**Community Gardens:**
The New Victory Gardens in a Public Health Crusade

**Benefits of Community Gardens**
Community gardens have long been a recognized strategy to address food shortages. From the victory gardens that supported war efforts and fed Americans during WWII, to First Lady Michelle Obama’s White House garden that launched her Let’s Move Campaign, to the flourishing plots in low income areas with otherwise limited access to healthy food (food deserts), community gardens provide nourishment in a number of important ways. Local gardens not only improve much-needed access to healthy food, but they also encourage cross cultural and intergenerational bonds and provide opportunities for civic participation. Community gardens can support health equity at the grassroots level. In low income areas, communities of color and immigrant communities, gardeners can grow produce that is part of a traditional diet, often much healthier than choices at fast food restaurants or convenience stores.

In a 2003 CHCC report on California community gardens, the authors called for more research on the benefits of local gardening to support necessary policy changes. Since then, a number of studies have reported on the health benefits of community gardens. One such study concluded that household participation in a community garden improved fruit and vegetable intake among urban adults. A 2011 study in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that not only did community gardeners consume more fruits and vegetables than either home gardeners or non-gardeners, but also that community gardens can improve neighborhood social capital, literally offering common ground to bridge across groups and generations.

**The Current Landscape**
A recent report from the Institute of Medicine concludes that “making healthy foods and beverages routine, readily available, and affordable will help Americans achieve and maintain a healthy weight.” More specifically, the Health Equity and Place Tool from Policy Link includes urban agriculture and community gardens as one of the major tools to combat lack of healthy foods in low income areas. These conclusions and tools come none too soon in light of recently released research on obesity and its related consequences. A May 2012 study in *Pediatrics* reports that the prevalence of prediabetes/diabetes in US adolescents, 12-19, is at an all-time high, having increased from 9% to 23% from 1999 to 2008. The general population remains at risk as well. According to a June 2012 article published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, by 2030, 51% of the U.S. population will be obese. These rates are always higher in populations of color.

**California Healthy Cities and Communities**
Since 1988, California Healthy Cities and Communities (CHCC) has promoted an inclusionary and systems approach to improving community health that requires both broad-based, multi-sector collaboration and the demonstrated commitment of local government. During that time, CHCC has funded many community-based nutrition and physical activity programs across California. In those communities, leaders have embraced community gardens as a viable strategy. As a result, local food environments have improved through interim land use and water recycling policies, food policy councils, resident and business partner engagement, and cross-sector collaboration among government, schools, health and nonprofit organizations. California Healthy Cities and Communities is a program of the Center for Civic Partnerships.
Sustaining Community Gardens in Three California Healthy Cities

How do projects like community gardens, which improve individual and community health, sustain when grants end and budget cuts reduce staff and resources? In the case of three California Healthy City and Communities grantees, the answer has been through building and strengthening partnerships, fostering community participation, and changing the way business is done by adapting systems and enacting policies. Community gardens in the Cities of Willits, Delano and Oceanside have been institutionalized through these principles and practices.

Systems Change in Willits: Closing the Loop from Farm to Schools

The City of Willits lies in the center of rural Mendocino County, 35 miles east of the Pacific Ocean and 150 miles north of San Francisco. After working on a successful, multi-year plan to create a walkable and bikeable community, Willits’ subsequent CHHC grant proposed growing healthier food for children and youth, with the objective of getting healthy food into the schools. The City of Willits, North Coast Opportunity (NCO), a community action agency with gardening expertise, and the Willits Unified School District played primary roles in this farm to school strategy. The major outcomes of the strategy were to see that the school district purchased 10% of its produce locally; food service staff had the training and time to prepare meals using this produce; and the school district had policies in place to train...
students to assist in food preparation and allow them class time and credits to do so. Needless to say, this was an ambitious undertaking, involving necessary changes in four systems: food service, which involved not only the school district, but also the workers’ labor union; the School District and Willits High School regarding both student participation and purchasing policies; food procurement, which necessitated coordinating produce demand from the school with supply from local growers; and local government, not only for fiscal agency support, but for policies that make growing and selling local produce easier.

The partners in Willits have successfully met many of the challenges inherent in making these changes. In the case of the food service workers, their union wanted to be sure that getting help in the kitchen did not in any way jeopardize jobs. Here, relationship building led to increased understanding of the strategy—service learning for students would translate into extra, non-paid help for food service staff as they made the transition to freshly prepared food. In a bold stroke, food service workers across the district are now meeting as a cohort, adding their front-line voice to the local farm to school movement. Food purchasing policies present a “harder nut to crack,” since schools receive very limited funding for food procurement. The transition from processed to fresh food can be expensive at first, but a comprehensive strategy, like the one in Willits can produce savings in the longer term. The partners continue educating leaders in this cost benefit analysis. On the food procurement front, NCO, through USDA Farm to Fork funding, trains growers on the produce needs of local schools, closing the loop of supply and demand.

Alan Falleri, Willits’ Community Development Director, credits the CHCC grant opportunity for “moving the City of Willits toward better health for all its residents.” Today, due to budget and staffing cuts, the City has spun off the hands-on work of the farm to school project, and NCO takes a primary role. But the City continues to put policies in place that promote a thriving local farm and community garden landscape. These policies include applying a “use by right” designation to community gardens, which means no permit is required, and making zoning changes to make more Farmers’ Markets possible.

How Local Governments Can Help

- Allow zoning for community gardens and Farmers’ Markets
- Include community gardens in the general plan
- Take leadership to kick off or incubate the program and build partner capacity to eventually take it on
- Fund and staff a municipal community garden
- Host/Participate in coalitions and councils that support healthy eating and activity
- Act as fiscal agent for obesity prevention efforts
City of Delano and Delano Regional Medical Center: A Partnership for the Community’s Benefit

The City of Delano is located along Highway 99, a major north/south artery through the state’s Central Valley. It is Kern County’s second largest city with a diverse population of 55,000. In 2005, as a CHCC grantee, the City of Delano decided to address its rising number of overweight children by focusing on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)-eligible residents. Coordinated by Delano Regional Medical Center, the Family Academies program engaged parents and children together in nutrition education. The Medical Center donated the needed land to create garden plots and held well received workshops. When the grant ended, the Medical Center decided to keep the garden open. It was a move that demonstrated the intended spirit and potential of Hospital Community Benefits programs, as well as the fruit of strong community partnerships. This decision meant that the Medical Center would provide the land and water, dedicate staff to coordinate the program and perform maintenance with the help of the gardeners, develop a workable structure and guidelines, and hold community meetings.

Today, the garden has 50 participants of all ages, a long waiting list, and is a great source of pride for Medical Center staff. Its participants are 50% Latino and 50% Filipino, providing opportunity for cross-cultural community building. The newest development is an expanding partnership with the Delano Joint Unified School District. Last year, school staff planted and harvested 300 pumpkins for students to take home. A section of the land is now partitioned off for the use of schools, which will develop curriculum around garden use. Finally, to enjoy a social activity and “spread the wealth,” gardeners plan to take their extra produce to the city’s Farmers’ Market. Managing and maintaining this kind of grassroots project inside a complex hospital system has required not only hospital support but also staff acumen to develop workable structures and systems. According to Becky Gutierrez, the project’s current coordinator, the garden’s success is partly due to clear guidelines for everyone involved. She held community meetings to get gardener buy-in for participation guidelines, and, equally important, she had to set guidelines for managing her time at this part of her job. “I’m available to garden participants on certain days and times,” she says. “And if I hold to my rules, everyone else respects them.” What’s the best part of coordinating a community garden while working full time in a hospital? Becky doesn’t hesitate: “When I go out there, I always see smiles of satisfaction, and I come back with bags full of chili peppers, tomatoes, tabungao squash and bok choi, the produce from two cultures all mixed together.”
The City of Oceanside: Building Strong Neighborhoods with Partnerships, Food, and Community

Oceanside is an ethnically diverse coastal community in northern San Diego County. Camp Pendleton, a Marine Corps training base, borders the city to the north. The city and the military installation are interdependent economically, socially and culturally. A Healthy City since 1994, Oceanside has had success in several areas, including violence prevention, community enhancement, nutrition, and tobacco control and education. Brendan Mangan, Management Analyst with the City of Oceanside Neighborhood Services Department, Housing Division, says that with the initial CHHC grant, the City accepted that the “community’s health was everyone’s responsibility.” Soon Partners for Healthy Neighborhoods formed, Family Resource Centers appeared in neighborhoods overrun by gang violence, and resident gardeners with expertise and dedication turned lots littered with drug paraphernalia into produce-bearing gardens. Today, the Family Resource Centers are still neighborhood centerpieces, and the community gardens created in East Side on city land and Crown Heights (bought by the city from a private owner) are still producing. Recently, a new garden has started at the El Corazon Senior Center.

The Eastside Community Garden is the largest of the gardens with 53 plots used by families to grow vegetables for personal use. Gardeners trade produce among themselves, and some donate vegetables to other area residents when they have a surplus. The mostly Latino families have been joined by Chinese and Vietnamese gardeners. Though all ages can be seen working the rows and beds, it’s primarily the older, retired gardeners who help the City with garden maintenance. When funding and staffing were available, the City held meetings once per month, but now every three months is all they can manage. Still, Mangan insists that it’s a great testament to the power of the gardens in the neighborhood that the City continues to operate the gardens, providing organizational support, maintenance and water in the face of such limited resources. As evidence of the
City’s continued commitment, the 2009 Neighborhood Revitalization Plan for Crown Heights and Eastside neighborhoods includes a community health goal to improve health of residents through improved access to fresh fruits and vegetables and increased physical activity.

Crown Heights hosts a smaller garden with nine plots and most of the gardeners are woman. Fifty percent of residents are new arrivals from Mexico and Central America, and Crown Heights is the neighborhood with the lowest income in the City. But exciting partnerships are developing at this site. Creating a circle of community well-being among green business, local government, schools and young residents, a partnership has developed between a local composting plant, the El Corazon senior center and the Crown Heights Resource Center. Employees at the plant met youth from the Center when they were all helping plant fruit trees at the senior center. The business offered to bring fruit trees to the Resource Center and help with planting, if the teens would also help. They installed an irrigation system and planted a variety of 14 dwarf fruit trees and blueberries. The produce will be used for healthy snacks in the after school program at the Crown Heights Resource Center. Any surplus fruit will be available to residents picking up monthly supplemental food baskets distributed at the Resource Center.

**Sustainability Lessons from Three California Healthy Cities**

- Build partnerships, collaborations, alliances.
- Build community capacity on an ongoing basis.
- Spin off programs to capable partners.
- Take chances. Do business differently.
- Engage community organizations and residents based on the strengths they offer.
- Weather the storm. Keep things going by anticipating and preparing for resource slumps.
- Everyone has to accept responsibility for the community’s health.
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