Improving Baltimore Community Nutrition Through Enhanced Food Access and Community Gardens
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As rates of obesity and obesity-related diseases rise across America, federal, state, and local governments have increasingly turned to community nutrition outreach and increasing healthy food access to improve public health. Specifically, Baltimore City has enacted a number of measures and several food policy initiatives to improve the health of its citizens. Baltimore’s food environment faces many challenges. Twenty percent of the City’s residents live in food deserts (a group of blocks that are more than a quarter mile from a supermarket and have 40 percent or more of the population with an income below 125 percent of the federal poverty level), nearly twenty five percent of school-aged children live in a food desert, and one in three neighborhoods are located within a food desert.¹ Thus, in recent years, Baltimore has sought to increase food access for its citizens, expand community gardens and green spaces, and improve the local food system through City policies, programs, and broad collaboration between the work of government and non-profits. One nonprofit that is involved in the City’s efforts to improve the food environment is Parks & People Foundation. The Community Greening Resource Network (CGRN) of Parks & People Foundation builds upon the City government’s efforts to work with nonprofits to support green spaces, increase healthful food access, and better community nutrition. CGRN partnered with the Community Impact Internship Program of Johns Hopkins University to expand its mission which allowed those involved to understand community members’ values and the changes needed to implement long-term solutions to food access disparities.

In November of 2008, former Mayor Shelia Dixon announced the creation of the Baltimore Food Policy Task Force to develop policies to increase healthy food

consumption and improve the City’s food environment.\textsuperscript{2} The Task Force is led by the Baltimore City Department of Planning and the Baltimore City Health Department, and brings government offices, business owners, and community leaders together to create a sustainable local food system to heighten healthy food access.\textsuperscript{3} Members of the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative work alongside the the Baltimore Office of Sustainability in continuing its work to improve the City’s food system and alleviate food deserts. A key component of the Food Policy Initiative is the Food Policy Advisory Committee (Food PAC), which consists of over 45 member organizations that represent stakeholders in Baltimore’s food production, distribution, and consumption system. The goal of Food PAC is to aid in developing and implementing policy measures to improve the food environment. Food PAC builds on the City of Baltimore’s efforts to work with nonprofits to advance communities and increase food access. Nonprofits who serve on Food PAC include Citizens’ Panning and Housing Association and Franciscan Center.

Baltimore City has also mobilized numerous measures to promote urban agriculture and community gardens to improve the local food system and heighten access to healthful foods. Such programs include the Vacants to Value Initiative and Power In Dirt. Vacants to Value rehabilitates abandoned neighborhoods to support development in economically distressed areas. This promotes the financial viability of neighborhoods considered to be food deserts. Vacants to Value also maintains, demolishes, holds, and promotes non-housing uses for properties that are unlikely to be redeveloped which supports neighborhood greening activities.\textsuperscript{4} Furthermore, Vacants to

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
Value sponsors the City’s Adopt-A-Lot program which allows residents to apply for a license to convert an abandoned lot into a greenspace or garden, provides low-cost, seasonal access to water, and connects gardeners to nonprofits throughout the city that can assist in establishing and maintaining their lot.5 Power In Dirt is a city program that helps residents who want to adopt a vacant lot, plan a garden, or obtain water, tools, and other resources.6

Additionally, in 2011, the Baltimore City Department of Planning and Department of Housing and Community Development invited non-profit and for-profit farmers to submit Statements of Qualification to allow farmers to participate in the development of certain city-owned vacant and underutilized properties throughout the City. The City initiated this project for the purpose of promoting urban agriculture, alleviating neighborhood food deserts and transforming unused land for economic, social and environmental benefits.7

One nonprofit that works in conjunction with City government and assists in its efforts to green communities and combat food deserts is Parks & People Foundation. Founded in 1984, Parks & People Foundation works in Baltimore to alleviate the social and environmental problems facing the City’s neighborhoods and natural resources.8 Parks & People Foundation works to improve the physical, social and environmental quality of neighborhoods through its greening activities and develops networks of

support among communities to sustain natural resources.\textsuperscript{9} One extension of Parks & People Foundation’s sustainable mission is its Community Greening Resource Network (CGRN).

The Community Greening Resource Network was established in 2008 through a partnership between the Parks & People Foundation and the University of Maryland Extension. The network was founded to meet the growing city-wide need for long-term gardening support.\textsuperscript{10} CGRN is an annual membership program that assists individuals, community gardens, schools, and green spaces throughout Baltimore City. It coordinates the efforts of the numerous organizations throughout the City that are working to support community greeners and the resources that they have made available to improve green spaces. This creates a wide-ranging network of information and resources that make it easier for citizens to sustain gardens and neighborhood green areas.\textsuperscript{11}

The network that CGRN has built among City gardeners includes physical resources such as tools and seeds as well as informational support and a consolidation of the city’s resources from programs such as Vacants to Value and Power in Dirt. CGRN also creates and hold workshops that allow members and City residents to learn how to start and maintain a garden as well as acquire public resources to do so. Members of the Network communicate and draw support from each other that includes resources, materials, education, and connections which increases the viability of green spaces throughout Baltimore City.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
Many CGRN members are involved in food production and are themselves sources of healthful food to their communities. CGRN serves 93 community gardens, most of which are self-identified as food producers. Since many of its members are important food sources for their communities, CGRN is looking to expand the support it provides to include educating both gardeners and communities about the nutrition of the food they produce and consume. This past summer, the Community Greening Resource Network partnered with the Community Impact Internship Program (CIIP) of Johns Hopkins University to expand its nutrition outreach and understanding of local food production within the Baltimore community. Through this collaboration, numerous pamphlets and handouts that contained fundamentals of nutrition and starting and maintaining a garden that produces food were assembled for distribution. A workshop at the Baltimore Food Co-Op that discussed nutrition basics and using locally sourced food in healthy cooking was also created and presented.

Several pieces of literature that related nutrition to the Baltimore food system were generated. For example, a nutrition guide of the 45 crops that are most prevalently grown and best able to thrive in Central Maryland was made. The guide listed the crops that are most frequently grown in the area, the vitamins and minerals found in them, and how these vitamins and minerals serve the body. The guide complimented another paper that was made that listed essential vitamins and minerals and the function they serve in the body. These handouts helped those who read them to understand what vitamins and minerals the body requires, where these vitamins and minerals are found,

and how locally produced food can be used to create a healthy and balanced diet that meets the body's nutritional needs.

In addition to working to increase nutrition awareness, CGRN and CIIP created materials to aid CGRN members and other Baltimore residents in starting and maintaining a garden to produce their own food. A gardening terms glossary was made to help gardeners better understand the natural conditions for plants and soil as well as the cultivating tools used in gardens. To further assist CGRN members in maintaining their gardens, CGRN and CIIP collaborated to improve CGRN's give-aways. CGRN give-aways are events that distribute plants, seeds, and gardening materials to members for free. The collaboration between CIIP and CGRN yielded handouts for give-aways that discussed a number of gardening topics ranging from pollinators to tomato blight to cultivating berries that are relevant to maximizing food production in gardens. Additionally, CIIP and CGRN worked to update CGRN's *Resources for Community Greeners*, a guide that provides sources of information, materials, and funding for Baltimore's community gardeners. Furthermore, a directory was created that lists the location and hours of operation of all of the farmers' markets in Baltimore in addition to tips for shopping at a farmers' markets and a list of terms that customers will encounter while shopping there. These guides help readers to be better able to access locally produced food, support area farmers, and be able to incorporate more fresh produce into their diets. Finally, several articles for the newsletter that provided healthy recipes that use crops grown in the region during the summer as well as tips for community garden upkeep during the heat of the summer were written as a result of the collaboration between CGRN and CIIP.
The seminar that was created and presented through the partnership of CIIP and CGRN had three components. At the beginning of the workshop, attendees were introduced to the work of Parks & People Foundation and CGRN and discussed how gardens act as food sources for the communities they are situated in. This allowed the audience to better understand the importance of community gardens to the local food supply chain as well as the resources available to start and maintain a garden in Baltimore. Next, the components of a nutrition label were defined. This allowed audience members to understand fundamentals of their food’s nutritional content and the ramifications of their dietary choices on their bodies based on the information that food companies provide to consumers. The final part of the presentation was a cooking demonstration and discussion of healthy cooking basics. The recipes that were showcased used locally sourced tomatoes, kale, basil, and garlic as well as bread purchased at the Druid Hill Farmers’ Market. This allowed workshop participants to gain useful tips on preparing healthy meals based on products found at farmers’ markets and showed that healthfully prepared food can be delicious as well as nutritious. A packet for workshop attendees was created which had information on how to begin and maintain a garden, basic information on nutrition and nutrition labels, cooking terms and healthy tips for the kitchen, and the recipes that were demonstrated.

The importance of community gardens as sources of healthy, fresh food as well as neighborhood improvement and unity was demonstrated through this experience. Gardens are an important part of the neighborhoods where they are located and have great potential for improving healthful food access and combating food deserts. In addition to providing fresh fruits and vegetables, they also act as a meeting place for
neighbors. Finally, they are a source of education for youth and a positive way for kids to spend their time and energy. The partnership between CIIP and CGRN also revealed residents’ values about food. Community members as a whole were not opposed to eating healthier and were interested in the content of the workshop and handouts. Poor food choices generally arose from a lack of awareness, availability and affordability of unhealthy food, the food that community members ate while growing up and had become accustomed to, and time and transportation constraints. Frequently, an unhealthy diet was shaped by a poor social environment rather then detrimental personal choices. Overall, the work between CIIP and CGRN contributed to CGRN’s overall efforts to help residents that wanted to start a garden, sustain already existing gardens, and educate community members about nutrition, local food, and utilizing local crops in their meals.

I interned with CGRN through the JHU Center for Social Concern’s Community Impact Internship Program. The program gives undergraduates the opportunity to directly involve themselves in the Baltimore community and to support the work of City government and nonprofits. I applied to be a part of the internship program because I believe that solutions to public health problems, disparities in food access, and environmental and community degradation are multifaceted. City government, nonprofits, and community members are not in and of themselves the answers to these issues. I believe that solutions come from a broad collaboration between these groups, with input of the resources and talents of all those involved. The Community Impact Internship Program put me at the intersection of community, City government, and nonprofits, providing me with the chance to see how they work together and both the
efficient and less effective community improvement strategies they have developed and implemented.

The program allowed me to understand community dynamics and community members’ perceptions of those who seek to improve their neighborhoods. I found that people value community gardens but don’t want them imposed on them; they want to be a part of the improvement rather than watch an outsider do it. On the first day of my internship, I was taken on a tour of several community gardens that were a part of CGRN. The gardens that had the most positive impact in their neighborhood were those that had the greatest community participation. Gardens that were planned, built, and maintained by community members were viewed most positively whereas residents often viewed gardens that had been designed and constructed without their input as intrusive. The same values held true with nutrition education. Community members were open to tips about eating healthier and being taught about nutrition when information was presented to them in a way that respected their values, intelligence, and community and not imposed upon them.

My experiences taught me that improving food access and the public health of the City of Baltimore must come from collaboration between City government, nonprofits, and community members. To formulate and implement the most effective solutions, City government and nonprofits must pool their time and resources and provide the opportunity for community members to voice input and be a part of the change. Solutions can not be viable without the talents and resources of City government and nonprofits and can not be sustained without the support of the communities which government and nonprofits are working in.
References

About Parks & People. Parks & People Foundation Web site. 


CGRN: Community Greening Resource Network. Parks & People Foundation Web site. 


Planning/Baltimore Food Policy Initiative/Food Deserts. Baltimore City Department of Planning Web site. 