Addressing Food Insecurity in Sacramento through Urban Gardening

Healthy Communities Success Story

Food insecurity – the limited or uncertain ability to acquire nutritionally adequate and safe food – is on the rise in Sacramento County. Concentrations of individuals and families who are food-insecure tend to appear in lower-income communities of color. However, incidences of food insecurity are also on the rise in areas perceived as more affluent. Children, seniors, disabled individuals and people with health conditions are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.

Proximity, food quality and transportation to food sources affect food security. Sacramento County contains areas known as "food deserts," where residents don't have convenient access to healthy food or emergency food providers. Food deserts tend to consist of mostly low-income households. Many of these families may lack access to a car, and must walk, bike or ride transit to get food. In these cases, the volume of food that can be purchased and the time to buy food is limited. The farther a person lives from grocery stores and restaurants, the more difficult it becomes to access food. Lack of mobility and neighborhood safety may also be barriers to access to healthy food. Often the only available food in these neighborhoods is at corner stores or fast-food restaurants.

Although food-insecure individuals often obtain food from traditional outlets like supermarkets and grocery stores, many other food-source alternatives are not being used by individuals most in need. Self-sustaining food sources such as home and community gardens offer one such alternative. However, there are challenges associated with this approach, such as a lack of space or training. Check out Community Link's report "Hunger Hits Home" for details about the status of hunger in Sacramento County.

This healthy community success story illustrates how one nonprofit group is working to address these challenges and combat food insecurity in Sacramento.

Local Government Commission

The California Endowment

The Action Taken

Ubuntu Green is a Sacramento-based nonprofit that promotes healthy, sustainable and equitable communities through advocacy, education, community development and empowerment.

Ubuntu Green's Home and Community Garden Project seeks to spark interest and fosters skills needed for residents in local food-desert communities to create and sustain their own urban gardening efforts.

The gardens provided through this project were an opportunity to enter neighborhoods and build the capacity of residents who would then become powerful levers for making sustainable changes in their community.

This project was supported by The California Endowment, UC Davis, Home Depot and in-kind donations from local farms and nurseries. Gardens were initially installed in the Sacramento Building Healthy Communities project area and later expanded to North Sacramento, with the support of UC Davis. Soil Born Farms and the Sacramento Yard Farmer provided gardening workshops and technical assistance to participants. UC Davis measured lead in the soil, returning that data to residents free of charge.

Ubuntu Green primarily built raised-bed gardens, equipped with a drip irrigation system, an irrigation timer, organic soil and edible plants. The design of these boxes reflected residents' concerns about the safety of their soil, as well as their desire to make the gardens visually appealing and easy to manage.

The raised-bed model has the added benefit of allowing renters to participate in the program, as landlords understand that the boxes are not a permanent change to the property's landscape.

Garden Participation

To be eligible for the Home and Community Garden Project, an applicant had to live within the Sacramento Building Healthy Communities project area or the Del Paso Heights community. Applicants were also required to complete program evaluations and give Ubuntu Green staff access to their yards.

As a benefit to each project participant, Ubuntu Green provides quarterly information on seasonal and healthy food, advice about safe gardening in urban landscapes, a map of the participant's yard with soil lead results, environmental education, flyers for upcoming events sponsored by Ubuntu Green and partner organizations, and good ideas about how to engage in community improvement efforts.

Ubuntu Green helps gardeners identify and take advantage of opportunities to improve their experience with their new garden.

Community Outreach

Outreach efforts began through existing networks and community hubs. Advertising at local events such as farmers' markets, canvassing, neighborhood meetings and health care enrollment fairs proved most effective in spreading the word about the project.

Ubuntu Green follows up with all inquiries, conducting site visits and scheduling soil lead test dates for interested garden recipients.

New gardeners receive project welcome packets, which include project information, seasonal recipes and materials about local events and resources.

Government Engagement

Local government representatives are involved, recognizing it as a way to address the problems associated with vacant and abandoned lots. This effort transformed lots typically associated with crime and drug use into positive community gathering places.

Sacramento City Councilmember Jay Schenirer created WayUp Sacramento, a community-based initiative that supports disadvantaged youth and their families to address large gaps in the city's social infrastructure and the challenges associated with chronic poverty.

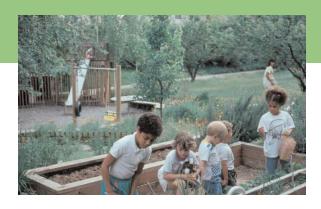WayUp Sacramento helped fund some of the project's gardens.

Legislative Foundations

Based on feedback from their urban gardeners, Ubuntu Green assisted with the advocacy effort that led to the passage of Sacramento's Community Garden Ordinance, which allows vacant land to be used for gardens with the owner's consent.

Ubuntu Green continues to push for urban agriculture policies that make it easier for residents to grow and sell food, as well as other helathy community policies to address other environmental concerns such as brownfields, illegal dumping and pedestrian safety.

While Ubuntu Green's advocacy is always informed by residents, their goal is to continue to build the capacity of residents to lead advocacy efforts themselves.

The Results

The Home and Community Garden Project has provided more than 120 edible gardens, created a youth-run community garden in Oak Park and is planning a second community garden in Del Paso Heights. The program continues to receive dozens of inquiries each month from residents interested in starting a home or community garden.

The project seeks to develop leadership skills among community members. Ubuntu Green's Green Youth Leadership Team (G-Squad) has engaged students from throughout Sacramento to develop and maintain a community garden in Oak Park, as well as organize and conduct workshops and public events to promote health, gardening and environmental stewardship in the community.

The project taps into and strengthens natural neighborhood connections. Neighbors are exchanging crops and recipes. These connections help add an extra level of accountability in taking care of the gardens, and also start to build a sense of community that has led, in some cases, to neighborhood meetings focused on environmental issues beyond gardening. By fostering neighborhood-based leadership, Ubuntu Green hopes to build more sustainability for advocacy work around land-use issues in the region.

Ubuntu Green's website includes a map showing the locations of garden builds. It also showcases videos of residents reflecting on the process and results of their home gardens. These real stories help expand community engagement. One resident in North Sacramento felt so strongly about the importance of gardening, she helped get almost a dozen residents in her community to sign up for the program.

According to participant survey responses, 100% eat more fruits and vegetables than they did before they received their garden. Everybody (100%) feels better able to provide food for their families, is more physi-cally active, cares more about their environment, and feels more connected to their neighborhood. When participating renters moved, they often took their garden boxes with them to their new home.

Lessons Learned

Unlike the advertising of many other gardening programs, Ubuntu Green has sought gardeners at events focused on health care access, at schools in target neighborhoods, and through word-of-mouth. This shift in outreach strategy increased the percentage of its gardeners who are low-income, Spanish-only speakers and first-time or currently "inactive" gardeners.

As the demographics of its gardeners shifted, so did the requests for technical assistance and the need for translation services. These gardeners were more likely to have limited English speaking and reading abilities, and less likely to have money to buy supplies needed to solve garden issues as they arose.

It's important to engage residents after they receive their gardens. Passive engagement will not work, particularly with new gardeners, and especially if it is a free program. Participants may assume they should not bother program implementers with follow-up questions or concerns. Follow-up should be frequent and ongoing. As Ubuntu Green's program demographics changed, they found that in-person visits, either scheduled or drop-ins, worked the best.

Low-income communities have great needs, but also great assets which may be overlooked. For example, project implementers should tap into existing gardeners and identify local leaders in the community to help newer gardeners with questions and concerns. Ubuntu Green launched a "Garden Mentor" program, where energetic residents with expertise checked in on neighbors with new gardens. Many of those mentors also hosted garden parties, sharing food, advice and seeds.

With a growing pool of newer gardeners, the need for more robust garden trainings became apparent. Ubuntu Green recruited several local organizations with expertise in related areas of interest, such as organic pest management, soil nutrients, and seasonal planting and harvesting. Project implementers should also leverage existing training opportunities, at local food banks or nearby community garden sites, for example.