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Growing for Good with Green Thumb: Growing Home Inc.

Englewood-based urban farming organization Growing Home Inc. wins grant to provide job training and fresh food access in Chicago

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Growing Home Inc. is a USDA-Certified Organic urban farm, workforce development center and non-profit social enterprise based in Englewood. They produce more than 35,000 pounds of produce annually, while serving more than 3,500 people through their food access program and providing job training and assistance services for 100 Chicagoans. Growing Home was recently awarded a \$60,000 grant from Green Thumb Industries to continue their work. We spoke with Growing Home's Director of Employment Training Zenobia Williams to learn more.

Please share some background about Growing Home and your work in Chicago.

Growing Home's mission is to operate, promote, and demonstrate the use of organic urban agriculture as a vehicle for job training, employment, and community development. Since 2006, we have focused our work on Chicago's South Side in the Greater Englewood community. Our USDA-certified organic farms serve as the foundation for our innovative workforce development programs. We produce 35,000+ pounds of vegetables and herbs annually, including more than 200 varieties of vegetables, which we sell at affordable prices at our weekly Wood Street Farm Stand and other local markets.

We believe that farming is a unique and powerful vehicle to teach hard, transferable job skills, while also providing a therapeutic experience to individuals looking for personal growth and connection. Our 12-week paid workforce development program aims to increase employment opportunities for individuals with extreme barriers to employment. To date, we have empowered over 500 individuals with the tools, connections, and confidence they need to find and keep stable jobs and find paths toward self-sufficiency. We also have an apprenticeship program and a neighborhood computer resource center.



How does your work connect to the cannabis movement?

A majority of the participants in our 12-week paid employment training program are justice-involved and are returning citizens—many who have been impacted by the war on drugs. Our program provides wraparound services including record sealing and expungement. Graduates learn a wide array of horticultural and transferable skills — and some have graduated to work in the cannabis industry. In 2022, we partnered with Olive-Harvey College's pilot scholarship program Still I Rise, which is designed to provide wraparound services and free cannabis education certificates to individuals with violence involvement and who have

cannabis records. Through this additional apprenticeship and partnership program, we provide Still I Rise scholarship recipients with hands-on farm training, including planting, harvesting, and marketing skills.



What can a new participant or volunteer expect when they get involved with Growing Home?

Participants in our 12-week paid program can expect to spend their mornings training on the farm, and classwork in the afternoon, up to 25 hours of paid work. Classes include environmental science, emotional resilience, and job readiness / job placement. We also have wraparound services, including free legal aid for record sealing and expungement, housing referrals, assistance with gaining a GED, continuing education, professional certifications, and more. We have two dedicated employment training and retention specialists who support each participant in creating individualized career paths based on their interests, skills, and passions. We currently partner with more than 100 employment agencies, and we're adding to that list every day.

After graduation, we provide 30-60-90 day follow-ups and paid incentives for those who stay on the job once placed. We also have an alumni program where we provide additional services and assistance as needed. Our goal is for our participants not only to find jobs but to maintain stable employment for themselves, their family, and their community.

Volunteers are invited to help on the farm alongside our training cohort, assist with events or within our classrooms, or provide administrative support with creative, tech, or data-entry projects. Opportunities can be found at growinghomeinc.org/volunteer.



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How has creating more opportunities for employment and access to fresh food impacted the communities your organization serves?

It's been life-changing, as most of our participants are returning citizens that have not naturally had an opportunity to gain employment. Through our program, we're able to assist them with stability so that they can return back into society with everything they may need from food, to housing, to employment, so they may be able to sustain themselves and their family.

Our workforce-development participants give back to our community by growing, harvesting, and distributing nutritious, organic produce throughout Greater Englewood and Chicago. Many have gone on to work in various industries including transportation, construction, healthcare, customer service, food service, landscaping, and cannabis.

Along with economic opportunity, Growing Home's goal is to improve the health of our community by showing residents of all ages that nutritious food can be affordable, easy, and accessible. We distribute 50% of our produce to Greater Englewood residents annually through four local markets and storefronts, two Farm-to-Pantry partnerships, a no-cost eight-week Englewood CSA program for thirty households, Veggie Rx and local wholesale partnerships, pop-up markets, and HarvestFest and WinterFest Events, where we distribute more than 400 food boxes. Our initiatives also include food and nutritious education, including cooking demos and workshops, tours, volunteer opportunities, and print and online recipe resources.



We price our food sold in and around Englewood below the cost of production, at about half the market rate. We accept payment with LINK and WIC / Senior coupons, which can double the amount of produce our customers receive. In 2021, we distributed 61% of our produce in Greater Englewood and surrounding

communities, serving over 6,400 people with over 48,600 servings of fresh produce. The remaining crop yield represents community-based social enterprise initiatives across the city.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your Growing Home?

We have a Career Advancement and Computer Bootcamp Series this summer open to the public. Anyone can join us at Growing Home to level up their computer skills, employment skills or personal and professional branding skills.



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