

Collective Roots and Free at Last

Collective Roots, a food justice nonprofit organization in East Palo Alto, CA joined forces with Free at Last, a community recovery center for substance abuse treatment, intervention and prevention services to provide hands on education to residents in gardening, nutrition, cooking and healthy living with the support of Get Healthy San Mateo County.

East Palo Alto, California, population 28,155, was once considered the murder capital of the United States with 42 murders occurring in 1992 alone. With a historically high rate of drug abuse and violent crime, and a median household income of \$48,734 reported in the 2006-2010 ACS, the barriers to healthy, sustainable living in this community are numerous.

Collective Roots has a vision to promote social justice by developing “a community in which all people have access to gardens and fresh, healthy and environmentally sustainable food.” In the interest of improving food justice, the Free at Last program was chosen as a site for the development of market-scale gardens in the men’s and women’s residential homes.



In 2012, Collective Roots implemented a program in these two residences to establish

market-scale gardens, providing fresh produce for residents and educating them about nutrition, cooking and healthy living in addition to providing job-training skills and income-earning opportunities to the residents by selling the produce at the East Palo Alto Community Farmer’s Market. They used grant money from Get Healthy San Mateo County to cover all material costs of the project.

This collaboration between Collective Roots and Free at Last was a great success overall with all participants reporting a positive experience. Two rounds of courses were conducted at each residence lasting six weeks each.

Behavior	% Increase
Eat more vegetables	71%
Eat more fruits	57%
Eat more low-fat or fat-free dairy products	29%
Eat more whole grains	86%
Eat more lean meat, chicken, or fish	43%
Drink more water	50%
Improved cooking skills	71%
Made a recipe from class at home	29%
Would recommend the course to a friend	100%

Pre- and post-course evaluations revealed highly positive changes in eating and cooking behaviors as well as 100% of participants stating they would recommend the course to a friend.

There were also significant increases in knowledge related to organic gardening, composting and cooking, interest in farmers markets and awareness of the environmental impacts of food choices and water conservation.

Some of the challenges this program faced were inconsistent staffing, which delayed installation of the garden at the women's site, and therefore prevented sale at the farmer's market for the 2012 season, although residents and staff remain motivated to sell in future seasons. In addition, the residents did not always stay for their planned term for various reasons.



According to Nicole Wires, Manager of Community Initiatives at Collective Roots, there was mixed participation from residents. She reports that although the response of residents was all positive, the degree of enthusiasm varied greatly from residents who were highly motivated to learn to make healthy choices to residents who took a more passive role in the hands-on component and did not want to get their hands dirty. To those less eager residents the activity and courses were interesting, but they did not see how these skills would translate into them getting a steady, paying job.

Nicole believes the residents face extensive barriers living in their current setting or

transitioning out into difficult financial situations, so it is hard for the residents to view the program as salient to them. She would like to see the program evolve into a certificate-based job skills training program for edible landscaping which would allow the skills and knowledge learned to translate directly into a paying job and the stability they are seeking. In addition, she identifies the large time commitment and the necessity of paid staff as reasons why these programs often are not sustainable long term. However, with Collective Roots' dedication to weekly maintenance as well as selling produce at the upcoming Farmer's Market, they see a bright future for their partnership with Free at Last.

The home gardening project at the Free at Last Residences was a great success in terms of furthering the missions of the Free at Last Organization, Collective Roots, and Get Healthy San Mateo County.

"This is the best class of the week! In some other classes we just sit all day long, but in this class we get to do things that really help us." - Michael

"When I get out of here I want to get a job doing this kind of stuff. I want to leave behind the negativity in my life, the people who were just bringing me down, and start doing something positive like this." - Justin

"You've got me hooked on that kale stuff. And we grew that in our garden! That's dope!" - Rigo

Residents were able to learn to make healthy lifestyle choices as a part of their community re-entry process, and their responses to the program were overwhelmingly positive.

Collective Roots and Free at last have formed a lasting relationship and are excited to plan future programs tailored specifically to this population. Collective Roots also plans to hire graduates of the program at Free at Last to do organic garden maintenance at their other sites in the community.

