

Community Services Unlimited, from the Ground up: Promoting Safe and Healthy Urban Agriculture

An Environmental Justice Grant Success Story

Project Overview

Community Services Unlimited is an organization working to address the inequalities and systemic barriers that make sustainable communities and self-reliant life-styles unattainable.

The project teaches young people in South Central Los Angeles about sustainable urban agriculture in order to increase access to healthy food, while raising awareness about, and reducing exposure to, lead and pesticide hazards. It also teaches residents about the health, environmental, and economic benefits of urban agriculture and home food production, the health risks posed by lead in soil and pesticide use, and farming and gardening techniques to reduce exposure to these risks.

The Community

The project serves South Central Los Angeles, a densely populated neighborhood that is home to predominantly working class African American and Latino families. The community of focus for “From the Ground Up”, a project funded under a \$25,000 [Environmental Justice Small Grant from EPA](#) is South Central Los Angeles, a heavily developed community bordered by two major freeways, crisscrossed by heavily trafficked boulevards and situated beneath the approach path for airplanes landing at Los Angeles International Airport.



Figure 1: A network of freeways surrounds South Central Los Angeles.

A long history of poor land use planning decisions and heavy industrial pollution has contaminated the neighborhood’s soils with toxic substances such as lead. South Central Los Angeles contains the highest number of reported cases of lead poisoning in Los Angeles County.

In addition to suffering from significant environmental impacts, residents of South Central Los Angeles also deal with severe issues of food equity. The community is a food desert overrun with junk and fast foods outlets. A recent mapping project conducted by Community Services Unlimited and their partners found that 50 fast food restaurants and 39 corner stores occupy a 1x1.5 mile area. This limited access to healthy fresh food has resulted in residents struggling with high rates of adult and childhood obesity, high rates of diabetes, and hypertension.

While the South Central Los Angeles area reflects a significant environmental justice issue, social justice organizations such as Community Service Unlimited, Inc. work tirelessly to develop

community enrichment programs that use hands-on training as a means to educate and empower youth to take a proactive approach in rebuilding their community.

Project Description

The project teaches young people in South Central Los Angeles about sustainable urban agriculture, and engages them in teaching other youth and adults in the community in order to promote healthy eating habits and the proper techniques used to reduce exposure to lead and pesticide hazards. In teaching residents how to grow food naturally, the project increased residents' access to healthy fresh produce.

The Results

In the spring of 2010, CSU hired two From the Ground Up apprentices and recruited 15 youth participants. The organization also hosted six workshops on healthy home gardening for more than 125 participants.

CSU identified a soil-testing lab that offers local residents free to low-cost soil testing. CSU identified 12 residents who want to initiate the soil testing process. Soil testing was offered free of charge to residents attending a minimum of three workshops. Fourteen residents elected to have their soil tested. CSU also tested the soil at their urban farm sites to use as demonstrations during trainings.



The Clay Mini Farm created at a private home as part of From the Ground Up educational program. (Photo by Eugene Cooke)

Opening New Doors

Increased leveraging throughout the course of the project helped CSU to collaborate with EXPO Center, an intergenerational park and recreation facility. This partnership supports both organizations in meeting their desired goals of equality and self-reliance. EXPO Center provides CSU with the necessary resources to carry out From the Ground Up, while CSU offers EXPO members the opportunity to partake in diverse programs and services that promote healthy families and communities.

What's Next for CSU

Community Services Unlimited, Inc. was awarded a 2011 Environmental Justice Small Grant to fund their Growing Healthy: Reducing Exposure to Toxins in our Community project. The project, which is also part of CSU's Growing Healthy program, focuses on developing an 8-week course that uses culture-centered instruction to generate interest in the benefits of sustainable urban agriculture among the ethnically and culturally diverse students of John Muir Middle School and Normandie Avenue Elementary School. CSU intends to use this project as a means to educate children in a manner that will permit them to have a positive influence on the diets, food-purchasing habits, and home gardening practices of their families.



Students at Normandie Avenue Elementary participate in a Breakfast Activity survey by placing stickers under their favorite breakfast food item. (Photo by Neelam Sharma)

From The Ground Up Key Accomplishments

- Increased youth understanding of environmental pollution, food systems, and climate change issues
- Youth participants developed a Safe and Healthy Gardening brochure that will be distributed throughout the community
- Youth participants presented a healthy home gardening workshop on using natural methods and homemade recipes for dealing with garden pests
- Established new partnerships with organizations that shared common goals for the communities in South Central Los Angeles

To learn more about From the Ground Up, please visit [Community Services Unlimited, Inc.](#) or contact Neelam Sharma, Executive Director, at (323) 299 - 7075 or neelam@csuinc.org.