

VISTA CONCEPT LETTER

Area served

Springfield Community Gardens is a grassroots nonprofit with a mission to create gardens that strengthen neighborhoods where people grow healthy relationships, food, and community. The city of Springfield in Missouri is the project target audience which serves about 165,000 individuals in the city limits. Our vision is a community where everyone has access to healthy, local food.

As we begin to change food culture within our city and work toward our mission and vision, outlying communities will be indirectly affected by our efforts. Rural farms will move more food into the city as there will be a demand in the market.

Need

Springfield, MO is a mid-sized town with 164,122 people and an estimated population growth of 2.9% since 2010[1]. Greene County ranks 38th in health outcomes and 15th health factors out of 115 counties in Missouri.[5] Chronic disease is a significant public health issue. From 2007-2011 eight of the leading ten causes of death in Greene County result from chronic disease. In 2011, heart disease alone was the cause of 32.5% of all deaths in Greene County and it listed as a contributing factor in 51.4% of all deaths. Heart Disease and other related conditions (e.g. stroke, hypertension) accounted for 39% of all chronic disease related emergency room visits made by Greene County residents in 2011.

There has been significant growth in the number of households living below the federal poverty line in Springfield, MO. According to the Census Bureau, 9.9% of households were below the poverty line in 2000, growing to 21.8% in 2010, and 25.7% in 2015. The number of individuals in poverty has grown by more than 250% in 15 years. Twenty-five percent of the population lives below the Federal Poverty Level,[3] and Springfield is the only metro area in Missouri the Department for Housing and Urban Development has given the designation “severe fiscal distress.”[4]

[1] Census Bureau, 2013

[2] Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 2015

[3] Census Bureau, American Communities Survey, 2009-2013

[4] Department for Housing and Urban Development

[5] County Health Rankings, 2015

[6] Springfield-Greene County Community Health Assessment, 2014

The root causes of poverty and the reasons for local growth are complex and stem from several local and global factors. These factors are low wages, the rising cost of living in the United States, high levels of child abuse and neglect, individual circumstances, predatory practices that exploit the poor and an inability to transition out of poverty without having a dramatic loss of supportive services created by the “cliff effect”. Poverty can affect several social issues like the achievement gap, public safety, quality of housing stock, and the ability to sustain important local services through tax revenue.

Without the ability to make a living wage, individuals and households are unable to afford basic needs like food and housing. According to SPS 2013-2014 annual report 60% of children in elementary schools and 57% of middle school students in Springfield are on Free or Reduced lunch. According to Ozarks

Food Harvest one in four families in the Ozarks, accesses one or more of the food pantries in their network. Sixty-seven percent of households in the Ozarks have to choose between paying for food or utilities. Efforts to reduce food insecurity include; food pantries, the SNAP program, backpack programs, community meals and community gardens. However, with all of this work, we still hear stories of children going to bed hungry. To address food insecurity we must get to the root of the problem.

How the VISTA Program will Help the Beneficiary Community

Springfield Community Gardens is in need of full-time workers who can consistently be available to create systems that will improve programming and daily operations. As a grassroots endeavor, we are struggling to garner a salaried staff who can be available to manage our gardens, volunteers, educational programming, and financial development consistently. AmeriCorps VISTA Program is a cost-effective way to have educated workers who will learn and grow with the organization as they build systems and procedures for long term sustainability.

We believe that if we can build our capacity, we can be more efficient. We will be able to generate more revenue to build out our operating budget, create policy and procedures to manage all aspects of organizational operations, spend more time building relationships with volunteers, continue to build successful programming and expand our reach to help people out of poverty.

Proven Success

Since its inception, SCG has done an exceptional job staying nimble and grassroots driven. Focusing on asset-based community development, the organization has allowed communities to use what they already have to help themselves move out of poverty. While volunteers have done a fine job leading such efforts, the organization has grown to the point where utilizing full-time individuals carrying out the daily operations of the organization is necessary in creating intentional, anti-poverty efforts. Not only have we proven that we do a fine job of building relationships among community members, we also have been able to create strong working relationships with many other organizations in Springfield including: City of Springfield, Community Partnership of the Ozarks, Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Cox Health, Habitat for Humanity of Springfield, Mercy Hospital, Springfield-Greene County Health Department, Springfield Park Board, University of Missouri Extension, and the YMCA. Together, we are working toward building a thriving local food shed that provides local food access to everyone.

How We Know VISTA Members will Make a Positive Impact

In the summer of 2015, Springfield Community Gardens was awarded grant funding through the Missouri Convergence Fund in partnership with the YMCA. Instead of those funds going to one constituent, they were shared among five part-time 'interns' through paid stipends. These individuals worked from May 2015 to August 2015. In those five months, SCG was able to determine the needs of the organization, create job roles for future interns and staff, and build out an operational budget for 2016. Below are some specific benchmarks the organization was able to achieve with these interns:

- Organize educational workshops for Garden Leaders
- Leverage resources with food bank, Ozarks Food Harvest, to coordinate the use of volunteers who already work with anti-poverty issues
- Manage the Produce Distribution, a program that donates produce to families in need.

- Write three more grants which led to more programming; eg. the creation of a High Yield Farmer Training program that will work out of a community farm to train more future farmers and subsequently feed more people.
- Develop key relationships with City of Springfield which led to a collaboration on a city grant for the ability to have connected bike lanes within the gardens in Council Zone 1
- Rewrite a website
- Draft first official SOP
- Create volunteer workdays and provide oversight to 18 gardens
- Build two more gardens
- Provide permaculture and water catchment workshops
- Event-planning for two fundraisers
- Launch a crowdsourcing campaign for 10k to build a greenhouse
- Market through social media accounts

These things were accomplished in just four months. We still have a long way to go as far as improving capacity, but we know that paid VISTA members working one year will only add to this success and the long-term sustainability of SCG. While the interns still volunteer, they are unable to work the same amount of hours without payment. Subsequently, 80% of the administrative tasks now falls on the shoulders of the President while the other 20% is managed by the board. This type of structure is not sustainable.

Strengthening Communities

Describe how your VISTA project aims to complement or expand current efforts in the community to address the need(s) described. Include how the project will be designed to build long-term sustainability.

Springfield Community Gardens operates 20 gardens and a supplemental produce distribution program that has already donated 85,000 pounds of produce and 3500 hours of volunteer time by the clients served this year. We also will break ground on a high-yield community farm later this month. In 2016, we need to build a stronger infrastructure to make expanding our programming (and reach) possible. Building capacity with replicable and efficient systems will provide long-term sustainability for our organization.

AmeriCorps VISTAS will meet the following goals for Springfield Community Gardens:

- Diversify our revenue streams through writing grants, planning fundraisers, and soliciting corporate sponsorships
- Complete an SOP/best practices manual including a volunteer manual and board policy guidelines
- Create our first annual report
- Develop streamlined programming and curriculum
- Design scaffolding for ongoing education in all gardens
- Add two greenhouses to the program to provide yearlong growth and education
- Expand Produce Distribution to two more locations in the city
- Create systems for adding more gardens
- Increase number of volunteer and volunteer hours

The VISTA program will be designed to meet these goals by creating a stronger organizational foundation. SCG will be able to optimize our current programs and create more programming that will

be able to provide more access to local, healthy food.

Measureable Outcomes for Community

The byproduct of this internal success will lead to positive outcomes for the community. This is what we will measure (Note that the data is currently collected by, and will continue to be recorded by, Springfield-Greene County Health Department):

- Pounds of produce donated from the gardens
- Pounds of produce donated by Ozarks Food Harvest
- Number of hours logged by volunteers
- Changes in diet and food choices
- Program efficiency and expansion efforts
- City policy changes to advocate local food access

Engaging Communities

How will VISTA members engage with community?

SCG has already built a friendly rapport with the neighborhoods we serve by providing education, cooking classes, blood pressure checks, and a variety of other services. VISTAS will easily be incorporated into this culture of caring.

How will the VISTA members' work to lift people out of poverty?

VISTAS will work to lift individuals out of poverty by working toward SCG's vision and mission. Gardens create safe environments where individuals are able to supplement their produce, build relationships, and build networks of support and trust where clients can more readily develop these relationships to receive services. The gardens provide a platform to help members deal with other social challenges. For example, by working with the Health Department, we address chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, heart problems, high blood pressure, and obesity. Working with Habitat for Humanity, we are a liaison for addressing affordable housing. In 2016, we will be providing workers who will help register neighbors for SNAP in addition to supplemental produce.

State how many VISTAs you are requesting and what activities they would perform.

We are requesting three VISTAS. We believe each VISTA will be instrumental in the long-term success of SCG.

We need:

(1) Development Coordinator: This person will work closely with the E.D. and board to delegate tasks and oversee projects. The Development Coordinator will also write the SOP, write educational curriculum, and plan activities with the Operations Manager and Volunteer Coordinator. This person will increase current revenue streams by writing grants, planning fundraisers, and will develop new funnels.

(1) Operations Manager: Create systems for management and logistics of successful garden operations. This individual will be in contact with Garden Leaders to understand their respective needs. This person will fulfill purchasing orders, manage garden leaders, and oversee quality control in the Greenhouses to ensure they are fully functioning and meeting educational obligations. This person will work very closely with Project Manager and Volunteer Coordinator to orchestrate volunteer work days, events, and educational workshops.

(1) Volunteer Coordinator: Volunteer Coordinator will create a volunteer database for scheduling and managing volunteers. He/she will solicit more volunteers, coordinate volunteer events, and build ongoing relationships with volunteers. Volunteer Coordinator will also work closely with partner

organizations to leverage current resources that generate more volunteers. With the Project Manager, the Volunteer Coordinator will co-write the Volunteer Handbook.

Once we develop our operating budget, we will hire full-time staff post the VISTA period. This will make the organization sustainable beyond the three-year planning period. This process won't be entirely linear; VISTAS will be met with new challenges as the developed systems are tested, and they will be encouraged to laterally modify the processes as SCG responds to these challenges and needs.

Organizational Capacity

Detail your organization's experience operating anti-poverty programming.

In 2015 we have:

- Distributed & delivered 86,000 lbs of produce
- Managed over 10,000 hours of volunteer work
- Designed and led four educational workshops
- Led two literacy workshops
- Facilitated weekly blood pressure checks
- Held quarterly cooking classes
- Provided thousands of one-on-one encounters with clients in need to facilitate further services
- Developed an organic, communal farm in a low income area
- Implemented a high-yield farmer training program on the community farm

Define how community partners will be engaged with the project and what will be their roles.

Collaboration is key in solving poverty. SCG works closely with Ozarks Food Harvest to operate the Produce Distribution and to leverage more volunteers. Habitat for Humanity has provided for the Tom Watkins Community Farm and Springfield Public Schools has agreed to run a pilot farmer program for 7-12th graders at the farm as part of summer school programming. The City of Springfield is helping to fund one of our greenhouses. The City has also created a committee that includes SCG to build more sidewalks and bicycle routes to connect the gardens. The Springfield-Greene County Park Board offers the Horse Park for the literacy program. The YMCA is writing grants to help build a general operating budget for SCG.

These organizations will:

- Provide volunteers
- Help generate funding
- Provide oversight for legal documentations
- Provide land
- Expand programming
- Advocate for issues surrounding poverty
- Create policy changes
- Build capacity

Describe how the VISTA project will be managed and how VISTAs will be recruited and supervised.

List the resources—including office and desk space, access to computer and phone, and other supplies—that you will provide to the VISTAs.

The VISTAS will be managed by and report to the Executive Director. Initially, they will be recruited from a pool of interns SCG is already utilizing. We will also recruit members from other parts of the state and nation. SCG currently uses an office at The Fairbanks, a community wellness center in the middle of Council Zone 1. Desks, telephones, computers, and other office supplies will be provided for VISTA use.

