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San Diego Urban Growers' Collaborative

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Summary:

San Diego urban growers typically operate at an average parcel size of less than one acre and cannot easily enter into contracts with traditional produce distributors due to barriers in cost of entry to meet commercial packaging standards, small production scale of farm/garden operations, and losses associated with average wholesale costs. Many urban growers in San Diego are non-profit or social enterprise organizations dedicated to providing job and skills training to at-risk populations. As such, they have very few scale-appropriate marketing outlets to sell their produce to generate a profit to help further sustain their growing enterprises.



In response to this identified need, UC San Diego Center for Community Health (UCSD CCH) established the San Diego Urban Growers' Collaborative in 2017 to better understand how to assist small-scale urban growers to be economically viable by collaborating together to develop shared practices and products to meet local market demands. This collective of eight urban growers also agreed to prioritize development of products, services, and education that would explicitly contribute to improved food access and health opportunities for low-income consumers and/or individuals living in low food access neighborhoods. The majority of participating urban farms are located in or adjacent to low-income and/or low food access census tracts in the following San Diego regions/neighborhoods: City Heights, Southeastern, and the South Bay.

Impact:

A thorough two-phased research approach was used to conduct supply and demand assessments for urban grown local farm products, alongside congruent delivery of technical assistance and training for urban growers. The following activities were conducted during the project timeline:

Phase One:

1. Conducted a thorough literature review related to the viability of urban agriculture.
2. Assessed product supply of nine urban growers in San Diego.

3. Identified opportunities to provide technical assistance to help urban growers access local markets.
4. Gauged growers' interest in collaborative multi-farm projects and facilitated building a trusted rapport between growers.

Phase Two:

1. Assessed local demand for urban-grown produce from both buyers (restaurants, caterers, small-scale distributors, and small neighborhood ethnic food markets) and direct consumers.
2. Provided initial recommendations for a collaborative project (multi-farm CSA).
3. Provided multiple training and technical assistance opportunities (e.g. financial planning, food safety, marketing and branding) to help growers access local markets and increase their farm viability.
4. Brokered several scale-appropriate buyer relationships for urban farmers.

The planning project concluded with recommendations and agreement from urban growers to pursue the development of a multi-farm CSA to prioritize service to low-income consumers and/or consumers that live in low food access neighborhoods. A multi-farm CSA will meet consumer demand for diversity and flexibility without straining the resources of a single farm. Risk will be mitigated for the consumer and grower while drawing on the expertise and/or niche products of each individual grower. Given that the supply is relatively small from urban growers in San Diego and expressed consumer interest is high, a multi-farm CSA can improve farm viability if it offers farmers flexibility, minimal risk, and high returns while providing consumers with the desired diversity, choice, and flexibility in their CSA membership. The CSA will accept and institutionalize EBT/SNAP payments, and in the short term, options for grant funding will be explored to subsidize the cost of a subset of shares for high-priority low-income families. As the CSA becomes financially viable over time, the business can cover the cost of subsidized shares through earned revenue. The CSA will be based in the South Bay in the City of San Diego with a centralized aggregation site at one of the participating urban farms. It will serve consumers at drop sites in the South Bay, City Heights, and Southeastern San Diego.