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Chicago Urban Farm Sows a New Legacy for Englewood Residents

Growing Home combines environmental job training with access to healthy food.

HADASSAH PATTERSON MAY 24, 2022



(Photo by Melissa Legette)

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Chicago's West Englewood residents face quite a few challenges. According to the [Chicago Data Portal](#), 34.4% live below poverty, 35.9% over 16 are unemployed, 26% of adults over 25 have no diploma, and the per-capita income is as low as \$11,317 a year. Those numbers are striking compared to the city of Chicago in general, which has only 12.9% unemployment, 19.7% below poverty and a \$28,202 per-capita annual income.

[Growing Home](#) aims to tackle those stark numbers, starting with a comprehensive farm and job training program for those facing employment barriers.

Janelle St. John, the executive director of Growing Home, says it is the only USDA-certified organic farm in Chicago. The Southside Englewood farm is not a block-sized community garden, but rather a high-volume production farm on 1.5 acres producing over 40,000 pounds of food a year. The farm provides more than food, however.

"We use the farm for two main purposes," St. John says. "We use it as a job training program where we have four cohorts of 20 people a year with a total of 80 participants who are paid and receive a classroom curriculum and placement help."

The classroom curriculum is Roots for Success, which teaches about environmental jobs and how to be good stewards. The evidence-based curriculum was developed by a professor and involves well-rounded support, including group therapy. It's linked to the farm where participants receive on-the-job experience working with professional paid farmers and managers growing and processing food. At the end of a 12-week program, participants are placed into full-time employment at one of Growing Home's partner organizations.

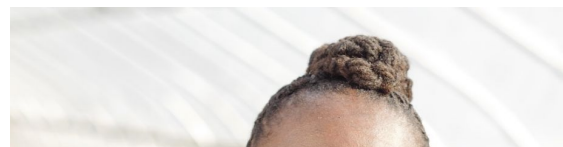
"On the farm they learn the nitty-gritty of applying themselves professionally," St. John says. "We say the job training program begins before they get to the campus. Meaning, from filling out a job application to providing job documents and how important it is to clock in on time."

Growing Home sells its produce at a discount to locals, many of whom experience food insecurity. The rest is sold at markets and restaurants, or through a partnership with the Greater Chicago Food Depository, which purchases the produce at market rates instead of wholesale. Any excess is donated to a local food pantry. They're also looking into a GAP certification for grocery store sales.

They opened their newest farm site in 2020 on Honore Street, with the support of local CDFI Chicago Community Loan Fund (CCLF). They plan to raise \$9 million to expand with another site on the south side of their campus.

The planning process for each site can be arduous. The industrial-use land they purchase is often contaminated, so they work with the city both in acquiring the land, but also through providing in-kind value in remediation of the soil itself.

"A lot of times people say about Englewood, 'There's all these empty lots, why don't they do something?'" St. John says. "It's a very





good thought, but there are a lot of costs growing food in an urban community with an industrial history, right? Part of that is soil contamination. You've probably heard of the lead in Logan square. You can't just say 'I'm going to grow there.'"

The remediation process starts with soil testing. If it proves contaminated, you have to dig out as much soil as possible and replace that with good soil before capping it with a half-foot of concrete and putting in watering systems. It can cost up to \$400,000 just to create a clean lot to grow food on.

The process of USDA organic certification was nothing to sneeze at either. It can take years, adding extra quality control and safety measures. But it's a valuable learning experience to trainees and provides precious value to the community and culinary customers.

St. John says they wouldn't have been able to accomplish much of their work, including opening up their new site, without long-term partnerships with social-minded funders like CCLF, which is committed to providing low-interest loans to nonprofits.

Janelle St. John (Photo courtesy of Janelle St. John)

For Lyrecia Parks, VP of portfolio management for the Chicago Community Loan Fund, supporting Growing Home was a no-brainer.

"Urban farms provide fresh and healthy fruits and vegetables to a community that has experienced the disappearance of grocery stores," Parks says. "They are leading the way to provide job training skills to residents with barriers to employment, to help them obtain living-wage employment."



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