

Evaluation First Report: USDA Community Food Projects Grant

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Grantee: Seeds of Solidarity Education Center, Inc.

Project Title: The SOL (Seeds of Leadership) Patrol: Cultivating Healthy Communities

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Seeds of Solidarity and the participants of this project reside in the North Quabbin area, an economically depressed region in North-Central Massachusetts. This project plans to increase the accessibility and reliability of local, fresh food for low-income teens and their families in this region. In addition, relationships will be developed between local schools and local food producers to provide students with fresh food and to give them a better understanding of where their food comes from. This project also plans to promote renewable energy alternatives to insecure fossil fuels that threaten true food security and public health.

Ten major outcomes and outputs of the SOL Patrol: Cultivating Healthy Communities Grant are being evaluated over a three-year period.

In this first phase of an on-going formative evaluation, three of the outcomes and outputs for this USDA grant were tested for success. From January 2004 through October 2004, these three outcomes were evaluated in depth. Beginning in January 2005, the other seven outcomes will begin to be measured.

Teens active in the SOL program were interviewed and responded to a written survey. The methodologies included 12 personal interviews, a group interview and a mailed written survey. SOL Garden celebrated six successful seasons in 2004. A representative sample of teens from each year of the program, all of whom were active participants during the grant period made up our interview and survey group.

- Seven teens participated in a group interview at the SOL Garden site in August, 2004.
- Twelve teens were interviewed at the Garlic and Arts Festival in October 2004. This was a community outreach event hosted by Seeds of Solidarity and designed to heighten the awareness of local growers and food producers in Western Massachusetts. Teens worked cooking food, selling garlic and produce, and educating visitors about local food alternatives and alternative energy.
- A written survey was sent to 15 SOL Garden/Patrol participants. 8 teens returned the survey.

Three major outcomes and outputs established for the USDA grant were evaluated and included in this report.

1. One major outcome of this project is to teach low-income teenagers to grow food for themselves and their families. The outcome as stated in the grant reads: “90% of teens

involved in SOL Garden and Patrol programs learn to grow food for themselves and their families in ‘at home’ gardens.”

Anticipated Outputs: 30 teens from low income families (10 per year) over 3 growing seasons will grow food for themselves and their families effecting a total of 30 households (10 per year).

2. A second outcome is to facilitate the wheels of change by engaging the SOL Patrol (Garden) participants in community outreach. Participants travel to schoolyards, farmer’s markets and community events in a solar and vegetable-oil powered van bringing with them samples of locally grown innovative food, along with information, relevant experiences and stories about local food production and renewable energy. The outcome as stated in the grant reads: “Information on local food and renewable energy will be disseminated to the larger community and the general public.”

Anticipated Outputs: Over a 3 year period, 10,000 people (about 3300 people per year) will be reached with information through 24 presentations (8 per year) .

3. A third outcome is to increase the project participants’ knowledge of regional and national food systems and the resulting impact on food quality and nutrition. The outcome as stated in the grant reads: “90% of participants in SOL Garden will increase their knowledge of regional food systems.”

Anticipated Outputs: Over three years of 30 young people/teens (10 per year) will participate in SOL Garden and increase their knowledge of regional and national food systems and change their food habits, such as buying and eating local and fresh foods.

Based on the survey results, compiled below, the evaluators conclude the following:

Outcome number one:

- All teens (100%) who responded to the survey and were involved in the SOL Garden and Patrol programs have learned to grow food and feel confident in their farming skills.
- 90% have active gardens at home and grow seasonal vegetables.
- 100% of the respondents believe that regional foods are healthier for consumption and taste better than ‘store-bought’ foods.
- 100% of respondents think that regional food systems have less impact on the environment and decrease the use of fossil fuels.

Outcome number two:

- 90% of the surveyed teens felt comfortable and confident talking with the public about regional food systems, the benefits of local foods, alternative fuels for transportation.

- Eight out of the 12 teens had attended public events like the Garlic and Arts Fest or SolarFest as members of the SOL Patrol. All had positive experiences educating the public about regional foods, organic growing techniques and alternative fuels.
- Ten of the 12 teens had participated in a community event at a local retirement home where they served elders food grown on the SOS farms and explained to elders the benefits of locally grown fresh food.

Outcome number three:

- 90% of the surveyed teens successfully diagramed a regional food system compared to a national food system and could describe the differences in terms of costs and benefits.
- 90% of the surveyed teens named the benefits of regional food systems indicating greater freshness, higher nutritional quality, lower environmental impact (chemicals, pesticides and GMOs), lower use of fossil fuels, benefits to local business, (and greater sense of community).

The survey results stated above are echoed in the formal interviews of twelve SOL Garden/Patrol participants. The interviewing process allowed for emergent data to surface broadening the field of information for the Grant recipient. This emergent data provides unsolicited strategic feedback for the program.

The emergent themes highlighted:

- Personal health and nutrition. Teens were amazed at how little they knew about food and how little they cared about their body's health before SOL garden where they were informed about their food choices.
- Concern about the environmental impact of large corporate food systems that 'hide' the costs of large food systems.
- The need in teens for strong mentors who care for teen health, community/civic service and responsibility and membership in a supportive-caring community.
- Teens are really interested in the social, cultural, political and economic aspects of food systems and how their choices might impact the shape of those systems.
- A significant rise in teen confidence and self-esteem emerged from advocacy work in public venues. Teens see themselves as meaningful and productive citizens by promoting local farming and regional food systems.
- The importance of real authentic work bonded teens into tight, supportive communities despite diversity (where labeling and cliques usually separate, gardening brings them together)
- The importance of teens feeling a part of the larger community and being acknowledged and recognized by adults as contributing community members. We were surprised by how many participants have been coming to the program for multiple years.

- Teens and community members find aspects of Seeds of Solidarity farm, SOL Garden and the USDA initiative intimately related. Seeds of Solidarity Farm (fiscally distinct from the non-profit organization) makes land available to the SOL Garden project. Seeds of Solidarity is a viable small farm that keeps the education programs rooted in local agriculture. The education programs like SOL Garden enable others to absorb and take home techniques used on the farm.

Emergent data is contained in the following quotes drawn from both the individual and the group interviews.

Before I came to SOL garden I just went to the supermarket and picked up what I wanted/needed and went home and cooked, but now I've learned so much about food and it's so much better for you if you just go to a local grower or have your own garden in your backyard instead of using ones that come from so far away...do you know that an avocado can travel 5000 miles and 2 weeks to get to a store. The full cost of food is astounding...we need to know more about what we put in our bodies and take from the earth.

Instead of giving your money to someone who is faceless and lives 2000 miles away, you can give it to somebody in your own neighborhood.

SOL garden has really impacted my life...I am choosing to exercise the right to choose what I eat and what I put into my body...I am in charge of my health, good healthy food is what we all need right now.

Being here, given the opportunity to meet all these wonderful people. We all have different personalities and we're all different in our communities. We all come together and work so hard together and everything works our perfect, like no one ever fights. We all get along because we work hard.

It is just cool how, you know, opportunities that spring up that are based from this place like conference attendance, business opportunities, educational events, public speaking...so much comes from this place.

We've been learning a lot about alternative fuels and solar energy and we get to advocate when we go to an event like Solar Fest and as we're serving people good food, it's just a great combination – food and education.

I have honestly increased my skills in communicating with others. I've gone to more places than I ever imagined to explain about food and how its grown and where it comes from...I stick with it because I know I make a difference.

I've learned how to be a leader. I never considered myself a leader until this program. It taught me how to talk, to take my life seriously, to meet and respect people, to organize and present information. I used to hide in class. Now, I get picked to be a leader in group projects...we got an A once because I was able to organize the group in a good way. That's because we are given the responsibility to organize our work and work crews...we have to lead and work together well or we fail and our food dies or our presentations are terrible.

I learned a perspective that is global and considers the whole food system. I know that I can make a difference in the bigger picture with what I do on a local level. This program taught me to look broader...like war that is fought over oil if we don't need it then it won't cause a war. Youth need to realize that we are the next leaders and its important to know all of these things so we can cause change.

I want to be a chef, and now an organic chef using local foods as much as possible.

This work has definitely effected my relationship to the larger community. There is a diverse community just within SOL garden but we also go out into the larger community and begin to know people through the markets, the events and the service work we do.

The Farmer's Market is another place where you meet lots of people. We got to know the vendors and farmers who came every week, they would see you on the regular street and wave or ask how things were going. When I saw them outside of SOL garden, I felt part of a larger community that I wouldn't have reached out to without this experience.

We went to the Wendell Senior Center, the folks there get food from local farmers. We put on a cooking event and ate with them. There were elderly people from all over, most who were involved in Farm Share. We are the people who grow some of their food, that was an awesome feeling.

We aren't pressured to get anything in particular out of this, R & D let us experience the whole thing and pick and choose our particular learning. What they do teach you is respect for each other, for adults and for the land...that expands out from the experience to everything.

SURVEY RESULTS:

The evaluation team used 15 questions on a written survey to assess the following from SOL Garden/Patrol teens. 8 out of 15 teens responded to the survey:

1) Have you gained the knowledge and skills to grow your own food?
Eight said Yes. Zero said No.

2) Are you growing food for yourself and/or your family?
Eight said Yes. Zero said No.

3) Please describe the space or spaces that you grow food (greenhouse, garden, flowerpots...).
Four said backyard Gardens. Two said flowerpots. Two said Greenhouse and gardens.

4) Have there been any challenges or obstacles in growing your own food?
Six said 'bugs', because they didn't use pesticides. Four said weeds. None said these obstacles were a problem, most said it just took a while to solve the challenge.

5) Are there any particular aspects of growing food that you have a strong interest in?
The taste of food after its all done growing.
The satisfaction of knowing I have made a difference.

6) The whole cycle of planting and growing, the hard work, harvesting, the delicious food.
I like it all. (Three)
Herbs are great culinary asset, medicinal infusions and salves, healthy food.
To excel by simply involving myself in such work, the confidence I gain when food is grown, the sustaining of my well being.

7) Do you have any thoughts or feelings about being able to grow food for yourself and others?

I would like to grow food for myself and others for the rest of my life.
It is better for me and for my family, I know what goes into growing so I won't be eating anything I don't want, like pesticides.

It makes me feel good that people can eat out of their backyard and not have to eat a vegetable that came from a long distance area.
It is a useful, freeing and money saving process.
I feel good knowing where it comes from that what's been put on/in it to grow.
It is a privilege that all cannot comprehend. It is a gift to learn how many possibilities there are.
It is the healthy choice, the one and only choice...I am proud that I can survive if need be.

8) What do you think people should know about food systems?

That we live in a fantasy world...Sugar, fats and processed stuff are the main ideas in American food systems, Foods like McDonald's are cancerous. Food locally grown is fresh, and loaded with nutrients that keep one vital.
Know the best time to plant seeds.
Know how far it has traveled, what pesticides have been used, if it is worth all the pollution.
What happens to their food from farm to table.
Definitely know where your food comes from...know their options and where to get a fair price and labeling.

9) In what kind of setting or situation can you best utilize your leadership and outreach skills?
Working at farmer's markets and informing people of fresh food, GMOs, Biodiesel alternative energy and SOL programs.

Planting gardens at schools was the best situation, this allowed me to teach small children and show them how to grow vegetables to they may go home and talk to their parents and grow food at home.

In the garden is a great setting for me to use outreach and leadership skills. I have learned to communicate with the other members, ask questions about what I am doing and ask for help so I can learn to teach others.

In a small informal project where there are no judges to watch.

When I know so much about something and am with my peers, I can be a real leader.

My increasing confidence links to my great courage gained from direct experience with Seeds of Solidarity farm.

10) When do you feel most comfortable/competent talking with people about food systems?

I work at a local pharmacy and was promoting the Garlic and Arts fest. I was very confident talking about the worthy festival. I was least prepared to speak with people who were so naïve about the whole food thing...their minds were made up and it takes madness for them to realize its different.

I feel most confident talking with people who are interested in food systems and ask questions.

When around people who are willing to listen.

When other members of the group are sharing information with me as well, then if I miss something someone else can tell it.

With people my own age.

With a group of my peers who are also excited about the subject.

11) Do you feel prepared to talk with people about food systems? Eight said Yes.

Two said there is a lot more to learn.

Are there any other skills or knowledge that you would like to have to better prepare you for outreach to the public.

More support from recognized associations or people.

Three said Public speaking skills (SOL garden supports this through group meetings.)

Higher self esteem and Patience

More ways to teach others to grow their own food.

More facts about the national food system.

12) What particular activities or aspects of Sol Garden have been most informative for you?

Working together in the garden.

Going to/speaking with farmer's markets and learning local food systems.

Growing food in the SOL garden.

Participating in the 'knowledge' games we played during group meetings

Planting the seeds and watching them grow.

Hands-on activities like planting and taking direct care of veggies

Direct or hands-on learning/experiencing planting

Putting in elementary school gardens and at the homeless shelter

When we met and discussed the need for oil and the alternative biodiesel and its benefits.

13) What do you think are the most important reasons for strengthening and promoting regional food systems?

Advertisements

Everyone wants to live a good and healthy life, we have to let them know how their food is full of sugar and fat and that it kills and that there is an alternative.

It supports local farmers and their livelihood and if people start buying from them instead of stores they could possibly be eating healthier too.

To encourage good eating habits and responsibility.

Helping regional food producers with their businesses and not allowing bigger food systems to corrupt their business. It is also healthier for you and the environment.

Helps keep local farmers in business.

So we are not dependent on food that can't be provided to us if things like transportation and imports were not happening.

The answers to question 14 were diagrams. All eight teens were able to trace in detail the life of a tomato in a regional and a national food system. They indicated the different degrees of 'wait time', the impact of transportation from different distances, the use of monocultures for growing large amounts of food for distribution, the health benefits of local food because of freshness, the better small growing techniques on local small farms.

The answers to question 15 were cost/benefit graphs. The benefits being independence, freshness, lack of chemicals and GMOs, low transportation costs and lower use of fossil fuels, low impact on environment, lower fats and sugars in processing. The costs of a regional food system are lack of diversity in fruits and veggies during winter months.

Recommendations

It is clear through the results of the interviews and surveys that the first year of the Cultivating Healthy Communities project has had significant positive impact on the participants. Not only have the teens gained competency in growing their own food, they have increased their knowledge and awareness of their regional food system as well. In addition, many participants have expressed a growing sense of confidence and leadership skills because of their involvement in the project.

The one recommendation that the evaluators would like to offer is for the project director to think about how the teens might use their new found confidence and leadership skills to take public outreach beyond “preaching to the choir” to reach more deeply into the communities in which they live.