

## ***Growing Green Jobs Partnership***

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*The authors will outline the Green Jobs Partnership between the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and FoodShare Toronto. Three programs are part of this partnership; a box washing program, an organic seedling sprout program and an organic market garden program. All aspects of this partnership and programs will be discussed including how this partnership developed, a description of the projects and the structure of the employment training. We will primarily discuss the many benefits for the program participants as well as mention the successes and challenges of working with a diverse population.*

Growing Green Jobs, a partnership between CAMH and FoodShare, has evolved and strengthened since 2000. Clients of CAMH, who are living with persistent and severe mental illnesses and are interested in developing work skills are referred to the Vocational Educational and Rehabilitation Services where they are offered the opportunity to participate in the Growing Green Jobs Program. They attend the Employability Program, which is a life skills group that provides clients important information related to work and returning to the workforce. The program includes topics such as hygiene, punctuality, coping with illness on the job, goal setting, working as part of a team, and completing an interview process. This program requires a commitment to attend eight one-hour sessions, twice a week with the idea that the participant will attempt to return to work upon completion.

Upon graduation from the employability portion of the program, participants choose from three project areas: a box washing project at FoodShare's Eastern Avenue warehouse, growing of sprouts in the CAMH greenhouse or working as a gardener in the Sunshine Market Garden located on the CAMH grounds. Participants then become employed and are paid by FoodShare to work an average of four hours on a regularly scheduled day each week. In each program area the participants work with FoodShare staff members who are supported by vocational rehabilitation counsellors from CAMH that come to work with the participants. In order to support the participant, their roles include team building exercises, job coaching, dealing with personal problems and encouraging appropriate work behaviour. There is a process of weekly tracking, debriefing and discussions between the staff of both organisations as well as with the participants. There

are measurable expectations for the number of boxes washed each session, for the amount of sprouts planted and harvested and for the number of sales from the market garden in order to ensure that the business enterprise is being satisfied.

The participants benefit from further training by attending cooking classes. They learn how to prepare and cook basic meals using fresh fruits and vegetables while also learning how to budget for fresh food in an affordable way. Participants from each program area attend two cooking classes while they are employed with Growing Green Jobs. The participants also benefit from other offsite activities such as educational field trips to organic farms and to urban agriculture projects around the city.

In order to measure impact of the enterprise, a focus group was held with participants from each of the project areas. The focus group was conducted by Helene St. Jacques of Informal Market Research Company and was very useful in determining the impact of GGJ on the employees. The findings showed that there were many benefits to the participants, which is demonstrated from the following summary from the executive overview.

Participants all agreed that their Green Jobs experience had reaped many benefits, which varied depending on the individual. They gained work experience, met new people, learned to work with others, experiences shouldering responsibility, acquiring new skills (cooking and gardening), “keeps you busy #1” and references for their resume.

Below are some quotations from participants who attended one of two focus groups:

“I feel good and happy about being part of this (growing sprouts). That you’re back in a position to put in your services in the workforce and dealing with managers and employers, and getting a cheque. You feel like you’re back in that environment as opposed to being a mental health patient.”

“They know you can hold down a job for six months so you are more hireable even though you’re at Queen. You’re basically back on your feet.”

“...very happy...being treated well. On a different course that was before, and that’s a good thing...”

“I learned not to be bossy but to be open-minded and respectful.”

Individual stories like Sharlene’s also helps to paint a picture of the benefits of being a participant in the Growing Green Jobs program can have for a person. Sharlene was a gardener with the 2003 Growing Green Jobs program and this year came back and was hired as the lead hand in the garden. She left the garden program in August and has since been accepted to the Redirection Through Education Program at George Brown College and is currently in school.

Ron first started working at FoodShare as a box washer through the GGJ program and was then hired as a driver's helper. Recently his caseworker came to see him at the FoodShare warehouse, where Ron showed her around his work place and introduced her to his co-workers. The caseworker noted that Ron seemed very happy and confident in his work environment and that it was the first time she saw him this excited about something. Ron is now working for FoodShare three days a week and as a result of stable employment is no longer on ODSP.

When Mark first started working in the garden, he found it very challenging to focus on given tasks and had to take a break at least every thirty minutes. After six months of working to slowly increase his attention span, he is now able to focus and complete a one-hour task without difficulty.

Strong bonds were also formed between program participants. Sharlene and Vanessa got a chance to know each other while working in the garden together. They are now best friends who spend time together outside of work hours. Social circles among people with mental health issues can often be small and new relationships can be very meaningful and positive. Time in the garden is a unique experience to work in a team environment and further participants' social skills. Once the group has worked together for a number of weeks, they start relying and supporting each other.

There are always any number of tasks that need to be completed in the garden and one of the advantages of working in the garden is that there always seems to be someone among the diverse group of participants with the right skills to get the work done. Frank, for example, has plenty of energy and loves to mow the lawn. Sharlene, who likes intellectual work, is in charge of the cash and the customers at the market. Ming, who enjoys detailed work, helped complete a large portion of the mosaic. This variety in tasks in turn helps participants reduce their frustration levels and increase their self esteem because they feel they are valued and contributing to the garden. These types of opportunities may have also played a role in Roland beginning to be more talkative and energetic. The CAMH caseworkers who are in close contact with the participants when they are not in the garden constantly comment on the improvements they see in their clients as a result of being a part of the garden program. Hearing this feedback is very important in evaluating the success of the program since most of these caseworkers have worked with their clients for over five years, and have a good perspective of the participants' overall health.

The implications of this project go well beyond the benefit to the program participants. The interest that this project has generated by the concept of selling food directly from a production garden in the middle of the city has been enormous. Some of the many advantages include the environmental benefits from the reduction (or elimination!) of food miles, the freshness of the vegetables and herbs and an increased consumer education about food and food issues. We hope that this project can affect policy and act as a model for urban production gardens.