Durant Democrat

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Sowing seeds for positive change

Perhaps nobody would expect a garden to be growing outside the Bryan County Health Department. But it's a place concerned with residents' well-being, so why not plant some good ol' fruits and veggies?

Some community-minded people, most with ties to the health department, literally got their hands dirty for this cause.

In a trio of wood-frame boxes, they planted seeds for broccoli, carrots, corn, collards, cucumbers, okra, squash, watermelon, etc. And in growing the fruits and vegetables, they hope healthier lifestyles will sprout and spread throughout the area.

This is the start of the Bryan County Community Garden, created to aid in changing the mindset or habits of Bryan County residents by offering fresh fruits and vegetables to them at no charge when they need it. Approximately one in five residents (21 percent) lived in poverty, according to Oklahoma Health Department annual report released in 2014.

"I'm very excited about the prospect of community gardens, growing fruits and vegetables, and the community coming together," said Gina Rodgers. "There are many people who rely on food banks and are just not getting enough vegetables."

Local food banks could, in fact, reap the benefits of this garden. Community gardens in Oklahoma typically are harvested for non-profit service organizations.

"There is a lack of fruit and vegetable consumption in our community," said Cassie Mullens, who helped plant the garden and is the local resource coordinator for SoonerStart. "Something like this that makes them readily available could help change and improve that."

Access to fresh fruits and vegetables is an economic concern as well as a matter of convenience. With busy schedules, having to go here and there for this and that, people tend to see visiting a fast-food restaurant as an easier option than cooking a healthy meal with high nutritional value.

Although it is starting small, it is the hope that the garden's success will lead to installation of more raised gardens throughout the area and reach all those in need. The project is expected to have an impact on the community as, in time, consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables increases locally.

"The Bryan County Community Garden is a great initiative that we hope becomes widespread throughout the county in efforts to increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables," said Williams Maguire of the county Turning Point Coalition.

"This is such an important initiative for the community, especially with the recent health statistics," said Kara Hendrickson, a community volunteer and Imagine Durant executive director. "I'm excited about this going in and I'm looking forward to more of them being planted throughout the community."

The garden was funded through the Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust. While the State Health Department reported a reduction in the number of smokers statewide, there's still work to do in that area in addition to better nutrition

and increased physical activity. Unhealthy lifestyles and behaviors—such as low physical activity and fruit/vegetable consumption, and a high prevalence of smoking and obesity—contribute to most of today's leading causes of death. The grant's expressed intention is to make positive changes in the county's health rankings and outcomes.

Bryan County's report card is similar to the state grades, and that's really not very good.

Oklahoma ranks 44th in overall health status of its residents, according to the 2014 State Health Department report. It shows Oklahoma has a high prevalence of deaths due to heart disease (third-highest rate), stroke (fourth-highest), cancer (12th-highest), chronic lower respiratory disease (the highest) and diabetes (fourth-highest).

Stats for behavioral risk factors contributing to high mortality rates:

- Oklahoma has the next-to-lowest rate of fruit consumption in the nation.
- Oklahoma has the 44th-lowest rate of vegetable consumption.
- Oklahoma is the 44th least physically active state.
- Oklahoma has the sixth-highest rate of obesity.
- Oklahoma's adult smoking rate in 2012, while better than the 26.1 percent in 2011, was 23.3 percent compared to 19.6 percent nationally.

As the numbers show, there is certainly room for improvement.

"It is our strong desire to make positive impacts on Bryan County's health outcomes through great initiatives such as the community garden," Maguie said. "With the help and support of our community partners, coalition and residents of Bryan County, we can make great strides in creating a healthier environment for us all.

"The Bryan County Community Garden would not have its success without the great help and donations of Rustin Concrete, Orscheln Farm and Home, and Lowes. We thank them for their great support of the project."

Also involved in the planting last week and not previously mentioned were Wendy Dewitt, Christine McClour and Leslie Jaycox.

Others interested in more information about this community garden could contact Maguire at the health department.

Resources are available regarding the planting of such a garden. For tips, rationale and success stories, readers might visit tulsafoodsecurity.org/images/GrowHealthyOklahoma.pdf. Health is an obvious and important aim, but groups also are taking on the project to teach children about services, responsibility, team-building, agriculture and the environment.

For nutrition and physical activity pointers, plus recipes and more, take a look at www.shapeyourfutureok.com.

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