

HIGHLIGHTING IMPACTS OF SKILL-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

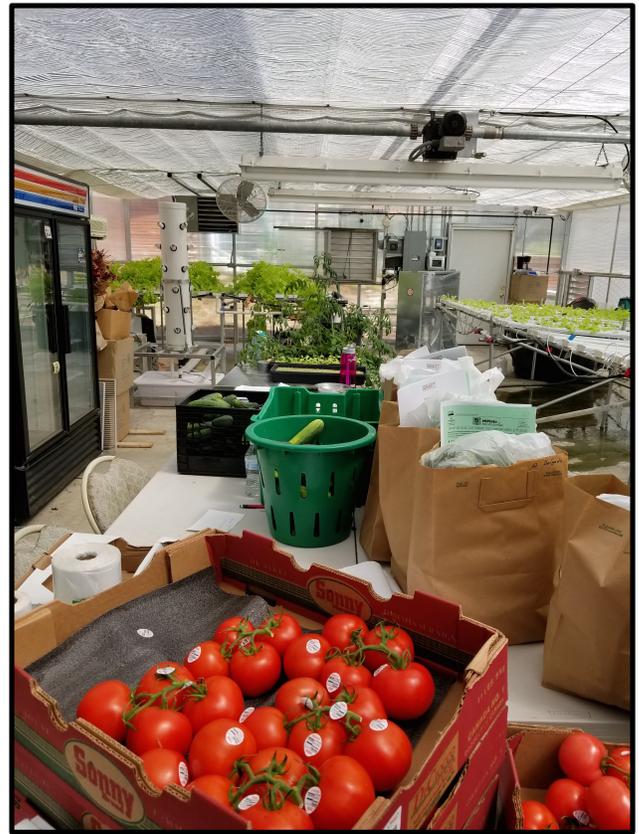
Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation: *Healthy Food Fund*

Prepared by Fertile Ground & DAISA Enterprises

February 2019



Brass City Harvest, Waterbury CT



Brass City Harvest, Waterbury CT

HEALTHY FOOD FUND

Launched in 2016, The Harvard Pilgrim Healthcare Foundation's Healthy Food Fund (HFF) supports 25 community-based organizations in four New England states, with the goal of making fresh, local food easily accessible and affordable for more low-and middle-income families in the region. Participating non-profit organizations work to expand access and affordability where commercial markets have failed and benefit from three years of HFF grant funds. The initiative supports organizations as they build infrastructure and pilot innovative programs such as farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), mobile markets, town and urban farms, co-ops, food banks, and gleaning. Many of the grantee organizations also provide skill-building opportunities for community residents, including family gardening classes, cooking lessons, grocery store tours, and nutrition education classes.

The HFF initiative includes an evaluation and learning team from DAISA Enterprises and Fertile Ground dedicated to capturing and reporting the efforts and outcomes of the cohort. After the first two years, it became clear that measuring and demonstrating the impact of skill-building opportunities is more challenging than measuring outcomes related to total sales, distribution, partnerships, and points of sale/distribution. This case study, featuring HFF grantees Brass City Harvest of Waterbury, Connecticut and Healthy Communities of Capital Area of Gardiner, Maine, highlights skill-building design, innovations, success factors, and outcomes.

HOW DOES SKILL-BUILDING AFFECT PARTICIPANTS?

The DAISA Enterprises and Fertile Ground evaluation and learning team began work on this case study with the hypothesis that the combination of better access to healthy affordable food *and* skill-building activities improve healthy lifestyle practices for participants, but that measuring and demonstrating the impact of the skill-building opportunities is especially challenging.

This case study is guided by two learning questions:

- 1. How do organizations design effective skill-building programs that best suit their communities?** Are health and lifestyle impacted by: growing family food in gardens; cooking with healthy, fresh ingredients; learning harvesting and preserving skills; and learning how to shop on a budget and reading labels?
- 2. How do organizations leverage resources to offer relevant skill-building programs?** How do partnerships, cultural knowledge and understanding, and community connections enhance skill-building programs?

SKILL-BUILDING IN HEALTHY FOOD FUND

Poverty, growing opioid abuse, low literacy, and limited economic opportunities affect the communities in which most of the grantees operate. With rates of obesity and chronic diet-related disease steadily rising, nutrition education, particularly in such vulnerable communities, can be a key factor in preventing, or even reversing debilitating health issues.

Nearly all HFF grantees offer skill-building activities in conjunction with their food production, aggregation, and/or sales/distribution programming. Since the start of the program, HFF grantees have provided more than 10,000 hours of skill-building activities to approximately 9,300 participants in their communities. Seventy-three percent of these participants reported a change in awareness of the importance of healthy foods.

However, few of these organizations are able to offer structured and regular skill-building activities for a consistent group of participants. Many organizations are working with vulnerable, transient, or otherwise unstable populations, making recruitment, retention, and delivery a challenge. Additionally, measuring impacts of skill-building is complex and has low-reliability.



HFF: CASE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The DAISA Enterprises and Fertile Ground learning and evaluation team selected and visited Brass City Harvest (BCH) in Waterbury, CT and Healthy Communities of the Capital Area (HCCA) in Gardiner, ME. Both organizations have developed and adapted innovative skill-building strategies to address the challenges of working with vulnerable communities fraught with poverty and unstable situations. HCCA and BCH vary in size, mission, and scope, yet their reported results over a two-year period share two common trends.

First, both organizations reported substantial skill-building activity enrollment in their first grant year (launching their programs) followed by a drop in enrollment in the second year, and then a building back up of participation the third year.

Second, BCH and HCCA both reported and described increased participant awareness of the importance of healthy foods during that second year (which also increased in the third year).

It isn't feasible with three years of flat funding to continue significant rates of growth, but the data demonstrate that host organizations took stock during the second year, got to know their constituents better, and were able to be more targeted in delivering programs to engage the scope of diverse populations in their communities with programs that were relevant to each population.

MEASUREMENT METHODS

The HFF grantees measure the impact and benefits of their skill-building programs in a number of innovative ways, including collecting letters written by program participants, recalling anecdotal conversations, and conducting surveys and interviews. Survey and interview queries explore whether families have tried new produce or are preparing familiar produce in a new way; are cooking meals with fresh produce more often, are reading labels when shopping, have decreased consumption of pre-packaged foods, or have shared recipes with their network. Additional marker indicators highlight the importance of establishing and maintaining authentic relationships with participants, and of continuously communicating the value of participation in skill-building activities as a means of long-term lifestyle changes. Combined, these qualitative methods reveal a broad sketch of lifestyle changes among skill-building participants.

“Our experience proves that increasing access to fresh food is simply not enough to overcome barriers that relate to nutrition and dietary lifestyle changes or foster sustainable demand. Nutrition education, dietary assistance, experiential food shopping training, SNAP Education and budgeting are all necessary interventions within our core nutrition program that will enhance fresh food access and foster sustainable demand.”

- Susan Pronovost, Executive Director, Brass City Harvest

Brass City Harvest is an urban agricultural organization with a mission to establish a sustainable community food system in Waterbury, Connecticut in collaboration with local health, human service, and economic development organizations.

BCH is located in the city’s Hill Street and Main Street neighborhoods - areas blighted by huge brownfield corridors which arose out of defunct or relocated industries. These distressed neighborhoods do not offer residents basic access to services such as banks, pharmacies, major grocers, post offices, or health or medical facilities. BCH operates a community farm, greenhouse, CSA, and offers cooking classes to low-literacy and low-income adults and children.

For the Healthy Food Fund, BCH initially established goals to 1) increase organizational capacity in relation to the expansion of nutrition, healthy cooking, smart shopping and nutritional guidance programs, customized to Waterbury Health Department’s WIC Program; 2) expand capacity of fresh food access and opportunities for public education, food demonstrations, and nutritional outreach through a Waterbury Healthy Corner Store Initiative.



BCH food educator Nicole assists youth during a skill-building cooking and nutrition class at Interfaith Ministries, a BCH partner organization. (Photo credit: Calandra Chaney)

Brass City Harvest		
	# of Skill Building Participants	
Baseline	13	-
Year 1	300	(+2208%)
Year 2	57	(-81%)
Year 3	322	(+465%)

The data in Figure 1 shows a drop in number of participants from Year 1 to Year 2. BCH’s constituents offered that while helpful, the first year 20 minute cooking demonstrations did not teach them *how* to actually cook. In response, BCH changed its skill building programs, providing six-week, hands-on, and in-depth workshops with smaller cohorts of community members at partner sites; aligning workshop

timing with CSA pick up, and providing children’s cooking classes. in Year 2, BCH reported a substantial increase in participant self-reported self-change, reflecting BCH’s change in strategy.

BCH’s Year 3 data reflects a deep knowledge of their constituency, evidenced by a steady building back of participation rates (very close to its Year 1 levels), and a firm hold of its impressive levels of reported self-change. BCH gathered data through anecdotal conversations, field notes, interviews, instructor observations, and letters written by participants discussing class impact.

“Discussing what makes certain recipe ingredients healthier is helpful and often participants will attend a subsequent class and give examples of how they have incorporated healthier ingredients at home. Doing an activity that centered around specific recipes helped people feel that healthy options were accessible to them.”

- Renee Page, Assistant Director, Healthy Communities of the Capital Area

Healthy Communities of the Capital Area is a public health organization with a mission to convene community members to address quality of life and public health issues in Gardiner, Maine. HCCA collaborates with the Kennebec Sheriff’s Office on its Kennebec Restorative Community Harvest Program to 1) distribute produce from its five-acre farm, 2) glean end-of-harvest fruits and vegetables from area farms and donate them to local hunger relief and other organizations serving those in need, 3) incorporate appropriate training and nutrition education for inmates and food recipients.



HCCA’s portable demo board and props for its SNAP-Ed grocery tour and nutrition class. (Photo credit: Catherine Sands)

HCCA’s food distribution operation is paired with nutrition education both for county inmates and SNAP-eligible community members. By offering practical tips for eating, storing, and cooking with freshly harvested produce, HCCA increases the likelihood that a participant will actually consume the distributed produce. In its first two years of HFF funding, HCCA distributed over 43,000 pounds of food that otherwise would have gone to waste. This effort was combined with SNAP-Ed lessons at food bank distribution sites, schools, Head Start programs, and Meals on Wheels.

The SNAP-Ed program aims to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables, and to provide tools for healthy eating on a budget. This is done through guided store tours to identify low-cost, healthy choices, combined with hands-on nutrition education and cooking classes in adult and youth settings. HCCA adapted its former grocery store tour program into a portable, interactive tour; enabling HCCA to reach a much broader audience.

Figure 2 shows a drop in HCCA skill-building participation between Year 1 and Year 2, attributable to staff turnover and lack of sufficient resources for staff (i.e., AmeriCorps recruitment was inhibited by low stipends and a lack of health insurance to volunteers). The drop also reflects HCCA’s shifting tactics to reach populations. By Year 3, HCCA reported participation totals similar to its Year 1 data.

Healthy Communities of the Capital Area

of Skill Building Participants

Baseline	104	-
Year 1	503	(+384%)
Year 2	387	(-23%)
Year 3	483	(+25%)

Rates of reported self-change increased notably from Year 1 to Year 2, and held firm throughout Year 3. HCCA assessed the impact of its skill-building programs through pre- and post-surveys, photos, and participant stories; tracking what participants reported about the change in the number of servings of fresh fruits and vegetables they consumed. Some participants were also able to share their stories and pictures on the SNAP-Ed Connection *Success Stories* national website.

SKILL-BUILDING SUCCESS

Analyses of information gathered from the visits to Brass City Harvest and Healthy Communities of Capital Area as well as reviewing previously reported data confirm the learning and evaluation team’s hypothesis, revealing:

Behavior change as a result of skill-building activities is most likely when it is combined with fresh, healthy food access, when the activity is supported by strong relationships with the community and partnering organizations, and when the activity is adapted to address the needs of the community and circumstances.

The following transferable recommendations are rooted in BCH’s and HCCA’s successful strategies.

1 INTEGRATE PROGRAMS

Integrate food shares/distribution with skill-building programs such as cooking classes and taste tests.

Though not unique to BCH or HCCA, integrating food provision programs with skill-building opportunities are key in optimizing the adoption of healthy eating behaviors. Interconnected programs (i.e., pairing CSA pick-ups or mobile market stops with taste tests or cooking workshops; offering gardening lessons with cooking workshops) appear to produce positive results. Anecdotally, people return, have tried the recipes, and have even shared them with friends and family.

BCH found that they were more successful in consistently engaging people in skill-building activities at a site where they also had a CSA share pick-up during a cooking class. BCH also discovered that if they placed fresh produce front and center in their food pantry, participants selected the same fruits and vegetables they had just cooked with in class

When the pantry ran concurrently with some form of skill-building class, the community responded. During a site visit, one BCH program participant shared her exuberance and appreciation for the week’s bounty with the learning and evaluation team and BCH’s executive director. She was particularly happy with how affordable the weekly produce bags were and about having fresh blueberries and eggs to use in her meals. BHC also offers cooking classes to both children and parents with easily accessible, and familiar ingredients.



BCH cooking class participant, Harry, shares: “I didn’t really eat fresh food before because I didn’t know what to do with it or how to prepare it. I can cook some fresh food now and I can add it into things like pasta or rice for a meal. I now know how to change my diet.”
(Courtesy of Brass City Harvest)

HCCA's partnership with the Sheriff's Department and Corrections Facility provides low-risk inmates with opportunities to reduce sentencing and get outside, cultivate, and harvest potatoes and other vegetables at the county garden, as well and glean surplus produce at select farms through a partnership with the Maine Gleaning Network. Inmates have the opportunity to become certified as Master Gardeners, beekeepers, and in ServSafe food handling. They also receive nutrition education with Cooking Matters.

HCCA also provides kids, families, and seniors with much-needed SNAP Education. Over the last decade, Maine's CDC and Department of Health have both been gutted, resulting in a stark reduction of community-based prevention programs that contribute to the health of state residents. Maine has the highest rates of obesity and the oldest medial age in New England, making its residents vulnerable to chronic or debilitating health events. HCCA's nutrition program provides a bag of food, necessary kitchen tools, and recipes to participants who graduate from the 6-week Cooking Matters training. The curriculum also includes lessons in reading labels and shopping on a budget which are key skills for vulnerable populations.

Success Factors:

- **Pair** free distribution or sales activities with skill-building lessons, and offer them as one event (versus offering them separately).
- **Frame** food distribution as a free offering at the conclusion of a skill-building activity.
- **Offer** opportunities for learning at the point-of-sale for sales activities.
- **Be creative** in what skill-building programs or lessons to offer, and think past the traditional classroom model. Consider shorter, more targeted sessions in unconventional locations or venues.
- **Provide training certifications** to support job mobility.

2 CULTIVATE STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Successful healthy food programs are based on strong foundational relationships in the community and among partnering organizations.

Because people attach stigma to accessing hunger relief programs, designing a relevant, community-centered approach for marginalized communities is critical to building trust and participation. Both BCH and HCCA talked about meeting people "where they are", in a variety of ways.

"Taking a student-centered approach was key to the success of all nutrition education series programming. I never wanted to assume I knew what folks would want or need to learn when it comes to making healthy food choices, so I always used their questions or interests as a starting point. Starting out with a new group, the first class would always be focused on introducing myself, what I can bring to the table as an instructor, discussing what folks would like to learn that fell under the heading of 'healthy food', and creating a responsive curricular plan from there."

- Healthy Communities of the Capital Area

Skill-building programs bonded participants and their instructors. An older adult with a history of poverty and health challenges regularly attends HCCA's workshops to report on health progress and to share his story. He professed to previously "hating" vegetables but through HCCA's cooking workshop, he learned how to "hide" them in meals - a move that helped him lose over 100 pounds.

HCCA leverages networks and relationships in order to make changes in people’s lives and behavior. Aligning with existing programs, HCCA provides the innovative “glue.” For instance, when it discovered that the sheriff was a certified Master Gardener and interested in hunger relief, HCCA brought in the Maine Gleaning Network and supported farmers in destigmatizing inmate gleaners. It also built its nutrition education program into the Criminology Addiction Recovery Academy program for select inmates nearing the end of their sentences.

“Tasting the healthy food options, we talked about seemed to drive home the nutrition messaging in a tangible way. Particularly working with incarcerated folks combating drug and alcohol addiction; they experienced and noticed a marked positive difference in the way their bodies felt after tasting samples of the healthy recipes that were central to our programming with them.”

- Healthy Communities of the Capital Area

BCH collaborates with food pantries and employs a nutritionist to turn community meals into nutrition education for children and families. BCH finds that children are strong advocates for healthy food shopping when they learn about nutritious recipes they like to eat.

BCH partners the Waterbury Housing Authority and private Section 8 housing sites, the Hispanic Coalition of Greater Waterbury, the Waterbury Public School system, and local soup kitchens to reach its constituents.

Success Factors:

- **Know your community**, specifically its challenges and barriers to inclusion, access, and participation (i.e., transportation, literacy, schedules, interest, childcare, marketing, applicability, or understanding of programming, etc.)
- **Cultivate** cultural sensitivity and understand the national and local histories of structural, racial, and economic inequities.
- **Partner** with organizations that can help circumvent barriers and challenges.
- **Support participants** in sharing their stories; be respectful and strategic in conveying them. Select appropriate context to tell stories, avoid perpetuating “bootstrapping” myth as it may backfire in this political climate.



BCH cooking class participants in session.
(Courtesy of Brass City Harvest)

3 BE FLEXIBLE

Adapt activities and data collection practices as needed to accommodate the populations served.

With the HFF grant, HCCA has created a way to reach incarcerated individuals with nutrition education and food system community service opportunities. The partnership also teaches inmates gleaning/harvesting, gardening and food preservation skills, and provides opportunities for certificate training in Master Gardening, ServSafe training, and beekeeping.

HCCA also has been able to reach people with SNAP-Ed that they wouldn't have otherwise. HCCA found that their SNAP-Ed supermarket grocery tour class was challenging to families without transportation, or who are older, or with disabilities. The instructor adapted the class to meet the needs of their participants, providing an interactive capsule grocery lesson designed to share healthy and budget-friendly grocery shopping tips that is portable and can be delivered at any location.

Brass City Harvest noted that their greatest innovation was to meet people where they are:

“The best strategy that we have found to be helpful is to meet where they are –physically and mentally. Go directly to them where they would congregate either for a hot meal or bag of groceries (or both). Organize programming around a partner’s programming. Do not pontificate about fresh food and nutrition but engage them in a congenial way. The first social engagement is a critical strategy for retaining attendance and participation in cooking classes. Incentives are necessary to retain engagement. We offered bus passes, cooking implements, and child care.” - Brass City Harvest

Both organizations noted that a whole family model works best for skill-building programs: when learning with adults, children will begin to influence family shopping preferences and menus.

- *“In an odd way I reach a lot of adults through their children [at Head Start] – a parent said her child described asparagus as ‘long like a green bean and looks like a paintbrush.’ As a result, she purchased asparagus the first time to have the family try it. We get some of this [information] in the paper surveys. How are we moving the needle on public health outcomes? This kid will always eat asparagus now...”* -Healthy Communities of the Capital Area

Success Factors:

- **Capture** with video and photos anecdotal stories or testimonials.
- **Ask** participants to **write down** their learning experience and how it will impact their eating habits.
- **Be sensitive** to the non-extractive use of data and stories. Ask for permission, use where appropriate, and be careful to not reinforce bootstrapping myth.
- Have a staff member or volunteer dedicated to interviewing and **capturing stories**, managing surveys, and synthesizing evidence/data. Use this information to improve data and evidence-collection efforts, and to improve skill-building activities.

CONCLUSION

The three-year grant cycle enabled both BCH and HCCA to test methods of skill-building delivery and to pivot as needed to reach their desired diverse constituents with more appropriate healthy food and wellness instruction. While it is not feasible with three years of flat funding to expect significant rates of delivery growth, both organizations demonstrated strong reach and deepened the impact of their classes amongst the broad range of diverse populations in their communities. They integrated their strategies with strong partners who knew their communities, fostered relationships with their varied constituents, and demonstrated flexibility to shift program structure to meet community needs. Despite unpredictability of conditions, having the funding to design, test, evaluate, rework, test again, created stronger programs that changed lives.

Fertile Ground: fertilegroundschools.org

DAISA Enterprises: daisaenterprises.com