

## Inclusive Gardening in The Sunflower State



In spring 2020, Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health created a community garden that included building accessible raised beds and focuses on healthy food options for the local community. This project will increase access to free, healthy foods for low-income families and create opportunities for physical activity and learning to grow your own food.

### Challenge

Douglas County, Kansas is a metropolitan area with a total population of 117,121, of which 12,652 have a disability. This community health garden was designed to address environmental health issues and food insecurity in Douglas County. The surrounding Pinckney neighborhood has been identified as a food desert in the county, with low access to healthy food, one-third to one-half of the population living below the poverty line, and most of the population living over one mile away from a grocery store. The garden area is located on the southeast side of campus, very close to neighboring homes with easy access from the sidewalk. In establishing the garden in that area, we wanted to increase garden visibility for the neighborhood and label the produce in an accessible way to create a welcoming environment for all. We also discussed projects with our Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) supervisor that would improve healthy food access and increase physical activity opportunities for children and WIC families. These classes may involve teaching WIC families how to garden and providing different seasonal cooking opportunities with ingredients from the garden. The garden produce will be free to any garden visitors and we hope to also distribute it to our clients visiting the public health clinic.



*Kansas, The Sunflower State*

### Solution

Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health was awarded a local grant from the Douglas County Community Foundation geared towards addressing food security and a healthy built environment in the Community Health Plan. The grant allowed us to expand our garden for future years to increase healthy food access, and help establish our own tools, materials, accessible raised beds and signage, and other planting expenses. We collaborated with the Pinckney Neighborhood Association; Douglas County Master Gardeners; Independence, Inc.; University of Kansas; WIC clients; and local farmers. In assessing the garden location, we secured approval from the City of Lawrence and contacted the national call-before-you-dig phone number (811) prior to any ground disturbance.

In addition to the awarded grant, we contacted multiple seed companies that donated hundreds of seed packets. Our environmental health specialist raised many seedlings with the donated seeds months prior to planting, which offset any costs of purchasing plants. Our garden intern from KU will also build a Seed Library by the garden to donate excess seeds to the surrounding community. The City of Lawrence provided free compost, Forest Keepers Tree Care donated mulch, and our intern donated multiple truckloads of soil from her family's farm. It truly was a community effort.



*Garden location with no modifications.*



*Installation of built accessible raised beds.*

## Results

We have built 4 large 2-foot-tall raised beds; two wheelchair-accessible raised beds; and created accessible signage that includes large, clear pictures, ADA-approved text, and Braille labels. The accessible signage will benefit marginalized community members who may be blind, visually impaired, or have limited reading ability. The two wheelchair-accessible raised beds create a more inclusive gardening environment.

We have also planted the entire garden with vegetables, fruits, herbs, and native flowers. The excess seedlings were donated to community members. During that time, we met Pinckney folks who said how excited they were

to have a community garden space and free produce available to them. With the raised beds, tool shed, drip irrigation system, and Seed Library, this community garden should remain a permanent fixture in the neighborhood for many years to come.

By locating the garden in a Lawrence food desert, we hope to bring food production closer to families facing transportation barriers and who might not be able to purchase expensive produce. In partnering with our WIC nutrition program, we hope to bolster the food assistance our clients receive while also providing education on cooking skills. Ultimately, we hope to contribute to reducing food insecurity in Lawrence.

## Lessons Learned

COVID-19 has been a challenge for many. We originally had many community work days scheduled, all of which have been cancelled. The work days we did have consisted of under ten people, masked, and socially distanced. Not only has this been difficult for hands-on activities, but it has been much more difficult getting to know the Pinckney community. We have heavily relied on social media communications about garden progress, but our efforts have been greatly limited.

Other challenges include the amount of time and manual labor that went into planning and executing the garden. While it was possible for the environmental health specialist to do most of the behind-the-scenes work, that work also had to be juggled with regular duties, which resulted in many volunteer hours. Partnering with a local university to get a garden intern greatly helped offset much of the work. It seems probable to collaborate with universities and establish an annual garden intern.

Inclusive health department community gardens are great ways to focus on community health, access to free and healthy foods, food security, and environmental benefits. They can certainly be replicated across the nation; it simply takes a few passionate folks willing to commit time to creating accessible community gardens.



*Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health accessible signage, including Braille labels.*



*Vegetables growing in the community garden.*

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## Links to More Details

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/communityhealthgarden/>

For more information about inclusive gardening:  
<https://www.naccho.org/blog/articles/inclusive-gardening-cultivating-health-for-all>