Local Food Resource Hubs Network Boosts Residents' Ability to Grow Fruits and Vegetables

Implementation Sites and Partners

Gardening Matters

Northside Hub

Phillips/Ventura Village Hub

Southside Hub

Homegrown Minneapolis

City of Minneapolis
Department of Health and Family Support (MDHFS)
www.minneapolismn.gov/dhfs

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As part of its efforts to support healthy eating, the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support (MDHFS) partnered with Gardening Matters (a local non-profit that supports community gardening) and other community members to facilitate the creation of the Local Food Resource Hubs Network (Hubs Network). This project was part of Communities Putting Prevention to Work, a federally-funded initiative to prevent obesity and chronic diseases.

The Hubs Network was a recommendation originating from Homegrown Minneapolis, a citywide initiative expanding residents' ability to grow, process, distribute, eat, and compost healthy, sustainable, locally grown foods. Modeled after Detroit's cluster system, the goal of the Hubs Network is to provide members with the resources and education needed to grow, preserve, cook, and compost their own fresh produce, thus increasing access to healthy foods and consumption of fruit and vegetables.

The Hubs Network is comprised of geographically-based 'Hubs', which are partnerships of individuals, businesses, and community organizations, rather than physical locations.

In the 2011 growing season, three Hubs served residents and community gardens in North Minneapolis, Phillips/Ventura Village, and the Southside. Two types of low-cost memberships were available: Household Garden—for a single gardener, or Community Garden—for multiple gardeners. Both types of membership offered benefits such as seeds and seedlings, gardening and canning classes, social events and more.

Activities

Gardening Matters worked with a group of about 20 stakeholders (including community members and City staff) to develop the concept of a hubs network. They held regular planning meetings and a community conference to engage additional community members in planning and participating in the project.

To formally launch the concept collectively developed, Gardening Matters released an application for community organizations to partner together to become pilot hubs. Three groups from different parts of the city were selected to become hubs, based on their existing connections to neighborhood organizations and community members, their capacity to coordinate the hub's activities, and their commitment to reach diverse populations within their communities.

Gardening Matters served as the Hubs Network administrator, and staff coordinated meetings, communications, resource distribution events, and the project finances. Volunteer organizers in each hub met regularly to plan hub-specific activities, conduct outreach,

Activities (continued)

recruit new members, and facilitate events and projects. A taskforce made up of Gardening Matters staff, City staff, community members, and hub members oversaw the ongoing development and implementation of the Hubs Network. From early spring through the fall of 2011, the Hubs Network completed the following activities:

- Enrolled 377 household and 45 community garden members, involving more than 600 people
- Distributed 13,000 seed packets and 15,000 seedlings at two resource distribution events
- Hosted social events for members in each hub
- Held 43 classes to grow and retool residents' knowledge and skills in building healthy soil, planting and maintaining gardens, composting, and preserving food
- Completed hub-specific projects, such as starting new community gardens and tool lending libraries
- Held a network-wide planning meeting
- Founded a Stewardship Council with representatives from each hub to guide the project

Evaluation of the Hubs Network occurred in several ways:

- *Pre- and post-season surveys* of household and community garden members to assess member demographics, skills, knowledge and behaviors
- *Bi-monthly check-in calls* with hub representatives to document hub activities, successes, challenges, and time spent on the project
- *Facilitated small group discussions at a network-wide meeting* to capture hub members' experiences with the network, member successes, and ideas for improvement
- *Stakeholder interviews* conducted with community leaders, Gardening Matters staff, and City staff to document the process for administering the Hubs Network, successes, and strategies for improvement and sustainability
- *A Garden Harvest Estimation Tool* to estimate pounds of produce grown in member gardens without using a scale (the tool was piloted in the 2011 season)

Results

Overall, results showed that the Hubs Network had a successful first year, and that there are opportunities to improve and grow the network in the future. Results are summarized below by evaluation tool.

Member surveys

Household garden members completed pre-season surveys at the first resource distribution day (280 completed surveys, 64% response rate). They completed post-season surveys in person at a fall network-wide meeting, online, or through the mail (117 completed surveys, 31% response rate). Leaders representing community garden members also completed surveys in the spring (32 surveys completed, 77% response rate) and fall (20 surveys completed, 44% response rate). *(Note that comparisons between pre- and post-season survey data should be interpreted cautiously because the survey samples were not random, and the findings may represent differences in the samples, not differences in the membership overall.)*

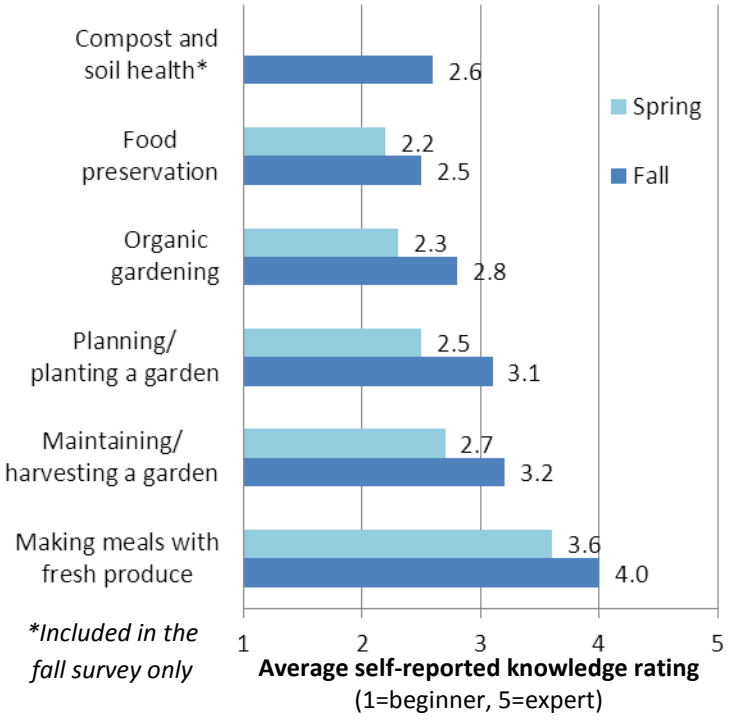
Spring survey data (similar to fall survey data) showed that members had the following demographics:

- 77% identified as women
- Ages ranged from 23-81, and mean age was 45
- 78% identified as White, 8% as Black or African American, 3% as Hispanic, and 10% as other or mixed-race
- 51% had 5 or more years of gardening experience, 36% had 1-4 years of experience, and 13% had less than a year of experience

Other findings of interest included:

- 45% of household garden members had to cut or skip meals in the past year because there was not enough money for food
- Household members reported increases in gardening & food preparation knowledge (Figure 1)
- Household members overall felt connected to their communities and that membership helped strengthen their community connections (Figure 2, next page)

Figure 1: Knowledge of Growing and Preparing Produce



Results (continued)

- 90% of household respondents plan to join the Hubs Network again in 2012
- Members were asked how many fruits and vegetables they consumed yesterday. In the spring survey, 47% of household garden members reported eating at least three servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit a day, compared to 37% in the fall survey. Note that the difference from spring to fall may be due to the fact that the spring and fall surveys were administered on different days of the week, or that the non-random survey samples differed from each other in some way.
- Community garden leaders reported an average of 20 members in their gardens
- Community garden leaders reported hearing 7 different languages spoken at their gardens (English, Spanish, Hmong, Dakota, Russian, Somali, and another African language), indicating that community garden members might represent more diversity than household garden members

Bi-monthly check-in calls with Hub leaders

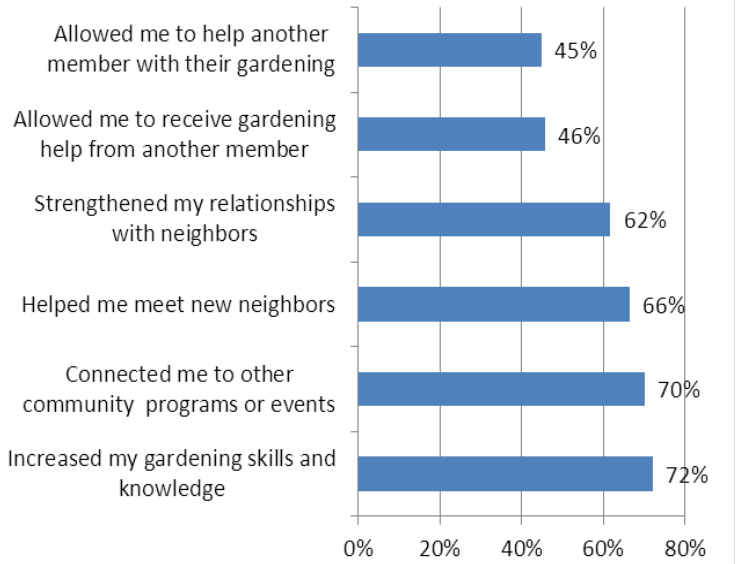
Hub representatives reported many accomplishments in the first season. Much of the initial work focused on recruiting new members and preparing for distribution days. Hub leaders and members volunteered an estimated total of 4,236 hours to Hubs Network activities. Member and leadership participation varied greatly by hub and participation from leadership and members decreased after the resource distribution days. Hub leaders were proud of their accomplishments, but also encountered many challenges along the way, especially in finding ways to engage members after they had received their seeds and seedlings.

Facilitated small group discussions

At the network-wide event in October 2011, Hubs Network members shared the following opinions and ideas:

- Members were grateful for the wide variety of seeds and seedlings available to them through the program for such a low cost
- Members wanted to see more diversity in the program and suggested that churches and neighborhood organizations would be great partners in this effort
- Members expressed a strong desire for more opportunities to gather with other hub members and to share expertise and resources with each other
- Members wanted to be more involved in leadership and volunteer opportunities

Figure 2: Percent Agreement to the Community Connectedness Statements, "Being a Hubs Network member…"



Stakeholder interviews

Key findings from the stakeholder interviews included:

- Successes, such as starting a program from scratch, getting resources to people, and having strong community involvement and self-organizing
- Challenges, such as managing a large workload, facilitating difficult partnerships, increasing member engagement, increasing the diversity of the membership, and achieving long term sustainability
- Ideas for growing and improving the network, such as creating better defined volunteer opportunities, partnering with community organizations to increase member diversity

Garden Harvest Estimation Tool

Nine volunteer gardeners piloted a tool to track their harvests from July through October. Based on their reports, they grew an estimated 542 pounds of produce.

Key lessons learned

Key lessons from the 2011 Hubs Network season are summarized below:

- The demand for the Hubs Network was high; all 600 membership slots were filled
- Member satisfaction with the Hubs Network was high; 90% of members planned to join again in 2012
- The Hubs Network appears to be reaching people with limited access to healthy food, the intended audience through the CPPW grant. Almost half of the household members had experienced at least some food insecurity in the previous year.
- It is unclear how membership in the Hubs Network impacted actual fruit and vegetable consumption; the evaluation will continue to explore this in the second year of implementation.
- Organizing the Hubs Network required considerable time from volunteers, City staff, and Gardening Matters staff. Volunteer leaders were essential to the functioning of the program, and they helped maintain a grassroots approach.
- Many members were not tapped as resources in the first year. However, members were interested

Key lessons learned

in in finding ways to volunteer and contribute their knowledge and expertise in the future. The Hubs Network can increase and better define opportunities for volunteering, and it can facilitate opportunities for members to connect with each other and share skills and resources.

- The racial/ethnic, language, and gender diversity of the program did not match the diversity of the city, at least among the household garden members. The Hubs Network plans to increase this diversity through targeted outreach and partnerships with community organizations and leaders.
- Most gardeners had five or more years of gardening experience. Experienced gardeners are important resources with high levels of knowledge and skills, and they are vital to the program. However, the network would like to see an increase in the number of new and inexperienced gardeners, who can benefit greatly from participation.

Sustainability and future plans

CPPW funded the start-up costs required to develop a sustainable program. Future costs will be covered through revenue raised from member fees, donations, fundraisers, and other grants. In addition to financial sustainability, the Hubs Network has also developed sustainable leadership for the project through a newly elected Stewardship Council. The council consists of hub leaders, Gardening Matters staff and City of Minneapolis staff. The Stewardship Council will guide the design and implementation of the program in the second year.

Many of the recommendations from the first year are already being implemented, such as changes to membership package options, sliding scale member fees, and the development of a mentoring program. The Hubs Network is also expanding by adding a hub in Northeast/Southeast Minneapolis and a hub in St. Paul Midway for the 2012 season.

Going forward, the Hubs Network will focus on increasing the diversity of its membership. A grant from MDHFS (provided by the Minnesota Department of Health's Statewide Health Improvement Program) will allow Gardening Matters to train individuals and/or organizations to conduct outreach to members of diverse cultural communities, provide support for gardening and urban agriculture projects, and hold culturally tailored classes and events. The Stewardship Council will continue to use the evaluation results to refine the Hubs Network and to further evaluate the program by adapting the evaluation strategies used in the 2011 season.

Resources

City of Minneapolis
To learn more about MDHFS *Communities Putting Prevention to Work* interventions, visit:
www.minneapolismn.gov/health/cppw/index.htm

To learn more about *Homegrown Minneapolis* and the *Urban Agriculture Policy Plan* visit:
www.minneapolismn.gov/health/homegrown/index.htm

Gardening Matters
Visit the *Gardening Matters website* for detailed information about the Hubs Network, the individual hubs, and to find resources for gardeners:
www.gardeningmatters.org

Greening of Detroit
Detroit's Garden Resource Program served as a model for the Hubs Network in Minneapolis. More information is available on the Greening of Detroit website:
www.detroitagriculture.net

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