The GreenWerks Micro-Urban Farm at Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital Thunder Bay, Ontario

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Interviews conducted June - August 2014
CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

* Mental health and addiction outpatient Employment Program
* Social enterprise model improves viability of program
* Mix of staff, volunteers, summer students and clients provides essential labour
* Most of infrastructure supplied internally through St. Joseph’s Care Group
* Food production on over 1/3 acre supplied to small, weekly markets, and purchased by Sodexho and Regional Food Distribution Agency
* Planning includes garden expansion, an Aboriginal healing garden, a greenhouse, and value added products (jams, preserves)
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http://projectsoil.ca

Shared Opportunities on Institutional Lands
PROJECT OVERVIEW

GreenWerks is a micro-urban farm located in the Northwestern Ontario city of Thunder Bay, Ontario (pop. approx. 110,000). The garden is situated on a large plot of land behind St. Joseph’s Care Group’s (SJCG) Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital (LPH) site. As part of the hospital’s outpatient Employment Program, the garden employs clients who have complex mental health and addictions concerns throughout the summer and early fall. The aim of garden, and employment program as a whole, is to provide skills development opportunities in addition to clinical and vocational supports.

GreenWerks is one of the nine social enterprises that are part of the larger co-op of TeamWerks. As a collection of social enterprises, TeamWerks has a blended bottom line, which allows it to focus on meeting the needs of the clients it serves and focus less on maximizing profits. However, the co-op is self-sustaining. As Doug Dowhos, program supervisor states, “I’ve been here 10 years, the cooperative has made money every single year.” The Social Enterprise forms a major part of the overall employment program, allowing clients a number of different time limited placements and, for some, ownership in the worker co-op as a member.

The garden employs program clients, volunteers, summer students, and SJCG staff to maintain the garden throughout the year. Beginning in June, approximately 20 different
vegetables, fruits, and herbs are planted including potatoes, tomatoes, basil, pumpkin, beets, and cabbage, just to name a few. Once harvested, the produce is bought either by SJCG food and nutrition services, the Foodservice provider (Sodexo), the Regional Food Distribution Association (RFDA) or by staff and/or clients in their ‘mini farmers market’.

I began working in the garden at the beginning of June 2014 and had the opportunity to assist with everything from the preparation of the land for gardening to the harvesting of produce. Since the garden had its own unique set of challenges to be overcome throughout the season, we had to come up with many innovative solutions in order to sustain it. For example, one of the biggest challenges faced by all gardeners in Northwestern Ontario is weather. We saw it all in the 2014 growing season: weeks of rainy and cold weather, followed by intermittent periods of warmth, only to be followed by more rain and cold. It wasn’t until August that we really saw any weather remotely reminiscent of a normal Thunder Bay summer. Additionally, our growing season is much shorter and often requires the use of a greenhouse, which GreenWerks currently does not have access to. Due to abnormal rainfall, after planting much of our time was spent making sure there was adequate drainage around the gardens, so that we didn’t drown all of our plants. Despite our best efforts though, we couldn’t save everything and the cucumbers didn’t survive our intense weather conditions. However, some plants absolutely thrived in these conditions, including potatoes and cabbage—of which, thankfully, we had a lot.

As previously mentioned, Employment Options also employs students throughout the summer season. In 2014, the GreenWerks summer student was a kinesiology student named Justine. We had the opportunity of working closely throughout the season, helping harvest, plant, and maintain the garden along with the program clients. Both of us had limited hands-on gardening experience going into it, but by the end of the summer we had both learned a great deal not only about gardening itself, but also about sustainable food systems, and complex mental health disorders. When asked about her experience, Justine felt that she learned a lot from her time at GreenWerks and that it would be very beneficial to see more programs such as this in the future.

History

The GreenWerks garden grew out of the larger Employment Options program. The program aims to provide an opportunity for individuals with complex mental health challenges to gain meaningful employment, while retaining access to important resources like clinical treatment teams and vocational counselors. The Employment Options program started as four social enterprises in 1998 and has now grown to nine, the most recent being GreenWerks.
The garden was established with three main goals in mind:

1. Increase the amount of locally grown produce within SJCG food services;
2. Increase the amount of fresh local produce the RFDA can access;
3. Provide additional therapeutic supports and vocational skills development opportunities for clients with complex mental health and/or addiction challenges.

The addition of GreenWerks to the program relied on many community partners including, SJCG and the RFDA, who both made a commitment to support the initiative. The St. Joseph’s Care Group was already invested in the therapeutic gardening aspect, as they had a small pilot site that was showing what they considered beneficial results, while the RFDA recognized the potential benefits of being able to access locally grown produce at wholesale prices that could then be distributed to the local food banks. Additionally, the partnership with the RFDA and SJCG meant a guaranteed source of volunteers, and financial support through the purchasing of produce. With all of the necessary partners secured, the garden began growing produce in May of 2011 and had its official opening in August of that same year. When asked about his thoughts on what makes GreenWerks work, Doug Dowhos notes that the partnership with SJCG and the RFDA are the key to the ongoing success of the garden.

PROJECT RESOURCES

Human Resources

Between five and seven clients of the Employment Options program tend to the garden five days a week starting around May. They continue to the end of the harvesting season and are responsible for all maintenance, planting, and harvesting. Clients with the physical capacity for the work have the option of working in any one of the eight other social enterprises operated by TeamWerks, but many choose the rewarding and therapeutic setting of the garden to come to work every day. In addition to clients, the GreenWerks garden and SJCG employs one supervisor and one Occupational Instructor. Collectively, the supervisor and Occupational Instructor oversee the operation and management of the garden in conjunction with the clients. As well, they organize the physical resources needed throughout the growing season, including the harvesting and distribution of the produce. One or two summer students and three to five volunteers also lend a hand sustaining the garden throughout the summer months. Community volunteers with extensive gardening experience have also been called upon for their expertise since the garden’s beginning.
Infrastructure Resources

The garden is located on a large plot of land directly behind the hospital. It is enclosed by a gated chain link fence that provides the garden protection from animals and vandals, both of which can present a problem in urban settings such as this one. The garden is equipped with a tool shed that houses all necessary gardening equipment such as a wheelbarrow, gas-powered tiller, shovels, trowels, rakes, hoes, etc., while also providing shade and shelter for garden workers during breaks. GreenWerks also has access, through SJCG, to a cube van and cargo van, tractor with tiller and disc harrow attachments, and will soon be acquiring a greenhouse. Due to the garden’s association with SJCG, garden staff and workers can also utilize vital resources through the Care Group’s health and safety department, communications department, and clinical support teams. They also secured the necessary capital to start and expand the garden’s operations through SJCG.
Natural Resources

The garden consists of three plots, two of which are approximately 60ft by 100ft in size while the other is approximately 70ft by 60ft. Due to the partnership with SJCG, infrastructure for a water supply was in place prior to the development of the garden, as was the fence. Soil testing was done prior to the first growing season and was deemed conducive to the growing of most types of vegetables. Employment Options Supervisor Doug Dowhos explains that they are currently moving towards the utilization of on-site compost, but for now, an application of 19-19-19 organic fertilizer is being applied every second year.

Financial Resources

Capital and infrastructure funding for the GreenWerks garden and the Employment Options program are supported through SJCG. They provide items such as the tractor, water supply, vehicles, etc. The garden also is supported financially through the sale of produce to Sodexo/SJCG food and nutrition services, the RFDA, and through the SJCG ‘mini farmers market’ for staff and clients that is run periodically throughout the summer and fall months.

Community / Social Resources

Partnerships with local community organizations represent a large part of how the GreenWerks garden was able to get started, and they continue to play a valuable role in its ongoing success. The garden was established through the direct partnership with the RFDA, SJCG, and SJCG food and nutrition services/Sodexo. As partners, SJCG provides vital resources to the garden including access to water, tractors, tillers, communications professionals, clinical treatment teams, support staff, etc., while the RFDA provides volunteers and financial support through the purchase of produce. However, other key players have been instrumental in sustaining and consulting on the garden operation. Locally, Willow Springs (http://www.willowsprings.ca/) and the late Dr. William Dowhos have been called upon in the past to as local “garden experts” to consult on garden maintenance and continuing development. The Thunder Bay Correctional Centre has also been a supporter of the initiative through the donation of plants. The Thunder Bay Correctional Centre’s donations account for approximately 75% of all the starter plants grown at GreenWerks.
GreenWerks has commitments from SJCG and the RFDA to support the social enterprise, as the garden directly benefits the clients they separately serve. GreenWerks also receives support through memberships in organizations, such as the Ontario Co-op Association and the Health Care Coop Federation of Canada which is committed to supporting co-ops that have a positive impact on the health and well being of individuals.

In the future, GreenWerks hopes to see more conventional lending opportunities and government funding opportunities. Access to these would help facilitate the continued expansion of the garden while supporting the on-going maintenance of the current land that is required.
Resources Needed to Sustain the Project

As a fairly large operation, GreenWerks relies on many different resources to help sustain the project. As previously mentioned, SJCG is relied upon for capital and operation costs while providing the program clients access to the clinical treatment teams. Additional financial resources are received through SJCG food and nutrition services department/Sodexo and the RFDA, as both are relied upon to purchase produce. As a health care co-op focused on the rehabilitation and health and well-being of individuals, GreenWerks also relies upon referring agencies within the community to refer individuals that would benefit from the program and who have the capacity to complete the required work. Within the Co-op, an executive team is also called upon to ensure the continued smooth operation and success of the organization.

At present, a relatively small amount of time is spent seeking funding due to the support of SJCG. As the garden continues to expand, however, the need to seek outside funding may increase and more time may have to be dedicated to seeking financial support.

Future Community Connections

As Doug Dowhos explains, GreenWerks envisions a future that involves bringing together like enterprises to share valuable information including best practices, partnership opportunities, and funding opportunities. This community network will hold quarterly meetings and discuss issues relevant to local food growing. In addition, the project may benefit from having access to more volunteers with gardening expertise that could potentially help train current and future garden staff.

CONSTRAINTS

Due to the garden’s location in Northern Ontario, weather and climate play a role in the selection of produce as well the length of the growing season. Weather in the area can be temperamental with significant amounts of rain and cooler weather during the beginning of the summer months, often without the predictable warmer weather starting until August. Compared to areas in Southern Ontario, the growing season is much shorter, with harvesting sometimes not beginning until late July — as was the case this year at the garden. Also, the weather in the area is not conducive to certain types of produce. Therefore, careful consideration must be put into the selection of plants that will be more likely to thrive and produce a good harvest. Staff and clients must also be flexible due to the unique weather and seasonal constraints of the area (i.e., more time is required during good weather days and during harvesting and
planting). This can present a problem for certain clients as many are only be able to commit to part time work and cannot do full days. Additionally, time spent in the garden can be restricted as there is currently no dedicated staff member for the garden. Presently, the main garden staff members are responsible for multiple projects/sites and must divide their time between them.

**SUCCESSES**

The GreenWerks garden has been incredibly successful despite being a fairly recent addition to the Employment Options program. Since its inception, six to ten clients every year receive the direct benefits of the skills training and employment opportunities that the garden creates. Doug Dowhos, who oversees the entire Employment Options program, notes many of the garden’s successes including the increase in quality of life and for clients due to the therapeutic aspects of gardening, a decrease in readmission rates to the hospital, improved quality of food at the SJCG cafeteria, a positive environmental impact, and an increase in the amount of fresh produce available to local food banks through the RFDA.

Although the garden boasts many successes, there are still plans to expand the program and add to the list of current success stories. At present, there are plans to expand the garden, add an Aboriginal healing garden, incorporate a greenhouse in order to extend the growing season, and utilize produce to create value added products like jams, preserves, etc. In order to put these plans into action, the program will be looking to access funding opportunities outside SJCG to fund a 100% dedicated garden staff member.
CHALLENGES OVERCOME

As previously mentioned, the unpredictable and temperamental Northern Ontario climate presents its own of unique set challenges for local gardeners. Being flexible and adaptable is therefore essential to the success of a garden. A unique challenge to the GreenWerks garden however, is trying to identify clients suitable to the program. Dowhos explains that the ability to complete the physically demanding work in the garden and the ability to be flexible with one’s schedule are not traits possessed by all clients referred to the program. Additionally, establishing new land can be challenging due to the labour-intensive work that accompanies tilling and creating a drainage system around the garden. Nutrient levels in the soil of an expanded garden will need to be established and financial and human resources must be secured before any plans are carried out.

Fortunately, over the past three years, GreenWerks has overcome the difficult challenges that have come up and they are planning to continue to expand their operation. However, to make the expansion plans a reality, GreenWerks is planning on securing more financial resources, involving additional community resources (i.e., businesses, volunteers, etc.), acquiring dedicated garden staff, increasing community exposure, and further enhancing their relationship with SJCG food and nutrition services/Sodexo.
RELEVANCE TO OTHER PROJECTS

GreenWerks shows that there is potential for an operation like this to be replicated in larger institutions and organizations like schools, other hospital/rehab facilities, and charitable/non-profit organizations. The garden is a wonderful example of the returns on investment, positive outcomes and impacts that utilizing unused land can have—on the community, individuals with barriers to employment, and on the environment. By demonstrating the feasibility of this large growing project, they have also provided outcomes that are appealing to stakeholders of large institutions, which is imperative for those preparing a proposal for a future food growing initiative. GreenWerks has set a great example that could be used as a template for institutions that decide to turn unused land into gardens suitable for growing produce.

Online Resources

Website

http://teamwerks.ca/

Media