

Farm on Ogden aims to bring fresh produce and jobs to troubled North Lawndale



The Farm on Ogden is a 20,000-square-foot urban farm set to open June 22 in Chicago's North Lawndale community. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

By **Greg Trotter**
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A new urban farm is poised to open in the heart of North Lawndale, one of Chicago's most violent and impoverished West Side communities.

The Farm on Ogden — a unique partnership between the Lawndale Christian Health Center and Chicago Botanic Garden — aims to improve community health in North Lawndale by providing access to healthy food. The facility, which opens June 22, also will house youth farming programs, job training for veterans and former convicts, and apprenticeships for aspiring urban farmers.

Passers-by on Ogden Avenue will glimpse the purple glow of the energy-efficient lights in the plant nursery and, eventually, the tilapia swimming in the massive blue tanks of the aquaponic system, providing nutrients to the plants. Windy City Harvest, the botanic garden's urban farming program, will run the operations, growing and aggregating produce from 12 other sites in the city.

It's uncommon for a health center to invest in an urban farm and the impact on community health may be difficult to measure, acknowledged Dr. Wayne Detmer, chief clinical officer of operations for Lawndale Christian Health Center.

But it's well worth the risk, Detmer said.

"The retort to anyone who questions why a health center would do this is: How's the status quo working right now?" Detmer said. "My answer would be not real well."

In North Lawndale, 14.3 percent of residents have diabetes, a rate which far exceeds that of the city of Chicago and the United States, according to the Chicago Health Atlas, a database created by the Smart Chicago Collaborative and the Chicago Department of Public Health.

Unemployment rate of 21.7 percent is roughly twice that of Chicago, according to an analysis by the Great Lakes Urban Institute. The percentage of North Lawndale residents living in poverty, 44.8 percent, is more than double

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Also, in the past 2½ years there have been 600 shooting victims in North Lawndale, the second highest total of Chicago's 77 designated community areas, according to crime data through June 6. Only Austin, another West Side community, has more shootings and homicides so far this year, the data show.

Enter the Farm on Ogden, trying to do “a little bit of good,” as Detmer put it. About half of the \$3.5 million project cost was directly funded by the Lawndale Christian Health Center. The rest was raised by the health center and the botanic garden.

The first seeds of this idea were planted in 2010, when Detmer attended a seminar at Duke University where he met theologian Norman Wirzba, who challenged him to think of providing access to local food in the community — and in a sustainable manner — as a societal responsibility. Inspired by Wirzba, and also by writer and agrarian Wendell Berry, Detmer began exploring ideas for North Lawndale.

Soon after, Detmer walked down the street from the health center to inspect a youth garden that's been run by Windy City Harvest since 2005. There he found a kindred spirit in Angela Mason, associate vice president of the urban farming program.

“When we started to get to know each other, we realized we had a lot of overlapping values. And honestly, it went beyond two formal organizations partnering together to real friendship,” Detmer said. “That sounds kind of cliché but it's true.”

About half of Windy City's produce is sold to restaurants, an important revenue stream that helps fund the training programs, Mason said. The rest is sold at a lower price in low-income communities.

Over time, the Farm on Ogden will allow Windy City Harvest to increase both production and sales, which means the program can rely less on grants and donations, Mason said. In the first year, Windy City's job training programs will add 100 participants, a number that will continue to grow as production and funding increase.

A large sign hanging on the fence outside the greenhouse beckons to passersby: “Have a criminal background? Are you looking for a job?”

Some of the produce grown at the Farm on Ogden will be distributed to patients of the Lawndale Christian Health Center through the Veggie Rx program, which allows doctors to write prescriptions for subsidized boxes of healthy food for diet-related conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure. Last year, 160 families received boxes of produce through the program, Detmer said. This year, the goal is 900.

Inside the greenhouse on a recent morning, the music of John Coltrane and Herbie Hancock rippled from a stereo as Windy City workers bustled about, piecing together the 50,000-gallon aquaponic system. With its giant blue tanks that will be visible from the street, the system is expected to produce 2,500 heads of lettuce per week and 14,000 pounds of tilapia each year.

Attached to the greenhouse, a 20,000-square-foot facility will house a “healthy corner store” from which produce will be sold, a plant nursery, space for educational programming, administrative offices and a commercial kitchen. The renovated building — formerly a Sherwin Williams paint store — has high-arching bow truss ceilings and brick walls. It's open and light.

Dawvid Chayim, 41, didn't know what he was getting into when he signed up for the Windy City Harvest Corps, a 14-week job training for veterans and those formerly incarcerated. After serving time for a residential burglary conviction, Chayim applied for the program, in part, because it helps criminal offenders expunge their records.

“Most people that know me probably wouldn't even believe me that I've been a part of something like this,” said Chayim, who hopes to enroll in Windy City's more intensive apprenticeship program.

Reynaldo Engram also turned his life around through Windy City after serving a short stint in Cook County Jail for a heroin possession conviction. Engram, 58, has lived in North Lawndale for most of his life, more specifically in K-Town, the part of North Lawndale west of Pulaski Road that's lined with streets that begin with the letter “K.”

Engram said it's important to be realistic about what to expect once the farm opens. “The majority will love this place. But you also have that 5 percent that want to destroy a place because of the goodness it brings to the neighborhood,” Engram said.

The degree to which the Farm on Ogden can engage the entire community will determine its success, said Lt. Ted Kramer of the [Chicago Fire Department](#). Kramer and some of his fellow firefighters stationed at the corner of 24th Street and Kedzie Avenue have stopped by the farm to help out on occasion.

“It's basically just an opportunity — an opportunity for the children to learn some skills and focus on some other things than the negativity they get from the streets. An opportunity for people to get some fresh produce and just take a break from their routines and learn something new,” Kramer said.

Detmer and Mason are considering ways they might expand their partnership on other community health initiatives, perhaps one focusing on treating post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Both Mason and Detmer struggled to put into words how it feels to them to have the Farm on Ogden so close to opening after years of planning and fundraising. The doctor's cautious deliberation was balanced by Mason's more unabashed optimism.

"It's beyond what I even imagined," Detmer said. "But the truth is we don't even know if it's going to succeed or not."

"Yeah, we do," Mason said. "It's going to succeed."

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