

# McDowell County



## **Department of Social Services**

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## **McDowell County Work First Community Garden**

The McDowell County Department of Social Services came up with an idea to start a community garden as an agency project, but with some definite goals in mind. Our county was in the midst of the economic downturn that is still gripping much of the nation. Our unemployment rate was in the 15% category and we could not find employment, community service or work experience opportunities for our clients who were participating in the Work First program (TANF in other places). One requirement of this program in North Carolina is that the participants have to do at least twenty hours per week to earn their benefits. This created a dilemma that we needed to solve. Out of that problem the idea of establishing a garden was born.

Some of the main points about the garden are as follows:

- ✚ It cost very little money to create. We received a small grant from a local foundation to purchase some materials that we could not get donated. Companies and organizations in the community were more than willing to donate essentials when they heard what we were doing.
- ✚ We also gleaned expertise in gardening from local organizations. We used the Cooperative Extension Services Master Gardener program to train a number of our staff. We also had them do presentations to participants about gardening, canning, etc. to prepare them to grow the food and how to handle once you harvest. We also had folks talk about healthy eating and living habits as part of this project.
- ✚ We were able to provide an opportunity for clients to get the hours required by program requirements in order to earn benefits. They also got to keep as much produce as they wished from the garden which helped in nutritional choices.
- ✚ We expanded the garden to all of our Food and Nutrition SNAP on federal level) clients who wanted to participate also. We gave them a piece of the garden to be able to grow their own food. They can buy seed or plants with their benefits. With numerous people volunteering on the project it made people feel like they weren't have to do this on their own.
- ✚ Our staff volunteered at the garden also. We also use some subsidized employment funding we had to hire some participants as garden help. This gave them some work experience and references for the Department of Social Services.

**PEOPLE FOCUSED & SERVICE DRIVEN**

**Our goal for the coming year's garden is to partner with local YMCA in their efforts to establish a community garden. They have received some grant funding and are much more centrally located in our community. That was an issue with our former property we used in that it was not very accessible to our clients and this is a county without any kind of public transportation. We also feel that our partnership with the YMCA will help further our goal about informing and helping clients in all of our programs make good decisions when it comes eating and nutrition. The other benefit to a project like this is it brings the whole community together and there are some obvious promotional opportunities for the Department to put ourselves in a different light. It also brings our staff together and gets them to also think about healthy eating and nutrition.**

**Please let me know if you have further questions or need further information.**