

# FROM FOOD DESERTS TO COMMUNITY GARDENS: OLDER ADULTS CREATING HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES



In the late 2000s, with a small grant from Atlantic Philanthropies, the New York Community Trust embarked on a research effort designed to shed light on the potential of the city's older adults to make neighborhoods and communities stronger. The Trust already had a long history supporting “elder-focused” projects, investing nearly \$1.5 million annually to help older adults remain active and to meet the basic needs of those who are vulnerable and dependent. But this project was coming from a different point of view. What if they looked at experienced adults not only as having needs, but as a unique and valuable asset that might be deployed to tackle important community issues?

They convened a panel of advisors and experts—composed primarily of people over age 60—and they commissioned research about the interests, needs and priorities of New York's older adults. Unlike many of their community foundation peers who embarked on similar studies as part of the national Community Experience Partnership, the Trust approached the question of older adult community participation from a neutral perspective, hoping to activate a powerful resource for making sustainable change, but with few preset ideas about what issues might be tackled. They took a community organizing approach, looking for opportunities that would excite older adults and leverage the unique skills and experiences they offered.

It quickly became clear that the city's “elderly” population, well over 1 million people strong, was vital, active, and looking for meaningful ways to give back. The traditional notion of volunteerism, however, did not resonate. What motivated many of the city's older adults—and what was too often missing from opportunities for civic participation—was a desire to help make neighborhoods better places to live.

By 2009, ideas for potential projects began to emerge, and the advisory group developed criteria for picking an issue: in addition to being something about which New York City's older adults felt passionate, they wanted to tackle a problem that mattered to low-income communities (particularly in light of the 2008 economic downturn), would create tangible change at the neighborhood level, was not stereotypically a “seniors” issue, and would lead to achievable, measurable outcomes.

## AT-A-GLANCE

### NEW YORK CITY'S HEALTHY COMMUNITIES THROUGH HEALTHY FOOD INITIATIVE

#### COMMUNITY ISSUE

Improving access to affordable fresh food in low-income communities

#### COLLABORATORS

New York Community Trust  
United Neighborhood Houses  
United Community Centers  
Myrtle Avenue Revitalization Project  
Isabella Geriatric Center  
BronxWorks  
Just Food  
Queens Community House

#### GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

New York City  
Total population = 8.3 million  
55+ population = 1.8 million (18%)

#### RESULTS (FIRST THREE YEARS)

126 tons of fresh food brought into low-income food deserts  
145 food gardens strengthened or established  
2 farms stands and 2 farmers markets opened  
3 new Good Food Box programs created  
Local organizing helped bring in a new supermarket that hired 50+ people from the community  
325+ workshops and cooking demos promoting nutrition and teaching how to grow fresh food, reaching thousands of community residents  
Participants feel better physically (87%) and emotionally (92%)  
\$1.8 million raised to support the program

## **New York City's Food Deserts**

Although many project ideas were suggested, the issue of access to healthy, affordable food emerged as the top choice for the widest number of experienced adults. The need is easy to understand, and it has been of growing concern to older New Yorkers as well as their younger neighbors.

In New York City, one of every four children lives in a household suffering from hunger. Low-income neighborhoods struggle with disinvestment, unemployment, crime, and limited access to basic needs, including fresh, nutritious, affordable food. These same communities also suffer significant health challenges, many associated with diet. Higher-than-average rates for obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease all add billions to society's annual health care costs. One way or another, food "deserts" are a problem that affects everyone.

In addition, food access was an issue that seemed tailor-made for an initiative driven by older adults, who were among the generation that pioneered urban gardening in New York in the 1970s and 1980s. Older adults are leaders in showing people how to use fresh food, teaching children in schools and adults at farmers markets, food pantries, in their churches, and at other venues. Moreover, in great numbers, older adults are the backbone of food preparation and distribution in shelters and pantries that serve the hungry. The advisory group recognized that these key roles that older adults already filled were ripe for growth at a time when local and national officials alike were calling for community-level investment to tackle food deserts. The Healthy Communities Through Healthy Food initiative was born.

## **One Initiative, But Many Approaches**

The Trust typically plays convening, catalyst and funding roles, seldom running programs in house. For Healthy Communities Through Healthy Food, they engaged a managing partner with experience building community capacity and working with older adults. United Neighborhood Houses, a support organization and network of human service providers at more than 400 sites across New York City, became the lead agency for the initiative. The Trust provided funds to hire a full-time project manager with extensive experience mobilizing communities and building the capacity of community-based projects to engage older adults.

A new advisory board—once again predominantly adults 60 and older—tapped experts in urban agriculture and gardening, people with knowledge about city and state food access efforts, community-based health and nutrition educators, specialists in addressing and overcoming ageism, and others with experience mobilizing low-income communities. They designed an RFP process that drew more than 60 proposals, from which they funded three projects: One engages experienced adults in community gardening and selling produce at a farmers market. The second supports older adults living in public housing to grow food on public housing grounds, run a farm stand, serve as community educators, and launch a local food council. The third effort produces weekly fruit and vegetable bags to sell at affordable prices in their community. (By the end of the first year, the program was so popular and had produced such strong results that the Foundation funded three additional projects, expanding the initiative to all New York City boroughs.)

It was no accident that the projects each look different, or that, in the nation's largest city, the projects are scaled small and focused on neighborhoods. The work is nurturing a cadre of older adult community experts and activists. Their efforts demonstrate how communities can identify and create their own responses for addressing local issues—in this case, food access. Whether the strategy is to create a new outdoor fresh food market, build a community-wide low-cost food distribution network, use a vacant lot to grow and sell food locally, or advocate for affordable and better quality food in local supermarkets, each approach grows out of the unique needs, opportunities and interests of individual neighborhoods.

## **Older Adults In Leadership Roles**

The projects offer a range of opportunities in order to align with participant needs and interests. Having many different kinds of roles—growing, cooking, selling, organizing, teaching, managing, etc.—creates opportunities for people to connect with the work and offers avenues for growth into new roles over time. The projects include periodic trainings for participants who want to increase their knowledge or develop new skills to support the tasks they are taking on (for example, learning how to use Electronic Benefits Transfer machines to sell produce at farmers markets). The initiative also hosts annual Learning Forums where participants from across the city connect with each other and with policymakers.

Most importantly, the coordinating nonprofit partners understand that participant ownership of the work is fundamental to its success and longevity. Particularly in projects administered by organizations with community organizing experience, older adults have been at the table, serving in leadership roles, from inception through execution. For example, staff began one project by attending tenants meetings at a public housing association. The coordinator introduced the idea of supporting residents to create gardens, asked for their interest and help in designing the project, and over time gained their trust. Before long, the residents had formed a Community Food Council that included older adults leading the process, and the project had evolved far beyond the initial vision for on-site gardens.

### Why are older adults effective change agents?

Older adults have unique characteristics that help make Healthy Communities Through Healthy Food successful:

- Many have lived in their communities for decades and have a deep understanding of how to “get stuff done” in their neighborhoods.
- They are respected and hold clout, and consequently their neighbors are supportive of their efforts, buy into the work they are doing, and treat the projects with respect.
- Many bring gardening or cooking knowledge from earlier in their lives.

New contributors join regularly. As the first projects have grown, other experienced adults have taken notice of new gardens, participated in cooking demos, seen farmers markets open, or heard from the neighbors about the benefits of the work. Most participants learn about the projects by word of mouth, and are drawn to the work because of their interest in the food access issue in their neighborhood.

It is because Healthy Communities Through Healthy Food has such deep commitment from older adults that this work will continue, regardless of future funding. Certain activities—producing fruit and vegetable bags, or running farm stands, for example—will need at least minimal ongoing financial support. Yet many of the core changes that have been achieved—the establishment of new community gardens, creation of a neighborhood food council to champion healthy food policies, the skills and knowledge the partner organizations have developed about effectively engaging experienced adults in their work, and the deeper commitment these organizations have to working with older adults—will be sustained even when funding ends.

As word about Healthy Communities Through Healthy Food has spread, interest is growing. Six additional New York City organizations—including senior centers, development agencies and social service organizations—have launched food access initiatives that explicitly leverage older adults. The city’s public housing authority announced plans for urban farms at five developments. (The sanitation department agreed to provide soil on the condition that older adult residents would be core resources for the farms, believing that only older adults will have the time, commitment and follow-through to ensure the department’s investment will not be wasted.) Meanwhile, older adults at several of the original project sites have taken the initiative to create entirely new projects, including clothing and toy drives, and a computer literacy effort.

Three years into the work, the Trust and its partners see true progress toward systemic change around food access, using older adults as drivers of this change. Moreover, they are seeing the ripple effects that come from empowering older community members. Healthy Communities Through Healthy Food has not only shrunk New York City’s food deserts, but has demonstrated the magnitude of the contribution older adults can make when encouraged to address issues that improve the quality of life for everyone.



Many poor communities are discovering that strategies for strengthening the local food system also affect other challenges. For example:

- Community gardens and urban farms grow fresh food and provide supplemental income for growers, increase physical activity, and boost community involvement. In addition, these growing fields have been shown to reduce neighborhood crime, and serve as classrooms for local schoolchildren.
- Farmers markets provide access to fresh, locally grown food and increase economic activity in the immediate area.
- Addressing food deserts by opening co-ops, new markets, and locally staffed food carts increases access to healthy food and provides new job opportunities.
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and urban farms at public housing locations promote healthy eating and foster pride and ownership among participants, helping with other community concerns.

Learn about experienced adults leading other types of change in diverse communities across the country, and access resources to help you do similar work in your community.

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