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Heartside Gleaning Initiative: A Partnership to Increase Community Volunteer Base through Spectrum Health of West Michigan

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Heartside Gleaning Initiative; A partnership to increase community volunteer base through Spectrum Health of West Michigan.

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Abstract

Heartside Gleaning Initiative (HGI) is a non-profit organization who seeks to empower Heartside, Michigan and surrounding communities to become healthier by increasing their access to healthy foods and nutrition education (Web, HGI Mission and History). HGI combats the effects of food related illness and aims to restore healthy food security into the neighborhood through the collection and distribution of fresh produce to low-income families and individuals. All produce distributed has been donated by various local farmers in the West Michigan area.

Finding a consistent, reliable source of helping hands during the gleaning season is paramount to the success of HGI. The goal for the “Partnership Project” is to connect with another organization, Spectrum Health of West Michigan, to foster a long term, year round volunteer network for HGI. A profile for HGI was designed and will be posted on Spectrum Health’s Community Service Network. A framework of this profile will be provided in order to ensure possible replication with other community partners. Spectrum Health’s Insite web-page is a social network where the profile will be created. Due to the short time frame provided within the semester, we faced different challenges. However considerations for the future along with grant money is still in the process. Our greatest hope is that this connection created between Spectrum Health and HGI will result in many more volunteers, now and for years to come.

Introduction to Food Issues

The Heartside district is located in the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan and sits along the Grand River from Wealthy Street to Fulton Street. The total population of Heartside is 2,937 [as of 2010], the unemployment rate is 22.5 per cent and 42.5% of the households reported not having access to a car (Web, Community Research Institute). With the national unemployment rate at only 5% (Web, National Employment Monthly Update) it is clear that the Heartside community is struggling. Concurrent with high unemployment rates comes the repercussions of living in an impoverished community, including homelessness and food insecurity. The Heartside community is defined on HGI's homepage as a diverse neighborhood where at least "51% [of the residents] are below the poverty line, 34% receive Food Stamps/SNAP benefits, etc and the median household income is a mere \$13,495. USDA designates the neighborhood as a low-income, low access food desert" (Web, HGI Mission and History).

Food deserts, defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) are "vapid of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers" in the immediate living areas of those afflicted (Web, USDA defines Food Deserts). Income and transportation are the main factors determining access to healthy food providers in distant locations. This is not an option for many community members in Heartside. Small convenience stores have taken the

place of health food providers. These small stores usually have a high content of 'energy-dense', often devoid of nutritional foods, this contributes to a variety of health issues as a result (Walker et al. 2010). These energy-dense foods tend to be mainly low-cost and are an immediate option to low-income households, such as those found in the Heartside District. "Overconsumption is easy to achieve, can be habitual and may lead to obesity. This coupled with limited opportunity for physical activity enhances the likelihood of obesity in low income, food-insecure individuals, families and communities" (Block *et. Al*, 2006). Providing access to these healthy food will offer a solution to combatting food insecurity and food disease in low-income households across the nation, and locally.

In an increasing amount of inner city neighborhoods like Heartside, populations are plagued with disease and poverty due to the lack of nutritional education, income, and resources (to gain access to health food providers, markets, or supermarkets etc.). These factors create a vicious cycle of high expenses and poor health care. In a selected reading, *Food, Genes and Culture*, G. P. Nabhan discusses and analyzes the rampant food diseases in the United States. Nabhan goes into details about the activity of diabetes as an epidemic and stresses that food related diseases are directly related to what we consume. Nabhan states, "most experts point to the rise in consumption of high-fructose corn sugar, but what's painfully absent from the discussion is the connection between health and food ..." (Nabhan, 2013). Nutrition education is paramount to the health care crisis, mainly

focusing on diabetes. Education about nutrition is also key to the mission of HGI, this is one of the goals of the education program that HGI wants to design in the hopes of creating new ideas and eating habits in the Heartside neighborhood.

Framing the Issues of HGI

The Heartside Gleaning Initiative (HGI) is a product of Lisa Sisson, a professor at Grand Valley State University, who used time on sabbatical to perform studies regarding local nutrition. Upon conducting research, she found that soup-kitchen patrons were being fed, but not receiving proper proportions to sustain health (Sisson 2011) in Heartside community soup-kitchens. It was that research that prompted Sisson to found HGI.

The Heartside Gleaning Initiative (HGI) not only seeks to provide access to healthier options, but they also intend to provide education to further awareness of nutrition to encourage life-long choices. These efforts strive to empower individuals in the community with the knowledge and security about nutrition and healthy eating. The focus of HGI's mission is to help redirect food waste to those in need in the Heartside neighborhood of Grand Rapids, Michigan. This can be accomplished with the help of volunteers and supporters to provide education and nutritious food to Food Banks, Soup Kitchens and Individuals.

With the assistance and support of many very generous farmers at Fulton St. Market, HGI is able to put their mission into action. Every weekend from early June to mid October, HGI volunteers go to the Fulton St. Market to collect leftover produce

donations that would otherwise be committed to 'waste'. The food collected is then transported by a volunteer's vehicle directly from the market to various locations. These locations include soup kitchens as well as direct distribution to individuals.

In an interview with HGI's Director, specific areas that had room for improvement were outlined. The immediate needs of HGI were as follows: (1) a company car for transportation of volunteers and produce, (2) a full-time volunteer or employee, (3) a low-cost permanent kitchen space for nutrition education and storage of produce, (4) funding for travel expenses etc. and finally (5) more awareness and more volunteers especially for the summer season.

Action Plan Objectives

Our main interest was to work with HGI on the struggles of not having adequate assistance in the form of volunteers, as well as a possible full-time employee. We also wanted to address the lack of an owned form of transportation for volunteers and produce. As stated in *Disparities and access to healthy food in the United States: A review of food deserts literature*, "lack of transportation is echoed throughout the literature as a strong issue. Many low-income households do not have access to a car or the means of getting to a supermarket outside of their immediate neighborhood" (Walker, *et al.*, 2010). This issue is prevalent within the scope of HGI's focus. By providing HGI with a vehicle and access to many volunteers, it would open a door to the possibility of collecting more produce from a larger list of locations.

Not only was the lack of volunteers, transportation and nutritional education spaces an issue for the HGI team, but so is the lack in funding and donations from supporters and local awareness of HGI to bring in said funding. *Effective Non-Profit Management* states “non-profit organizations (NPO’s) have to acquire and secure adequate resources to achieve their goals and missions. In addition to resource acquisition, NPO’s have to have in place appropriate and strong financial controls to ensure effective utilization of their resources” (Ahmed, 2012). This information makes it clear that in order to help HGI find funding and resources, a strong and supportive partnership is needed to improve HGI’s potential for advance in their mission.

Due to the limited amount of time and resources available to us within the 10 week semester, the issue chosen to hone in on was providing HGI with access to steady volunteers and fund raising projects. We set out with the idea of providing an outlet for volunteers, either at GV or in the surrounding Grand Rapids area. Since food access is so important and is hard to take on, making more volunteers accessible to HGI will increase the amount of food that can be given to this community in need.

Since HGI’s “mission is to empower its local community to become healthier through nutrition education and providing access to healthy food”, having volunteers to do so is essential. There are several advantages to having access to volunteers, from Ahmed’s *Effective Non-Profit Management* book, volunteers increase efficiency, expand organizational capability, improve community relations, and bring in

more credibility and objectivity to the organizations that they volunteer for. But volunteering is not a one way street, Ahmed also states that “citizen participation within an agency can build the job skills and work experience of volunteers, promote greater awareness of the pressures and constraints faced by service organizations, and generally improve relations within the community”(Ahmed, 2012).

This is why we wanted to create a profile in support of volunteering for HGI, and give this to one or many of the local organizations that have similar mission statements. This would give HGI access to a large pool of people that have an interest in volunteer opportunities in the Grand Rapids area. We chose Spectrum Health as our target of support because their mission is “to improve the health of the communities we serve” (About Our Hospitals, Spectrum Health). It is a goal of HGI to get the community in and surrounding Heartside to participate in the gleaning and to be board members at Heartside Gleaning Initiative, which is why Spectrum Health is a perfect fit, it will provide access to those volunteers surrounding Heartside.

Process and Methodology

Upon consideration of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative’s immediate needs, the necessity to gain a strong community partner became apparent. Local businesses and corporations within the Heartside district and surrounding areas were considered. In the end, the decision was to forge a partnership connection between Spectrum Health and HGI by creating a “volunteer profile” which would be posted to Spectrum

Health's system networking tool. The primary reasons for choosing the non-profit giant, Spectrum Health as a focal partner is that the Heartside district is a major community served by Spectrum: their mission statement being one that directly correlates with that of the HGI.

Spectrum Health has a long standing history with Grand Rapids, and has a large network of Corporate and individual volunteers/sponsors potentially of great assistance to the establishing and expanding on Heartside Gleaning Initiative. By partnering with Spectrum Health, Heartside will gain access to these necessary resources.

The specific methods used to do this were as follows:

1. Established a solid connection to Spectrum Health's network of volunteers through their personal social media platform called "Insite". This required the construction of a concise explanation of HGI's mission and history, and the provision of solid dates for volunteers to choose from to assist. This will result in a steady stream of necessary community volunteers throughout the year, as well as more general awareness of HGI and their mission.

2. Having developed the profile through "Insite", the discovery of the "Spectrum Health System Sponsorship Request" proposal was made. A submission was processed outlining exact details of how Spectrum Health's employees can be involved with volunteer opportunities, and provided information about the exact use for the sponsorship funds and what HGI will do to advertise Spectrum Health's involvement.

The timeline for the first portion of raising awareness and access to the volunteer base was immediate. By having posted information and opportunities this far ahead of the next summer season, it gives volunteers the opportunity to plan accordingly as well as provide a clear direction of what is needed or required by each volunteer. By being established and remaining on the roster for volunteer opportunities, it also generates necessary awareness that could result in the provision of HGI with access to resources that it needs. Secondly, the "Spectrum Health System Sponsorship Request" has an approximate six week processing timeline to be reviewed by the Corporate Sponsorship Committee. We have begun this process for HGI but relying on others to expedite information to make our deadline and acquire the grant for HGI presented extensive challenges.

For potential collaborators in this endeavor, there were established open communication lines with the Director and board members of HGI. Marketing, Community Engagement, Community and Public Relations departments of Spectrum Health. The Community Engagement and Social Media Marketing representative, and Manager of Community Relations are direct contacts of Spectrum Health and are direct contacts for this specific project.

Results

The results of the Partnership Project was a success. A connection between HGI and Spectrum Health's Community Service Network was accomplished. A post profiling HGI was designed specifically to advertise

and attract not only ~1500 possible volunteer connections but also volunteers for general duties and skilled necessities from the Spectrum Health Young Professionals group within Insite. This provides HGI with possible graduate students to volunteer services like accounting, dietitian/ nutrition education, legal professions and possible board memberships. It gives members contact information, facts about HGI, resources to the HGI website, brochures, annual reports of previous work done, and places to donate funds and time. The page will remain on the Spectrum In-site and will provide HGI a resource for much needed community members. The second part of our action plan was not completed due to an inability to make the semester deadlines. This particular outcome is discussed further in the future considerations.

Some major challenges faced were seated in maintaining timely communications. Parts of the required deadlines were not met due to the amount of inter-system collaboration that would have been necessary to see a full completion.

Future Considerations

The Spectrum Health Systems Sponsorship Request grant for 10,000 dollars was completed but the request is still in processing. The process was very lengthy, it required contact with many different people and expedited contact was a definite complication. This could be something for future parties to consider and complete. Although the funds may still be made available to HGI, attention should still be given to ensure full completion.

Two additional ideas were presented to HGI: (1) to develop an online crowdsourcing campaign to raise awareness and make connection for HGI to raise funds, expand ideas, and market themselves, and (2) to help HGI win a grant money contest through Facebook. To win the contest would require spreading the word about HGI in order to receive the most 'likes'. HGI will win \$5,000 along with a new community of supporters if successful.

First consideration made was to have an online crowdsourcing campaign because of the practical, cost friendly way of raising awareness about HGI's mission. This would also include the possibility of being able to accept donations from supporters. The benefits of online crowdsourcing is that it is very manageable, unlike a fundraiser held in a single location.

The second idea had its benefits of winning \$5,000 and connecting through Facebook with a sizeable amount of possible supporters in and out of the area if won.

All of these ideas are great resources for HGI to tap into when the time is right, all have potential of benefiting the HGI team and its mission greatly.

Author Contributions

H.C., J.N. and K.K. all contributed in the writing of the research paper. H.C., J.N, K.K. and N.V. edited the papers, along with a class peer review. H.C., J.N., and K.K. invested their time into community research through volunteer opportunities with Heartside Gleaning Initiative. H.C. made appropriate connections at Spectrum Health to gain access to Insite. K.K., J.N. and N.V. worked in tandem with H.C. to produce a

presentation of items for ideation. H.C. and K.K. created the profile framework for the volunteer network.

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Appendix

HEARTSIDE GLEANING INITIATIVE



Every Saturday: June - October

Why Volunteer?

The Heartside community encompasses one of the central districts in the downtown Grand Rapids area stretching east for several blocks along the Grand River from Wealthy Street to Fulton Street. Of the greater than 2,000 residents in the Heartside neighborhood, 51% are below the poverty line, 34% receive Food Stamps/SNAP benefits, 25% are unemployed, and the median household income is a mere \$13,495. USDA designates the neighborhood as a low-income, low access food desert.

Get Involved:

Heartside Gleaning Initiative (HGI) is in need of collection and distribution volunteers, and is seeking volunteer service from professionals with nutrition education backgrounds, accounting skills, legal advisors and future board members.

Contact Us:

Email: heartsidegleaning@gmail.com

Follow us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/heartsidegleaninginitiative>

Visit our website at <http://www.heartsidegleaning.org/>

“Heartside Gleaning Initiative’s (HGI) mission is to empower the Heartside neighborhood and surrounding communities to become healthier through increased access to healthy foods and nutrition education.”

- Lisa Sisson
HGI Chair



Photo from www.HeartsideGleaning.org

Statistics

- ◆ 2014– 17,000+lbs of produce gleaned
- ◆ 2015– 19,000+lbs gleaned, a 12% increase
- ◆ Over 50,700 servings of fresh produce
- ◆ 100% of produce was grown and distributed in West Michigan