Research Report

Expanding Community Engagement and Equitable Access Through All-Abilities Community Gardens

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ABSTRACT
Community gardens accessible to people of all abilities provide affordable fresh produce for people with disabilities (PwD) who frequently experience food inequity and related health risks. The objective of this project was to enable 9 community gardens in southern New Jersey to welcome PwD and encourage their use through inclusive designs and practices. Postprogram surveys and a half-day group collaboration session demonstrated the desire of PwD to engage in inclusive gardens, the potential for increased social connections and produce consumption among PwD, and the challenge of limited resources in maintaining community gardens.

KEY WORDS: inclusion, access, food equity, systems change, community gardens

INTRODUCTION
People with Disabilities (PwD) have historically been unable to access community resources available to people without disabilities. Those who require additional support because of physical, cognitive, or sensory limitations often find barriers to participation in community resources related to policies, systems, and environments in which they are built. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) led to a shift away from intervention-focused initiatives and movement toward initiatives that focus on making systemic, environmental, and policy changes in communities to make it easier for people to engage in health-promoting behaviors.1 The US Department of Health and Human Services has called for increased accessibility for PwD in all realms of community life2 and, more recently, for creating public spaces accessible to people of all physical ability levels.3 The social determinants of health include the social and physical environment as essential to supporting the health practices and status of individuals and communities.4 A national project in which 10 communities received support to build inclusion into their policies, systems, and physical environments demonstrated that such efforts can be successful.5 Over 3 years, these communities most frequently made changes to the built environment, including creating inclusive community gardens with features, such as raised garden beds and pathways, that were accessible to those who use wheelchairs and other assistive devices. They also changed how community groups structured their methods of communication, rules for participation, and other ways in which they operated to be more welcoming of people of all abilities. Using simple language, accompanied by pictures and graphic images, in websites, documents, and signage was one way of making these resources easier to see and read. Community gardens provide social interaction, physical activity, and increased access to fresh produce for PwD.6,7

Consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables is associated with positive health outcomes, including the maintenance of healthy body weight and the reduction of cardiovascular risk factors.8–10 Forty-two percent of American adults are classified as obese,11 and approximately 90% do not eat sufficient fresh produce; these rates are higher for those with disabilities.12–15 Obesity is related to increased hypertension and type 2 diabetes for adults with Down syndrome and autism spectrum disorder.16 Home and community gardening is associated with increasing the consumption of fresh produce among adults,17,18 including during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic.19

The literature suggests that inclusive community garden initiatives (ie, those that are accessible and welcoming of people of all abilities through their physical design and organizational practices) can increase the integration of PwD into activities of the community as a whole and support the consumption of a healthier diet, yet these interventions were limited in scope and design.5–7 This study is a pilot of the Fresh Foods Initiative, a sustainable model for

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promoting community engagement and increased fresh produce consumption among PwD through a community-based inclusive gardening intervention that incorporates social and environmental supports.

This study aimed to assess the attitudes, knowledge, experience, and intentions of all stakeholders who participated in designing, facilitating and/or using an inclusive community garden and identifying factors that stakeholders report as important to the success of an inclusive community garden. Stakeholders included PwD and their caregivers, community garden groups, community organizations, garden designers/builders, and neighborhood associations. This project is part of the New Jersey statewide Inclusive Health Communities initiative to make public and community spaces and services accessible and welcoming to people of all abilities by making inclusive practices the norm in the state through policy, systems, and environmental changes.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION**

**Recruitment of Community Garden Participants**

We identified potential community-based groups in New Jersey to receive an inclusive garden. To receive an inclusive garden, the community group had to (1) demonstrate that it was functioning and active in the community within the past 12 months, (2) have at least 1 representative attend an initial interest meeting, and (3) have a study team member meet with all decision-makers in the group to review the purpose of the project, confirm their commitment and discuss garden design plans. Eleven community groups were identified, 10 engaged in this process, and 9 met all criteria. Participating groups included 6 existing municipal community gardens, 1 new garden construction in a low-income housing community, 1 new garden construction at a public school with a summer program serving students with disabilities, and 1 renovation at a nonprofit community center.

**Project Timeline**

We recruited 7 community gardens and all garden builders between November 2020 and March 2021. Seven gardens were renovated or constructed between March and November 2021: 2 in Atlantic County, 2 in Gloucester County, and 3 in Camden (Camden County). The fourth county, Salem, was added to the project in May 2022. Two garden communities in Salem were selected to receive gardens, which were built in November 2022.

Between 2 and 6 meetings were conducted with each community garden group to determine their goals for the garden, confirm the design, and identify the support they needed to increase participation in the garden by PwD. When possible, PwD were recruited to participate in these discussions. The first community garden to be renovated had 3 adults with disabilities and 1 caregiver participate throughout the process.

We obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the university of the lead author before collecting data for this project (PRO-2021-514) through an expedited review process. Written informed consent was obtained from all study participants, with modifications to be accessible to PwD.

**Garden Design and Construction**

Two garden construction businesses were recruited to design, renovate, or build the community gardens. None of the builders had experience designing inclusive gardens, so a community garden consultant with experience working with PwD provided consultation in the design process.

Three of the 9 gardens were built in Camden, NJ. Two partnered with the Parkside Business and Community in Partnership program, a nonprofit community group actively building and supporting community gardens in Camden neighborhoods. Parkside Business and Community in Partnership was already working with a regional hospital system that operated a mobile grocery store through which community gardeners could purchase fresh produce using vouchers they received from their health care providers. The mobile grocery store also purchased produce from community gardeners, thereby creating an income source for the gardeners. One of the garden communities donated an additional $2,000 to resurface the pathway from the sidewalk to the garden. The third garden was built at the site of a Salvation Army Kroc Center, which provides a wide range of resources to the community, including fitness facilities, a pool, a church, after-school and summer camp programs, social groups for youth and seniors, tutoring and music lessons, an onsite medical clinic and a food pantry. They incorporated their garden into their summer camp program for children of all abilities and offered the produce they harvest through their food pantry.

Two gardens were built in the Atlantic City area in partnership with C.R.O.P.S., a nonprofit community organization that addresses food equity through various efforts, including community gardening. One was renovating an existing community garden next door to a group home. The second was a new construction. C.R.O.P.S. leveraged its resources to attract funding to construct a water catchment system to capture and use rainwater for irrigation at the existing garden site. They also recruited summer youth programs and church groups to offer volunteer labor to help build the sites.

One of the 2 Gloucester County gardens was the addition of 5 “all-abilities” raised beds to the newly constructed community garden in Glassboro, funded and managed by the Borough. The second was expanding a local community garden in Williamstown, a neighboring community to Glassboro. When this garden appeared to need a curb cut and wheelchair access ramp, the University’s Engineers Without Borders club donated their expertise, labor, and materials to create it.

Two community gardens were built in Salem, NJ. The Hires Street garden is managed by the community organization Stand Up for Salem. The Lafayette Pershing School garden served the entire community.
and was incorporated into the summer camp program hosted by the school for children with disabilities.

Each community garden was built or renovated for $6,000 plus the additional volunteer labor and resources that other groups donated for some of the gardens. We hired local contractors to design and construct each garden according to the Americans with Disabilities Act standards. Each garden included a table-top raised bed that accommodated a wheelchair and an additional 2 or 3 raised beds with side benches. Wheelchair-accessible pathways were created in all gardens, and other improvements were made as the budget allowed. Additional raised beds with kneeling benches were built in each garden. Accessible raised beds were placed near the front of the garden to minimize the distance from the sidewalk to the beds. Two gardens required a curb cut in the sidewalk with a ramp leading up to the pathway to the garden to ensure accessibility from the parking lot. Pathways were made of combinations of cement paving, fine gravel, and mulch; all are considered accessible to someone using a wheelchair or walker. A third garden created a sensory experience by adding a fragrant flower and herb section to enhance the experience beyond visual stimulation, which may be particularly helpful to people with autism, as they need additional support to improve their integration of sensory experiences. Community members using the gardens were asked to minimize their use of decorative spinning wheels and chimes, as these can be stressors for a person with a cognitive disability.

Most of the community garden partners for the grant were selected because they could sustain the long-term use of the gardens without active ongoing effort by the researchers. Six of the gardens were built in partnership with existing community garden organizations with the staff, knowledge, and resources to plant and harvest their gardens independently. Two gardens were built in community gardens in which residents independently adopted individual plots to plant and harvest with the informal support of other garden members. Additional funds were provided to 1 garden, which needed consultation and assistance from one of the garden builders to plant, grow, and harvest the first season of crops as they learned how to do this on their own.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE EVALUATION**

**Representation of People With Disabilities**

We strove to engage PwD directly and actively in the entire evaluation process. From our prior work with the communities that participated in this project, we know that all of the PwD engaged in this project have ≥ 1 intellectual or developmental disabilities. Examples of these types of disabilities include autism, Down’s syndrome, cerebral palsy, fragile X syndrome, and fetal alcohol syndrome. Many PwD in this project also have physical disabilities that limit mobility, vision and/or hearing. We intentionally decided not to ask PwD to identify their specific disability or diagnosis in the survey or focus group, as this may be perceived as intrusive and/or stigmatizing by the disability community. Our desire in all of our work with this community is to focus on providing the level of support that PwD need to fully engage in the project rather than focus on the person’s medical diagnosis or type of disability.

**Half-day Collaborative Meeting**

Twenty-five inclusive community garden participants attended the half-day collaborative meeting in May 2022, after the first planting season for 7 of the 9 gardens. This allowed them to share experiences, learn from each other, and provide qualitative data to the coalition to learn how to improve and expand the inclusive garden initiative. Participants included PwD who use one of the community gardens (n = 5) and their caregivers (n = 2), garden designers and builders (n = 6), and 12 individuals representing 7 of the 9 community garden groups. Formal presentations and written reflections about their experience were made by 2 garden builders, 1 PwD and their caregiver, and 6 community garden group representatives. Two 45-minute, structured round table discussions allowed everyone in attendance to share their experiences. Data sources were the written reflections submitted by each project partner and the slide presentations submitted in advance by a smaller group of partners invited to present to the group. This smaller group included 2 garden builders, representatives of 1 community garden organization from each of the 3 counties involved in the project at that time, and 1 family (caregiver and adult PwD). Each round table discussion had a research team member present to listen to the discussion; however, no notes were taken during the round table discussions. The research team discussed the round table discussions after the half-day meeting.

Two authors reviewed the written data (reflections and slide presentations) independently and identified the unique themes present in the data that addressed what participants experienced and learned. Then, they met to discuss the identified themes and create a mutually agreed-on list. This discussion and final list were also informed by what they learned from the round-table discussions at the half-day event. Three themes emerged from this process.

The first was the value of incorporating gardens into other community initiatives. One garden was constructed at the site of a low-income housing community on the communal property of the neighborhood. Partnering with the neighborhood community group increased the usage of the garden and led to the development of cooking classes in the adjacent community building. Two sites incorporated the garden into summer camp programs serving children with disabilities. The experience of growing food and preparing recipes using the produce was a motivator to taste and eat new vegetables, which is a challenge for many PwD.

A second was the creation of a sensory garden with texturally and visually stimulating native plants, flowers, and herbs to engage PwD more effectively with the garden. Related to this was the recognition that excessive stimuli in the garden decor, such as pinwheels or shiny
Table 1. Survey Responses for Inclusive Community Garden Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudinal Items</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>sD</th>
<th>NE</th>
<th>sA</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is important for community gardens to be inclusive of people with disabilities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with disabilities will participate in a community garden if it is accessible and welcoming</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in the community I serve are welcoming of those with disabilities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with disabilities in the community I serve will use an accessible garden</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having an accessible community garden will make a significant difference in the community I serve</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My participation in the Inclusive Community Garden project was a positive experience.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

sA indicates slightly agree; SA, strongly agree; sD, slightly disagree; SD, strongly disagree; NE, neutral.
Note: Values are presented as n.

objects, could be stressful for PwD. One garden created a Please Touch herbal section specifically for PwD, encouraging them to feel, smell, and taste the herbs. All of the gardens limited the use of stimulating garden decor items.

Finally, the need for additional resources to meet ADA standards added to the cost. Two of the gardens required curb cuts in bordering sidewalks to allow those using wheelchairs to enter the garden. Although ADA compliant, the initial pathway surface of one garden was not accessible to PwD and was replaced with poured concrete. Beyond ADA requirements, one garden added signs to identify each plant, using pictures and words for easier identification.

Online Survey

Informed by outcomes of the half-day meeting, an online, written survey was developed in Qualtrics and implemented in October of 2022 for those who participated in the design, construction, facilitation, and use of the community gardens. The survey assessed participants’ experiences and attitudes regarding the importance of having accessible community gardens, the openness of the community toward PwD in using community gardens, and the feasibility of maintaining an inclusive garden in their communities. The survey included 6 Likert scale attitudinal statements and 2 open-ended questions. It was emailed to 26 community garden designers, builders, facilitators, and PwD who used the gardens and their caregivers. Twenty responses (77% response rate) were collected, representing 6 garden builders and designers, 6 of the 9 community garden facilitators, 3 PwD, and 3 caregivers of PwD. Eleven respondents were female, and 9 were male. Seventeen were White, 2 were Black, and a third identified as other. PwD received help from a caregiver as needed to complete the survey.

Table 1 shows the results of the fixed-choice statement responses.

All of the responses indicated the importance of public spaces, including community gardens, to include people of all abilities and that PwD will participate in community gardens when they are accessible. Of note, 1 respondent was neutral in their perception of their community being welcoming of PwD and whether an inclusive garden would significantly impact their community.

Two authors independently reviewed responses to the open-ended questions to identify themes; 7 were agreed upon after a joint review and discussion of the individual themes that each author identified. Table 2 is a selective list of the responses to the open-ended questions in the survey, framed around 7 themes identified from 30 written responses.

Theme 1: Development of knowledge and skills in a new area by PwD. Among respondents who were PwD or their caregivers, participation in the inclusive gardens led to new skills in tasks not tried before and a sense of responsibility in caring for growing plants.

Theme 2: Increased access to and consumption of fresh produce and social opportunities among PwD. Respondents who were PwD and/or their caregivers commented on increased access to fresh produce, their excitement about increasing their daily consumption, and expanding the variety of produce they used in their recipes. They also found the gardens to be opportunities for social engagement with others.

Theme 3: Accessible and inclusive public spaces. Garden facilitators found these gardens more accessible and inclusive than other community public spaces. This increased inclusivity was often accomplished by making small changes, such as adding signs using pictures and policies to keep the garden free of distracting decor.

Theme 4: Source of community collaboration. Several respondents expressed that the garden brought together like-minded individuals who are supportive of inclusivity and that the gardens are now a source of community pride.

Theme 5: Need for leadership and staffing to ensure sustainability. Garden facilitators believe that future projects need managers with the skills and resources to lead and maintain an inclusive garden that will be used beyond the first growing season. Many gardens become dormant once the initial funding has been used, and there is no plan to support the costs of running the garden in future years.

Theme 6: Need for adequate funding. The project was completed during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic when resources were scarce, and prices increased substantially. One garden facilitator noted that tight budgets are especially challenging for small organizations without financial reserves.
Table 2. Selected Qualitative Survey Responses for Inclusive Community Garden

Responses
In what way did participation in the Inclusive Community Garden project impact you and/or the community (or communities) you serve?

Development of knowledge and skills in a new area
- I was excited to grow my corn and even popcorn. I was so excited that it worked (participant with disability)
- I enjoyed planning what to grow. It was exciting when things really started to grow, especially our zucchini (participant with disability)
- It provided more opportunities for people to experience growing and planting. Practice taking care of and being responsible for something (caregiver and group home manager)
- It gave my children an opportunity to learn more about gardening, eating and cooking with fresh vegetables, and to interact and learn from others who like to garden. It also gave them an opportunity to practice skills needed to care for the garden (caregiver)

Increased access to and consumption of fresh produce and social opportunities
- We hope the garden will uplift our community and provide fresh produce to a community living in a food desert (community garden group leader)
- We had the opportunity to see the staff and residents of the [Arc of Atlantic] use the space and get excited about gardening and eating fresh food (caregiver and group home manager)
- It has revitalized a space that now has purpose and provides a blessing to a community who needs fresh produce (community garden group leader)
- I saw lots of butterflies. I enjoyed going to the festival where people brought food that they cooked from foods from [sic] the garden. The eggplant parmesan and the peach cobbler were my favorite (participant with disability)
- It encouraged me to find healthy recipes using fresh vegetables from the garden (participant with disability)

Accessible and Inclusive public spaces
- It opened my eyes to simple upgrades that can be made to public spaces that will make them more accessible and inviting to everyone in the community (community garden designer/builder)
- I was so impressed by the amount of community engagement, especially from people with disabilities (caregiver, teacher of students with disabilities)
- It’s a priority for us that all residents in the community we serve can see themselves as gardeners (caregiver and group home manager)
- It encouraged me to find healthy recipes using fresh vegetables from the garden (participant with disability)

Source of community collaboration
- Participation in this project offered a glimpse and perspective into how much communities are willing to come together and support spaces that are more inclusive. Gardening is a great conduit to recreating public spaces in a positive way, and I saw that there’s not only a great need for more of these projects but also a desire for them by community members (community garden designer/builder)
- We had the opportunity to meet and connect with neighbors who share our passion for community gardening and building an inclusive space (community garden group leader)
- Our gardens strived to be welcoming to those of all ability levels, but our organization didn’t have the means to build new special beds or wheelchair ramp on our own, so now we’re able to have a new level of inclusivity (community garden group leader)
- It seems too often that inclusive elements to people of all abilities are overlooked in the construction and design of community spaces (community garden group leader)

What advice do you have for the project leaders to improve the Inclusive Community Garden project in the future?

Need for adequate leadership and staffing
- We need ongoing support. It was challenging to rely on staff that support people as they were not always interested in the garden and their day to day work is already challenging. Additionally, as we are experiencing staff shortages, it is sometimes difficult to make something happen even if we all want to do it (community garden group leader)
- Picking sites with built in participation and a group committed to managing the area is key (and I thought we found great recipients. Let’s do more!) (community garden group leader)
- It seems that projects go from a stand-still to rapid implementation. Just be ready to move quickly (community garden group leader)

Need for adequate funding
- Reserve or request additional funding for unseen barriers like paying for curb cuts (community garden group leader)
- Put an emphasis on working with small organizations like ours because we often are the ones on the ground with real relationships in the community. Include[e] funding for the actual facilitation of the garden. There are undoubtedly going to be costs associated with “extras” like plants for multiple seasons in a row, supplies for volunteer days, outreach costs and the cost of someone’s staff to work to get the community further engaged in the garden. Our public gardens are already factored into our organization’s capacity and the operational costs are covered by our annual budget. As much as we wanted to, it was very hard for us to find extra time to help with that smaller private garden because we are stretched so thin (community garden group leader)
- To be more mindful of the stress these projects put on small nonprofits and provide additional funding and support for infrastructure and staff hours (there are many unseen costs) (community garden group leader)

Foster collaboration among community members of all abilities in each stage of the project
- I enjoyed planning what to grow. It was exciting when things really started to grow, especially our zucchini (participant with disability)
- It encouraged me to find healthy recipes using fresh vegetables from the garden (participant with disability)

ADA indicates Americans with Disabilities Act.
Focus Group Discussion Outcomes

A 1-hour focus group was conducted in November 2022 with group home residents who used 1 of the inclusive gardens but did not complete the written survey. This ensured that the viewpoints of PwD were fully represented, as completing an online written survey was difficult for some PwD. Two residents were female, and 3 were male. They identified as Black (n = 2), Hispanic (n = 1), Native American (n = 1), and White/Non-Hispanic (n = 1). Each identified a different age range from 18–24 to 65–74 years. All were verbal, although 1 participant spoke minimally. The authors printed a visual of 3 cartoon emojis of a smiling face, a neutral face, and a frowning face as an option for responding to questions. Two authors created the focus group discussion questions using Universal Design principles (ie, using symbols and simple graphics in addition to words). One author led the discussion, and the second author took anonymous detailed notes of responses. The participants shared their attitudes, experiences, intentions, and recommendations for the community garden and other public green spaces. Focus group questions are listed in Table 3.

The participants did not directly answer each question as it was presented, which may result from having a disability. At times, they responded to prior questions when asked a new question and shared thoughts that were not directly related to the garden experience throughout the discussion. They reported growing eggplant and tomatoes the previous summer and hoped to grow flowers, cucumbers, strawberries, squash, and fruit trees. Participants most enjoyed that it was peaceful, seeing wildlife and other animals and painting mural squares to decorate the sides of the raised beds. Participants least enjoyed seeing trash in the garden and having plants die and not yield any produce. When asked what they would like to see in the garden in the future, the participants said they would like to see more decorative objects, smooth walking paths, a greenhouse, and a fountain.

DISCUSSION

Despite mandates from the US Department of Health and Human Services and the ADA to make systemic changes in public spaces and resources so that they are welcoming of all abilities, the literature suggests that this has not happened for community gardens in a way that reduces systemic and environmental barriers and is sustainable beyond the initial construction of the garden. We sought to identify ways of creating sustainable social and physical environments within community gardens, supported by inclusion-focused policies, so they can engage PwD and potentially contribute to their improved physical, social, and emotional health.

This project demonstrates that PwD are interested in participating actively in community gardens for social interaction, building new skills, enjoying nature, experiencing beauty, and adding fresh produce to their diets. When the physical design and social structure of a community garden are inclusive, PwD will participate, particularly if they are included in planning it from the start. Inclusive policies can do the following: ensure that PwD are included on garden management boards, incorporate Universal Design principles on the garden website and signage, simplify the process to become a participant in the garden, and reserve garden beds that are more accessible to the walkway for PwD. Garden boards can also advocate with their local government to ensure that all sidewalks leading to the garden have curb cuts.

Committed community garden partners are essential to the long-term sustainability of an inclusive community garden. The primary criteria for selecting the community garden sites in this project was the presence of an active, well-functioning garden group that would continue to support the inclusive gardens beyond the life of the grant. The inclusive gardens will be used and maintained in the coming years, and gardeners of all ability levels will be welcomed because of the previously-existing commitment of the community garden groups.

Existing funds can be leveraged to attract additional funding and support, which also ensures the sustainability of the garden beyond its initial funding. Additional funding, volunteer labor, and the donation of materials and equipment were attracted to supplement 4 of the community gardens in this project and build the final 2 added toward the end. This additional support came from grant funders, student groups, community volunteers, businesses, and other community organizations. Having additional funders and supporters of the gardens increases the community’s commitment to the garden and appeals to future funders.

Engaging community partners and consultants can have a ripple effect to expand the practice of...
The impact of the use of inclusive community gardens by PwD on their levels of obesity and diabetes is a longer-term outcome worth investigating. It could also explore the intersectionality of disability and race/ethnicity, a limitation of this study as respondents were predominantly White and non-Hispanic. Interventions could provide internship opportunities to PwD in the construction, planting, and harvesting of future gardens, which would build workforce skills and increase employment opportunities for PwD. Policies in government and public institutions supporting the following principles of inclusion could increase the welcome and access of public spaces, including community gardens, for people of all abilities.

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REFERENCES


IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Inclusive community gardens facilitate social connection among community members of all ability levels and can be supported through changes in policies and systems that make inclusion practices the norm. These gardens improve access to and consumption of fruits and vegetables among PwD. Building collaborative partnerships among active community groups is a way to make these programs sustainable. Community garden construction presents unexpected costs that become significant obstacles; leveraging additional resources offset these costs.

Future research could explore the impact of this initiative on the extent of social connection among people of all abilities within a community and on the fresh produce consumption patterns of PwD in the community.

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