

Operation Growing Strong Together (OGST)

Summary

- Operation Growing Strong Together (OGST) is a communal gardening initiative that aimed to address issues faced by seniors in the greater Fredericton area.
 - The initiative targeted both physical wellness (addressing hunger and promoting physical fitness) and mental wellness (addressing social isolation and mental health concerns). Ultimately, OGST's goal was to enhance seniors' independence, autonomy, and overall wellbeing.
- Drawing on the work of both the Canadian and American Horticultural Therapy Associations, and in consultation with the New Brunswick Coalition of Persons with Disabilities, OGST project team members designed and built an accessible garden. Seniors were invited to care for the garden, harvest vegetables, and attend educational workshops.
 - The garden was equipped with raised beds, a full accessibility ramp, and wide paths to accommodate gardeners with mobility limitations. Feedback about the garden's accessibility and usability was gathered from seniors throughout the project and relevant changes were made to meet their needs.
- OGST provided educational gardening workshops on topics such as: seed starting and saving, honey and bees, building healthy soil, cooking with native plant species, making pain-relieving salves, herbal teas, fermentation and preservation, blueberry gleaning, reducing food costs, and more. Indigenous food knowledge was incorporated into the programming.
- This project evaluated the impact of an accessible communal garden and knowledge sharing on seniors' healthy eating habits, feelings of food insecurity, and holistic wellbeing.
- 41 seniors (31 women and 10 men) participated in gardening activities and workshops over three growing seasons. To be included in the analysis, participants were required to have attended 10-20 workshops, visited the garden 10-20 times, and responded to at least 3 surveys. From June 2020 to October 2022, 30 participants met these criteria.

HSPP Focus Area

Increasing independence, quality of life, and promoting healthy lifestyles

Project Start & End Date

May 2020 – October 31, 2022

Organization/Agency

The Governing Council of the Salvation Army for Canada and The Salvation Army for Canada in Fredericton

Location

Fredericton, New Brunswick

Indicator	Impact / Outcome / Result	Quotes
General Health and Wellbeing	<p>In response to surveys, 100% of participants felt that workshops and garden activities improved their mental acuity, sense of usefulness, allowed them to learn new skills and to share their own knowledge and skills with others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While 100% of participants already spoke to their doctors regularly, had up-to-date flu shots, and felt they took care of themselves as best they could, 100% also felt they learned more about self-care from attending workshops. • Participants did not report long-term increases in general health. 	<p><i>"I look forward to seeing the garden grow and people grow as well – physically, mentally, and spiritually."</i></p> <p><i>"Being in the garden just makes me feel better. If I could come every day, it would improve my quality of life drastically."</i></p>

Indicator	Impact / Outcome / Result	Quotes
General Health and Wellbeing	<p>Through comments and observations in workshops, all participants expressed that garden activities and/or eating fresh vegetables benefitted their mental, emotional, and physical health, alertness, sleep quality, quality of life, and sense of autonomy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> While being in the garden made participants feel happier, physically healthier, and more mentally alert, these feelings were not always sustained the following day. 	<p><i>"I just feel better. I'm not as depressed when I'm here. I feel useful..."</i></p>
Reduced Social Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From observations in workshops, participants felt that the more they learned with their new friends from the garden, the better they felt. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants felt their knowledge was valued by their garden peers. This contrasted with their feelings of being unappreciated and useless at home. Survey data showed that 3 of 30 participants felt lonely; however, their feelings of loneliness reduced through garden activities and workshop attendance. While few felt lonely, all participants were eager to meet new friends. 	<p><i>"I feel feelings of connectedness, community, and togetherness."</i></p> <p><i>"There is always friendship and laughter."</i></p> <p><i>"I enjoy the actual work and physical activity plus meeting new people..."</i></p>
Access to Healthy Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1100 pounds of fresh garden food was harvested in 2020. This increased to over 1500 pounds in the 2021 and 2022 growing seasons. Participants expressed that access to healthy garden food provided them with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A healthier lifestyle. The ability to make healthier meals. Opportunities to eat new vegetables/herbs. Knowledge of how to grow their own food. Greater independence in choosing their food. Reduced reliance on others to obtain food. None of the 30 participants identified as food insecure, however: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All felt they could not afford organic food. Only 5 felt they could afford to buy the non-organic fruits and vegetables they wanted. 20 felt they could not eat healthy foods because they could not afford them. Participants felt gardening at OGST gave them access to healthier, fresher food. 	<p><i>"I am concerned that a lot of people out there don't get fresh fruit and veggies like me every day. I look forward to meeting new people and watching the garden grow – and get fresh veggies."</i></p> <p><i>"I never buy fresh greens like this. I just can't afford them and look how much I can get here! I don't buy fresh peas or beans either. I eat out of a can. I just can't believe I have all of these fresh vegetables!"</i></p> <p><i>"When I take bags of fresh veggies home and can share them with neighbours, I just feel fantastic!"</i></p>
Garden Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The accessible garden design (ramp, wide rows and raised bed) allowed seniors to comfortably participate in gardening activities. Seniors could not spend much time in the garden due to a lack of shade and seating. Transportation was the primary barrier to workshop attendance. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although there was a bus stop in front of the garden location, the transit system in Fredericton was not considered senior-friendly – the transit schedule was inconvenient and the distance to a bus stop from participants' homes was too far. Participants felt taxi services were unaffordable. Most participants relied on family or friends to drive them to workshops. 	

Methods and Comparison

The impact of the OSGT garden was evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

- To quantify OSGT's healthy food output, the project team measured the cumulative weight of harvested garden food during each of the 2020-2022 growing seasons.
- Data on participant wellbeing was collected through recurring participant surveys and observations during workshops, garden activities, telephone calls, and email communications.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

- Overall, OSGT built an accessible garden space that provided community members with access to fresh produce and an increased sense of food security. This learning community helped to mentally and socially stimulate participants while supporting a renewed sense of purpose and feelings of joy.
- Transportation was a barrier to participation. Providing transportation may have improved participants' access to the garden.
- Physical elements such as shaded areas, more seating, water coolers, a shorter distance to parking areas, and a safe place for personal belongings, may have improved comfort and participation.
- Dedicated marketing materials and personnel, especially with mainstream media, may have increased awareness of the project and boosted participation.
- The low participation rate could be related to COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 and 2021. Older adults, being vulnerable, may have hesitated to participate despite outdoor garden spaces being considered safe.
- While OSGT did not intend to assess caregiver experiences, one caregiver participated in garden and workshop activities. She expressed that the garden gave her comfort.

Recommendations

- Offer seniors more learning opportunities to help them stay mentally alert and feel a sense of purpose.
- Increase shade in the garden using a permaculture design, which mirrors elements of a natural ecosystem, to make the space more user-friendly.
- Protect agricultural and green spaces in urban development policy by integrating accessible urban gardens.
- Prioritize senior's need for accessible public transportation in municipal policy.

Next Steps

- The garden and workshops will continue at minimal cost with funding provided by The Salvation Army, SEED, Government of Canada's Canada Summer Jobs program, and volunteers.
- An edible fruit forest was attached to the seniors' garden and OSGT digital workshops were developed.
 - These initiatives were funded by the Government of Canada New Horizons for Seniors Program.
- The research team initiated a gardening program for seniors in the greater Fredericton area, providing raised beds at their homes and the option to connect with young people who exchange labor for part of the harvest.
 - This initiative was funded by the Government of New Brunswick Environmental Trust Fund and Government of Canada New Horizons for Seniors Program.
- The team hopes to provide growing space and workshops to local students by developing a partnership with the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Disclaimer

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