

## **Growing a More Food Secure Wilmington**

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People's choices about what to eat are severely limited by the options available to them and what they can afford. Many communities in Wilmington are food deserts. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), a food desert is a low-income census tract where a substantial number of residents have low access to a supermarket or large grocery store. According to the State of Delaware Community Health Status Assessment (CHSA), almost half of children age 12-17 years in Delaware are clinically overweight or obese, and only 32 percent of adults in Delaware consume fruits two or more times a day,<sup>1</sup> with only 30 percent consuming vegetables three or more times a day.

According to an analysis from the Delaware Health and Social Services, Wilmington's obesity rate is estimated at 32.6% – compared to 29% for suburban New Castle County.<sup>2</sup> As a result, these populations may be more likely to suffer from high rates of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity. Fortunately, for many neighborhoods in Wilmington, urban agriculture is on the rise. Three examples are described below.

### **Wilmington's Eastside Community:**

#### **Duffy's Hope Youth Garden**

Duffy's Hope, Inc. has established a Youth Garden in Wilmington's Eastside Community offering fresh fruits, vegetables, and cut flowers to youth, their families, and community residents. Students in the Duffy's Hope program are at risk youth ages 12 through 17. The garden site, located at 9th and North Church Streets, was made available through the City of Wilmington property disposition program in 2010. Overall, the project encourages youth to live healthier lives through gardening while learning how to work with peers to achieve a positive end-goal. Youth learn aspects of crop production, soil health, and use the tools of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) to grow crops and flowers.

Phase I, in 2010 and 2011, included the site acquisition, soil testing, site excavation, construction, and maintenance including the addition of white stone on top of the former asphalt parking lot location, equipment purchases, crop production, and harvesting supplies. Phase II, in 2012, initiated raised beds for vegetable and fruit crops, and a storage shed. Phase III, in 2013, established a raised bed flower garden.

The garden mobilizes at least 25 youth for spring, summer, and fall programming. Hands-on interactive curriculums reinforce the principles of engagement, leadership, and empowerment through the gardening process. The project has brought science, technology, engineering, and mathematic (STEM) concepts to youth in a fun manner allowing students of all ages to explore and unlock new areas of interest. Additionally, Duffy's Hope Leadership encourages youth to

work as teams which develops socialization skills and encourages healthy communication while in the garden setting. The yearly schedule includes planting spring, summer and fall crops, nurturing soil health through use of compost materials, plant supplements containing soil microbes and mychorizae, and IPM practices.

### **Conscious Connections**

Conscious Connections (CC) is working to transform vacant lots in Wilmington's Northeast community, into thriving community gardens, greenhouses, and a food distribution complex. The project is working to create a sustainable food and urban agriculture network through community youth programs that provide an outlet for local youth to explore their interests and talents through art, agriculture, and achievement. The project includes:

- Seasonal community farm stand
- Community resource center with a community kitchen and seasonal café
- Hydroponic commercial greenhouse
- Pass through cold storage facility

Using agribusiness as the vehicle, the complex uses a community garden as a resource center to teach low- income and disadvantaged community members and youth the principles of healthy eating and active living. The program helps to lay a healthy foundation in order to reduce the incidence of lifestyle related chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and cancer.

Conscious Connections is also working with the Food Bank Delaware (FBD) to develop a Produce Enterprise Center that will create a food aggregation and distribution facility designed to service the specialty crop market in Delaware and the surrounding area by providing a linkage between commercial enterprises, institutions, consumers, and fresh fruit and vegetable growers of any scale.

The Produce Enterprise Center will be a revenue- generating extension of the Food Bank of Delaware which leverages its existing supply chain infrastructure to mitigate startup risks and overcome the market barriers to entry typically faced by an emerging food hub or distributor. The project will utilize dedicated staff and existing fleet and warehouse resources to conduct sales outreach and facilitate transactions between wholesale produce customers and specialty crop growers during Delaware's nine month productive season.

The Produce Enterprise Center will steer the local food system toward a more sustainable and socially responsible future by providing efficient and affordable distribution of locally grown fruits and vegetables to existing and emerging consumer access points in the Delaware area. The enterprise Center will include:

- Clean room for repacking bulk produce and value- added processing for greater marketability
- Multiple temperature- and climate-controlled produce refrigeration units
- Infrastructure (including employees, fleet vehicles, and a spacious new warehouse facility)

- Linkages to the FBD Culinary Enterprise Program for cross-functionality and revenue source

## **Partnerships to Improve Community Health**

The Partnership to Improve Community Health (PICH) awards were part of a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) initiative to improve the health of communities through collaborative efforts to create environments that support wellness and reduce chronic disease. Funding for the initiative was provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and brought approximately \$1.7 million to Delaware, specifically the City of Wilmington and the surrounding area of New Castle County. Community organizations across the city worked together to implement strategies focused on increasing access to healthy foods and places for physical activity. These strategies included healthy corner stores, farm stands, and park revitalization.

One of these partners was the South Wilmington Planning Network (SWPN), a group of more than 20 organizations working to improve south Wilmington. In 2011, the SWPN founded the Southbridge Community Garden. The garden, formerly two vacant lots owned by the Neighborhood House community center, includes 12 raised beds, fruit trees, berries, and wildflowers.

Residents rent space in the garden for a nominal fee and are provided with all the tools they need to successfully grow successfully including seeds, transplants, tools, and free workshops. In 2014, the SWPN founded a second garden focusing on youth. The Southbridge Youth Garden, an offshoot of the successful community garden, demonstrates through hands-on learning, that growing healthy and chemical free vegetables is easy, fun, inexpensive, and delicious. It also helps develop small business, money management, and entrepreneurial skills among local youth through cooking demonstrations, farm visits, a monthly youth-led farm stand and health fair, and weekly garden lessons.

Building on these two gardens, and with funding provided by the PICH award, the SWPN greatly increased the availability of fresh, healthy, and locally grown fruits and vegetables, and health education to the area's residents. Located near the Port of Wilmington, the low income and minority community of Southbridge enjoyed a monthly youth-led farmers market and health fair located at the local community center, a bi-weekly pop-up farm stand located at a community garden, a weekly farm stand located inside the local medical center, park revitalization, and the addition of healthy foods to a local gas station convenience store.

Community gardens and urban agriculture projects like these contribute to an overall healthy lifestyle and reduction of chronic diseases by offering more healthy choices for those who need it most. While urban agriculture alone will not solve the many health problems faced by Wilmington's residents, it can be an important part of the solution.

## **References**

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