



CASE STUDIES



**Community Action
Organization of Erie
County, Buffalo, NY:**
*Eliminating Food
Deserts and Sustaining
Program Funds*

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"You have to be creative. Our [Green Entrepreneur Center] is a self-sufficient project.

-Nathan Hare, President/CEO

MISSION

The mission of Community Action Organization Erie County in the short term, is to address the most immediate needs of their customers and, in the long term, to engage, convene, mobilize and utilize practices, programs and available resources that continually demonstrate the ability to build financial, educational, health, safety and positive social capital within its communities.

Field Tested Best Practices Described in this Case Study:

- A proven social enterprise model that sustains the program and offers growth opportunities.
- Preserving the natural land resources by revitalizing underutilized vacant lots
- Executing an effective community action plan to maximize the project impact

Unique to this Case Study:

- Eliminating food deserts by creating a demand for fresh produce.
- Providing funding, labor and technical assistance to community and faith-based organizations to build green houses and grow an urban garden network.
- Providing customized organically-grown wholesale produce and distribution to 12 local restaurants.
- Creating an urban aquaponic system which breeds chemical-free catfish.



KEY SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

- **Technical Assistance:** Through the agency's Green Entrepreneur Center it provides financial assistance and training for entrepreneurs, nonprofits and faith-based organizations.
 - o Since 2009 five-hundred volunteers were trained and converted into urban farmers. Ten of the trainees became entrepreneurs are operating gardens harvesting fish and selling wholesale fruits, vegetables and flowers. The other 490 are practicing organic farming and have become advocates of the Center.

- o Ten green houses have been installed on vacant lots across the community. Using the hands-on technical assistance of CAOEC.
- o **Innovation:** Creating a fresh fishery from recycled rain water to breed fish for eventual sale to residents, restaurants and grocery stores.
- o Healthy Food Creation and Community Education
- o **Community Engagement:** The project created a network of public, private and residential partners.
- o **Social Enterprise Development:** The organization established a business relationship with 12 high-end restaurants, two major hotel chains that have purchased several hundred pounds of fresh fruits, vegetables and flowers that is harvested from the agency's urban gardens.

WHAT MAKES THE PROJECT GREEN?



- Urban farms have a significant benefit on the preservation of natural environmental resources by increasing green space and restores oxygen, which lessens pollution.
- Consumption of locally grown fresh food improves health of the poor people and saves them an average of 30% on their food bills each month.
- Recycling rain water reduces the demand on public waters systems and energy consumption using hydroponic methods to preserve waste, reduce harmful airborne chemicals and breed chemical free fresh fish.
- Creating compost stations from food waste from local restaurants and hotels, which has utilized 300 tons of kitchen waste since 2010 and produced 100 cubic yards of compost per year.

CHALLENGES

- How do you help disadvantaged people explore the possibility of creating a business from gardening?
- How do you obtain the human resources needed to create 50 urban organic farms?
- How do you help residents in a community surrounded by unhealthy eating establishments embrace healthy eating habits?

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Community Action Organization of Erie County (CAOEC) has deeply established roots in community activism in Buffalo, New York. Since it was designated as the official Community Action agency by the county in 1965, CAOEC has been helping citizens of Erie County raise themselves out of poverty. Led by L. Nathan Hare, who is a notable community leader within Erie County, CAOEC operates on a \$ 38 million dollar annual budget and operates twelve core services and more than 20 different services. The agency employs 382 staff members. Hare is the organization's biggest public advocate, hosting radio shows, writing articles, serving on boards and committees and building relationships with city and state officials.

Nationally, U.S. food prices have increased 4.6% which has had a significant impact on the average consumer's ability to continue to buy food for themselves and their family. Unfortunately, food price increases will affect the poor in way that will be much more detrimental to them than any other segment of the population. According to a Food Research and Action Center report-Food Hardship in America, food hardship rates have increased for households with and without children. Their report indicates that hardship rates were 14.9 percent for households with no children and 23.4 percent for those with children. In Erie County New York, where the 2009 Census indicates 13.9% of its residents live in poverty. Many who live in poverty have limited access to healthy food. "You can drive 30 miles through parts of Buffalo and not see one full service grocery store! " said Mr. Hare about the lack of accessible fresh food in Buffalo. As a poor substitute to fresh food, East Buffalo has several ill-stocked

convenience marts which often serve high calorie fast food and provide a stock of processed food. These quick-marts will on occasion have a small selection of bananas, onions and or a green pepper. The Food and Drug Administration reports that a balanced diet, which includes a daily regimen of the four food groups, lessens the incidence of disease. Food deserts are areas where there is no access to fresh fruits and vegetables and or items that allow people to prepare homemade meals. The CAOEC Green Entrepreneur Center was established to eliminate food deserts, build community relationships, while creating jobs and business opportunities for local residents. This case study gives a detailed look at how the agency created the concept of an urban farming social enterprise for the purpose of empowering unemployed people to establish a viable business , building community relationships and create an unrestricted income source by selling the produce and various organic products it produces right on its urban headquarters location.

EXEMPLARY PRACTICES: EXPANDING HUMAN RESOURCES

Community Action Organization Erie County's organizational culture is one of internal and external empowerment. The agency's approach to community development is both innovative and practical. Specifically, its Green Entrepreneur Center engages the broader community around eliminating food deserts through organic urban farming and healthy food education. CAOEC's Green Entrepreneur Center is an exemplary model, which outlines a replicable method of managing an urban farm for the benefit of the agency, its community and the environment. The project is an example of consistently applied processes which uses proven strategies that benefit its underserved population and the broader community. CAOEC's Green Entrepreneur Center is the only urban gardening project in Buffalo which focuses on expanding the network of organic fresh food farmers. The model is one that teaches individuals and groups how a sustainable, healthy local food supply chain can be created in an urban area. The project concept began in 2008. "We were looking for a strong green project that would be economically sound and sustainable," said Nathan Hare, CEO of Community Action Organization of Erie County. "When the ARRA funds hit, it was like a miracle; we now had more funds to provide jobs for people desperately in need of employment." CAOEC created the Green Entrepreneur Center with the goal of creating entrepreneurs in the area of agricultural farming, greenhouse development and urban gardening. The Center is based on Will Allen's model, who is the founder of Growing Power in Milwaukee and a farming pioneer who was awarded a 2008 MacArthur Foundation Fellow award for his skill and expertise in sustainable farming.

The model uses Allen's holistic farming approach, which incorporates both cultivating "foodstuff" and designing food distribution networks in an urban setting. Using a 3.1 million dollar grant from New York State Department of Agriculture the organization hosted Allen to train the more than 500 volunteers on how to build aquaponic hoop houses or green houses. CAOEC is operating one of two aquaponic green houses in the state of New York. Using foresight, the agency launched the Green Entrepreneur Center as a social enterprise, to reduce its dependence on diminishing grants. Social entrepreneurship has been associated more often with for-profit businesses; however, nonprofit organizations are now becoming more recognized for their social enterprise efforts as well. According to the Social Enterprise Alliance, a social enterprise is an organization or venture that achieves its primary social or environmental mission using business methods. In other words a model that focuses on philanthropy and profit at the same time. CAO's social enterprise model has helped the project become self-sustaining in less than three years.



CAO's urban farming operation grows vegetables, fruits, flowers, mushrooms, herbs, algae and catfish inside their greenhouses, as well as raised garden beds on their own lot. It has provided technical assistance to ten agencies to remove vacant city lots across Buffalo and Erie County. Their farms provide fresh chemical free produce to residents in its community and trains Greenhouse management, agricultural practices, aquaculture, composting, business development and sales. "When we started the Green Entrepreneur Center, we were looking for a way to make the resources we had work for the needs of those we serve and sustain the organization down the road," said Nathan Hare about the program's initiation. The first step we took in starting a social enterprise was to create a sound business plan. The Center's business plan is in line with the two of the organization's key strategic objectives

for 2007-2012, which are: To diversify funding streams underpinned by income earning community-based ventures and to increase employment for people in its community by 40% by the end of 2012. Though the agency has 63 locations and employs 382 staff, it would need dedicated project ‘manpower to make the Green Entrepreneur Center a success. Desiring to maximize their financial resources, the agency organized a vast volunteer recruitment effort. “Once we put the word out about what we were doing, people just started coming and haven’t stopped since then,” said Mike Lee, agency Project Director. Through word of mouth, community and university partners, the faith-based community and private stakeholders 500 volunteers were recruited to initiate the work and create a ‘buzz’ within the community about the new venture. This ‘buzz’ attracted groups like Keep Buffalo Clean, Adams Mark and Comfort Suite Hotels, The New York Sustainable Agriculture Group, Faith Christian Fellowship , the Cornell Cooperative and several other churches and faith-based organizations. From waste retrieval services, to community education classes to collaborative outreach, the agency forged a network which contributes to its success.

EXEMPLARY PRACTICE: REMOVING BLIGHTED LAND AND CREATING A DEMAND FOR THE HARVEST

Buffalo has over 10,000 vacant lots which make up a large percentage of underutilized land. In fact, organizers of Buffalo’s Food Policy Summit were quoted as stating “we can use our food system and its network of producers to generate a higher food-based economic multiplier, making our food system a major engine for economic development.” One of the many objectives of the Green Entrepreneur Center is to develop entrepreneurs who

contribute to removing blight that exists on the 10,000 vacant lots in Buffalo. Thus far, all 50 of its gardens have been sole and are producing a myriad of fruits, vegetables, herbs and flowers. CAOEC charges \$4,000 for the necessary supplies and technical assistance for greenhouses for area community groups to replicate their mode. Lots that where once vacant, now have garden beds and greenhouses that are preserving the environment and creating a food source. What makes this project unique is that the all the farms use organic growing methods. All the gardens are grown using natural composted soil, so the use of harmful chemicals is never needed. One of the best practices the agency’s thorough approach to sustaining the items it grows by employing uses to prevent insects from ruining the crops is attracting beneficial insects and repelling the bad ones. The project incorporates a daily scientific process of attracting and repelling various types of insects that protect the plants. Preserving the crops is essential to the farm because it now has a steady crop demand.



EXEMPLARY PRACTICE: INNOVATION THROUGH COMPOSTING AND AQUAPONIC SYSTEMS

The Community Action Agency of Erie County is headquartered in a beautiful historic red brick building on about two acres of land. Who would think that this inconspicuous building in downtown Buffalo would create 50 garden beds, two green houses and an aquaponic fish tank that breeds live catfish? “The number one thing any agency that wants to take on an organic farming project should keep in mind is, to know what grows well in your climate,” said Mike Lee, Master Gardener and Program Coordinator for the Center. “We grow about twenty different types of plants here, continued Mike. We grow vegetables like, broccoli, Swiss chard, onions, lettuce, all types of greens, tomatoes, and even edible flowers.” When the agency started the gardens, they hired Mike Lee who is a well-known authority on gardening and a former Executive Council Member for the New York State Aquaculture Association. During an onsite visit Mike Lee was eager to demonstrate the process of using hydroponics to breed catfish and harvest plants. The agency built the hydroponic system for less than \$500. Hydroponics is a method of growing plants using mineral nutrients rather than soil. The waste from the catfish, serve as a natural growth agent

for watercress, basil and houseplants that are grown in the system. Mike and his team have also been successful in growing algae, which when in abundance will serve as an energy source. All of the water in the tank is recycled rain water, thus reducing the demand on electric-powered water pumps.

Hector, a senior citizen, visits the CAO food pantry each month to receive both donated food and fresh produce. “I save a lot of money on my grocery bill coming here once a month.” Hector said. About 50% of the harvested produce and edible flowers goes to the twelve restaurants and the two grocery stores that the agency sells to. The remaining fifty percent is sold at a very price to local residents. Hank Taylor is one of the agencies most tenured volunteers, he’s been volunteering for the agency for twenty-nine years. When the agency started the organic food farm, Hank found his passion. “I enjoy coming here each day to take care of the gardens, and the food taste so much better. It reminds me of how food tasted when I was coming up,” said Hank about his experience at the CAOEC Green Entrepreneur Center. His wife Claudia explained how she doesn’t even buy produce at the grocery store any more. “It’s [the farming] has cut our grocery bill in half.” Claudia said about the savings. Kipp Millerton is a volunteer from Pathways, which is the faith-based agriculture program of Faith Christian Fellowship. Kipp is a Master Gardner who’s agency is in East River about ten miles outside of Buffalo. Kipp has participated in CAO’s farming center and been able to enhance his skills and interest the rural farmers of East River in the project, thanks to a grant from CAO. Kipp gained a greater value for organic farming and its produce. He said about the his volunteer experience, “At first I thought, why don’t we just give the food away, but the CAO farming venture has helped me realize, farming is a business and there is a tremendous amount of work that goes into producing the end product.”

EXEMPLARY PRACTICE: ATTRACTING MAJOR CORPORATIONS TO SUSTAIN THE BUSINESS

Oliver’s Restaurant, located on Buffalo’s West side, is one of the recipient restaurants of CAOEC’s fresh organically grown produce. “It’s a chef’s dream to be able to prepare food with produce that is minutes of being harvested, right on to the customer’s plate.” Chef John Lennon of Oliver’s said about the business relationship he has with CAO’s Green Entrepreneur Center. Chef Lennon explained that he looks forward to the front door delivery of fresh produce each day. Oliver’s is a fine dining establishment that has operated since 1936. “The proof of the quality of the vegetables is in the customer response”, Lennon said, “I can’t count the number of times our customers have said how good our food taste, and I attribute a lot of their response to the food we get from the Center.” Trip Advisor listed Oliver’s on its “Best of Buffalo Restaurants” based on its customer satisfaction reviews. CAO receives standard and special orders from each of their commercial clients. The agency charges a wholesale price for the produce by the pound.

The Green Entrepreneur Center is examples of how Community Action Agencies can think-outside the box using innovation to sustain programs that benefit both the low-income population and add lessen the strain on operational dollars.



APPENDIX

Key Staff Bios

Advertising Tools

Forms

Sample letter to businesses and potential farmers

Other documents

The products of this project were created by the National Association of Community Action Agencies - Community Action Partnership in the performance of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Community Services, expansion supplement to Grant Number 90ET0424. Any opinion, findings, and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.