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Action Research Project Final
The Community Empowerment and Youth Enrichment (CEYE) Program

INTRODUCTION

The Community Empowerment and Youth Enrichment (CEYE) Program is comprised of three branches—Community Service, Food Access and Engagement, and Roosevelt Credit—which collectively aim to benefit the lives and futures of Chicago Lights Urban Farm (CLUF) volunteers, at-risk urban youths, and Cabrini seniors.

CEYE seeks to take teens out of a path of trouble and into a path of service, volunteerism, and eventually college and career. The program also seeks to empower and assist local seniors by improving their food access and strengthening their community connections. Below are the three points of movement within the program:

1. **Community Service:** The program begins with at-risk teens who are non violent juvenile offenders and detainees of The Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, and allowed to fulfill a certain number of community service hours in Chicago. These hours may be served at CLUF performing the various duties required to maintain the indoor/outdoor gardens and grounds.
2. **Food Access and Engagement (FAE):** This branch of the program begins to incorporate a service element for seniors and incapacitated individuals in the Chicago Lights Urban Farm (CLUF) and greater Cabrini Green community. The goals of the FAE branch would be to improve food access for local seniors; streamline the collective resources and benefits of CLUF and the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP); and encourage healthy yet affordable eating habits.
3. **Roosevelt Credit:** The program concludes with these same teens, having worked a set number of hours over several years, earning credit hours at Roosevelt University to be used towards a degree. This proposal would recommend three credit hours be awarded, likely as SUST credit. This will benefit teens by incentivizing them to pursue a degree which can lead them to fulfilling careers.

DETAILED PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The following sections discuss and describe the three core branches of the CEYE Program at length.

1. COMMUNITY SERVICE

By all accounts, there is little difference between an adult prison and the conditions inside of the juvenile detention center. As a matter of fact, in its present state, the experience of the juvenile detention center merely serves as a stepping stone towards the adult criminal justice system. Kaitrin Valencia, the Deputy Chief of the Cook County Juvenile Probation Department, has come to realize that the youth that fall into the grips of the system are better served in a supportive, community-based setting. "Anytime you institutionalize a kid, the likelihood is that kid is going to continue getting into the system and graduate into the criminal justice system," said Valencia. "And so our goal is the least restrictive setting, not necessarily to house them all together. Because that can breed more criminal activity in getting associations with people that they may not have been with on the street."

To that effect, Cook County has made deliberate efforts to shift the focus of the juvenile detention system from mere detention to rehabilitation and to counter recidivism. In 1998, more than 700 kids were housed in the juvenile detention center on a day-to-day basis. That number is down to 250, as several hundred are diverted into alternative programs like the one we are proposing. Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle even awarded \$800,000 last year to the alternative treatment programs, and she's expressed her wish that the detention center eventually shut down. Furthermore, alternative programs provide a significant savings to Cook County taxpayers. According to the Cook County Juvenile Probation Department, it costs approximately \$225,000 a year to house a juvenile at the detention center. Meanwhile, alternative programs, like the mentorship program directed by New Life Community Church, costs the county around \$36,000 total per year.

This is a moment that is primed for the success of the Community Empowerment and Youth Enrichment Program (CEYE), and ultimately, the success of the children that would be served by it. Out of the myriad programs developed as the county has embarked upon this new direction, none of them have the unique blend of community service and agricultural enrichment that CEYE has the potential to provide. We have experienced the redemptive benefit of community youth working at the Chicago Lights Urban Farm, so to provide other youth that may not have had the opportunity to have a program like this before they got into trouble, is simply a "no-brainer". Therefore, we propose employing non violent juvenile offenders at the Chicago Lights Urban Farm, to work alongside the Growing Power Youth Corps. By doing so, the youth would avoid direct incarceration, gain valuable skills, and also earn credits towards future education.

In this proposed community service, eligible youth would provide service to Chicago Lights Urban Farm in exchange for time served, "good time", and/or credits toward future education at Roosevelt University. Furthermore, their service would be an integral

component of a “sweat equity exchange” with community elders, who could, in turn, provide mentorship and necessary guidance. This project would save Cook County taxpayers money, reduce the youth recidivism rate, and assist at-risk youth to break free from the common cycle of crime and helplessness. To further the prospect of this proposal coming to fruition, we have enlisted the initial support of 27th Ward Alderman, Walter Burnett. Upon approval from the directors of CLUF, we would take our proposal to the office of Kaitrin Valencia, the Deputy Chief of the Cook County Juvenile Probation Department and await guidance on the next steps.

2. FOOD ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT (FAE)

Introduction. The Food Access and Engagement (FAE) component of the CEYE program seeks to improve food access for local seniors, while simultaneously helping them engage with local food resources and meet their nutritional needs.

The last residents of the Cabrini Green housing projects were relocated in 2010. Since that time, the inhabitants and identity of the Cabrini Green neighborhood have become increasingly scattered. Today, most seniors from the old Cabrini neighborhood live in mixed-income housing or senior living centers—in Cabrini Green proper and throughout the city.

Like many residents in low-income, minority communities, Cabrini seniors are faced with limited food access and veritable food deserts in their neighborhoods. Food isolation is a serious problem for all ages, but it is often compounded for seniors with reduced mobility and physical limitations. These circumstances can prevent them from pursuing outside resources available to other age groups.

In order to address these issues, the **CEYE program’s FAE branch aims to:**

- 1) Assist in the redemption of SFMNP coupons and distribution of produce
- 2) Supplement SFMNP produce with CLUF produce as needed

More details and descriptions for each of these two FAE goals are outlined below, following a summary of the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program.

What is the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP)?

The SFMNP is a federal grant program—funded by the USDA and administered at the State level—which seeks to “provide low-income seniors with coupons that can be exchanged for eligible foods at farmers’ markets, roadside stands, and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs”.

In 2011, the SFMNP operated in 51 states (including Illinois) and recognized territories. SFMNP benefits are reserved for low-income individuals who are 60+ years old and have household incomes not exceeding “185% of the Federal poverty income guidelines”.

The amount of funding available for each state SFMNP program differs, and is dependent on federal funding levels and individual state applications. The 2008 Farm Bill secured a total of \$20.6 million annually for the SFMNP through 2012. The State of Illinois received \$866,300 of this total last year, but the funding allotment for 2013 is still uncertain.

In general, SFMNP yearly benefits cannot be less than \$20 or exceed \$50 per individual. Coupons are distributed in the form of a yearly coupon booklet, which (in Illinois) contains seven \$3 coupons, or a \$21 value total. The Illinois SFMNP program operates from July 1st—September 30th each year, and this is the only time that coupons can be redeemed.

Coupons can only be used to purchase local fruits and vegetables from specific, SFMNP-approved farmers, farmers’ markets or CSAs. Commercial food retailers or food wholesalers cannot participate in the SFMNP, and approved farmers typically can’t sell nuts, grains or prepared food products (e.g. baked goods, dried fruits, honey, maple syrup, etc).

My initial understanding is that many low-income Chicago seniors, in the Cabrini neighborhood and elsewhere, use the SFMNP program (coordinated by Catholic Charities and the Chicago Department of Aging) and can/will continue to benefit from this resource. However, due to certain program restrictions, funding fluctuations and staff limitations, I believe the CEYE program (and specifically its FAE branch) can potentially improve the SFMNP’s efficacy and value within the Cabrini community. Preliminary suggestions in this regard are outlined in the next two sections.

1) Assist in SFMNP Coupon Redemption and Produce Delivery

Eligible SFMNP candidates will receive their yearly coupon booklet (containing seven \$3 coupons, or \$21) prior to the SFMNP season of July 1st—September 30th. Once the operating season has begun, seniors can redeem coupons for local produce at any point throughout that time period. Seniors are encouraged to redeem the entire amount for each coupon, as no change is given.

In general, SFMNP coupons are redeemed in person at a farmers’ market, a farmstand, or at a CSA pickup. If seniors cannot or do not want to pick up their own produce, they have the option of designating a “proxy” (friend, relative or hired helper) to do so for them.

According to a WIC/SFMNP/CSFP representative from the Illinois Department of Human Services, seniors can request or designate a proxy in their yearly SFMNP application. Otherwise, it’s possible to coordinate a proxy later on, but it’s unclear exactly how this process works, or who is provided as a proxy if a friend or relative is unavailable.

I would propose that the FAE, through CLUF and the CEYE program, volunteer Youth Corps services as potential proxies in the case one is needed for a Cabrini senior. This development would improve the convenience of SFMNP coupon redemption for incapacitated seniors; forge new community connections between age groups; help Cabrini seniors circumvent food access obstacles; and provide rewarding charitable experience for the CLUF Youth Corps and (possibly) CLUF community service volunteers.

2) Supplement SFMNP Produce with CLUF Produce as Needed

Through talks with different SFMNP reps, and through independent program research, a few inherent problems became apparent to me:

- 1) If state funding decreases, so does the amount of seniors receiving coupons
- 2) If the beneficiary list is cut down, no income-based analysis is conducted to ensure that poorest/neediest candidates aren't excluded—candidates receive benefits on a first-come, first-serve application basis
- 3) The number of yearly coupons given and their individual value isn't proportionate to local produce costs or daily nutrition needs
- 4) All eligible applicants are seldom (if ever) approved for the SFMNP before funds/booklets run out—there is a “waiting list” every year

I believe that the CEYE and FAE can partially alleviate these problems through a CLUF supplemental produce plan in the Cabrini community. While CLUF may not be recognized as an approved grower under SFMNP—I'm guessing non-profit growers are ineligible—I don't think there are legal restrictions preventing CLUF from independently supporting Cabrini seniors' produce needs.

By communicating with local SFMNP coordinators, CLUF and CEYE parties could provide SFMNP-relevant (but independent) food outreach services to Cabrini Green participants—the goal being to ensure seniors' dietary produce needs are met when and if SFMNP coupons are denied or inadequate.

The proxy services of CLUF Youth Corps and/or community service volunteers could be implemented again here. Not only could CLUF youth proxies perform the necessary supplemental produce deliveries for seniors, they could ensure this produce was provided to seniors free of charge—by performing volunteer sweat equity to cover food costs.

I'm unclear what funding rules and restrictions exist for CLUF as a non-profit. For example, I don't know if it would be acceptable to use charitable campaigns or crowd-funding efforts to help finance the CLUF supplemental produce plan (if needed). If such funding channels are prohibited, this suggestion can be discarded.

As an additional source of senior empowerment, and a possibility for returned investment in CLUF, groups of seniors from local centers could potentially request joint produce shares for a small joint fee.

This collaborative effort (between CLUF and SFMNP) would support the larger intentions of both organizations, while meeting FAE targets, and furthering the broader CEYE goals of community and youth enrichment.

3. ROOSEVELT CREDIT

Introduction. The Roosevelt credit portion of the CEYE program seeks to establish a meaningful foundation for a solid future that goes beyond the valuable experiences and interactions of the farm and senior work alone by offering college credit at Roosevelt University for the time spent on the CLUF. The fact is that turning eighteen, no longer being required to attend a school, perhaps moving out of one's parent's house, looking for income, presents a real turning-point for young people. Without much direction, any real plans for the future, perhaps little guidance available from parents, this can be a very critical time for a young person; it is the point at which he or she may simply see a life in school as just being out of reach, or "for someone else".

A 2012 [article](#) on Foxbusiness.com looked at how prepared high school seniors felt they were after high school. It states that, "Only 49% of high school seniors polled report that their school did a good job in preparing them for success in both college and the workplace." Work on the farm is incredibly valuable in this regard. Learning how to work under guidance, follow instructions, be patient, be responsible, work with others, understand new things, are all lessons learned in classrooms but also, and in a way unmatched by any classroom setting alone, real skills which are learned on the farm.

Being prepared for school and a career is critical, but none more so than those already becoming involved in crime. Countless studies show how staying in school and furthering a person's education will decrease their likelihood of being involved in criminal activities later in life. A 2006 [issue brief](#) published by the Alliance for Excellent Education talks about the reasons why continued education decreases crime:

- "People who have high school diplomas or better earn higher wages through legitimate work, thus reducing the individual's perceived need to commit a crime and/or raising the potential cost of crime to that person (i.e., getting caught and being incarcerated) to unacceptable levels."
- "The stigma of a criminal conviction may be greater for professional workers, who tend to have higher levels of education, than for those in lower-paying, lower-skilled jobs."
- "More time spent in the classroom may play a role in instilling values that are opposed to criminal actions."
- "Criminal behavior that begins during youth can continue into adulthood. By keeping adolescents in the classroom and off the streets, later criminal activity may be

avoided (Lochner & Moretti, 2004)”

Roosevelt University’s very vision of social justice, described on its [website](#) speak passionately about the need for social justice and a commitment to the community. Consider the ideas:

“Our view of social justice is based in a belief that fairness, honesty, integrity and impartiality should resonate throughout every institution within a civil society.”

“Over the years, Roosevelt University has fortified this singular dedication to civic and social responsibility, human rights, community partnerships, and public outreach – the kind of learning that transcends the classroom.”

“By reinforcing the importance of social consciousness to our students and greater community, the University plays a significant role in shaping the world’s next generation of progressive, ethical leaders.”

These sentiments could hardly align more with the goals of this program and this is an exciting opportunity for the school to demonstrate even more of a conviction to its principles. The following details are an outline for the potential credit earning component of the CEYE program.

Youth corp volunteers may earn 3 credit hours at Roosevelt University in the Sustainability Studies major by meeting the following requirements:

- a. The Youth Corp candidate will be aged 15-18 and will have:
 - i. Completed two consecutive seasons on CLUF
 - ii. Attended each week of the growing season _____ to _____ (no less than average 80% attendance)
 - iii. Completed a 1-2 page knowledge share essay the first season
 - iv. Completed a 2-3 page knowledge share essay the second season
- b. Knowledge Share Essay - This essay should help the candidate distill his/her experience on the farm into a meaningful reflection of lessons learned. The formatting should follow the outline below:
 - i. The paper should begin with a short paragraph about the volunteer and their time on the CLUF including:
 1. What the farm means to him/her
 2. Why service/volunteerism is important to him/her
 3. What fresh local food means for him/her
 4. What kinds of things surprised him/her about their time on the farm

- ii. The next section should detail some specific farming knowledge acquired throughout their time on CLUF. Examples may include:
 - 1. Detail the process of cultivating worms
 - 2. Detail the process of turning soil
 - 3. Detail the process of watering plants
 - 4. Detail the process of organizing the shed or greenhouse
 - 5. Detail the process of "dead-heading" plants
- iii. The final section should talk about how the candidate believes their time on CLUF has helped them prepare for college and/or career. They may speak about topics such as:
 - 1. How working in a team environment has enriched him/her
 - 2. How finding time for CLUF on top of household chores or other duties has afforded him/her prioritization skills
 - 3. How work on the farm has afforded him/her an ability to follow direction
 - 4. How work on the farm has afforded him/her an ability to learn things which he/she did not know before
- c. Program Notes
 - i. *The Student may seek assistance with any writing via Roosevelt writing lab
 - ii. The submission should be made to Roosevelt professor (Mike Bryson) and CLUF director Natasha Holbert

CONCLUSION

The Community Empowerment and Youth Enrichment (CEYE) Program has the potential to change not only the lives of the young people that it would enrol, but the entire community, and perhaps even the world. One is limited only by one's imagination in guessing at what ways the youth in this program may positively contribute to this planet's future. It is our collective hope that it may become a living/breathing part of the CLUF and it was our deepest pleasure to work together on putting the ideas in this program forward for consideration.