



Growing Food, Healing Lives:

LINKING COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



Gardens for Respect, Opportunity and Wellness

Prepared by the Center for Food and Justice



Growing Food, Healing Lives: Linking Community Food Security and Domestic Violence



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Introduction:

Growing Food, Healing Lives: LINKING COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A small girl in an Oakland area domestic violence shelter jumps up and down with joy because she has helped to grow strawberries, something she had never experienced before. A teen staff member and former resident of a shelter in Orange County is pleased and proud that he now takes time to make a salad for lunch from the shelter garden instead of running to McDonalds, his usual routine. An administrator of a third shelter in Del Norte County talks about reducing food costs. This is done by bringing a bounty of fresh produce into shelter meals through a subscription to a Community Supported Agriculture project, a program that links a farmer to the subscriber group through a basket of the produce harvested that week. A domestic violence victim in San Diego says that she is able to briefly forget her problems when she works in the community garden that had been created by the shelter where she lives. These stories and many more like them were told by those who participated in Project GROW, a unique program that explored the idea that gardens and healthy foods could improve the lives of both the clients and staff of grassroots domestic violence agencies. This Report, "Growing Food, Healing Lives," describes the Project GROW pilot program and the lessons that can be derived from a potential link between improving community food security and access to healthier food and addressing the issues and impacts from domestic violence.



Food Security in Domestic Violence Shelters: Background to the Issues

Every day of the week, thousands of domestic violence victims throughout California receive education, support and shelter from a broad network of non-profit grassroots agencies. Some of these agencies provide services on a short-term, emergency basis and others organize housing, counseling and support services for up to two years. All of these programs help to arrange food for their mostly low-income, traumatized clients through direct food assistance and/or by helping women provide for themselves through programs such as Food Stamps, WIC (Women, Infants and Children), and Head Start.

Food Insecurity and Victims of Domestic Violence

Women who seek out domestic violence shelters often come from backgrounds where they have had limited food choices or difficulty simply putting food on the table because of poverty or conflicts over the family diet that were part of a pattern of abuse. Some domestic violence victims speak of negative feelings about food that result from family violence at mealtimes and of eating disorders caused by the stress of a violent home.

A Yurok woman and her teen daughters who fled to a shelter on the north coast of California described this type of food disorder in one interview. The woman and her daughters spoke about how tired they were of eating the same monotonous daily diet of pork and potatoes and beans dictated by the batterer. Variety in the family diet came only when, "my soon-to-be-ex would be in a good mood; he'd bring chips, chocolate, candy or soda." Life at the shelter was a great relief for the family, partly because they were able to eat a variety of foods. One of the girls joyfully said, "We're actually eating. Before, mom would force me to eat dinner," and her mother added, "I didn't want her to be like me and not eat and not be able to hold it down."

Some domestic violence victims speak of negative feelings about food that result from family violence at mealtimes and of eating disorders caused by the stress of a violent home.

Women who leave an abusive relationship often have to remake their lives. A woman at an Orange County shelter said that when she arrived with her small child she had no immigration papers, job, money, family to turn to, or place to live. "It's about changing your whole lifestyle while you are here," the shelter resident commented several weeks after she had settled at the shelter. "You have to start to take care of yourself." The situation is even worse for those who start out with few resources and little social support. As one woman said, "At home we didn't know anyone, and we've had to cut off all our friends." Sometimes women only have a month to six weeks to put their lives back together again. As one mother of three young children said, "I'm stressed because I know that I will have to move soon. My time here [at the shelter] will end."

Before entering a shelter, battered women are often isolated in the home. Their educational and work opportunities have been restricted, and they have had limited experiences with many other aspects of life including the kinds of foods that they had consumed. The effects of social isolation and poverty are illustrated by two women who had never eaten in a restaurant before they were taken on an outing by their domestic violence shelter; by a woman who said she had never been "allowed" to do simple things like carve a pumpkin at Halloween when she lived with her abuser; by the group of women who cooked an artichoke for the first time during shelter communal cooking activities; or by the woman who said she didn't think that she was "capable" of gardening

before she entered the shelter.

The poor quality of foods in most low-income neighborhoods combined with little knowledge of nutrition, lack of time to prepare meals in high-stress circumstances, and over-reliance on high-fat, high-sugar snacks as comfort foods all contribute to unhealthy eating by large numbers of women who enter domestic violence programs. One executive director said that the clients at her domestic violence shelter had been reliant on "diets heavy in meats and potatoes over fruits and vegetables; and Poptarts for breakfast." An executive director of another agency put it another way, "People who have poor diets don't know different foods."

Food Issues and Domestic Violence Shelter Programs

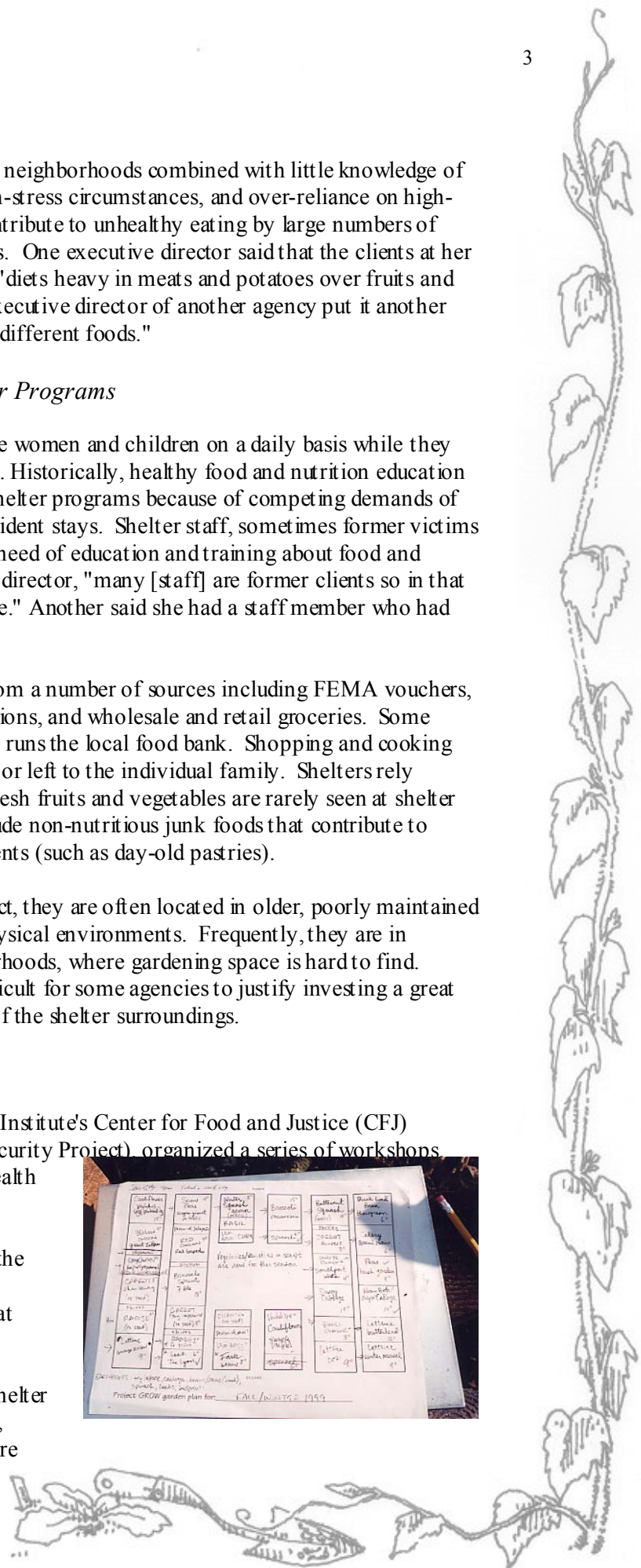
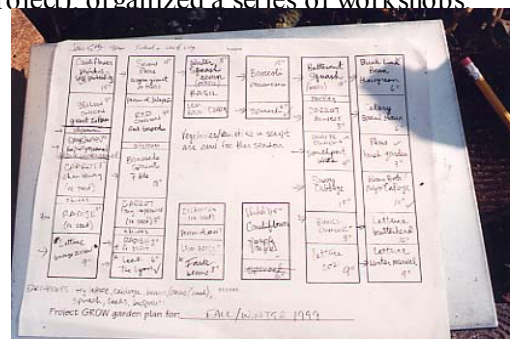
Domestic violence shelters serve food insecure women and children on a daily basis while they grapple with their own agency food insecurity. Historically, healthy food and nutrition education have not been a focus of activities in typical shelter programs because of competing demands of crisis intervention, tight budgets, and short resident stays. Shelter staff, sometimes former victims of domestic violence themselves, are often in need of education and training about food and nutrition. According to one agency executive director, "many [staff] are former clients so in that sense they have moved out of being on welfare." Another said she had a staff member who had never eaten an apple.

Shelter food programs are cobbled together from a number of sources including FEMA vouchers, government food commodity programs, donations, and wholesale and retail groceries. Some shelters are part of a multi-service agency that runs the local food bank. Shopping and cooking are organized communally by the shelter staff or left to the individual family. Shelters rely heavily on canned and processed foods, and fresh fruits and vegetables are rarely seen at shelter meals. Community donations frequently include non-nutritious junk foods that contribute to unhealthy eating patterns of both staff and clients (such as day-old pastries).

Most shelters do not have food gardens. In fact, they are often located in older, poorly maintained rented buildings, surrounded by uninviting physical environments. Frequently, they are in expensive or highly developed urban neighborhoods, where gardening space is hard to find. Insecure rental arrangements also make it difficult for some agencies to justify investing a great deal of time and effort into the improvement of the shelter surroundings.

Developing Project GROW

In 1998, the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute's Center for Food and Justice (CFJ) (formerly the Occidental Community Food Security Project) organized a series of workshops sponsored by the California Department of Health Services, Maternal and Child Health Branch, Domestic Violence Section (MCH/DVS). The workshops were designed to begin to address the problems of food insecurity faced by both domestic violence victims and the agencies that provide them shelter. State-funded domestic violence agencies that were interested in the possibility of starting a garden or expanding shelter educational programs to include food security, horticultural therapy or nutrition education were



invited to attend. The original idea for the workshops grew out of a 1997 Community Food Security Project study by Hope Mohr, *Gardens for Survivors: A Feasibility Analysis for Developing Healing and Food Security Strategies for Survivors of Domestic Violence*. This study described the potential for gardening projects to provide horticultural therapy, increase food security and promote economic development in domestic violence shelters.

Based on a positive response to the workshops – “this is the most exciting new concept I'd heard in ten years,” one shelter director said at her workshop -- MCH/DVS, in conjunction with CFJ, decided to develop an innovative program called Project GROW (Gardening for Respect, Opportunity and Wellness). Project GROW was designed to establish an initial 21-months of funding by MCH/DVS, through a competitive grants process.

The purpose of this pilot program was to determine: 1) whether a community food security approach was viable for domestic violence shelters and 2) whether agency clients and staff could benefit directly from both a food and nutrition and therapeutic perspective, through the programs that the shelters established. The pilots were also designed to create an important new linkage between community food security and domestic violence constituencies. The Center for Food and

Nine Pilot Projects:

- Building Futures for Women and Children (Alameda County)
- Center for Community Solutions (San Diego County)
- Community Resource Center (north San Diego County)
- Interval House (Los Angeles and Orange Counties)
- Kings Community Action Organization (Kings County)
- Ocean Park Community Center (west Los Angeles County)
- Plumas Rural Services (Plumas County)
- Rural Human Services (Del Norte County)
- South Bay Community Services (south San Diego County)

Justice's role was to provide coordination, technical assistance, and evaluation for the pilot projects to be selected and funded through small seed grants at different locations around the state.

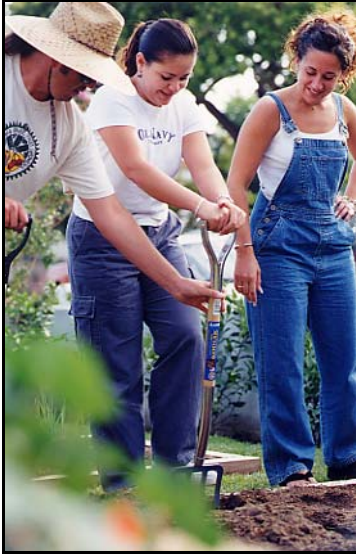
The GROW Pilot Programs

The GROW pilot programs consisted of nine sites situated in diverse climates, gardening zones and regions, reflecting California's geographic and human diversity. None of the programs nor the goals of the shelters involved were entirely alike. Agencies varied in size, program emphasis, and length of stay. Average lengths of stay ranged from 30 days to two years. Some agencies devoted their entire efforts to the issue of domestic violence, while others were multi-service programs that included domestic violence in a larger mission. Homeless and domestic violence populations were combined in several programs.

The projects were rural and urban, located in small remote communities and in highly populated metropolitan areas. Five of the agencies were in southern California, and three were located in different regions of northern California (San Francisco Bay, northern Sierra Nevada, and north coast). One program was in the San Joaquin Valley.

The heart of the program was the effort to link the community food security needs of a domestic violence agency with the healing and empowerment goals of helping to remake the lives of the women and children who were its temporary residents. Although not intended

as a program goal at the outset, the quality of the food and food-related activities for agency *staff* also became a factor in the development of the pilots. From the outset of the program, the idea



that food needed to be both a source of nutrition and healthier eating was seen as complementing the concept that the growing of food (and other community food security strategies for accessing and preparing food) could be a source of knowledge, healing, and empowerment for those who participated in the program.

Some projects stressed nutrition and cooking activities and others focused more heavily on gardening. Some emphasized horticultural therapy over education and food production. One agency developed a landscaping job training and micro-enterprise program as a way to build economic self-sufficiency. In some agencies gardens were installed at the domestic violence shelters, and in other cases they were established at off-site locations, in partnership with other in-house programs or community agencies. For most though not all of the pilots, the growing of food through gardens either located on or off site remained a central focus.

Effects on Shelter Residents

Approximately 1500 women and children, not including agency staff, participated in Project GROW from the spring of 1999 to December 2000. As a result of Project GROW, many of these women and children were exposed for the first time to gardening, unfamiliar cooking techniques, new types of fruits and vegetables, and farmers markets. These activities provided fresh opportunities for therapy, recreation, education, and cultural exchange.

Interviews and surveys were conducted in English and Spanish with a total of 81 participants across eight sites. Those who were surveyed or interviewed about the effects of gardening said that they had been most affected by the therapeutic benefits of the programs. Women commonly talked about how gardening had been a source of stress relief and relaxation, a positive thing that helped them take their minds off their problems. A mother of five children who was in bad physical shape as a result of abuse when she first entered the shelter said that gardening was, “relaxing, a family thing we’ve been doing together ... the most important part of your life if you can relax.” Another woman who had gardened as a child in Vietnam said, “I found it hard to talk about things except the garden.... It’s so stressful in America. This is needed to relax you. Nature. Soft noises.”

Being able to get out of the house and enjoy the outdoors was a special thing for many women who had been living lonely lives secluded in their homes before arriving at the shelter. One Spanish-speaking woman said, “The garden gives me air. I breathe fresh air. It relaxes me. I return to life. I stop now and notice the flowers.” Others said things like “I feel less isolated” and “I felt peaceful, a little bit of freedom.”

“The garden gives me air. I breathe fresh air. It relaxes me. I return to life...”

Many residents also considered acquiring new skills and knowledge, such as learning to grow their own food, important. Again, women and children who had been stifled by poverty or a



coercive home atmosphere or both seemed to take special delight in new educational opportunities and the self-help aspect of the gardening activities. One shelter resident explained that it was important for her to be able to ask questions and have them answered “without being told I was being dumb.” Another woman summed it up this way, “Being here has been an eye-opener for me. Many women who come here are lost. We all need goals. I have two kids. I really need more training.”

Women were proud of their new knowledge. Some residents had never previously gardened, assuming they wouldn’t be able to succeed at it. The act of gardening itself became empowering, providing a “feeling of pride of eating from the garden something that I grew,” as one resident put it. A Spanish-speaking resident also explained how important it was to learn that one could “have our own vegetables in a small space where we are living.” Another woman said, “I like the classes. Learning things like making compost. I used to think it stinks, but now I love it!”

The ability to obtain fresh food was limited, due to the newness of the gardens, restrictions on space, and variations in the growing seasons, with most of the gardens not able to provide a year-round source of food. But the presence of the fresh food, even if irregular, itself became a value. Several residents explained that the garden produce was sometimes the only fresh food in the shelter diet. At the same time, a large percentage of those who participated in the program, over 80 percent of those surveyed, said that they had eaten fruits and vegetables that they had grown. One woman said, “We like to get the fresh vegetables, otherwise, we have to eat frozen since these are the only fresh vegetables that the shelter gets.”

In some cases, expectations may have been raised for women who wanted more fresh food, causing some internal shelter discord. A Mexican immigrant, at a program that emphasized nutrition classes rather than gardening, spoke of how frustrated she was in not being able to regularly eat the foods that she and her children preferred, “There is a conflict with the children because they are not used to this. We like fresh things. There are no vegetables to cook a stew or soup ... I wish there were more fruit, especially for the children. There is no fresh fruit, not even salad.” Another Mexican immigrant complained, “Many things we use are canned. I want fresh.” At the same time, a Latina who had not eaten many fresh foods from her own culture was excited to have produce from the small shelter garden, “I never used green tomatillos. Now I use them. The little ones like to pick tomatoes.... I feel more like a Mexican. All the Mexican girls like chiles. We all share salsa.”

Out of a smaller subset of those surveyed, over ninety percent said that they intended to garden after leaving the shelter. One woman who had never gardened before the shelter experience and had moved on to her own apartment by the time she was interviewed said, “I now have roses in my garden, tomatoes and an orange tree growing at home.” A number of people, many of them immigrants or people from rural backgrounds, mentioned that they had gardened as a child, often with grandparents, and were glad to have the opportunity to once again connect to their family heritage, while others simply expressed pleasure at mastering new skills that would help them take better care of themselves in the future. One woman involved in the Project GROW for over a year said, “I always wanted to garden but didn’t have



space. At my grandparents in Mexico, I watched them garden corn, wheat, squash, beans, sugar cane, lemon, pomegranate, flowers, and herbs.”

Children’s Involvement

The pilot project helped to structure and elevate the level of activities for children at a number of shelters, and women frequently described how good it made them feel to see their children able to play and learn from the gardening and cooking activities. As one mother said, “I feel the gardening program has made my children become more gentle with plants and flowers, also they have learned all things grow with care and love.” Another woman who could not spend time outdoors because of a health condition that made her sensitive to the sun, talked about enjoying the experience through her child, “I like watching him come outside and swing and dig in the dirt. I think it’s good for him. Let him be a kid. He can feel like we’re okay doing something healthy.” And still another said, “Kids love helping out in the garden. It is peaceful for me.”

A woman with a teenager who normally had great difficulty focusing because of a learning disability said that her son spent long hours in the garden because, “plants don’t talk back, they don’t blame him.” The ability to move back and forth quickly among a variety of tasks in the garden also seemed to work well for him. Another mother said, “The children point out all the vegetables we grow at the garden when we go to the market. They want me to buy more vegetables and fruit.” Separate children’s activities also served as a form of childcare in some programs, allowing mothers time for other things such as counseling groups.

Healthier Diets

Women surveyed said that the primary effects of nutrition and cooking classes and activities were the ability to prepare and eat healthier foods while at the shelter and to learn new things about nutrition and cooking. Approximately half of the shelter residents asked about changes in their food consumption said that they were eating healthier foods or more fruits and vegetables. Over 50 percent said that they had eaten some new type of food. One woman said, “[I] learned to like eggplant.” A Spanish-speaking shelter graduate and volunteer said, “Now I have a glass of juice every morning with fresh vegetables be it carrots, peas or whatever other vegetables I may have.” Another woman said, “I eat vegetables now, oranges, tomatoes, huge tomatoes!”

Residents also mentioned that they were eating less snack and fast food. A woman who lived with her family for over a year in a transitional housing program said that they were eating out less, “We eat more vegetables. I cook more now.” By far, the most popular aspect of the nutrition and cooking activities was the hands-on cooking instruction and exposure to new foods and recipes. The most frequently identified suggestion for changes in the food programs by the residents was the expansion of shelter menus.

Impact on Agencies and Communities

One of the most positive aspects of the pilot program was that the domestic violence agencies tapped into completely new sources of funding and community support. Included among the new food security and gardening partners were: master gardeners, local landscapers and nurseries, community colleges, Plant-An-Extra Row projects, Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Physical Activity and Nutrition, EFNEP (Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, a University of California Cooperative Extension Program), community supported agriculture projects (CSAs), the American Horticultural Therapy Association, and the California Nutrition Network.



Shelters and neighborhoods were beautified and rehabilitated through the pilot program, which agency staff described as a boost to morale and internal community building. All of the programs expanded or installed gardens—with a few going far beyond their original plans. One agency even did a clean up of toxic soil in the shelter yard with the help of their local city government. Often, residents and staff said they took greater pride in the shelter environment after the creation of the garden. At a few locations, children’s programs became more visible, and kids took more ownership of the shelter space. One executive director summed up her agency’s experience with gardening this way, “It is such a community builder. An incredible way to build self-esteem quickly. In social work we put so much energy into the clients every day and don’t always see changes. This is so concrete, so tangible.”

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A number of shelter staff and administrators reported improvements in their diets and talked about installing or expanding their own home gardens. Visits to the farmers’ market or a subscription to a Community Supported Agriculture project became a regular part of the program activities in five shelters. Nearly all of program staff reported an improvement in shelter diets and over-all shelter food security through the introduction of additional sources of fresh produce, reduction in snack foods, and the improvement of food safety procedures. Staff also reported that cooperative food and gardening activities had opened up unexplored avenues of communication between themselves and residents.

One shelter shared a community garden with a local family resource center, using the opportunity to connect shelter residents to community resources and community members to the work of the domestic violence agency staff. In the process, some community members were identified as victims of domestic violence and some shelter residents found support in the larger community. A community member, originally from Mexico, who participated in the garden program said, “I come here and feel relaxed. The children can play here and the older children help with the plants.... My daughter likes to come here especially because of the fruits and vegetables that we grow. We get to take them home ... It’s different here. I feel comfortable. It’s very tough being in this hole that I’m in. I come to participate, work the soil, sing. I have more motivation. It was a good idea to do this.”

Pilot Project Challenges

Despite the many successful aspects of the various pilot programs, there were also enormous challenges. Some programs were overly ambitious and tried to do too much too fast. The funding cycle was less than two years, which was difficult for shelters that were trying on totally new types of activities, interacting with recently identified community partners and trying to keep track of program data for evaluation purposes. Staff and clients did not always assume, at least initially, the same level of enthusiasm as administrators, especially when it came to gardening.

Bilingual instructors and consultants sensitive to the issues faced by shelters and their clients were occasionally difficult to find. Many project plans had to be revised due to such things as staff turnover and burnout, shelter relocations, kitchen renovations, transportation difficulties, toxic soil, harsh weather, and shortage of funds. The installation of gardens required much more time and physical labor than some shelters had realized, and changes in communal food preparation

sometimes produced tension among clients and staff.

Although the variability among programs provided a range of experiences not necessarily replicable as complete models, the pilot project established an important baseline of information about how to develop community food security and domestic violence links. In the process, much was also learned about the types of activities that are feasible for different types of shelters and the issues that will need to be addressed by domestic violence constituencies and food advocates attempting similar interventions in the future. Some of these lessons are specific to the domestic violence setting but many can be applied to other types of shelter and grassroots social service programs attempting to establish new food security, nutrition and gardening initiatives. Three of the more successful pilot projects are described in greater detail to give a fuller portrait of the project and the opportunities for extending the links between community food security/domestic violence prevention advocacy.

Three Case Studies

Building Futures for Women and Children, San Leandro California: Therapeutic Gardening for Kids in Urban Shelters

Building Futures for Women and Children, which serves the Oakland area and a shelter population that is primarily African-American, had some experience with gardening prior to the pilot program, but those activities had lapsed with staff turnover. Because of their brief program experience with gardening and a belief that therapeutic activities worked better than talk therapy with traumatized children, the agency decided to set up a children's horticultural therapy program. This agency designed their program to serve the children of two shelters, one a homeless shelter and the other a domestic violence safehouse.

Asset mapping, early in the early planning stages, revealed a wealth of gardening and food resources in the surrounding San Francisco Bay area and considerable collective gardening, nutrition and cooking experience among the 22 staff. Program staff strengthened their skills by attending additional gardening training. Despite this wealth of in-house education and experience, there were still considerable barriers and problems to address. Some program participants and staff were skeptical, seeing the idea of a garden program as somewhat frivolous. The garden was planned for a courtyard that had been primarily used for a children's play area. Some staff questioned whether a garden was an appropriate use of the space and worried that it would create an unsightly mess at the entryway of the shelter. Also, many of the urban shelter residents who had little previous contact with nature or gardening found the whole idea of gardening a little foreign.



The project slowly took shape, taking several months before raised beds could be installed. It also took sometime before staff and children got used to a more structured weekly program. Building Futures made good use of consultants and volunteers. A crew of community volunteers from local corporations ("Community Impact" volunteers) were brought in to help build raised garden beds that were wheelchair accessible and wide enough for children to reach across the width of



the containers.

A certified horticultural therapist helped design the garden space and plan a curriculum that included weekly therapeutic, educational, social, and physical activities. The therapist designed a curriculum to cover a two-month period, the average time spent in the shelters. Craft and cooking activities were developed for cool, wet winter weather. The gardening groups were led by horticultural therapy interns, with the assistance of shelter staff and a corps of local high school volunteers.

...the surroundings of the homeless shelter were transformed. Its entryway, an urban churchyard, previously an asphalt and concrete area with a few bedraggled flower boxes, became a lush green environment.

With the development of the garden over time, the surroundings of the homeless shelter were transformed. Its entryway, an urban churchyard, previously an asphalt and concrete area with a few bedraggled flower boxes, became a lush green environment. After the program had been running for a few months, additional garden activities were added on top of the weekly garden program, and in the second year a nutrition and cooking night (“Good Food Night”) -- not part of the original project plan -- was created, utilizing a curriculum developed by a Jesuit volunteer staff member. During the second year of the pilot, separate nutrition and gardening activities were begun for the children at the domestic violence program, which had acquired a more permanent safehouse facility with an ample garden space.

Two hundred fifty-four children participated in the garden and food programs during the pilot project. Not only did the program offer therapeutic and physical activities to traumatized children, but it provided them with new skills, information, and exposure to the natural world and to foods that they had never eaten before. Staff said that many of the children did not know how food was produced prior to the garden activities.

In-depth interviews allowed the children to speak directly about the experience. They talked about growing many types of plants and eating a large variety of new foods either directly from the garden or during nutrition/cooking activities. The children’s comments showed the great pride they took in actually producing food. One child said, “I helped make them strawberries.” When asked what she grew in the garden a little four-year old shouted, “I grew pumpkins! strawberries! lettuce, seeds, lambs’ ear, basil! basil! beans and corn, flowers, tomatoes, chard ...”

The smallest children, in particular, compared the plants to themselves, to their problems, and to the world around them. One child said, “If I’m a seed, and I’m down in the ground, it feels warm. It feels good because you can eat dirt if you’re a seed. It feels good and snug.” The children surveyed said that the specific gardening tasks such as watering, weeding and planting were what they liked best.

Staff said that they started making more nutritious children’s snacks as the program increased their awareness. They said that their initial skepticism about the use of shelter space was transformed by the children’s reaction to the project and the beautification of the shelter. They said that they felt the gardens helped create a “homier” atmosphere, made children feel welcomed, and made mothers feel good about bringing children to the shelters.

Program staff said that the horticultural therapy and food nights benefited the overall agency by helping the existing children’s program take on greater structure, legitimacy and respect. As one

of the administrators said, “Children get put last. So it is important.” By design, adult residents only participated with children in a few horticultural and cooking activities on selected family nights, so that the children would take total ownership of the garden program. This also allowed the program to serve a childcare function, creating activities for the children while their mothers attended counseling groups

The design of the pilot program at Building Futures was a good fit with the existing structure of the agency, never overwhelming the staff and residents or the limitations of shelter space. Rather than starting out with an overly ambitious set of activities, the program expanded gradually into new aspects and additional shelter sites, building on growing support of staff and residents. After the pilot phase ended, the gardening groups were no longer run with the assistance of horticultural therapists. Program staff felt that the horticultural therapist and the horticultural therapy intern helped to lay the needed groundwork, through the development of a curriculum and on-the-job staff training, making it possible for agency staff to continue the program on their own into the future.



Additional funding was received from other sources because of the program’s initial successes. The Alameda County Children and Families Commission provided funds for the installation of raised beds at a third shelter site, in Midway, in the spring of 2001. Again, this was used for a children’s garden. By the end of the Project GROW funding and the completion of the pilot program, the San Leandro shelter had made a transition towards integrating its gardening activities and the importance of food issues into its overall strategy of providing a living and healing space for its residents and staff.

*Community Resource Center, Encinitas, California:
Bringing Healthy Food and Community to the Shelter Setting*

Community Resource Center (CRC), the only provider of social services in their small coastal community in north San Diego County, was in the unique position of having short-term, emergency and long-term transitional shelters at the same location. The majority of the shelter residents were Anglo, but a significant number of Latinos and African-Americans were also included, particularly in its transitional housing program. A warm, coastal, year-round climate and a community rich in garden resources were part of the mix.

CRC had a staff and board with special enthusiasm and experience with food and gardening. The director said that staff and administration’s positive feelings about the potential for a nutrition and garden project made up for what she felt was a very small amount of money relative to grant requirements. No formal organizational support had ever been given to gardening at the shelter, although shelter residents had sometimes planted little plots on their own initiative. Prior to the project, staff described the common courtyard shared by the emergency and transitional housing programs as a “brown desolate area.”

Staff, board members, volunteers and residents worked hard to make the small plot suitable for gardening. The garden space, which was located next to old stucco buildings, was tested for lead



and other contamination. Trees were removed and soil was amended. Shelter residents helped choose the plants and plan and prepare the garden. Some ideas developed without the input of residents had to be modified. For example, transitional shelter residents were strongly encouraged to choose edible herbs for the apartment window boxes, but some of the women wanted flowers instead.

Gardening activities were offered on a voluntary basis. Women and children developed a watering schedule and assigned titles, roles and responsibilities to the main participants. Administrative staff began to spend more time at the shelter, using the garden area as a place to relax on lunch hours. One resident said, "It looks and smells so much better around here that I feel like I have moved." Residents and staff learned more about gardening through trips to nurseries and gardens.

Children took to the gardening experience with much greater gusto than staff had expected. In the first year, staff emphasized gardening activities during the spring and summer, but children continued to participate during the cooler months as well. One child who helped to install the garden described the pride that kids felt in being part of the project: "When I first moved here it was really different. When I took the trees out, I felt like I accomplished a lot. The kids felt that they could help the other people." Another child's school science fair project grew out of her newfound gardening expertise.

Previous to the pilot, shelter activities covered some food security interventions, including monthly sessions on menu planning, budgeting and meal preparation. However, individual women and families were responsible for their own food shopping and cooking and received bread from the agency food pantry as well as other periodic donations.

Weekly cooking and nutrition activities, developed and conducted by in-house staff and geared to a 12-week cycle, were started through the pilot program. Each resident was given a nutrition education booklet that included the 12-session curriculum. A bulletin board in the emergency shelter was devoted to nutrition, gardening and food security issues, and food safety guidelines were posted in the shelter kitchen. A registered dietitian supplemented these activities with a series of monthly nutrition and cooking classes.

Resident trips to the local farmers' markets became a regular part of the shelter routine. More fresh food began to appear in the shelter diet. A remodeling of the kitchen led to frequent potlucks and communal barbecuing in the shelter courtyard. Produce from the garden and the farmers' market was used in these communal meals. The activities were so successful at bringing families and staff together that communal cooking became a more consistent part of the program after the kitchen was completed. A communal cupboard was installed as part of the new shelter kitchen.

Children took to the gardening experience with much greater gusto than staff had expected.

Emergency shelter residents had limited exposure to the program because of their shorter stays, but the transitional housing residents were able to attend a large number of activities and help provide program continuity. Women who were at the emergency shelter for only a brief period of time did not always have the time to focus on activities, but even for the short-term residents, the activities provided a respite from life's stresses. At least one emergency shelter resident said that participation in the garden had helped in the transition into the shelter community and had taken her mind off of the difficult things she was experiencing.

Sixty women and 75 child residents participated in the pilot project. The nutrition and cooking activities and classes, mandatory at the beginning of the project, were made voluntary after residents responded negatively to being forced to participate. This was a compromise for staff who were never totally convinced that this was good for residents. Gradually, staff also modified the curriculum when they became aware that residents responded much more positively to classes with hands-on activities.

Some of the residents said that the nutrition and cooking activities had been good for their family life. One resident said, “The classes have been a way for me and my children to start doing activities together again. I’m starting to cook with ingredients at home again for my kids.” The regular trips to the local farmers’ market were one of the most popular food activities at CRC. The director said the project had been good for staff as well as residents: “Even staff have been affected. I have one staff member who had never eaten an apple. Now she eats fruits and vegetables ... now she is eating salads.”

After the pilot project, CRC went on to receive a California Nutrition Network grant in the winter of 2001. Nutrition activities were expanded beyond the shelter through this grant to include community and school activities. The food garden is still providing fruits and vegetables year-round. Two nutrition and cooking classes continue to be offered on a weekly basis at the shelter, one for kids and one for adults. In addition, a monthly class is offered to low-income community members who participate in the food commodities program, and the bulletin board that focused on nutrition and food security has grown to ten bulletin boards scattered throughout the entire agency. Similar to San Leandro, the CRC program demonstrated the importance of incorporating food issues into the goals and activities of the agency at its different sites as well as the value of extending a food-based approach to include not just growing but accessing and preparing fresh foods.

*Interval House, Los Angeles and Orange Counties
From Suburban Lawn to Fresh Food through Community Partnership*

Interval House, which operates shelters in urban, immigrant neighborhoods with large Latino, Vietnamese, and Cambodian populations, developed a garden and food project that fit the personality of its unique shelter program, where 85 percent of the multi-cultural staff (30 languages are spoken) are former program graduates. From the outset, the training and education of agency staff and graduates were seen as equally crucial as providing new services and opportunities to current shelter residents. Another special aspect of the program design was the involvement of a community partner, Long Beach Organic (LBO), a local environmental organization committed to reclaiming land for greening and food production.

Before applying for the pilot grant, Interval House staff, graduates and residents had participated briefly in a community garden project run by LBO. Asset mapping of 148 staff, graduates and Americorps volunteers showed a high degree of experience, knowledge, and interest in gardening, nutrition and cooking. Over half of the staff had experienced gardening as children, and nearly 40 percent had gardened as adults.

There had never been a garden at the agency’s shelters, although they had some in-house gardening expertise. The front yard of one of their transitional shelters was chosen as the site for a garden. Lawn and shade trees were removed and replaced with a fruit, herb and vegetable garden. Again, everyone was brought into the process (staff, graduates, residents, and



AmeriCorps volunteers who helped with the heavy physical labor of tree removal and garden installation). A volunteer consultant and board member helped to develop the garden plan, along with input from the staff of LBO. Focus groups and planning meetings were used to get feedback from shelter residents. Care was taken to include plants from the cultural heritages of shelter residents and graduates.

*(Interval House)
turned gardening
and farmers' market
experiences into
social and cultural
events.*

Interval House took great advantage of their southern California climate. Dwarf peach, guava and plum trees were placed on one end of the garden. Grapes and kiwis were planted on trellises. A flowerbed was located in the entry way to the house, and an herb spiral and birth bath were placed in the center. Espaliered fruit hedges were planted along the street to provide privacy for the shelter. Container plants were arranged along the side of the house. In all, they raised 50 different varieties of vegetables, fruits and herbs.

Long Beach Organic developed and led ongoing garden training workshops. These included topics such as mulching and composting, herbs, garden ecology, seed propagation, and seasonal planting. Attendance at the workshops was mandatory for staff, residents and graduates (all staff were required to attend at least one workshop). This was not without controversy; in the beginning many staff and graduates did not understand why they had to add one more thing to their already busy schedules.

The construction of a new emergency shelter during the pilot program lowered the agency census and created barriers to some aspects of the pilot program implementation. The idea of providing cooking classes was dropped. As a substitute, the agency put a major new emphasis on participation in the local farmers' market. Many of the graduates and staff had been exposed to the farmers' market prior to the project; however, the experience became much more structured, although voluntary, and was extended to shelter residents. Residents, graduates and staff also took gleaning trips to an orchard every few months. The fruit that they gleaned was used in shelter meals and as barter at the farmers' market to obtain more produce. Shelter youth worked at the volunteer farmer's booth, helping to sell the lemon and avocado crops.

Interval House emphasized the social and therapeutic aspects of food and gardening. They turned gardening and farmers' market experiences into social and cultural events. One program graduate described how the project encouraged more casual interactions with program residents. He said, "Everybody has fun, chats, gets closer. They start talking about their country." Another woman described how the project fit into her horticultural heritage, "Most Vietnamese people have farmed. Ninety per cent of Vietnamese people grow something at their house or apartment. I love to grow herbs. In Vietnamese food, you have to have green and red. My daughter loves to garden. She doesn't remember Vietnam. She has her own plants, and she calls me out to see how they're doing. Here I see Mexican people grow cilantro and use it. So I learn."

The farmers' market experience seemed to be especially important to the young people in the program, in some cases because it was culturally familiar. Two immigrant boys said they had gathered wild food for the market in their home country of Russia. Another young woman said that the farmers' market reminded her of the town where she grew up in Mexico. Farmers' market visits became literally a family affair for the agency, with the participation of residents, and relatives of graduates, staff and board members.

Food preparation was already communal prior to the project. For this reason, it was easy to utilize the fresh garden and farmers' market produce in regular shelter meals. In the last phase of the pilot, a new shelter manager was hired, in part because she had culinary training. The agency hoped to use her experience and education to continue teaching staff, graduates and residents nutrition and cooking skills.

A total of 348 participants were involved in the pilot project, including 53 women and 82 child residents, 48 graduates, 149 staff and volunteers, and 16 community members. The scale of the garden, the total immersion of all levels of staff, and the large number of workshop training sessions were unique to Interval House and could not be easily reproduced at most other domestic violence agencies. Nor could the additional costs, which were absorbed by Interval House and their partner, Long Beach Organic. However, agency administration strongly felt that an emphasis on gardening and food activities had been institutionalized at their agency, and they mostly attributed this to the required involvement of the entire staff in the garden workshops. Plans were to reinforce this in-house knowledge through one or two garden workshops annually and to continue integrating garden produce and farmers' market produce into the shelter diet through menu planning.

Learning from Project GROW: Lessons for the Future

The funding for the Project GROW pilot programs came to an end in December 2000 and the Center for Food and Justice filed its evaluation with the Department of Health Services in June 2001. A gathering of the Project GROW participants at the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center in September 2000 also clearly indicated that project participants wanted to continue their programs in some form and maintain an informal network that could provide technical assistance and help advocate on behalf of these new kinds of food/healing/empowerment connections. However, the larger issue remained of how to sustain and extend these kinds of projects in the harsh environment of overtaxed and short-staffed domestic violence agencies seeking to respond to the continuing crisis of domestic violence and the overwhelming needs of its victims, including issues related to food. The purpose of this Center for Food and Justice report then is to not only share the information about the Project GROW experience but to identify the lessons learned and how a new alliance and network of community food security and domestic violence prevention advocates can be forged.

Sustainability Issues

Since many domestic violence programs do not have an extensive prior history of involvement in these issues, innovative food and garden projects will usually require additional staff education and training and the development of a network of new community resources and experts to provide on-going support. The experience of the pilots showed that staff training that is relaxing and therapeutic can contribute to professional development, job satisfaction and increased educational opportunities.

Small, manageable initiatives that take into account the large and stressful agenda and limited budgets of grassroots



domestic violence agencies will help to build gradual resident and staff buy-in. Activities that dovetail with the existing program are more likely to be successful than new additions to an already hectic schedule (e.g. Building Futures' horticultural therapy and food activities, which were incorporated into an already existing children's program).

Funding cycles and timetables for implementation should take into account the learning curves of agency staff and other unexpected hurdles that might arise in the development of a new food or garden program (such as toxic soil, difficulties in obtaining a garden space, or turnover of personnel). Documentation and evaluation requirements should not be emphasized over program planning and implementation where these activities represent a significant addition to agency activities.

The requirements for confidentiality and domestic violence awareness training will need to be addressed when bringing new community volunteers and consultants into therapeutic activities. These issues will be all the more important when volunteers have had little prior exposure to the problem of domestic violence.

Food Policies and Procedures

Food preparation and donation procedures will need to be examined to ensure that existing policies do not sabotage new food and nutrition activities designed to promote healthy eating. For example, one agency introduced nutrition and cooking classes only to find that residents were becoming frustrated that they had trouble implementing what they had learned because of daily donations of day old baked goods that were brought into the shelter from the community. The agency changed its procedures for the routing of junk food donations as a result of this experience.



Communal food acquisition and preparation can provide a positive social experience, nutrition education opportunities, and a place to introduce nutritious foods to clients' diets but can also be a barrier to healthy eating and a source of social friction, depending on the shelter's sources of foods, the organization of food preparation, and sensitivity to cultural, medical and dietary needs. A number of pilot programs were able to successfully use their communal mealtime to reinforce healthy eating and to provide a time for cultural celebration.

Farmers' market visits provided fresh produce for communal meals in the pilot program as well as an opportunity for social outings and exposure to the foods of many cultures. Rural Human Services, in Crescent City used the weekly food boxes from a local Community Supported Agriculture project to teach residents about seasonal produce and new menu choices for communal meals. They said that the CSA subscription provided a cost savings for the shelter food budget and provided an opportunity to "visit a successful working farm to learn about gardening and help with the maintenance and harvesting of the crops."

Some shelter programs decided that residents and staff needed additional support in preparing communal meals. Several developed food safety protocols, developed in-service training for staff in food handling, and worked to revise menus to include additional fresh produce. By the end of the grant period, Kings Community Action Organization, in Hanford, and Interval House, in Orange County, decided to hire a cook to help with ongoing cooking instruction and the preparation of communal meals.

Several cases of eating disorders were discovered as a result of the pilots, pointing to the need to develop procedures for handling eating disorders identified through new shelter food and nutrition activities.

Length of Stay

Gardening and nutrition activities should be customized for program length of stay. Short-term, emergency shelter clients cannot easily benefit from a long series of classes but may enjoy participating in informal gardening or nutrition activities. Additional staff or key volunteers will be needed at short-term emergency programs (with high client turnover) to provide continuity for garden maintenance. Sometimes agencies have both a short and long-term program that can be integrated for the purposes of garden program continuity. Cycles of six-week EFNEP classes could benefit many women in short stay programs. Environmental benefits and fresh food can be enjoyed in all types of shelter garden programs, no matter the client length of stay.

Program Emphasis and Activity Scheduling

Busy schedules are a reality of domestic violence victims in shelter settings. Women are either looking for jobs and housing or are already working or in job training. They are also attending counseling sessions to deal with the consequences of trauma. Food and gardening advocates will need to take these pressing concerns of clients and staff into account when developing new initiatives. Because of adult schedules, gardening and food programs geared to children and youth may be easier to implement as a first phase of a project. This will simultaneously provide time for adult residents to concentrate on other issues while still benefiting from some aspects of the food or garden program. When agencies do not have an organized structure for children's activities, additional staffing or child care will need to be provided when food and gardening activities are geared primarily to adults.

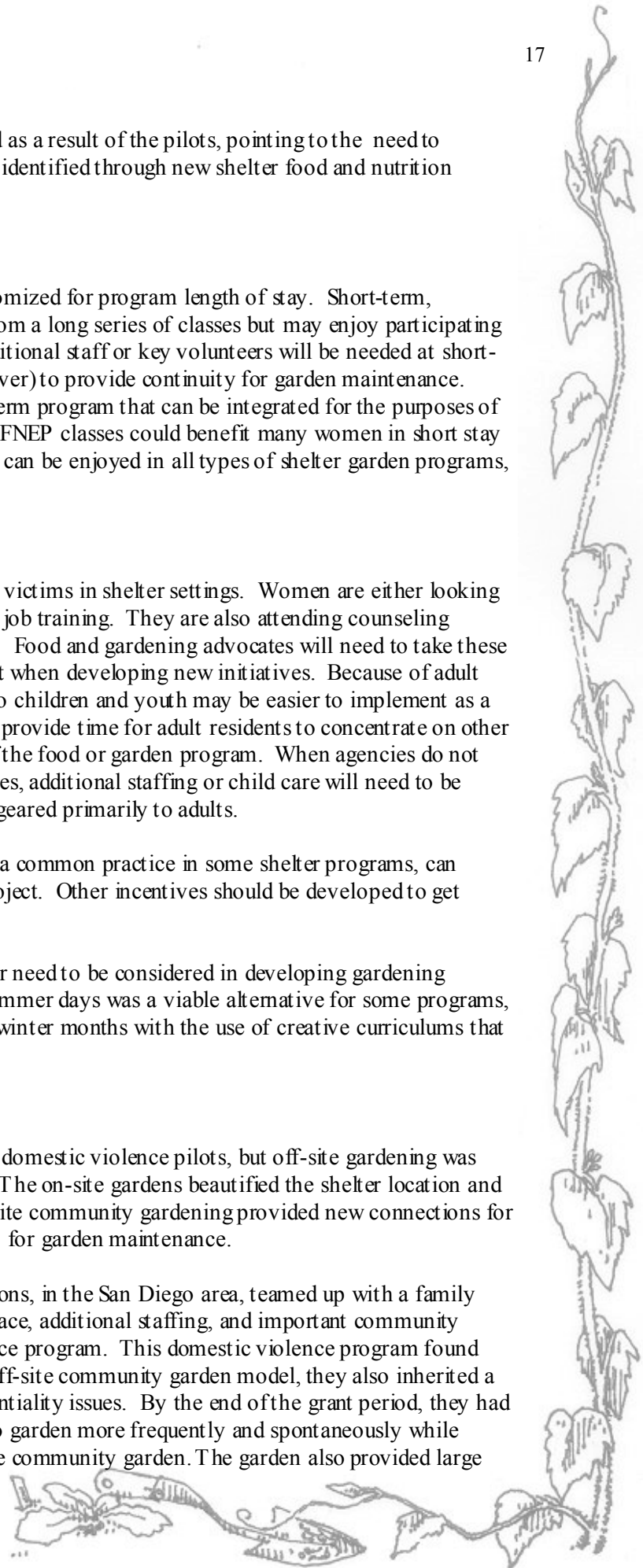
Mandatory or required participation in activities, a common practice in some shelter programs, can undermine participant buy-in with a new pilot project. Other incentives should be developed to get participants to try new activities.

Sun and heat exposure and cold and rainy weather need to be considered in developing gardening schedules. Evening gardening during the long summer days was a viable alternative for some programs, and garden programs were extended through the winter months with the use of creative curriculums that often emphasized crafts and food activities.

Off-site versus On-site Gardens

On-site gardening was easiest to develop in most domestic violence pilots, but off-site gardening was sometimes necessary due to a shortage of space. The on-site gardens beautified the shelter location and provided easy access to garden produce, but off-site community gardening provided new connections for clients and staff and additional sources of support for garden maintenance.

One pilot program, Center for Community Solutions, in the San Diego area, teamed up with a family resource center which provided a large garden space, additional staffing, and important community connections for the clients of the domestic violence program. This domestic violence program found that although there were definite benefits to the off-site community garden model, they also inherited a new set of scheduling, transportation and confidentiality issues. By the end of the grant period, they had instituted an on-site garden that allowed clients to garden more frequently and spontaneously while continuing to maintain a connection to the off-site community garden. The garden also provided large



quantities of fresh produce and kept clients in contact with an important community social service partner.

Educational Formats and Materials

Language abilities and literacy levels as well as educational experience of shelter residents and staff should be considered in the development of class activities and written materials. Hands-on formats and informal activities were more successful than formal lecture formats in the pilot program. Several agencies had to revise their activities and classes during the implementation of the pilot projects to better accommodate their clients' educational needs. For example, South Bay Community Services, in south San Diego County, worked with their local community college to customize classes for the women in their job-training program.

Women who have little formal education particularly appreciate receiving certificates of graduation. An example of this were the certificates provided through the EFNEP (Extended Food and Nutrition Education Program, a University of California Cooperative Extension Program) classes at the Center for Community Solutions in San Diego. Exposure to botanic gardens, libraries and college campuses were also greatly valued by shelter residents who had never previously had these experiences. Ocean Park Community Center, in Santa Monica, used field trips to the public library for the dual purposes of teaching literacy skills and helping residents research gardening information.



Container gardening information was the most practical for a highly mobile population of renters who have difficulty establishing a permanent garden. Rural Human Services, in Crescent City, encouraged their residents to take container plants that they called "buckets of hope" with them as they left the shelter program.

Forging a New Alliance: Recommendations

Coalition Building: Domestic Violence Agencies as Arenas for Food Security Work; Community Food Security Programs as Effective Intervention Strategies for Domestic Violence Agencies

The experience of Project GROW has shown that there is a large unmet need for increased food security in domestic violence agencies, both among the clients served and by program staff. Domestic violence

Exposure to botanic gardens, libraries and college campuses were also greatly valued by shelter residents who had never previously had these experiences.

programs should be seen by food security advocates as logical sites for the development of greater community food security through new food and garden initiatives. Key community food security players -- community gardeners, farmers' markets and CSA farmers, Cooperative Extension, nutrition educators and advocates, among others -- need to build relationships and partnerships with domestic violence agencies and advocates.

The Project GROW program also demonstrated that community food security strategies constitute an important new arena for intervention and for improving the quality of life of domestic violence shelter residents and staff alike. By seeking to identify community food security as an appropriate arena

for shelter activity and by establishing links with food security advocates, domestic violence agencies can potentially extend beyond a crisis management framework to help not only recover but remake lives.

Establishing New Sources of Funding and Support Mechanisms

Grassroots domestic violence programs need additional funding to establish new food and garden programs. Funding should be made available: 1) to train and educate more domestic violence agencies about the potential for food and garden programs, 2) to make the resources developed through Project GROW available to the network of domestic violence programs throughout the country, 3) to create new food security initiatives in other domestic violence programs utilizing the experiences of Project GROW. In addition a specific funding stream needs to be established through state and federal agencies to incorporate access to healthy food as a core goal for shelter support. This could take the form of a state-initiated domestic violence coupon program for farmers' market (modeled after the farmers' market nutrition program), subsidies to allow for participation in CSA-type subscriber programs, and support for gardens that also provide fresh produce for shelter residents. Ultimately, domestic violence funders should be aware of the innovative nature of these types of activities in the domestic violence setting and allow for changes in approach during program implementation.

Similarly, funding sources primarily focused on food access, nutrition, and community food security need to recognize how the experience and needs of domestic violence victims represent a critical constituency in re-envisioning where food comes from and how it is consumed.

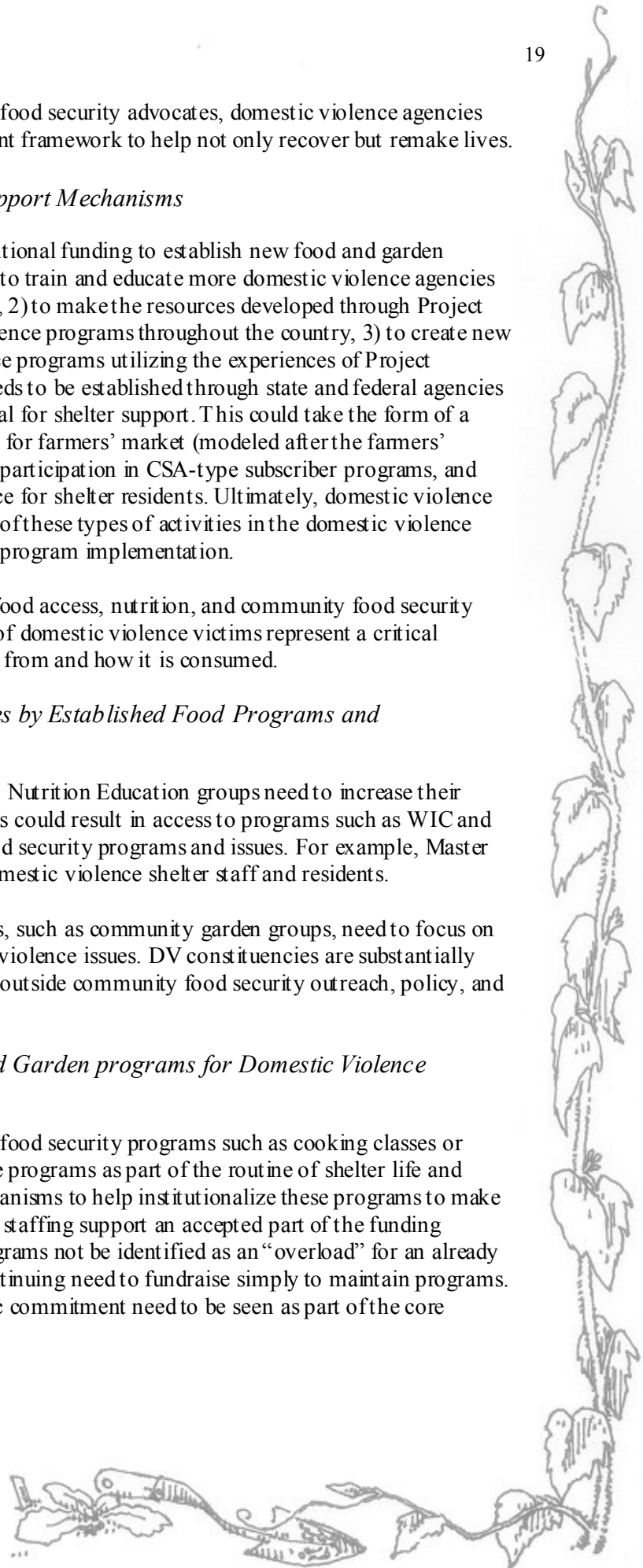
Outreach to Domestic Violence Constituencies by Established Food Programs and Organizations

Programs such as WIC, EFNEP, and Food Stamp Nutrition Education groups need to increase their outreach to domestic violence constituencies. This could result in access to programs such as WIC and food stamps. It could also include trainings in food security programs and issues. For example, Master Gardner trainings should be made available to domestic violence shelter staff and residents.

Community food security advocacy organizations, such as community garden groups, need to focus on the policy and program implications of domestic violence issues. DV constituencies are substantially food *insecure*, yet often remain at the margins or outside community food security outreach, policy, and programmatic initiatives.

Institutionalize Community Food Security and Garden programs for Domestic Violence Agencies

Shelters that initiate gardens or other community food security programs such as cooking classes or fresh food shopping, need to institutionalize these programs as part of the routine of shelter life and operations. Shelter funders need to develop mechanisms to help institutionalize these programs to make gardening, healthy food and horticultural therapy staffing support an accepted part of the funding structure for programs. It's critical that these programs not be identified as an "overload" for an already stretched staff and/or become dependent on a continuing need to fundraise simply to maintain programs. A "healthy food" staff position and programmatic commitment need to be seen as part of the core objectives of facilitating recovery and healing.



Conclusion

Despite enormous challenges, hundreds of women and children and domestic violence agency staff throughout California have had completely new experiences with food, gardening and local agriculture as a result of Project GROW. Perhaps of equal importance, the domestic violence agencies involved in the pilot program have become much more visible to local food security and gardening advocates as well as the communities in which they are located.

The pilot programs showed that gardening and food activities can be therapeutic and educational for clients and staff and also provide esthetic, economic, social and cultural benefits to domestic violence programs. The pilots also put a spotlight on a critical need to strengthen the quality of food in domestic violence shelters, particularly access to fresh produce, and to see the network of grassroots domestic violence agencies as an important new arena for food advocacy work.

The Project GROW experience has thus provided important information about the kinds of coalition building and policy initiatives that need to be developed to move from a pilot project phase to a broader paradigm shift in the community food security and domestic violence arenas. Community food security -- what we eat, how we grow it, where we access it, what is available, and how we prepare it -- represent a set of potent issues in how domestic violence agencies operate and what strategies they can develop for helping remake lives. Similarly, the issues of domestic violence prevention and recovery are powerful community food security issues and identify the ways in which community food advocates need to develop more expansive strategies in identifying who can and should be key players in transforming the way we grow, access, and consume our food. The challenge now is to make those connections a part of the goals and mission of these two crucial movements.



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