

SHIP Community Garden Intervention

Progress report: January 2011 – June 2011

Prepared for Brown-Nicollet Community Health Board as part of their SHIP evaluation

Brown-Nicollet Community Health Board (CHB) has been working with area leaders on a Community Gardens Initiative which aims to improve a community's access to healthy foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables. The project is part of a larger effort by Brown-Nicollet CHB, funded by the Minnesota Department of Health's Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP), to improve the health of residents in Brown and Nicollet Counties.

This report provides a snapshot of progress from January 2011 through June 2011. Wilder Research developed and conducted three key informant interviews with members of the River Meadows Community Garden Steering Committee to complete this report. It was prepared by Wilder Research.

Reach

After evaluating the needs of different communities throughout Brown and Nicollet Counties, Brown-Nicollet CHB chose to focus on North Mankato, where they launched the River Meadows Community Garden. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, the total population of North Mankato is 13,394, which is 23 percent of the total population of Brown-Nicollet CHB's service area.

The Garden Steering Committee, currently made up of four members, was formed to provide direction for the garden, recruit membership, manage day-to-day activities, provide education and membership to gardeners, and ensure the garden's sustainability. The Steering Committee has a manager, directing committee, and a treasurer.

The garden is the first community garden in North Mankato and is entirely organic. During the 2010 growing season, plots provided access to fresh produce, including spinach, tomatoes, and other fresh vegetables, for an estimated 120 residents. This season, there are 35 garden plots and 31 participating gardeners. Including spouses and families, there are an estimated 50 participants. Gardeners from 2010 will participate in the community garden this year as well.

The reason that people are here is because they want fresh produce and we have quite a number who live in apartment buildings and this is their only chance [to have fresh vegetables] and ours is a no-chemicals garden – so it’s all organic – so it has real appeal. (Garden Steering Committee Member)

There is a wide range of ages among the participating gardeners who vary from individuals to families. To further impact the reach of the garden, one of the plots is designated to go to the ECHO food shelf, which distributes emergency food to North Mankato residents.

Activities

From January through June 2011, the Garden Steering Committee and SHIP successfully implemented a full scale advertising campaign, recruiting 150 percent more gardeners than what was needed to fill the plots. As in 2010, invitations were sent to North Mankato residents through an insert in water bills. Fliers were also sent home with elementary students. Particular attention was put on recruiting participants from diverse economic backgrounds.

In addition, the Garden Steering Committee identified a need for gardener education and has started implementing strategies to mentor newer participants on successful gardening techniques. Some of these strategies include demonstrations on how to use gardening equipment and the development of an online group to serve as a forum for troubleshooting and other garden communications. A growing season kick-off for participating gardeners was held with educational presentations from a Master Gardener. This season, the Steering Committee is also focusing on developing a sense of ownership among gardeners at River Meadows by identifying and mentoring future garden leaders.

In response to challenges experienced last year, compost was brought in, in partnership with the city, to raise garden plots and allow for more drainage. Soil amendment techniques have also been employed to ensure the success of the 2011 harvest.

Steering Committee members are excited about all of the recent activity at the River Meadows Community Garden:

We’re doing demonstrations on compost with the gardeners. And we have gardening books in the shed and a bulletin board and last year we established a system [for alerting gardeners] if their garden is too weedy.

Policy, systems, and environments

One of the goals of SHIP is to change policies, systems, and environments to make the healthy choice the easy choice. In the case of the Community Garden Intervention, it means specifically changing policies, systems, and environments in the community to establish and sustain the River Meadows Community Garden.

From January 2011 to June 2011, the Garden Steering Committee took important steps to strengthen the infrastructure of the garden and improve its sustainability. One of these important steps was the creation of bylaws. In addition, gardeners are required to sign a contract which sets out important rules for making sure the community garden continues to thrive. Other steps include registering the River Meadows Community Garden with the secretary of state, establishing a bank account, and obtaining insurance.

Impact

To reduce the risk for many chronic conditions, it is important to make sure that residents in the community have access to quality nutritious foods. A community garden is a particularly useful strategy in North Mankato, as residents often have to go across the river to Mankato to buy fresh produce. A survey of residents in Brown-Nicollet CHB's service area found those who report getting food from "food grown at home or in a community garden" at least two or more times per week also more frequently report eating at least three servings of fruits and vegetables each week.

Through the River Meadows Community Garden, North Mankato residents have been given the opportunity for positive community involvement as gardeners and access fresh produce at a minimal cost. Other short-term outcomes include the following:

- From the 2010 to the 2011 growing season, community interest in participating in the River Meadows Community Garden has increased substantially.
- Special efforts have been made to recruit low-income individuals and families.
- Efforts to accommodate participants and potential participants who may need special assistance are underway.
- The Garden Steering Committee has been established and has quickly taken action to ensure the sustainability of the garden through the adoption of bylaws, development of city partnerships, garden contracts, and insurance. Infrastructure improvements include raising the garden plots, a water source, tools, and a shed.
- Committee members have observed the positive impact that the community garden has had on participants and themselves. Members mention the emotional satisfaction that participants get from growing their own vegetables. Others enjoy the experience of working alongside one another and seeing the success of the garden:

I'm finding our manager so delightful and [other participant] too. Our relationships are growing.

- The local emergency food shelf, ECHO, received and will receive the harvest of one community garden plot. Arrangements have been made with a gardener who is taking the responsibility of caring for the plot.
- Gardeners receive mentorship and education from the Garden Steering Committee on appropriate gardening techniques to improve their success with and appreciation for gardening.
- Challenges faced in 2010 are being actively addressed to continue to improve the garden's success. For example, garden plots were raised with compost to ensure better drainage than the previous growing season.

As the River Meadows Community Garden continues in the North Mankato community, it is expected to expand as a nutritional resource for area residents, reaching its goals of increasing the community's access to healthy foods and improving the overall health of residents.



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