MU Extension Regional Specialists Work on Projects Related to Healthy Eating and Active Living

MU Extension state and regional specialists are available to assist Missourians in all 114 counties and the city of St. Louis. These specialists are highly trained in the program area that they represent whether that is Agriculture and Natural Resources, Business Development, Community Development, Human Environmental Sciences, 4-H/Youth Development or Continuing Education. In addition to providing educational programming, MU Extension specialists also provide technical assistance to those with specific concerns.

MU Extension Community Development Regional Specialists contribute a variety of skills and expertise to projects related to healthy eating and active living. This newsletter story, thanks to an email interview with Kara Lubischer, MU Extension Community Development Specialist in St. Louis County, highlights a community food project in Old North St. Louis where MU Extension is one of several groups that have worked to open a grocery cooperative in a neighborhood that is considered a food desert.

How long have you been working with Old North St. Louis on their grocery cooperative project?
I began working with the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group (ONSLRG), the neighborhood non-profit community development corporation, in 2008. University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) and University of Missouri Extension have a nearly decade-long relationship with the Old North St. Louis neighborhood and ONSLRG working on housing workshops, community development, board of director training, and a history project.

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What role have you played in this project?
I have been working in Old North St. Louis since 2008 when we were approached by the executive director of ONSLRG to help close the food gap in this community. The nearest chain supermarket is over three miles away from the core of the community. For the 41% of residents in Old North St. Louis and the surrounding neighborhoods without a car, a 25- to 35-minute bus ride was necessary in order to purchase one’s groceries. It was time to close the food gap in this community not only by opening a grocery store but also by developing a comprehensive approach to increasing access to fresh, affordable, and healthy foods in this community.

The opening of a community-run grocery store was only one part of a comprehensive strategy developed to close the food gap in Old North St. Louis and surrounding neighborhoods. A five-part strategy was developed together in order to “green” this food desert by: (1) expanding the relatively new North City Farmer’s Market; (2) cultivating the 13th Street Community Garden; (3) establishing a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program; (4) opening a grocery co-op; and (5) providing educational opportunities for community residents.

Throughout the project, I worked on a team with Kay Gasen, MU Extension, and Sean Thomas, executive director of the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group. Each semester, UMSL graduate students worked on this project as part of a fellowship to learn more about community development and community building. Together, we researched co-ops (and other best practices) in other cities, recruited farmers, vendors
and other suppliers, and staffed a community resident planning committee. The planning committee, made up of residents, neighborhood business owners, and other stakeholders, steered the planning process for the Old North Grocery Co-op.

**What are some Community Development skills that you used as you worked on this project?**
The principles of good community development practice include: promote active participation, incorporate the diverse interests and needs of a community into the solution, develop leadership, and be open to a full range of action strategies. Adhering to these key principles was essential to the success of closing the food gap in this community. Participation from the community is vital – especially since, as is true with the cooperative model, the Old North Grocery Co-op is run by its members and receives input from the surrounding community.

Now that the store is open, a board of directors is being established and will serve as the formal governing body for the store. It is important to develop the leadership skills of the board members so that they may effectively lead the co-op. In the case of the Old North St. Louis project, the greatest community development principle used throughout this project was being open to, and developing, a wide range of action strategies in order to close the food gap in this community. No one single strategy would have worked in this community. Therefore, developing a comprehensive strategy was vital to the successful greening of the Old North St. Louis food desert.

Old North St. Louis Restoration Group is an MFH Healthy and Active Communities grantee. As a grantee, the group received funding to develop a seasonal farmers’ market prior to developing the Old North Grocery Co-op.
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Copy and paste into your browser the following link to see a video about the Old North St. Louis grocery cooperative [http://extension.missouri.edu/insider/](http://extension.missouri.edu/insider/).


For a list of regional and state community development specialists and descriptions of the programs that faculty are engaged in, visit [http://extension.missouri.edu/cd/](http://extension.missouri.edu/cd/).

**Other MFH Capacity Building Teams**

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**MFH Healthy & Active Communities—Implementation Team**

**Purpose:**

The MU Extension Implementation Team provides grantees with assistance in implementing project activities. They are available by phone and email and for meetings in your community to provide program implementation support. Types of assistance might include: program specific assistance on topics such as worksite wellness, farm to school, and starting and sustaining community gardens; recruiting participants for community initiatives; fostering organizational buy-in and support; effectively engaging policy makers; and strategies to build community-partnerships to ensure program sustainability.

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