

GREEN HARVEST PROGRAM

McKeesport, Pennsylvania

The Green Harvest sustainable food system project was developed by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank in 1991 to generate nutritious produce for low income people while facilitating agricultural sustainability, economic development, and urban beautification in communities it serves. The program encourages self-sufficiency within local communities by teaching gardening skills, providing Food Bank member agencies with easier access to locally produced fruits and vegetables, and promoting the local economy with small business development. The Food Bank also attempts to link Green Harvest's efforts with those of other projects designed to address the root causes of hunger and poverty.

The project uniquely combines environmental concerns, community economic development, and direct service to low-income people in the following ways:

- As a sustainable agriculture program and environmental enterprise that has resulted in new jobs (especially in low-income urban communities);
- By promoting accessible, well-planned garden space and retaining the community focus in urban/public housing areas; and
- By providing a multitude of opportunities for citizen and youth involvement in sustainable agriculture and environmental issues.

The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, a non-profit food distribution warehouse, distributes over one million pounds of food and grocery products monthly to over 370 soup kitchens, shelters, food pantries, and low income day care and senior citizen's feeding programs in Southwestern Pennsylvania. It has been in operation since 1980. Its 1995 budget is \$2.3 million, of which about \$1.2 million is derived from donations and grants, \$700,000 from "regular shared maintenance" fees (of .05, .07 or .10 cents per pound to cover the cost of sorting and packaging donated food), and \$72,000 from its wholesale program.

Revenues to support the Green Harvest program come from CSA shareholder fees (see Longview Food Bank Farm, below), sales to Farm Stands, seed and produce sales,

and foundation support that includes funding from an anonymous local foundation, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, and Share Our Strength. Community Development Block Grant funding helped secure needed equipment for the farm. Total project revenues for 1995 are estimated at \$196,800.

Program components

The Green Harvest project has six inter-related components: Gleaning, Community Gardens, Longview Food Bank Farm, the Farm Stand Project, Market Gardens, and links to City Parks' Farmer's Markets. The components link to one another and to the Food Bank in a variety of ways, as described in the following:

■ **Gleaning**, a strategy for eliminating food waste on farms, organizes volunteers to pick surplus fruits and vegetables from local fields and orchards. When a farmer has edible crops that might otherwise go to waste, s/he calls the food bank and volunteer "gleaners" are sent to harvest the food for the benefit of the Food Bank's member agencies. The volunteers, which number in the hundreds, come from colleges, churches, member agencies, and businesses. Farmers who donate their produce to charity can benefit from tax credits. Since 1991, over 148,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables have been gleaned for the use of the Food Bank. In 1994, over 50,000 pounds of food were harvested during a total of 12 gleaning efforts. The estimates for 1995s gleaned harvest is 60,000 pounds.

■ **Community Gardens**, organized to empower residents of low-income urban or public housing communities to learn to grow and share their own vegetables, are located throughout the Pittsburgh area. In the era when air pollution from industry was high, low-income housing was built on hill tops—places where no one else wanted to live. Consequently, the low income areas of Pittsburgh, which are for the most part isolated and difficult to reach, have inadequate sources of high quality food. What is available is expensive and generally inferior. To address the need of these communities for high quality and reasonably priced food, the Food Bank offers seeds, equipment, and technical support for community gardeners in the first year of assistance. Involvement by the Food Bank is designed to lessen each year until the garden's operators become self-reliant and are able to maintain the garden on their own. The gardens beautify vacant urban land, bring

residents together to improve their communities and learn new skills, and provide thousands of pounds of food to residents and local pantries. Since 1991, community gardens have been established in 11 separate urban communities. In 1995, the Food Bank is working with five community gardens, and a summer youth program that will engage 50 youth in neighborhood beautification, organic gardening and recycling projects, with related field trips throughout the summer.

■ **Longview Food Bank Farm** is a certified organic farm located in Armstrong County, 35 miles north of Pittsburgh. The project currently uses 20 acres of the 125 acre family-owned farm. In 1994, the Food Bank assumed responsibility for operating the farm with the help of its owners and the families who are members of the related Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program (see below). The Food Bank employs a farm supervisor who coordinates the growth of several acres of produce that are planted and harvested by volunteer groups, including many young people, and distributed to member agencies free of charge. A second parcel of land is dedicated to the CSA program, which grows produce for "shareholders" in the Greater Pittsburgh area who pay to have weekly packages of organic produce delivered to their neighborhoods during the growing/harvesting season. The farm also houses a demonstration garden and serves as host to high school, college, community garden, and Farm Stand workshops. The revenue generated by the CSA supports a portion of Green Harvest's operating expenses. In 1994 \$25,215 was generated from 81 CSA share fees. In 1995, 100 share fees are expected to produce \$32,500 in revenues. Since 1991, the farm has produced more than 89,000 pounds of organic vegetables for the Food Bank. In 1994, the yield was 35,000 pounds. The goal for 1995 is an increase to 52,000 pounds.

■ **The Farm Stand Project** makes fresh, Pennsylvania-grown produce accessible to low income communities through the development and operation of a community-run Farm Stand. It also provides small-scale business training and employment opportunities for community residents. The project, in a method similar to the Community Garden Project, aims to empower residents through technical assistance and training to eventually

maintain the seasonal profit-generating produce stands themselves. Farm Stands are run by managers who are residents of the communities. They accept cash, food stamps, and WIC Farmers' Market coupons, and are supplied with produce from Longview Food Bank Farm and several other local grower/suppliers. Managers and staff are responsible for decision-making at their stands, including produce selection and sales/marketing techniques. Profits generated by Farm Stands are used to sustain the project in future seasons. Host agencies in the communities act as program sponsors. Sites for Farm Stands are chosen based on evidence of community support and location within needy communities. In 1994, Farm Stands were established in six separate inner-city communities. In 1995, six will be in operation, with six being assisted by the Farm Bank. This year also ushered in an expanded educational training program for Farm Stand staff that spans six one-day sessions. Topics covered included: advertising/community support, marketing, bookkeeping, sales and price-setting, produce and nutrition, and organic farming. As part of the training program, the Green Harvest Project developed a comprehensive manual to assist participants in the program. Included in the content are program requirements, a garden calendar, garden design and planning guidelines, growing methods, and information on soil, compost, mulches, seeds, insects, weeds, and diseases.

■ **Market Gardens** link community gardens with Farm Stands. Under this arrangement, community gardeners will be able to grow produce to supply a portion of the vegetables for sale at their own community Farm Stands. In 1995, a third-year community garden will link with a first-year Farm Stand location. Also, with funding from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, the assistance of Slippery Rock University interns, a search for a large gardening plot within the city limits will be conducted. The goal is to employ homeless and low income people as Farm Stand suppliers. Other markets for the produce may be developed as well.

■ **City Parks' Farmer's Markets** are another way area farmers assist in feeding the hungry. The Green Harvest Coordinator, at the beginning of the season, links Farmer's Markets and Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank member agencies so that at the end of market day,

How To Get in Touch with Green Harvest

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Scope: Local/regional, urban/rural

Inception Date: 1991

Participants: Residents, farmers, volunteers

Project type: Urban gardens, community supported agriculture, food production, job training

Methods used: Education, training, demonstration, volunteer donations

Lessons learned: A diversity of potential urban / rural linkages exist that benefit interests in both areas; skill-building is critical to helping low-income people move away from dependence on assistance.

unsold produce is not wasted but picked up by an agency closest to the market. This strategy is expected to harvest approximately 25,000 pounds of food in 1995.

Skill-Building to break free from dependence

The Green Harvest Project/Food Bank has not encountered challenges or barriers that it has not been able to resolve, either by reassessing expectations or by developing strategies to address them. The project is helping to fill the void created by the sharp decline in government commodity foods for the hungry. USDA allocations have been cut by approximately 75 percent in the last two years. As local agencies requesting donated food continues to grow the services of the Food Bank become increasingly important. In turning this challenge into a benefit, the Food Bank has come to realize that the production of wholesome, locally grown foods is a more self-sustaining and effective plan to meet the needs of the hungry. In addition, growing, selling, and harvesting food locally

makes effective use of local land resources, stimulates the local economy, and exposes many people to the benefits of sustainable agriculture and social issues, such as hunger. And, realizing that it is no longer enough to provide increasing quantities of food to meet the needs of the poor and hungry, the project is addressing the root causes of hunger by giving people the skills to break free from dependence on private food assistance.

—Community Sustainability Resource Institute



UPDATE

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In July 1997, the Green Harvest Program became a new department at the Food Bank. Since that time it has grown considerably.

The Farm Stand Project is in year one of a three year transition to gradually spin the Farm Stands over to the communities in which they reside. The Farm Stands have been successful in providing fresh vegetables to low-income communities. They also serve as a meeting ground and create employment opportunities for members of each community.

Changes that are being considered for the Farm Stand Project include:

- incorporating a youth-operated Farm Stand into the project;
- expanding nutrition education at the Stands; and
- purchasing produce from a farmer's cooperative that will deliver to the stands.

The gleaning program continues to save food from local farms and gardens that would otherwise be considered waste. Eight farms were gleaned last year and 20 more farms wish to take part this year.

The Food Bank farm was relocated to Allegheny County (18 miles from the City of Pittsburgh) in 1997. The new location attracts more volunteers. Shareholders in the CSA Project now pick up produce at the farm.

In August of 1996 the Green Harvest Advisory Committee was formed. Its eleven members, and other concerned and interested individuals, will work together to help make decisions, provide guidance and support, and help shape the future of the program.

—Community Sustainability Resource Institute