



Application for 2009 Outstanding County Program Awards

County (if multi-county entry, list all): McDowell County Department of Social Services

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The Association encourages electronic submissions. E-mail the application and project/program description to Todd McGee at todd.mcgee@ncacc.org. You can also fax your entry to (919) 733-1065 (attn. Todd McGee), or mail it to: NCACC, 215 N. Dawson St., Raleigh, NC 27603. Applications must be postmarked by **Friday, Feb. 26, 2010**.

Projects/programs must have been implemented between Jan. 1, 2008, and Dec. 31, 2009. For additional information and category criteria, visit www.ncacc.org/awards/ocpa/about.html.

Project title: Work Fork Family Assistance Community Garden Project

Category (you may check more than one):

General Government Human Services Public Information/Participation

Address each of the following questions in a typed program/project summary in a separate Word document attached to this application form. Limit your responses to two pages. Use single-spaced lines and 12-point, Times New Roman font. Supporting materials may be submitted, but due to time constraints, judges may not review the materials.

1. What are the purpose, history, timeline and budget of the program/project? Will the county realize any projected cost savings? (For public information/participation programs, please try to estimate participation levels).
2. What makes the program/project unique? How does it differ from similar projects in your county or in other counties?
3. How well did the program use available resources, given the limitations on such resources?
4. Can this project be duplicated in other counties? If another county wanted to do a similar project, what advice would you give them to minimize obstacles and problems?
5. How did the project involve collaboration with other agencies, jurisdictions, nonprofits, businesses, etc.? How well did this collaboration work and is it on-going?

McDowell County Department of Social Services
Work First Community Garden Project

The idea for the Work First Community Garden Project was developed in response to a concern for county residents trying to make ends meet within the distressed economic climate of McDowell County. The obvious need reflected in the increased numbers of Food and Nutrition applications, along with the agricultural history of the county, evolved into plans for a Work First Community Garden, a community garden where anyone could help plant crops and share in the harvest. In addition to food provided for county residents, it was determined the goal of the project would be to revitalize gardening and promote healthier lifestyles through improved nutrition and increased physical activity. Additionally, it was hoped the project would create opportunities to learn marketable skills among the Work First Family Assistance Participants who would serve as the primary labor force. The garden would be a way to bring back the art of gardening, harvesting, and food preservation while developing stronger community partnerships. By the end of the season, the small group that formed the initial planning group could say that the Project had been a success.

The Work First Community Garden Project began development in January 2009 and took about three months to fully implement. The planning group had the idea but needed a location and tools. The group reached out to the community and began to “sell” the idea. The response was overwhelmingly positive. The project lasted into October 2009. Three grant awards and two private donations totaling \$6,500.00 were given to the Project. Through these funds, the Project Coordinators gave back to the community by purchasing additional supplies from local businesses. Some of the financial resources will allow the Project to continue into 2010.

Initially, the idea was to have clients in the Work First Family Assistance Program work in the garden; however, as news about the garden spread through the community, representatives from the Master Gardener Association, residents of a local assisted living facility (and staff), neighbors and other volunteers offered their services. Representatives from the local health department and cooperative extension program helped with client (and staff) education regarding the health aspects of gardening and preservation of foods. A food preservation class was conducted at the local Senior Center for Project participants, staff and volunteers.

The agency staff coordinators were invited to do a presentation for local physicians. The presentation to local doctors emphasized the shared obligation for the health and wellness of clients/patients in the community. Clients/patients seeking disability (and previously excluded from participation in the Work First Family Assistance Program requirements) could benefit from “Garden Therapy.” Patients could develop strength, confidence, and skills to go back into the workforce. One of the most helpful partnerships came from Dr. John Wilson. Dr. Wilson, a 93-year-old retired pediatrician, accompanied the staff and participated in the presentation. Dr. Wilson had experience in developing a successful community gardening project as he had assisted the neighboring community of Black Mountain (Buncombe County) to develop a project which has grown to several garden plots (over 60 in 2008). Through the growth of the Project, McDowell County Department of Services remained the organizer, coordinating many community partners and no less than seventeen local businesses that helped to sponsor the Project.

With the full support of the agency Director, Phillip Hardin, and the County Manager, Chuck Abernathy, McDowell County Department of Social Services allowed staff members to “volunteer” in the garden (while being paid by the agency as a regular day of work). These volunteers, as well as a Human Resource Placement Specialist (a “job coach” and staff member of the Work First Family Assistance Program) constituted a labor cost on the part of the agency. Other costs were absorbed within the community as area businesses donated tools and equipment for the Project. Twice the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina awarded the Project funding (totaling \$5000.00). These funds, as well as a \$1000 grant from the local health department, and two private donors (\$500 total) allowed the project the ability to purchase necessary equipment (e.g., seed spreader, gloves, plants, mulch and a tiller).

There were several accomplishments related to the implementation of the community garden project: Work First Family Assistance participation rate increased (a program mandate), participants were hired by area employers, due in part to the mentoring and one-on-one time with the garden coordinator/job coach; disabled clients worked on craft projects for the garden (e.g., row markers, signs, scarecrow). The crop harvest was bountiful and yielded an impressive harvest in spite of compromises by an inexperienced staff and a very rainy season: (Numbers are in pounds)

Corn – 882; Squash – 301; Cucumbers – 350; Tomatoes – 128;
Green Peppers – 19; Radishes – 50; Green Onions – 49; White
Cabbage – 95; Red Cabbage – 32; Beans – 130; Pumpkin – 484;
Watermelons – 331; Potatoes – 35; Carrots - 15

Portions of the garden harvest were distributed to our local Senior Center. This county-operated facility realized savings in food purchases, as well as the ability to offer seniors an increased nutritional value (i.e., *fresh* versus *processed* foods). Some of the produce was distributed to the three homeless shelters within the community, as well as a couple of churches, one of which operates the only soup kitchen in the community.

Introducing a new service to the county, the Garden Project effectively filled the gaps in the Work First Family Assistance Program and impacted the local economy. With the distressed economy, this project offered hope by emphasizing the benefits of self sufficiency, as well as emphasizing the nutritional benefits of a garden. Master Gardner Volunteers had the opportunity to teach and help staff members involved in the garden. Explaining the Work First Family Assistance Program allowed agency staff to educate the community regarding governmental programs. The participation requirements of the Work First Family Assistance Participants impacted the one hundred percent participation of area businesses. Through this project the Department of Social Services was able to promote many partnerships. These included the McDowell County Health Department (*Eat Smart Move More*) which focuses on reducing obesity, improving nutrition, and increasing activity.

Since the implementation of the Work First Community Garden Project, community members have consistently remarked on the innovation of the program. The staff members involved hope this project can grow and expand 1) introducing an educational element geared toward elementary school students; 2) playing a central role in encouraging a healthy lifestyle as part of the growing emphasis in the community on healthier alternatives (e.g., Farmers Market, *Lighten Up for Life* Initiative); 3) develop additional plots in the community; 4) continue to market toward all social service client recipients, especially Food and Nutrition recipients who can purchase seeds and food-producing plants with their benefits.