



IMPACT AREA:
HEALTH

LET'S GROW

A **CITIES OF SERVICE** BLUEPRINT

Let's Grow is a high-impact service strategy in which the mayor's office engages volunteers to improve access to healthy foods in low-income neighborhoods where grocery stores and fresh produce markets are scarce.

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LET'S GROW

Let's Grow is a high-impact service strategy in which the mayor's office engages volunteers to improve access to healthy foods in low-income neighborhoods where grocery stores and fresh produce markets are scarce.

By establishing fruit and vegetable gardens in partnership with local community-based organizations, schools, and volunteers, mayors can begin to address diet-related health challenges related to hunger, food insecurity, and poor nutrition which are often found in communities with little access to fresh fruits and vegetables ("food deserts").¹ This blueprint provides a plan for engaging volunteers in the design, development, and maintenance of community gardens that provide residents, particularly children and their families, with a better understanding of healthy food and access to it.

¹ Food deserts are places where there is "low income" and "low access" to affordable and healthy, nutritious food. In many places, this means locations where at least one-fifth of the population lives at or below the poverty line and where there isn't a supermarket within a one-mile radius (or within a 10-mile radius in rural areas). In densely populated, pedestrian-oriented urban areas, this radius is even smaller. All things told, about 13.5 million people nationwide have little or no access to stores selling healthful food. <http://www.good.is/post/usda-s-food-desert-locator-map>.





BACKGROUND

People tend to eat food that is convenient and affordable. But in food deserts, fresh and healthy food is neither convenient nor affordable. Many residents in these low-income areas too frequently eat a diet that is devoid of or low in fresh fruit and vegetables, which can lead to a variety of health-related problems.² Studies show that food deserts have been linked to increased rates of childhood obesity,³ diabetes, and other food-related diseases caused by poor diets.⁴ When nutrition education and healthy cooking classes are part of the initiative, the positive changes in behavior and health are striking.

Connecting residents to community gardening has been found to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, even among household members that do not directly participate in gardening.⁵ By providing a place for residents to grow their own fruits and vegetables and the support they need to keep the gardens flourishing, Let's Grow is designed to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables in the community and provide a natural venue for events that promote healthy eating.⁶

² US Department of Agriculture. Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food—Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences: Reports to Congress. 2009. Washington, D. C.: Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture.

³ Schafft, Kai A., Jensen, Eric B., and C. Clare Hinrichs. Food Deserts and Overweight Schoolchildren: Evidence from Pennsylvania. *Rural Sociology*; 74(2): 153-177.

⁴ US Department of Agriculture. Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food—Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences: Reports to Congress. 2009. Washington, D. C.: Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture.

⁵ Carrie Draper & Darcy Freedman (2010): Review and Analysis of the Benefits, Purposes, and Motivations Associated with Community Gardening in the United States, *Journal of Community Practice*, 18:4, 458-492

⁶ Twiss, Dickinson, Duma, Kleinman, Paulsen, and Liz Rivelria. Community Gardens: Lessons learned from California healthy cities and communities. (2003) *American Journal of Public Health*; 93(9): 1435-1438.





REQUIRED ELEMENTS

- 1** Mayor's office, with the help of city agencies and community partners, determines neighborhood(s) in the city to focus the community garden initiative. Target areas should include low-income neighborhoods where grocery stores and fresh produce markets are scarce.
- 2** Mayor's office identifies ways to support local or neighborhood partners in establishing garden sites and engaging community members as gardeners. All community gardens require land suitable for gardening, access to water, gardening supplies, equipment, and funds for the garden to be established and maintained.
- 3** Community volunteers of all ages and skill sets are engaged to support the gardens, working on projects ranging from site design and construction to garden maintenance and weeding, from event organizing to the harvesting and distribution of produce. At least one community-based volunteer should be tasked with being the Garden Lead (or site coordinator), helping to organize community volunteers and serving as the garden's link to local government.





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Mayor's office tracks and reports impact metrics for every garden, often collected from local partners each quarter.

Required metrics include:

- Number of new garden plots created
- Number of garden plots maintained
- Pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables harvested and distributed, or servings of food, if possible to calculate
- Number of families benefiting from the harvest
- Increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables amongst those benefiting from the harvest as measured by pre- and post-surveys

Optional metrics include:

- Number of cooking classes taught
- Number of people taking cooking classes
- Number of nutrition education opportunities provided
- Number of people taking advantage of nutrition education opportunities
- Number of adults volunteering to support gardens
- Number of youth volunteering to support gardens
- Perceived increase in wellbeing of those participating in or benefiting from community gardens (through pre- and post-surveys)





EXECUTING THE PLAN

CHOOSING TARGET NEIGHBORHOODS

The mayor's office identifies the neighborhoods where community gardens can have the most impact (e.g., areas where grocery stores and fresh produce markets are not available). Look for densely populated areas of the city, such as apartment housing zones, as these residents may be in greater need of a communal gardening space than residents with backyards. Choosing a location near a school increases the opportunities for partnership and engagement with the teachers, students, and families connected to the school. Map grocery store locations across the city and note any zones where stores are not within walking distance, paying special attention to those zones where poverty is high. These neighborhoods are most likely to have the greatest benefit from Let's Grow. When prioritizing target locations, consider whether there is access to public transportation, which can make it easier for volunteers to commute to and from the site, and site topography, as hills can pose a challenge for gardening.





COORDINATING CITY AGENCIES AND SERVICES

The mayor's office coordinates the available services of city agencies such as the department of public works, parks and recreation department, urban development or planning department, waste management, water and sewer department, and USDA extension office to establish a community garden initiative. These agencies can offer insight into existing garden-related programs and resources in the city, and can provide services critical to establishing the garden initiative such as:

- Identifying public land or vacant lots available for community gardening;
- Facilitating the permitting process to secure the land for such use;
- Advising on local growing conditions, including soil testing;
- Ensuring access to water;
- Helping to secure materials such as hose bibs, compost bins, raised garden plots, seeds and seedlings, soil and mulch, a tool shed, garden tools and supplies, and fencing; and
- Providing trash removal services.

The mayor's office can serve as a liaison between community garden stakeholders and city agencies.





IDENTIFYING LOCAL PARTNERS

Community garden initiatives require ongoing administration and maintenance. Most successful community gardens have rules that cover the use of resources, conditions for membership, plot assignment and management, alcohol and other community use policies, pesticide use, tool sharing, maintenance, and distribution of harvests. Should a mayor's office not have the capacity to fully manage the initiative, it may want to partner with community organizations that can support the administration and maintenance of the gardens.

Some best practices from around the country demonstrate the importance of partnerships. For example, the Mayor's office in Kansas City, Kansas is partnering with Community Housing of Wyandotte County. This group is responsible for building and managing the garden as well as recruiting neighborhood residents and other volunteers to support the garden. In Phoenix, Arizona, the Mayor's office depended upon many strong partners, particularly HandsOn Phoenix and the Valley Permaculture Alliance, for volunteer recruitment, garden design, and garden maintenance. In Little Rock, the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service provides expertise in locating garden spots, understanding planting and irrigation requirements, and supporting composting and the need for beneficial insects to suppress undesirable bugs that harm the plants.

SECURING LAND

Any community garden initiative requires land suitable for gardening, access to water, gardening supplies, equipment, and funds for the garden to be established and maintained. There are four key requirements for a suitable garden site: sufficient space for garden plots, abundant sunlight, healthy soil, and access to water. Too much water may pose a challenge, so be mindful of sites that flood easily. Community gardens can be hosted on a variety of land types, including vacant property, alleyways, parks, and school grounds. Many cities work closely with their municipal land banks to identify appropriate parcels of land that can be repurposed for gardening.

Some jurisdictions may also need to address issues such as leasing and insurance to secure the property.⁷ In instances where gardens require liability insurance - which may carry high fees that could preclude community-based organizations from starting community gardens - local partners may be able to help.

⁷ See Hale, Jack "Insurance for community gardens" <https://communitygarden.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/insuranceforcommunitygardens.pdf>





ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS

In Let's Grow gardens, the core group of volunteers should be from the local community. At least one community-based volunteer should serve as the Garden Lead to help recruit, coordinate, and manage other volunteers for the garden. Volunteers are responsible for tasks as easy as lending a watchful eye over gardening activities and as intense as daily garden administration and maintenance. They and other volunteers can support the community garden initiative in a variety of ways:

- Site design and development
- Site cleanup
- Planting the garden
- Garden maintenance (e.g., weeding)
- Harvesting garden produce
- Garden administration
- Marketing and outreach
- Training on how to plant and maintain gardens

Youth can be excellent volunteers: younger children can assist in basic tasks like weeding, while older youth will benefit from exposure to tasks with more responsibility like tending to the garden. Ideally, the local partner will engage parents as well as their children in supporting the community garden. Community members with gardening experience can be valuable trainers; local experts in landscaping and gardening might be willing to donate their time as well.





FUNDRAISING FOR LET'S GROW

Let's Grow is a compelling funding opportunity for local foundations and corporate partners interested in increasing access to healthy foods in low-income neighborhoods where grocery stores and fresh produce markets are scarce. Many of the materials needed for fresh fruit and vegetable gardens can be secured through cash donations or in-kind donations of equipment, materials, gift cards, or services from local sponsors

A proposal to a local or national sponsor would typically include:

- An overview of the Let's Grow initiative
- Information on how this initiative would increase access to healthy, fresh produce and positively impact the local community (e.g., number of individuals with increased access to fresh produce, increase in community wellbeing)
- Amount of funding requested and a description of how those funds would be used (e.g., paying for seeds, gardening supplies, or tools)
- Metrics that would be collected to assess progress
- Information on **Cities of Service** (this is especially helpful for national funders)
- Description of a recognition plan for the donor (e.g., logo on printed materials, branding on the city's service website)

Be sure to provide sponsors with feedback on the results, including photos and metrics information about the positive impact of Let's Grow.





RECOGNIZING AND THANKING VOLUNTEERS

Recognizing volunteers for their contributions to building and maintaining a community garden helps motivate them to stay involved. Consider sending thank you letters or providing updates to volunteers on the impact of the initiative (e.g., photos, number of citizens who now have access to healthy produce, amount of fruits and vegetables produced in Let's Grow gardens). Thank you letters should also request that volunteers stay involved in maintaining gardens in future growing seasons. Volunteer recognition events at a community garden also offer mayors an opportunity to publicize the initiative's impact, speak to the importance of eating a nutritious diet, and make a call to action for citizens to get involved by starting gardens in their own neighborhoods as part of Let's Grow.





MEASURING IMPACT

The mayor's office ensures that the garden initiative continues to meet its mission of improving access to healthy food by requiring local partners to track specific impact metrics.

The required metrics to collect for each garden are as follows:

- Number of new garden plots created
- Number of garden plots maintained
- Pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables harvested and distributed, or servings of food, if possible to calculate
- Number of families benefiting from the harvest
- Increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables amongst those benefiting from the harvest as measured by pre- and post-surveys

Optional metrics include:

- Number of adults volunteering to support gardens
- Number of youth volunteering to support gardens
- Perceived increase in wellbeing of those participating in or benefiting from community gardens (through pre- and post-surveys)





OPTIONAL ELEMENTS

PROVIDE GRANT SUPPORT

The mayor's office could establish a grants program in which successful applicants would receive a specified amount of funding to establish and run a community garden. This could potentially be administered through a local grants competition to generate excitement and energy.


HOST HEALTHY EATING EVENTS

Given that Let's Grow encourages healthy eating throughout the community, the mayor's office can deepen these efforts by hosting events that promote increased fruit and vegetable consumption and other healthy eating habits through experiential learning at garden sites. Such activities could include healthy cooking and food preparation classes, gardening workshops, and group discussions about incorporating fresh fruits and vegetables into a diet. An added benefit to hosting events at the garden is the reinforcement of the notion that it is a shared community space, open to everyone.





THE PLAN IN ACTION

 In the spring of 2011, **Little Rock** launched “Love Your School,” a volunteer service initiative that aims to reduce childhood obesity in the city as part of its high-impact service plan, Little Rock Serves. Through Love Your School, adults - typically college and university students - offer elementary school students and their families a variety of volunteer fueled services aimed at improving nutrition education, providing garden-enhanced nutrition programming, increasing access to healthy food through community or neighborhood gardens, and engaging students in vigorous physical activity through a volunteer-guided walking program.

After the first year of implementation, of the 242 students in the program, 100% increased their fat free mass and 51% decreased their body fat. The pilot project found that healthier students also had greater success in the classroom. Students in the program significantly outperformed their peers on state math and literacy exams with 79% of participating students scoring “Proficient” or higher in literacy (compared to 60% who were not in the program) and 72% scoring “Proficient” or higher in math (compared to 62% who were not in the program). Capitalizing on the success of this partnership between the City of Little Rock and the local school district, Love Your School expanded from two to seven elementary schools from 2013 to 2014, impacting over 2,500 students and their families.





RESOURCES

GARDENING

American Community Gardening Association is a primary resource for community garden advice. Visit: <http://www.communitygarden.org/>

Cooperative Extension System Offices lists members of its national network. Visit: <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/>

For examples of community gardens in San Francisco, see San Francisco Recreation & Parks, "**Start a Community Garden.**" Visit: <http://sfrecpark.org/park-improvements/urban-agriculture-program-citywide/start-a-new-community-garden/>

EDIBLE EDUCATION

The Edible Schoolyard Program serves as a comprehensive resource for edible education programs around the world. Visit: <https://edibleschoolyard.org>

FOOD SECURITY

PolicyMap displays the results of a supermarket study of low access areas that maps locations in the United States with limited access to supermarkets. Visit: <http://www.policymap.com/maps>

Community Food Security Coalition links to a national network of food policy councils and food security coalitions. Visit: <http://www.foodsecurity.org/>





FEDERAL FUNDING

Community Development Block Grant program funds local community development activities such as infrastructure development. Visit: <http://1.usa.gov/dMws3>

Community Food Projects Competitive Grants program is designed to increase food security in low-income communities. Visit: <http://1.usa.gov/mze1Dm>

Agriculture and Food Research Initiative - Childhood Obesity Prevention program supports research, education, and extension projects and Food and Agricultural Science Enhancement (FASE) grants that address childhood obesity. Visit: <http://bit.ly/g8fgb3>





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Cities of Service is a national nonprofit that designs and supports the implementation of high-impact service strategies that can be widely replicated in cities worldwide. We provide technical assistance, programmatic support, planning resources, and funding opportunities. Cities of Service supports a coalition of nearly 200 cities whose mayors are committed to using citizen volunteers to solve local pressing challenges, from engaging mentors to help decrease high school dropout rates to increasing energy efficiency in buildings. We help coalition cities share solutions, best practices, and lessons learned, as well as spread awareness about their great work.

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