

## **Hispanic/Latino Farmer Training in Iowa and Nebraska**

**Center for Rural Affairs** of Lyons, Nebraska received \$84,123 to increase the number of Hispanic and Latino farmers in Iowa and Nebraska. Funds were used to provide education, training and mentoring in hands-on application of growing, production techniques and farm business management.

[Final Report FY09](#)

## FINAL Performance Report

December 28, 2011

**Recipient Name:** Center for Rural Affairs

**Title of Project:** Hispanic/Latino Farmer Training in Iowa and Nebraska

**Grant Number:** 12-25-G-0958

**Location (City/State):** Lyons, Nebraska

**Contact Name/Telephone Number:** Kathie Starkweather, 402-617-7946

**Progress Report – Final**

### Summary of overall impact of the project.

This project's goals were to provide training and technical assistance in growing specialty crops (fruits and vegetables) for consumption and sale, and to provide business practice training for Hispanic/Latinos in South Sioux City, Nebraska, and Sioux City, Iowa, who wanted to eventually get into farming on a larger scale. The project was to make affordable, healthy food available to a low-income population while building business skills to start growing food on a larger scale.

The need was clear as demonstrated by the chart below which shows the number of Latino children in the elementary school system and percentage of all children receiving free and reduced lunch – a determination based on family income:

Elementary School	% Latino Children	% Free and Reduced
Lewis & Clark Elementary	65%	75%
Harney Elementary	71%	71%
Covington Elementary	54%	60%
Swett Elementary	66%	50%

We started out with the development of a community garden, which quickly moved into two community garden spots in South Sioux City, Nebraska as more people wanted to become involved as growers. The community gardens served as a training ground that allowed participants to gain essential experience in how to grow food organically and how to grow in the soil and climate Nebraska offered.

We set a goal of 60 total participants who would both grow food in the gardens and participate in both classroom style training and hands-on training in the garden. Program goals were laid out as shown below:

<u>Program Component</u>	<u>Year 1 Participants</u>	<u>Year 2 Participants</u>
Garden participation	15	30
Garden training	25	40
Classroom training	15	30
USDA program participation	3	6

The program planned on developing peer-to-peer mentoring relationships as well as a formal Community Garden Steering Committee to ensure sustainability for the project after completion of the grant.

We held monthly classroom style trainings from the beginning of the project, utilizing experienced and successful organic farmers, local Extension agents and small business trainers as presenters. Some of the topics covered included: Garden planning: seasons, frost, crops, varieties and layouts; seed starting and saving; organic garden management; transplanting in the garden; successful salesmanship; canning; basic business development and more. We held hands-on training in the gardens that included weed management without use of chemicals, development of a compost pile, and many other trainings that have been reported out in previous reports.

We were successful in developing the peer-to-peer mentoring relationships as gardeners worked side-by-side sharing their experiences and learning together. This allowed for more established gardeners to share their knowledge with gardeners newer to the project and newer to growing food.

One of our primary goals with this project was to create a framework so the project would carry on after the grant was done. It became clear early on that if we did not put something into place to ensure sustainability the project could very well be done when the grant was complete.

As a result we developed a Steering Committee that was made up of some of the gardeners, city officials, and other interested parties such as the local librarian who took this project to heart. He was an invaluable addition to the project since he was an experienced organic grower who had raised not only gardens but did it on a larger scale as well. He purchased Spanish-language garden and cook books for the library and displayed them so gardeners had easy access.

The Steering Committee worked together and established various garden rules that included the amount of money for garden plots and various other rules to keep the garden clean and functioning. We also intentionally reached out to and included local churches in the project. This allowed us to develop strong relationships that have paid off. One of the garden sites that was originally owned by the City was sold to an individual. Consequently, at the end of the second year of the project we had to find one new garden spot and one of the churches stepped in offering a space three times as large as the one we had.

It should be noted here that the City of South Sioux City embraced this project and provided one of the garden spots and constructed a system to bring water to the spot. They also gave the garden full access to the City's Parks Director who made sure various things were done that required tilling, wood chips and other things that needed doing. Without the support of the city it would have been a challenge to make this a successful project. We ensured this relationship by meeting with the City Administrator before we applied for the grant and had a commitment from them to support the project.

The Center for Rural Affairs was also fortunate in securing an AmeriCorps grant to allow us to keep a bilingual garden manager on site for one more year. As a result of all of these efforts the project is being sustained and planning is occurring now for planting and breaking ground on the new garden spot.

We ended the first year with 17 gardeners which was just a little ahead of our goal for participants in year 1. We also had and one small garden spot that was part of a large yard that had a house and garage sitting on the lot. This was city owned property that was eventually sold to an individual. The city also shortly after offering this smaller spot, made the second garden spot available. Soil testing was done on both sites to make sure there were no contaminants and to determine if soil amendments needed to be added. By the end of the second year and project's end we had 57 gardeners that included Latino 4-H students. This resulted in a mixture of all ages in the garden which was an exciting evolution that allowed multi-generational interaction and mentoring to occur.

We were successful getting the number of gardeners because we involved the Steering Committee and also had a lot of media coverage of the project that included newspapers, the Spanish language newspaper, radio and television. The two local television stations covered the project three times during the project period which always resulted in new garden signups. A garden opening celebration at the beginning of the second garden season also resulted in new signups, and Center for Rural Affairs' staff held a serious outreach effort. Our bilingual AmeriCorps person spoke at local Spanish-language churches telling of the project and encouraging participation.

### **Challenges and Barriers.**

This project was extremely successful not only in the numbers of people who participated and the outcomes that participation provided, but also in the fact that we were successful in developing a project that is sustainable and that will continue to grow. We did experience a number of challenges and barriers, however.

The weather was an immediate challenge. We were unable to get into the larger of the two gardens the first year of the project until later spring because of high snowfalls and places to dump the plowed snow. The second, larger garden spot that was provided for us was also the spot where a lot of the city's snow was placed. That put us a little back regarding time line to set out garden spots and till and prepare the soil.

The second year also brought strange weather patterns that included significant flooding in the city from heavier than expected rains and higher than anticipated snowmelt coming down the river from Montana and Wyoming. Gardens across Nebraska, South Dakota, Iowa and North Dakota were affected since harvests were impacted because of heavy rains and cooler, much wetter spring and early summer. Some of our gardeners who had planned on planting additional plots and expanding their garden to growing enough food to be able to sell to local markets were unable to do that because of the weather.

It was difficult to deal with weather conditions that were out of our control. However we tried to mitigate it somewhat by adding in late season foods for fall harvests. This allowed another level of learning and resulted in growing new types of vegetables successfully.

We were also challenged by overestimating how quickly people would learn growing practices and be comfortable scaling up their garden spots to grow more food. Our gardeners were almost exclusively first-time gardeners and while their first year's harvests were beyond their expectations, almost all were not ready to take the next step toward larger scale farming. One family was interested in doing that, however, but weather conditions in the second year of the projected put that goal back a year. They plan on having three garden spots this next growing season with an end goal of getting into larger market gardening/farming. However, we did not reach our goal of USDA program participation. We did, however, work with USDA Farm Services Agency to make them aware that Latino growers as they get into larger scale farming will still be considered to be "small" and diverse operations by USDA program standards. USDA FSA offices on a national level are in the process of developing a program specifically for smaller diverse farming operations. Information shared with state office level FSA staff helped raise this issue to a level where a program will be in place this spring. This will pave the way for our gardeners as they grow into larger scale farming.

Gardeners involved in the project took some time to build their skills and confidence to move to the next level, particularly when year two weather did not cooperate. We overcame this hurdle by the trainings we provided to help them build their skills and confidence in their skills, forming peer-to-peer mentorships and involvement of the Steering Committee. As a result all gardeners who participated in this project are coming back next season and several have plans to purchase additional plots beyond the one they originally had. Communication was key in overcoming this hurdle. Talking to the gardeners, hearing from experienced growers who have had similar situations and how they overcame them all contributed to a gardeners continuing beyond the project period and looking at growing more fruits and vegetables with plans to sell at a currently developing farmers market.

And finally our last challenge was a language barrier. Most all of our gardeners were Spanish as first language or Spanish-only speakers. Staff had some grasp on Spanish and could communicate with the gardeners in the garden and during some components of training sessions; however, outreach to get new gardeners in the first year of the project was limited. We overcame this barrier by finding a bilingual AmeriCorps staff person who was a community member and whose first language was Spanish. She was able to reach out to a number of new gardeners and by the second year we had filled every garden spot.

### **Who Benefitted and How.**

We estimate that at minimum 150-200 people directly benefitted from this project since most Latino families involved as gardeners had an average size family of four and also had extended family involved such as grandparents. Our growers had such a good first

year in the garden that many could not consume all they grew and shared their harvest with the local food bank and churches where low-income both Hispanic and non-Hispanic families attended. As a result, fresh, healthy food was provided to at least 200 people through this project who otherwise would not have had access to this food.

In addition, the training provided allowed for growers to save seeds to plant again in the next season and learned how to process and can fruits and vegetables they grew in order to store and have access during non-growing months. The adage of teaching a person how to fish is applicable here. We provided training and technical assistance to ensure that participants had the knowledge and had developed the skills to be experienced and successful growers. This project opened up access to healthy, fresh, and affordable food. It provided access to fresh air and exercise, and provided the business training necessary for some of these growers to begin to market garden, growing additional food for sale to local restaurants, schools and farmers markets. One project participant started a bread-making business as a direct result of the business training provided in this project. Others expanded their gardens and have plans for additional expansion in this year following the end of the project.

This project and grant dollars provided, resulted in healthy food being grown, prepared and consumed by a marginalized group of folks whose incomes did not allow for the purchase of the fruits and vegetables they were able to grow. It provided them with the business training needed to start a successful market garden business and provided them with resources and connections to experienced farmers to move to the next level and start farming on a larger scale.

It brought community together – an unexpected outcome of the project. The City Administrator was in complete support of the project but wanted to expand it to the entire community as a means of community development. The majority of our gardeners were Hispanic and Latino but we drew about 20% of our gardeners who were low-income Caucasian and had interest at the end of the second year from the Somali community. It was exciting and rewarding to see an English-only speaker and a Spanish-only speaker work side by side in the garden, figuring out a way to communicate with each other because of their shared experience of growing food.

We reached and surpassed almost every goal we set out to reach with the exception of overestimating the readiness of project participants to be able to move into larger scale farming by the end of the project. We did, however, lay the groundwork to ensure that several of our growers could move into larger scale farming in the next couple of years and several have those aspirations. We made progress with setting the stage to develop a beginning farmer loan program through USDA Farm Service Agency for growers such as ours to access in the future. And we took 57 people who represented well over the 200 we reached through this project and taught them how to grow fresh, affordable food and how to develop the business savvy to bring in additional income in the near future. None of this would have occurred without this grant and USDA dollars supporting the effort.



Garden Sign that appeared at both garden sites. This photo shows only one site. These two signs were paid for through the FMPP grant and will remain up indefinitely since we got weather-proof signage.