

Creating Green Spaces for Urban Communities

Sponsor: Via Christi Health System

Location: Wichita, KS

Via Christi Health System (VCHS) is headquartered in Wichita, Kansas, with four acute care hospitals in the state and two others in Oklahoma and California, as well as rehabilitation, mental health, medical research, and senior care facilities in Kansas and Oklahoma. The mission statement of VCHS is definitive in its identification of community and relationship building as core values, and a commitment to “provide quality healthcare to all people, particularly the poor and underserved members of our society.” These values are reflected in a series of ongoing initiatives to engage community stakeholders and a serious effort by senior leadership to develop incentives and performance measures to increase involvement and support from hospital staff and leadership and to improve the quality of charitable program activities.

One of the best examples of efforts to build community capacity is the Healthy Hilltop Community Garden Project. The project is located in the Hilltop-Jefferson neighborhood, adjacent to the Via Christi Regional Medical Center (VCRMC) in Wichita. The neighborhood was originally developed as temporary housing for aircraft factory workers during World War II. Out-of-state investors now own most of the property, and the housing stock is of very poor quality. Current residents include approximately 2,000 low-income families and senior citizens. Nearly 80% live in rental units.

In 1999, VCRMC representatives began to explore possible areas for joint action with local residents to improve neighborhood living conditions. One area of concern was a vacant lot owned by VCRMC that residents used as an informal garbage dump. Residents strongly supported a proposal by members of the neighborhood association to develop a community garden.

The primary role for Via Christi was to provide seed funding, engage key stakeholders, and serve as a convener and facilitator. Stakeholder contributions brokered by Via Christi included assistance from the local utility company in clearing the plot, technical assistance from the county extension service for design and cultivation, and tools, equipment, and building materials from local retail outlets. Resident volunteers also donated tools and worked the land with a church youth group.

In the fall of 2000, Americorps-Vista assigned two full-time volunteers to coordinate activities. In spring 2001, local benefactors donated \$20,000 to build a greenhouse, a large pavilion, decks, and a gazebo in the garden. The garden project has now become a place of social gathering, reflection, and community building. Community groups planned a series of concerts, plays, and cultural activities for the summer.

Proposals for other land uses include the development and renovation of nearby housing for women coming out of shelters and the VCRMC maternity home for teen mothers. Partners have also negotiated city support for the development of a new recreation center and enhanced infrastructure in the neighborhood, including lighting, sewers, and other utility improvements. The church youth group has been galvanized into action by their contribution to the garden development and is now working with schools to encourage intergenerational links that reduce isolation and improve quality of life.

In a recent study commissioned by the city, neighborhood residents identified the community garden as one of the top assets in the area. The project has served as the starting point for an ongoing process that has improved the self-esteem and sense of shared vision among local residents. What started as a small effort to clear a vacant lot and plant a few vegetables has grown into a major neighborhood revitalization project.

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