

**Ascentria Community Services LFPP Project titled: *Fresh Eats: Improving Access for Urban Consumers of Local Produce in Springfield and Worcester, MA*- LFPP Award No. 14-LFPPX-MA-0077**  
**Ascentria Community Services Final Performance Report 12.21.2015**

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<b>Grant Agreement Number:</b> <i>(e.g. 14-LFPPX-XX-XXXX)</i>	14-LFPPX-MA-0077
<b>Year Grant was Awarded:</b>	2014
<b>Project City/State:</b>	Worcester and Springfield, MA
<b>Total Awarded Budget:</b>	\$98,500

**1. State the goals/objectives of your project:**

**Objective 1:** To increase revenues for 30+ small-scale, beginning farmers in Sutton and West Springfield, MA by aggregating their produce for market.

**Progress Made:** The Fresh Eats project supported exactly 50 small-scale beginning new American farmers at New Lands Farm (NLF) by aggregating their produce. Aggregated produce was sold through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) share programs and farm stands, farmers’ markets and mobile markets, and wholesale markets including restaurants, stores, and distributors. As noted in the interim report, NLF staff worked with farmers in the winter to build individual production plans that supported a whole farm crop plan enabling farmers to grow a more accurate diversity and volume of produce appropriate for available markets, creating a more efficient and productive system for aggregation, and hence farmer sales. For the most part, the written whole-farm crop plan (shaped by 2014 sales data) was executed in the field, yielding crops delivered in the correct volume and date by farmers. Farm infrastructure improvements made at the West Springfield farm site were also implemented and were imperative to the aggregation cause. We installed hoses caddy corner from each other and a shade fabric on the south side of our wash station and a supplies cabinet to aide in food safety efforts and efficiency. The walk-in cooler was successfully installed and was used extensively. Farmers were able to hold produce until marketing opportunities arose, which otherwise would have gone to waste. The Mobile Market team also utilized a portion of the cooler. NLF staff were made available to assist farmers in harvest and post-harvest handling and farmers were trained on how to prepare produce for sale in a food safe manner using NLF wash stations. This enabled the farm to package produce that was all of a consistent, high quality. Harvest was supervised by staff and trained interns. Simple harvest record books were designed by staff and utilized by farmers in order to track what produce was provided by which farmer

and for what market the produce was needed. Coupled with good inventory and market sale records, staff easily compiled all individual farmer sales in addition to the farm sales.

By seasons' end, exactly 30 farmers increased their individual sales income on average by 38% from the previous season. On the whole, we saw a 36 % increase in the average farmer sales' income, 92% increase in the median sales' income, and a 43% increase in the maximum sales' income. Across the program, CSA accounted for 55% of farm income, 22% of income came from farmers' markets and 10% from mobile markets. Other sales comprised of distributors, stores, restaurants, and farms stand. Most farmers agree that they are involved in farming not just to generate supplemental income, but also as a way of preserving their farming identities and cultural backgrounds and as a means to access fresh chemical-free produce.

**Impact on Community:** The Fresh Eats project generated significant outcomes with far-reaching impacts on our communities. There is an increased participation of local businesses in purchasing locally grown food from new American farmers. Beyond local business, local organizations benefited from having us at their farmers markets and having our produce available at mobile market. And with more new Americans involved in community-scale agriculture, our local food system has become more inclusive and created an abundance of local, culturally appropriate produce and a diverse and thriving local food economy. We have seen continued growth in the farmers' skills set as a result to a more encompassing and efficient produce aggregation model. Select farmers are transitioning into leadership positions as a result, made possible by generating sales income collectively. We believe that as more farmers are more capable of running certain tasks at farm, other farmers with fewer or less developed skills sets will benefit by learning from someone who comes from their language and cultural background. Staff will then be able to focus on farmer capacity-building in new areas or bigger picture marketing.

**Objective 2:** To increase purchases of local produce in urban centers of Springfield, West Springfield and Worcester, MA, particularly by low-income consumers.

**Progress Made:** NLF was able to reach an estimated 11,240 direct consumers in 2015 (see table below), of which 50% were low-income and living in urban centers. Staff put special emphasis on increasing awareness in these communities about the multitude of purchasing opportunities (farmers' markets and 28 mobile market stops combined between Worcester and Springfield) and subsidized incentives offered to bolster their access including double value EBT and Senior and WIC coupons. At the Worcester farmers' market we saw an astounding 63% of sales purchased with SNAP benefits, and /or Senior and WIC coupons. It's also worth mentioning that 64% of all purchases at this market were comprised of culturally appropriate produce or "ethnic crops". Customer feedback indicated that customers prefer buying these foods from us because they are fresher and are higher quality compared to the nearby ethnic stores that may carry the same items for less money, often imported from overseas. The Worcester farmers' market per day average sales intake increased 36% from 2014. We sold 27,000 pounds of produce in total from our own farms and more than 40,000 pounds went home with farmers and dispersed informally throughout their families, friend, neighbors, churches, and other social networks. Although our overall CSA expansion did not reach its intended target, we did see increases in

specific locations. In W. Springfield, we expanded from 25 shares to 35 shares and in Sutton 26 to 31. There were 81 families in total between both sites. We served an estimated 264 consumers, possibly more as many shares are split amongst more than one household. We discontinued our Worcester YMCA pick up that ultimately deflated our goal of 80 shares in total. Our reasons for discontinuing the Worcester site are described later in the Lessons Learned section of this report.

**Estimated Direct Consumers for New Lands Farm, 2015**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Total Estimated Consumers</b>	<b>*Low -income Consumer</b>
Go Fresh Mobile Market Springfield, MA	3804	1336
Main South Farmers Market Worcester, MA	1580	995
Regional Environmental Council Mobile Market Worcester, MA	5400	3240
W. Springfield Farm Stand	192	0
CSA (combined W. Springfield+ Sutton)	264	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>11,240</b>	<b>5,571</b>

*\*low-income is based off sales data indicating % of payments using subsidized forms of payment such as SNAP, Senior and WIC Coupons at each location.*

Gardening the Community, our collaborative partner and subcontractor, sold approximately 21,000 pounds of locally grown food total to their community in 2015. A drought negatively impacted production as they lack irrigation at two of their sites, resulting in less of an increase than hoped for (baseline was 20,000 pounds in 2014). They also expanded their CSA Farm Share membership by 25%, with many of the shares provided at a subsidized price thanks to local businesses, individuals, and Heath New England who sponsored these shares. In total 70 families participated in their CSA (an increase from 45 in 2014) with an average of 57 families per week. GTC also added 1 week to their CSA schedule and made extensive strives to increase local awareness of CSA offerings to consumers including door hangers, flyers in local businesses, presentations to local groups, Facebook and e-blasts. During the summer, many CSA members shared recipes and photos of their creations through Facebook—a community aspect in which GTC sees potential to expand on in the future. They also sent a weekly newsletter/email to members with recipes and other info which was well-received.

**Impact on the Community:** An expansion in access to affordable, local and healthy food has provided more opportunity for low-income families to meet their daily nutritional needs and preferences while benefiting the micro-businesses of local small-scale farmers. There is new local awareness of community based food systems and their benefit to consumers, beginning farmers, and the environment, with more community members actively participating in and discovering ways to shape their food system

**2. Quantify the overall impact of the project on the intended beneficiaries.**

- i. Number of direct jobs created:** 1 NLF
- ii. Number of jobs retained:** 3 NLF/3 GTC
- iii. Number of indirect jobs created:** 0
- iv. Number of markets expanded:** 6 NLF/2 GTC. NLF expanded the Worcester Main South farmers' market by product volume and diversity, W. Springfield CSA expanded from 25 shares to 35 shares, Sutton CSA expanded from 26 to 31 shares. NLF produce sales to REC Mobile Market in Worcester expanded by 30% and also by diversity of produce offered, W. Springfield NLF sold 18% more to restaurants in 2015, and sales to distributor and stores in Worcester increased by 105%. GTC expanded their CSA farm share program schedule by one week and increased participation to 70 total families, up from 45 in 2014. Additionally, their Hancock Street farm stand remained open for a month longer than the previous season.
- v. Number of new markets established:** 0
- vi. Market sales increased:**
  - W. Springfield CSA by \$3,850 and increased by 36%.
  - Sutton CSA by \$2,250 and increased by 19%
  - Restaurants by \$708 and increased by 18%.
  - Distributors by \$800 and increased by 105%.
  - REC Mobile Market by \$282 and increased by 30%.
  - GTC's CSA by \$1,200 and increased by 6%.
- vii. Number of farmers/producers that have benefited from the project:** NLF served 50 farmers who were given the opportunities to sell their produce into aggregation. We also purchased from 12 outside farms to supplement our CSA. GTC worked with 3 farms to supplement their CSA. In total, 65 farmers benefited.

**Percent Increase:** NLF 3% increase/GTC 50% increase

**3. Did you expand your customer base by reaching new populations such as new ethnic groups, additional low income/low access populations, new businesses, etc.? If so, how?**

NLF focused on increasing sales to low-income and new American communities in Worcester and Springfield whose demand for specialty ethnic crops has risen over the last season. We expanded our produce diversity and volume to meet the demands of this community. In both sites, we continued and increased selling to mobile markets in order to specifically reach low-income and low-access individuals. In Worcester, there has been a concerted effort between REC and NLF to sell culturally appropriate crops and bolster new American attendance at mobile markets.

GTC engaged an additional 15 low to moderate income families through their CSA farm share program, a 25% increase over 2014. They sold to one additional business, a Puerto Rican restaurant in the neighborhood. They also did outreach (door knocking and flyer distribution in Springfield's Old Hill neighborhood, a very low income neighborhood, to expand their farm stand base.

#### 4. Discuss your community partnerships.

- i. **Who are your community partners?** Our community partners include the Go Fresh Springfield Mobile Market team comprised of Partners for a Healthier Community, City of Springfield Elder Affairs, Springfield Partners for Community Action, Concerned Citizens of Mason Square, Next Barn Over, Common Capital and our collaborative partner, GTC. In Worcester, our key community partner is the Regional Environmental Council (REC), which runs the Main South farmers' market and mobile market.
- ii. **How have they contributed to the overall results of the LFPP project?** The REC is responsible for running the Worcester Main South farmers' market and the mobile market in Worcester. They support our project and farmers by offering a market place for low-income and minority populations to shop for local produce. They operate all sites with access to EBT machines, including matching EBT benefits at the Worcester farmers' market. They also handle advertisements, market promotion, and special events. They have worked with us to get flyers translated, and general outreach to new American communities. They have worked closely with us to expand the ethnic crop offering via mobile market as well. As for partner work performed in Springfield, the Go Fresh Mobile Market team has reached over 3,000 consumers throughout Springfield and has been committed to working with our farmers to purchase produce for selling to low-access and low-income communities throughout the city, that otherwise may not access local food. GTC lead the project in Mason Square, Springfield overseeing the aggregation and distribution of food at their urban farm site. They combined local outside farm produce with produce grown on their farm to supply CSA members, the Mason Square Farmers Market and the Hancock Street farm stand in the center of the city . GTC staff oversaw aggregation, distribution and sales. They also conducted the promotion for these neighborhoods and tracked progress of the project.
- iii. **How will they continue to contribute to your project's future activities, beyond the performance period of this LFPP grant?** Go Fresh Springfield Mobile Market will continue to be one of our main vehicles for selling NLF's aggregated farm produce into low-access areas in Springfield. Both GTC and NLF are active partners on the GO Fresh Springfield Mobile Market team and will remain major contributors to the project. NLF and GTC will continue working collaboratively and complementarily in engaging the low-income and minority based community in accessing local and healthy foods. We look forward to finding more ways to weave our programs together. In Worcester, The REC will provide farmers' market access and outreach to consumers in the Main South area, where the majority of families are low-income are many immigrant communities live. This market offers matching EBT benefits and other incentives to purchase local food. It is also the place we sell the most ethnic crops. The REC also organizes the mobile market, which works closely with NLF to purchase aggregated produce from our farmers and sell into low-access area of the city. We plan to work with REC even more intentionally to expand the diversity and volume of ethnic crops sold through their mobile market. Additionally, REC is

planning a food hub for Worcester. We have already provided farmer perspective and feedback on the food hub by way of meetings and have agreed to be vendors in the pilot season set for 2016. REC plans to increase ethnic crop sales to small restaurants and stores throughout Worcester. As our program capacity grows, we also wish to participate in REC's other farmers' markets.

5. **Are you using contractors to conduct the work? If so, how did their work contribute to the results of the LFPP project?** Yes, please see Progress Made and Community Partnership sections above.
6. **Have you publicized any results yet?** No. However, by January 2016 we will publish our annual report that will reflect the results of this project.
7. **Have you collected any feedback from your community and additional stakeholders about your work? If so, how did you collect the information?** NLF has finished our yearly end-of-the-season one-on-one interviews with farmers to discuss sales, individual goals achieved, program feedback, and the direction of next year. In addition we have sent out and completed the synthesis of online CSA customer surveys. The Go Fresh Mobile Market collected customer surveys in the last two weeks of the market season and we will be receiving the results in the next few weeks. REC also takes customer surveys, but has not yet given us any results. GTC is in the process of gathering feedback from 2015 CSA customers—it's incomplete at this time.
  - i. **What feedback was relayed (specific comments)?** Farmers are excited about the prospect of continuing produce aggregation and the CSA. However, only a handful of farmers feel like they have enough capacity to run the CSA independently without staff assistance. That being said, many have signed up for more responsibilities on the farm, and have volunteered to be trained to run certain roles in running the CSA and farmers market. They are happy to aggregate produce, but are apprehensive about having the burden of doing all the marketing on their own. They all wish to increase their sales the following season.

The majority of CSA members reported being "Very Satisfied" or "Extremely Satisfied" by the variety, quality, and value of the CSA. They also reported having changed their cooking, eating, and food purchasing habits throughout the season as a result of participating in the CSA, with many consuming far more vegetables than they typically would and purchasing less produce at the supermarket. We received a number of comments such as "I enjoyed eating seasonally and the adventure of trying new recipes," and, "I got little more creative putting things together." Because the CSA also occasionally featured unusual ethnic produce, members were motivated to try vegetables they were not familiar with. One member wrote, "To be sure I use up the share I spend lots of time researching recipes to use things creatively... My favorite new salad was a quick pickled carrot-daikon combo." Garlic scapes, leeks, fennel, rhubarb, bitter eggplant, bitter melon, and bitter greens were all listed memorable vegetables, expanding member's palates and knowledgeability about locally available produce and varieties. At the end of this

year, 70% of CSA members reported knowing how to cook and eat more seasonally and 60% how to eat more healthfully. And the most common reason cited for joining the CSA was to help bolster the local food economy and land access for new Farmers.

Although, GTC has not finished gathering feedback for 2015, they have offered the following quotes from customers this year: “GTC EATS brings in farm fresh produce at a great price” and “It’s a better deal and less expensive than purchasing at a traditional grocery store. The produce is also fresher”.

#### 8. Budget Summary:

- i. **As part of the LFPP closeout procedures, you are required to submit the SF-425 (Final Federal Financial Report). Check here if you have completed the SF-425 and are submitting it with this report:**
- ii. **Did the project generate any income?** No.

#### 9. Lessons Learned:

- i. **Summarize any lessons learned. They should draw on positive experiences (e.g. good ideas that improved project efficiency or saved money) and negative experiences (e.g. what did not go well and what needs to be changed).** The CSA has been a powerful tool for New Lands Farm to expand production, develop a new customer base, engage the local community, and increase the skill sets of new American farmers. Many lessons have also been learned about the challenges and logistics behind running a CSA, in everything from member registration to crop planning to harvest quality control and post-harvest handling. Some major challenges remain in coordinating the multi-farmer CSA so that it is equitable in opportunity, as different farmers learn to produce the appropriate quantity and quality for CSA members and understand the bigger picture of running a CSA. Another major challenge is the accessibility of the CSA as a market for farmers without heavy oversight of staff. As we move forward with our CSA model, finding a way to increase farmer decision-making in the management of the CSA will be a high priority, as well as increasing the accountability of farmers to members and the visibility of individual farmers to members

From GTC: Our customers were very excited to have low spray, locally grown fruit options. In particular demand was strawberries and raspberries which we grew ourselves. We also bought in apples, peaches, pears and plums from Cold Spring Orchard. Demand for this produce varied week to week however, making it difficult to know how much to order. We tried a pre-order system to minimize potential loss on our end but that was administratively cumbersome and not something we could sustain.

We learned that distribution is a big barrier for us—getting produce from other farms delivered into Springfield is difficult and we do not have the capacity to pick it up. This prevented us from getting fresh corn to sell, for example. We

were able to get fruit delivered to our site through collaboration with Next Barn Over and the Mobile Market.

We also learned that getting on-site cool storage space is critical for increasing our sales, especially when we are aggregating from other farms. It is difficult to keep fruit and vegetables fresh without cool storage, especially in the hottest days of the summer.

We managed the CSA almost entirely online this year, which added to our efficiency. We were not successful in getting customers to pay online, however. They preferred to pay at pick up on either a monthly or weekly basis.

- ii. **If goals or outcome measures were not achieved, identify and share the lessons learned to help others expedite problem-solving:** As in any project, we experienced several obstacles, setbacks, and changes over the last year. Although having a clear trajectory toward the final sales income target, we unfortunately did not meet our goal. An unforeseen change in staff and a lag in the re-hiring process caused us to miss several farmers' markets days in Worcester that undoubtedly would have pushed us over our target. Additionally, we downsized our CSA by removing the delivery service to Worcester as the additional time and resources to maintain an off-farm pickup site far exceeded the benefits farmers and local communities garnered from it. These two factors resulted in decreased gains than we otherwise would have seen. The delivery portion and packing of shares for Worcester site was a large staff burden, difficult to coordinate transportation, and increased the amount of harvesting days on the farm, which took away from technical assistance opportunities. Moreover, the lack of interaction with customers at the Worcester drop off site was a dissatisfying situation for customers and staff alike. Since Sutton is only a 12 mile drive, we hoped that some members would follow us to the Sutton farm; however, that was not the result.

The Farm stand at the West Springfield Farm site continued to sell produce to walk-in customers during CSA pickup. Unfortunately the volume of customers decreased somewhat this year; due to the location of the farm and lack of accessibility by public transportation, the customer base is limited to the immediate neighborhood or those with their own transportation. While the farm stand plays an important role in cultivating community interactions between farmers and local community members, it needs to have more open hours and more publicity in order to increase sales and amounts of produce sold. This need will hopefully be addressed over the winter to determine the future of the farm stand and how it can be more successful.

The Merrick Market could not run this year due to an early-season office location change. Before the move, the market was held adjacent to the office in the farmers' neighborhood and provided on-site storage and restroom facilities to market staff. There was not enough time or administrative capacity to find suitable alternatives for this marketing season. However, the lack of this market opportunity was felt by the farmers and there is renewed commitment to

reopen this market by both staff and farmers. This winter will see a reenergized approach to building the capacity of the farmers to run the market themselves, including setup and cleanup, customer transactions, and market data collection. Oversight and guidance will still be provided by staff, with the goal of facilitating a complete handover of all market functions to farmers by 2017.

- iii. **Describe any lessons learned in the administration of the project that might be helpful for others who would want to implement a similar project:** We learned and suggest contemplating the following when beginning your projects: keeping a record of all serial numbers on physical purchase of equipment is mandatory, filling out and coordinating staff timesheets with internal accounting department and LFPP standards is necessary, keeping track of expenses and invoices with supporting data is important, and tracking and verifying matching documentation for your project is imperative to complying with LFPP regulations.

#### **10. Future Work:**

- i. **How will you continue the work of this project beyond the performance period? In other words, how will you parlay the results of your project's work to benefit future community goals and initiatives? Include information about community impact and outreach, anticipated increases in markets and/or sales, estimated number of jobs retained/created, and any other information you'd like to share about the future of your project.** NLF is excited to continue marketing products to low-income communities throughout Central and Western Massachusetts. We hope to broaden our sale of culturally appropriate crops, and assist farmers to increase neighborhood sales. One idea is to fabricate vegetable carts that can transport produce throughout low-income neighborhoods in Worcester and Springfield. We have already started talking to the city health board and permitting department to see what is needed to legally facilitate this happening. Ideally they would be available 7 days a week for farmers to sell produce to more accessible customer base with their same language and cultural backgrounds represented. It seems farmers have been more comfortable with this type of selling platform, and there is potential to have farmers independently operating these carts. We envision creating a program that engages and transfers more agency and responsibility to the farmers, in the hope that our program runs more independently and staff can focus on bigger picture development and promotion. With funding we will be able to fabricate and implement the vegetable carts, but until then we are implementing steps toward growing farmer capacity and agency throughout our education and trainings with farmers and our marketing systems design.

Our main short term goals are as follows:

1. Have the Main South farmers' market independently run by 2 farmers, including the actual overseeing of the aggregation post-harvest process in the 2016 farming season.
2. Create a new office market in Worcester to target new Americans (include getting an EBT machine)
3. Facilitate farmers in Springfield to attend the Merrick Market with staff support that will gradually be removed by 2017.
4. Implement a CSA structure that will allow for more farmer involvement and take away from staff time involved in running CSA, without diminishing the quality already established.
5. Increase sales of culturally appropriate produce by 20%
6. Increase low-income consumer base to 6,000.

A long-term plan NLF has is to introduce farmers to cooperative business formation. We have applied to the USDA/NIFA Community Foods Project to fund a proposal to facilitate cooperative business development amongst several more independent subsets of farmers already involved in our community farm sites.

GTC will continue aggregating from other farms to supplement what they are able to grow. They hope to expand fruit sales and add corn next year. They are considering some kind of add-on fruit share for next year to make payment easier and to minimize loss on their end.

Next year they hope to add 3 summer youth jobs for local youth to help with growing, harvesting and marketing food. They will also be expanding their own production by 20% and hope to grow their CSA membership and sales by another 20%.

- i. **Do you have any recommendations for future activities and, if applicable, an outline of next steps or additional research that might advance the project goals.** Research more ethnic crops and their production methods. Learn more appropriate and nuanced approach to transferring skills to low-literacy English-learning farmers. Integrate anti-racism and multicultural trainings into staff development and new-hires. Research other successful new American cooperatives to understand best practices and lessons learned.