



## Marion County Gardens Growing and Corn Sprouting- One Community's Solution to Food Access

### Summary

A church is known by many as a place where doors are always open. Marion's Christ Missionary Baptist Church went one step further and opened their outdoor space to the community. In early 2013, the Creating Healthy Communities (CHC) project director presented to the church pastor the idea of establishing a small community garden on church property. The USDA identifies this area on the north-end of Marion City as being food insecure. Access to healthy and affordable foods can be a challenge for residents due to finances, limited transportation, and proximity to full service grocery stores. Both the densely populated neighborhood and the church's vacant lot made for an ideal site to bring the community together to garden and grow food. In 2013, the establishment of 10 raised beds proved to be a success and within a year, school and community gardens began popping up across Marion County!

### Challenge

According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) County Health Rankings, 32% of Marion County adults are obese. A county-wide 3rd grade BMI study revealed 39% of Marion County youth are overweight or obese. Local data further supports the higher incidence of chronic disease risk factors in Marion County. Limited access to healthy foods and physical activity opportunities can contribute to a disproportionate incidence of chronic disease in a community. USDA recommends making half of your plate fruit and vegetables. As with many households across the nation, this simple health message is much more complex. Lack of transportation, finances and access to healthy foods can contribute to unhealthy diets, especially in a neighborhood where, according to the U.S Census Bureau, over 47% of residents fall below poverty. In an effort to combat low access to healthy foods several organizations joined this effort to

reduce this health disparity. CHC in conjunction with Pioneering Healthier Communities (PHC) and funding support from our local community foundation worked together to expand community garden space.

### Solution

Building on the success of the 2013 community garden season, a food access action team along with the CHC coordinator decided to expand the current garden site at Christ Missionary Baptist Church. The expansion would serve an additional 10 families, however, it did not stop there! Winnie Brewer, Food Service Director for Marion City Schools, the largest school system in Marion, quickly jumped on board and soon had approval from administration to add an additional 30 garden plots to six schools in Marion City. Winnie saw this as another creative solution to address food access for her students and families.

## Results

In a matter of a few months, Marion expanded from 10 gardens to over 50 gardens. In addition to the community/school garden expansion, Farm Bureau members presented another unique opportunity to address food access in Marion County. The Farm Bureau partnered with CHC/PHC Marion to grow an acre of sweet corn at the Marion Family YMCA. Over 8,000 ears of sweet corn were harvested by food pantry volunteers and the community-at-large.

“This is how a community takes on a health issue like food access,” states Tom Quade Health Commissioner for Marion Public Health. “It starts with one person connecting with another person and that is how you build a mini movement.”

*“I love the garden. It is so much more than a garden. It’s something I can do to give back. I have a feeling we are just beginning, so I’m getting ready to just begin.”*

*- Dorothy Downing*

## Sustaining Success

The Marion City/County Regional Planning Commission, along with community leaders has recently organized a Local Food Committee. The goal of this group will serve a dual purpose to make food production an economic driver in Marion County and to improve access to healthy locally grown food. The committee has settled on two short term goals: increase urban farming by growing fruits/vegetables in vacant downtown spaces and converting part of a Marion City park into an edible forest/ garden space for the surrounding residential neighborhood.

The ultimate goal of the Local Food Committee is to create a sustainable local food hub where local fruits, vegetables, and meats are available to county residents year round.

## Your Involvement is Key

- **Connect-** Community change requires traditional and non-traditional partners from a variety of settings. Identify shared opportunities, resources and assets. Collaborate to achieve the highest impact, this will have lasting results!
- **Share-** Share your time, talent and story with others in your community.
- **Advocate-** Be a voice in your community whether it’s at school, work, church or home. We all have a role to make our community a healthier place to live, work, play and learn! Seek to make the healthy choice the easy choice for all!



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