Investing in Solutions: Supporting Women in Agriculture and the Regional Food System

Michigan Food & Farming Systems (MIFFS)

Women-in Agriculture (WIA) Farm Development Center at Genesys Health Park
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Goal & Desired Outcomes

Goal:
To support women who are beginning a farming business by providing resources to become economically independent farm business owners, and to reduce significant barriers to starting a successful farm business.

Desired Outcomes:
- **MIFFS** – For women farmers to achieve personal health & independence in a farm business
- **Genesys** – For women farmers and the community population to access and consume healthy food as a means to achieve optimal health outcomes
- **Shared** – Create an opportunity for ongoing economic success for women farmers to expand their capacity to be a part of the local economy by selling produce, especially to populations who need access to healthy food
Located on the Genesys Health System/Health Park Campus, the WIA Farm Development Center is a place where beginning women farmers can receive education and development to achieve viable farming careers.

**Genesys:**
- Allocates a 3-acre parcel of land on the Health Park Campus for the WIA Farm including a land to farm, a hoop house, and a vermicomposting bin.
- Designates .25 FTE of the Genesys Greenhouse Manager’s time to coordinate use of the parcel including road access, use of water and electricity (provided by Genesys) and serving as a liaison between the farm and the health system to manage overall operations.

**MIFFS:**
- Provides overall project oversight and day-to-day management of farm activities.
- Designates a .50 FTE WIA Farm Manager to manage farming and education programming.
Why the food & health connection is important to Genesys

- **CHNA:** The 2016 Genesee County CHNA identified food insecurity, where households have limited or uncertain access to adequate food, as a top health need. It also identified food-related health issues including obesity, overweight and healthy lifestyles as top priorities.

- **Social Determinants of Health (SDoH):** Hospitals are shifting their focus from individual health to the overall health of the community. This is a strategic opportunity to align institutional assets to meaningfully impact the economic and social factors (SDoH) in the community that create health in the first place, including access to healthy food.

- **Population Health:** The WIA Farm Development Center fits the Genesys strategic population health objective where keeping people healthy is just as important as treating them when they are sick. Healthy food access helps to accomplish that goal.
Michigan Food & Farming Systems

- Michigan Food & Farming Systems (MIFFS) connects beginning and historically underserved farmers to each other and resource opportunities; ensuring social justice, environmental stewardship, and profitability.

- MIFFS work to address disparities in accessing resources among farming communities that have historically been excluded from the agricultural industry. We leverage peer to peer, regional, community based farmer networks to remove barriers, attempting to create a more even playing field for all farmers.

- MIFFS is strategically co-located with MPHI (Michigan Public Health Institute) through an innovative partnership to look at the historic and current intersections between agriculture and public health in an effort identify and to address common disparities in accessing resources for a healthy lifestyle and environment.
Desired Health Outcomes:

- Prevention of, or improved health outcomes related to chronic disease such as diabetes, heart disease, & obesity/overweight
- To provide access to healthy foods for the poor and vulnerable and for special populations such as Veterans and children
- Contribute to improvement in County Health Rankings (Genesee County ranks 82nd of 83 Michigan Counties for Health Outcomes; 76th for Health Behaviors; and 82nd for Physical Environment (2018 RWJF County Health Rankings)

How food relates to desired health outcomes:

- Healthy food is a key element in preventing or managing chronic disease
- Access to healthy food reduces health disparities & achieves health equity
- Enriched nutrients in food mitigate the consequences of lead exposure
- Healthy food distribution provides access for poor & vulnerable populations
- Green vermiculture education sparks curiosity and action of staff
- The WIA Farm creates a “built environment” that is therapeutic to staff and special populations including Veterans who can benefit from this healing setting
Community Benefit Connection

- The WIA Farm Development Center is aligned with the CHNA for Genesee County and the City of Flint. Developed by local health providers, WIA addresses many food-related health needs priorities for local action where community residents would benefit from increased access to nutrient-rich
  - Nutrition
  - Obesity/overweight
  - Healthy lifestyles
  - Food insecurity

- Also during this timeframe, the Flint water crisis erupted which served as an urgent impetus to create food access opportunities with lead mitigating foods as their centerpiece

- MIFFS recruits participants for the WIA program with a focus on reaching out to members of low-income and vulnerable populations

- Genesys also works to create an equitable, sustainable regional food system by advising and participating in the Regional Food System Navigation (RFSN) initiative, led by the Community Foundation of Greater Flint to improve healthy food access and consumption through resource coordination & collaboration of food system stakeholders
• Genesys/Ascension works in collaboration with community partners to address community health needs & disparities by leveraging its Health Park Campus and the local food system to promote economic growth and achieve well-being with a population health approach where keeping people healthy is as important as treating them when they are sick.

• In 2015, Genesys partnered with Michigan Food & Farming Systems (MIFFS) to initiate the Women in Agriculture (WIA) Farm Development Center on hospital grounds.

• This partnership was sparked by the former Genesys Greenhouse Manager, a farmer herself, who approached MIFFS about providing education for women farmers which in turn became part of a grant submitted by the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems to the USDA. She connected the dots to link the available land and strategic intent of Genesys to be a part of the local food system with the education that could be provided to women by MIFFS in a farm setting.

Regional Partners
- MSU Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS)
- Michigan State University Extension (MSUE)
- MSU Student Organic Farm
- Community Foundation of Greater Flint (CFGF)
- ROWE Professional Services Company
- United States Department of Agriculture
Evaluation – Outcomes

Since April 2016:

- 2,611 pounds of nutrient-rich/lead mitigating food produced & distributed
- 622 volunteer hours logged
- 14 educational trainings conducted
- 4 women newly growing and selling food, 4 more actively working toward this milestone
- 150 pounds of Genesys food preparation waste diverted per week from the landfill to the farm’s vermiculture compost system
Evaluation – Impact

- Nutrient-rich/lead mitigating food is distributed in high need communities (Veggie Box Program and Flint Fresh Mobile Market)

- An ongoing environment/opportunity is established for women to learn farm business best practices and develop farming careers

- Genesys is engaged in the regional food system to support equitable access to and consumption of healthy foods to keep community members healthy – Population Health

- A collaborative relationship with Hurley Medical Center offers patients in Genesys community clinics who have food-related needs to receive a prescription to the Hurley FoodFarmacy. The WIA farm sells fresh produce to the FoodFarmacy to meet food insecurity needs!

- The WIA regenerative agriculture approach to food and farming systems revitalizes the soil and the environment which creates capacity to grow and produce high quality, nutrient-dense food
Challenges & Triumphs

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<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Triumphs</th>
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<tr>
<td>Getting water to the farm</td>
<td>Got water to the farm (finally)</td>
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<td>Establishing farm infrastructure – clearing land, electricity, road access</td>
<td>Consistent, open communication between partners</td>
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<td>Integrating the corporate health system and farming grass roots cultures (communication, timing, approvals, legal)</td>
<td>A trusting, authentic partnership to achieve shared goals</td>
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<td>Recruiting incubator farmers</td>
<td>Creation of a foundation for leveraging funds and programs</td>
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<td>Role/responsibility clarification about when to assist and when to step back</td>
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<td>Genesys residents volunteer at the farm as part of their annual wellness day and internals the importance of good food and staying healthy</td>
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<td>WIA Farm is MEAEP Certified, recognized by both the State and the Ascension Corporate Environmental Stewardship Committee</td>
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Lessons Learned

- **Authentic Collaboration**: No one organization can make an impact on access to healthy food....This project really is a collaborative effort with all different kinds of expertise to create the environment to provide access to healthy food and promote healthy populations.

- **Site Assessment Due Diligence**: Infrastructure development, water and electrical connectivity, soil composition, wind, drainage, public interaction, and accessibility - these are all important factors to seriously consider before setting up shop as each can present a unique challenge that could be costly and potentially offset any benefit of "free land".

- **Planned Communication**: Clear, consistent communication and alignment is essential among partners to be successful in achieving goals.

- **Patience & Persistence**: It is essential to take the time to define goals and priorities, determine areas of alignment, establish shared outcomes, and have patience with the process (this work takes lots of time!) required to get there.
Thank You!

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