



Iowa immigrant and refugee incubator farm program

Abstract: A one-year planning grant was used by a Des Moines (IA) area group to plot the most effective ways to encourage and support refugee and immigrants interested in starting farm enterprises in the region around Des Moines.

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Budget:
\$6,985 for year one

Q How does a group develop a model for training refugee and immigrant growers to utilize their existing farming experience to establish successful small farm businesses in the Des Moines area?

A The planning team identified necessary resources (financial and other) needed for training related to land, curriculum, education and outreach.



MARKETING

Background

The Iowa Immigrant and Refugee Incubator Farm Program was responding to the desires of refugees and immigrants who have come to the state with farming skills and wish to continue growing food, either as a source of income or to provide culturally appropriate food for their families. The planning grant was used to research existing training programs for new residents to start small farm businesses, and then create a framework for a similar program to assist Des Moines-area refugees and immigrants. The components of the training program include land availability, connections to refugee and immigrant populations, curriculum development, educators and trainers, farm equipment, farming skills and marketing.

Approach and methods

The planning team created a three-phase initial framework for the program. Phase 1 connected immigrant and refugee growers to garden plots near their homes so that they would have an opportunity to grow food in Iowa and also allow interested entrepreneurs a chance to hone their skills in a new environment. These gardeners will serve as the initial candidate pool for potential participants in the training farm planned for Phase 2. The training farm will offer participants individualized assistance and education on horticulture, business development, financial literacy and marketing. They would begin growing crops on smaller pieces of land and gradually increase their acreage as they moved through the training process. As they learned how to operate a small farm business, this program would help them transition to Phase 3. They would then move onto their own land and start their own farm businesses.

Results and discussion

This planning grant focused mainly on implementing Phase 1 during the grant year and doing research to plan for implementation of Phases 2 and 3 in the future. A waiting list of more than 140 interested gardeners from the refugee community was assembled and maintained by Lutheran Services of Iowa (LSI). The planning team



*Karenni and Woodlawn,
May 2011.*

worked to place 100 of these gardeners on new or existing garden plots near their homes. They were able to grow food for home consumption during the planning year. Eighty of the 100 plots were in four new gardens that the planning team created in partnership with private landowners, the City of Des Moines, volunteers and interested gardeners.

The planning team also consulted with four existing training farm programs to learn more about their operations and determine how a similar program might be implemented in Des Moines. Members of the planning team traveled to Marshalltown Community College, New Entry Sustainable Farming Project (Massachusetts) Minnesota Food Association and New Roots for Refugees (northeast Kansas).

Conclusions

After research and visits to incubator training farms, it is clear that these are viable options for training refugees and immigrant growers to establish their own farming enterprises. However, in order to locate such a farm in Des Moines in the Metro Waste Authority area, a significant investment of financial resources is needed, perhaps from a USDA or Office of Refugee Resettlement grant. This would provide support for equipment, infrastructure and staffing.

Necessary elements of such a program would include:

- A clear understanding of the education, language and resource level of targeted participants
- Personnel and knowledge base to deliver needed training and individual assistance
- Extensive screening of potential participants to ensure suitability for the program
- Training on quarter-acre plots with opportunities to increase acreage when ready
- Training program of at least three years with a mix of classroom and field work
- Structure to allow participants to assume full costs of operation by their final year of training
- Appropriate curriculum and training materials
- A Community Supported Agriculture model with market opportunities for participants
- Help connecting participants to a variety of market relationships during training period
- Individualized technical assistance in horticulture, business management, and marketing
- Assistance for participants to graduate onto their own land where they can operate an independent farm business

One area that needs more work is exploration of sustainable funding models that would allow the project to maintain the staff and resources it needs to continue the program beyond the original grant period.



Fall gardens, 2011.

Impact of results

This planning project has had several positive effects on Iowa agriculture. LSI has created additional community gardens in Des Moines that enhance local food production for families and neighborhoods with limited resources. It allowed LSI to develop training programs for these gardeners to improve their productivity as they adapt their previous agricultural experience to Iowa’s climate and markets. Ultimately, the results will allow LSI to establish a training farm, but in the meantime LSI will pursue an alternative model encouraging farm business creation. Iowans will be able to use the results of this project to provide training, education or microenterprise assistance to refugee and immigrant growers in their area.

Education and outreach

Project results were used for development of a series of eight workshops on “Growing Food in Iowa” to be taught by an ISU Master Gardener, ISU Extension Horticulturist, local organic farmer, and lifelong community gardener. The workshops are presented in four different languages (Nepali, Kirundi, Karen and Burmese) with two languages used per workshop. The initial series of workshops was attended by 55 people.

Leveraged funds

Additional funds for this project were leveraged by \$13,450 from 100+ Women Who Care -- Des Moines.

***For more information,
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