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## Bringing Fresh Produce to a Heartside Daycare; Heartside Gleaning Initiative Partnership

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## **Bringing Fresh Produce To A Heartside Daycare; Heartside Gleaning Initiative Partnership.**

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### *Abstract*

The Gleaning Initiative is a Non-Profit organization in the Grand Rapids community. Every Saturday afternoon, their team of volunteers collects produce donated by farmers who attend the Downtown and Fulton Street farmers markets in downtown Grand Rapids. After collecting the produce they distribute it throughout the Heartside Community at food pantries and low income housing. While attending the Gleaning Initiative volunteer opportunities as a group we have observed how the Initiative could reach more people in the community.

Throughout our research we found the need for fresh produce in daycare centers located in communities declared as food deserts. Kids are not receiving the proper nutrition because of the lack of access to healthy foods. Additionally, the centers are unable to afford to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables because of the cost. Our attention has been mainly focused on the Hill Child Development Center. Our goal is to incorporate donated produce from the Gleaning Initiative into the meals served by the Hill Child Development Center day care staff.

Through a series of collaborators, we opened the lines of communications between the Heartside Gleaning Initiative and daycare centers in the area. We highlighted a series of recommendations to make distribution to the daycare center part of the regular route for the 2015 gleaning season. We hope this project will continue to increase the amount of people the Gleaning Initiative reaches each year. Our group would also like to see children in the Heartside community get the proper nutrition they need to prevent obesity or any other health risk they could face.

## Introduction

Malnutrition and lack of access to nutritional food is an issue people face all over the world, including the United States of America. The USDA has developed a method used to declare areas and neighborhoods as food deserts. In the article, *Mapping Food Desert in The US*, authors Michele Ver Poley, David Nulph, and Ryan Williams define a food desert as a low-income census tracts with a substantial number or share of residents with low levels of access to retail outlets selling healthy and affordable foods (2011). In a 2011 article, *Help for Food Deserts*, Mass Market Retailers claim 25.3 million people live in food deserts in the United States. Of those people 6.5 million are children. They also go on to report that people in the communities' only real source of food for people that live in these areas are fast food restaurants and convenience stores (Mass Market Retailers, 2011).

There happens to be a food desert in the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan. In the article, *Starved for Access: Life in Rural America's Food Desert*, authors Lois Wright Morton and Troy C. Blanchard did research regarding the access to supermarkets and places where families can buy fresh foods and produce in Grand Rapids. They found that less than half of the families in the Heartside Community do not have a way to make it to a supermarket (Morton and Blanchard, 2007). The Gleaning Initiative is a Non-Profit organization in Grand Rapids that collects donated produce from farmers who attend the Downtown and Fulton Street farmers markets on Saturday afternoons. After collecting the produce they distribute it throughout the Heartside Community at food pantries and low income housing (Heartside Gleaning Initiative).

In their first year of distribution, the Gleaning Initiative has made an incredible impact on the Heartside Community. Farmers have been increasing their donations each week. By the end of the harvest season the initiative was collecting and distributing over a thousand pounds of food at a time (Heartside Gleaning Initiative). Even though they have made incredible progress in their first year, there is still room for improvement. After hearing about the health of the members of the Heartside Community, we were inspired to look into the nutritional values of meals being served to the children raised in the community. We have chosen to assist the Initiative by building communication between the initiative and the Hill Child Development Center in the Heartside Community.

## Action Plan

Our group wanted to lay the foundation and write recommendations for the Hill Child Development Center to become an additional drop off of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative distribution on Saturday afternoons. Our project took place in two locations: Grand Valley State University and the Heartside Community of Grand Rapids, MI. Our group choose this area of focus because after doing research and interviewing different people close to this subject we found that children who live in communities labeled as food deserts are not getting the proper nutrition and therefore unable to develop healthy long habits related to diet. Additionally fresh produce is very expensive for day care centers; being able to donate the food would allow the staff to incorporate nutrient rich foods into the meals they serve to children.

## Process

A majority of our research has been done via informal interviews and through a process of networking. Fresh produce is very

expensive for day care centers. They prepare three to four meals a day for the kids. In the 2012 article, *Improving Nutrition in Home Child Care: Are Food Costs a Barrier*, authors Pablo Monsivais and Donna B Johnson point out how the extra cost of fresh produce might be preventing day care centers in the United States from incorporating it in their meals. “Longitudinal studies have linked rising fruit and vegetable prices with increasing BMI in children. Nutrient-dense foods – including fresh vegetables and fruit – are more costly than less healthful options and the disparity in cost is increasing over time” (Monsivais and Johnson, 2012). They go on to say adults have found that least “costly diets” have fewer vegetables and fruits in them. The Nutrition Journal also conducted a research in 14 daycare units of low income family. In the 2011 journal, *Nutritional status of pre-school children from low income families*, it found that the children had higher body mass index (BMI) than the recommended number of National Center for Health Statistics (Shopes and et al, 2011). We have met with professors at Grand Valley State University and have been in contact with individuals working in the Heartside Community. Our main contact has been with Lisa Sisson who is the founder of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative. She conducted a study into the nutrition and health of people in the Heartside Community. In collaboration with and Lara Jaskiewicz 2014 their research, *Food Access and the Downtown Market Grand Rapids, Michigan*, they found the only consistent fresh produce that was sold were onions, tomatoes, and limes. Additionally, only two stores sold greater than ten varieties of fresh fruits and vegetables. Sisson and Jaskiewicz reported that families who had children in the community felt there was a lack of availability of fresh fruits and vegetables (2014).

Professor Sisson expressed the interest in what the day care centers of the Heartside Community are feeding children. She directed us to the Kate O’Keefe who is a Heartside Collaborator working to bring organizations and people within the community, together. Kate provided us with information on the rules and regulations in place in regards to serving meals in day care centers. She also informed us the age range of the children in the centers was infancy to four years old (personal communication, 2014). O’Keefe directed us to the Hill Child Development Center director Sue Davidson, who quickly introduced our group to their nutritionist, Sue Gilbert. She informed of us what goes into preparing the meals for the children. Gilbert explained they prepare three meals a day: breakfast, lunch, and afternoon snack. She said they serve 50 children, and plan out a menu a week prior to serving. Gilbert said the center would need to know what they could expect from the Heartside Gleaning Initiative before their delivery on Saturday so they can plan what they are receiving into the menu. Professor Fauvel and Sisson advise our group to talk to GVSU Sustainable Agriculture Project (SAP) director, Dave Feenstra regarding federal and state guidelines. The SAP incorporated the food they grew into GVSU campus dining center, The Connection. Feenstra said the biggest obstacle they had to focus on was the cleaning process. They had to get cleared by the state of Michigan to make sure the SAP was not using any type of chemicals. Feenstra informed us, even though Heartside will be the middle man delivering food to Hill Child Development Center, we would need to check with the farmers that were donating and make sure they were using proper sanitation techniques to clean their food (Feenstra, personal communication, 2014).

## Results and Challenges

We achieved our original goal to have Heartside Gleaning Initiative distribute food into the Hill Child Development Center as a possibility for the 2015 gleaning season. The fresh produce would be integrated into meals and used as a snack option. The Initiative can contact Sue Davidson at [gnsgilbert@yahoo.com](mailto:gnsgilbert@yahoo.com) or by phone 616-780-0628. Lanie Moore, who helps out Sue Gilbert with the meals, is open to communication as well. Her email is 4455redroom@gmail.com.

Initially our group struggled to figure out what we wanted to focus on. We began with the idea of helping out with the distribution process of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative, but that was too broad. After speaking with Professor Sisson we were informed that the day care centers in the Heartside Community were an area of interest for the Gleaning Initiative. Once our group was able to focus on helping the day care centers in the Heartside Community the project became more of a reality because we had a main focus. Another challenge and unknown our group faced in the process was dealing with federal and state food guidelines. After talking to Dave Feenstra about working with those guidelines, it looked as if it would be possible but may require a longer process than originally expected (personal communication, 2014). Our group was not sure what type of restrictions or if any other rules the Hill Child Development Center had to follow. However once we were able to talk to Sue Gilbert, her confidence in the donation process eased our worries about potential regulations (personal communication, 2014).

The main challenge ahead is making sure the Bethlehem Lutheran Church Day Care Center is working with the menu of the Hill day care center. After speaking with Sue Gilbert, she informed us that Bethlehem Church plans out their menu for the

following week before the drop off date of Saturday afternoons. If the Gleaning Initiative does not know what they will get an abundance of that week, it will be hard for the day care to integrate it into their meals. It may be difficult for the Gleaning Initiative to inform Hill Development Center what to expect. The produce donated the most can vary week from week. Heartside can only speculate, however, after doing this for one year they will have an idea of the fruits and vegetables they can expect to see the most. Another potential step to develop is to appoint someone to contact the Hill Child Development Center a month before the Gleaning Initiative starts. If not, they will not become a part of the distribution drop off route and will not receive fresh produce.

The unknowns that we face are the federal and state guidelines the daycare unit may need to oblige by. In conversation with Dave Feenstra we noted the whole process the Sustainable Agriculture Project (SAP) had to go through. It might be different since Heartside is not growing the food themselves, not selling it, but simply distributing as a donation.

### **Future Consideration**

We talked with Sue Gilbert, head nutritionist at Hill Child Development Center, and she said the church would be interested in being a part of the distribution drop off of the Heartside Gleaning Initiative. She said to contact her in a month before the season starts, so the daycare center and Heartside can work out how the distribution logistics. After creating a relationship with the Hill Development Center, hopefully this will open the doors for Heartside Gleaning Initiative to reach out to other daycare facilities in the Heartside Community. We would like to see the Heartside Gleaning Initiative continue to reach more people

especially the children so they will get the proper nutrition essential in the prevention of health problems as they grow and develop and create lifelong healthy eating habits.

Community members can help by volunteering their time and help the Gleaning Initiative delivering the food to Hill Child Development Center.

Future students can easily pick up this project where we leave it. We have set up a plan they will just have to work with the Heartside Gleaning Initiative and Bethlehem Church to carry it out. Our hope is for it to be part of the normal distribution process on Saturday afternoons. Students can continue to reach out to other institutions in the area, which could benefit from the Heartside Gleaning Initiative. Our group was unable to reach out to the Westminster Child Development Center, so future students could contact them and see if they would be interested in a similar arrangement.

For anyone else interested in helping out daycares or distributing food, hopefully we will set a blueprint of steps required, and people to be contacted. Also, our hope is that someone will continue to reach out to other locations in the Heartside Community that could benefit from the Gleaning Initiative. While volunteering, we also saw a need to find a way for the Gleaning Initiative to reach more individuals. When we were at 50 Weston in downtown Grand Rapids, many residents of the building showed up while we were packing up to leave. Additionally, there might be people who live in this apartment buildings and unable to leave their home. Going into the future a great area of interest could be how can the Gleaning Initiative reach more

individuals in the community? Heartside Gleaning Initiative has done so much in just one year, it will be exciting to see how they continue to grow.

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