchburg Green—all of which were searching for ways to increase healthy eating and socialization among residents. “We wanted to find a way to provide seniors with access to fresh produce since they typically experience barriers to these healthy options due to cost and mobility issues,” stated Ayn Yeagle, Director of Elder Nutrition. Together, these gardens serve a growing number of elderly residents who have become enthusiastic gardeners, many for the first time. One resident, a self-proclaimed “sun child,” enjoyed the increased activity and the excuse to get outside more often. Another resident who is originally from Puerto Rico explained with pride that she liked her garden because “siempre hay cosecha! [There’s always a harvest!]” She is eagerly awaiting the ripening of her “veinte ocho [twenty eight] tomatoes.”

Building community within housing authorities

Next, MOC approached Bob Hill of the Fitchburg Housing Authority who fully supported establishing gardens for residents and contributed some funds to build the gardens. Bob believes “the gardens have bestowed benefits beyond just encouraging the families here to eat better and save money—the gardens have impacted the neighborhood as a whole and created a point of pride within the public housing community.”

Single mom Heidi always puts out extra vegetables in a box for the neighbors and encourages the local kids to get involved as well. “The fun part is when I get all the neighborhood kids in here—they’re interested in what’s going on and have lots of questions—I like to teach them something positive.” Heidi feels fortunate to have fully experienced the gardening process and feels a sense of responsibility to keep her garden going. She sees her garden as a powerful tool as well as a positive symbol of collaboration and community spirit.

Results

With little to no means to purchase or obtain fresh fruits and vegetables, many low-income families are struggling to afford healthy foods and provide nutritional meals for their families. Growing Places and MOC see this first-hand through their work with families every day and teamed up to make twice the impact to the community. While each organization has its own strengths, together they were able to share networks, expand their services, and accomplish more than either could have accomplished individually.

For more information about Growing Places Garden Project, please visit us at www.growingplaces.org or call us at 978-598-3723.

