**Garden Champions**

**FY18 Special Project Report**

**Prepared by the State Evaluation Team for SNAP-Ed**

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# BACKGROUND

Gardening is a popular strategy across AZ Health Zone local implementing agencies (LIAs) in Arizona. While the increasing number of gardens supported at SNAP-Ed sites attests to the success of this strategy, less is known about the factors that enable garden sustainability once SNAP-Ed staff reduce their time commitment at a particular garden. Although the direction of the SNAP-Ed program, in Arizona and nationwide, has been to move toward multilevel policy, system, and environment (PSE) changes, very little is known about how one PSE change in the form of a garden might affect others within a single site. Is the presence of a garden a potential facilitator for other PSE changes? To answer these questions, in FY18 the AZ Health Zone State Evaluation Team (SET), in consultation with the State Implementation Team, developed a special project investigating **garden sustainability and connections to other policy, systems, and environment (PSE) activities**.

This project was designed to address the *Environmental Settings* levelof the national SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework (ST6: Champions, MT5/MT6: Nutrition and Physical Activity Supports, and LT10: Planned Sustainability).

The Garden Champions project goals were to:

1. Understand facilitators of, and barriers to, garden sustainability at SNAP-Ed non-school sites.
2. Explore the extent to which other SNAP-Ed PSEs have been introduced at non-school sites with gardens, and facilitators and barriers for adopting them.

# METHODS

Our SET focused on gardens and their champions at three SNAP-qualified site types: community/senior centers, early childhood education (ECE) sites, and housing sites. In order to identify gardens for participation in this project, we asked LIA staff to assist in recruitment of garden champions at the three site types. Garden champions could be site staff (some of whom were in leadership positions), residents, or volunteers. In most cases, the garden champion was a single individual, but at one housing site, it was a team of three. Two of our SET evaluators conducted interviews with ten individuals at eight sites (**Table 1**). These eight sites were located in both predominantly rural and urban counties.

**Table 1. Garden Champions Participation by Site Type**

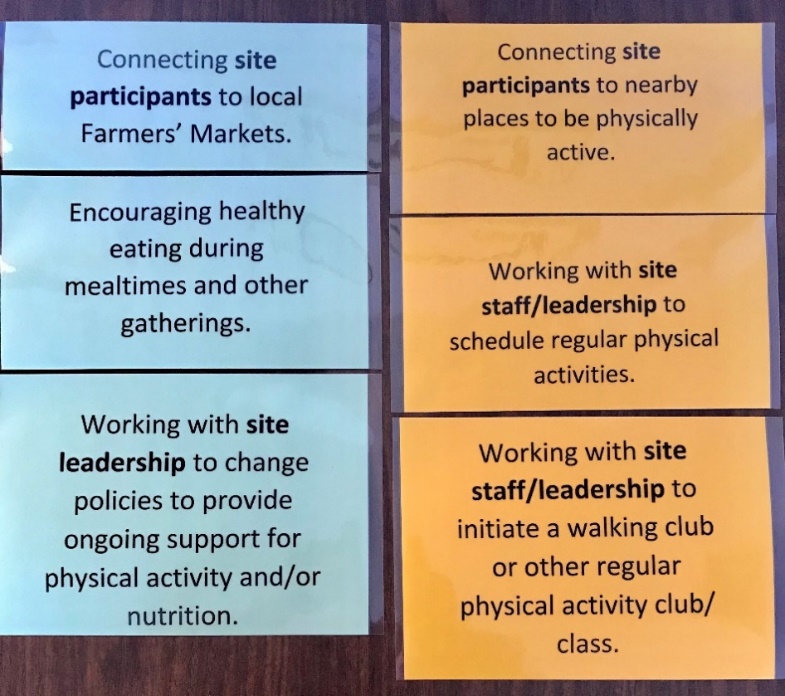
|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Site Type | Counties | Interviews | Participants |
| Early Childhood Education Center | Graham  Maricopa | 3 | 3 |
| Community Center | Pima  Pinal | 2 | 2 |
| Housing Site | Maricopa  Pima | 3 | 5 |

## Data Collection

We conducted in person interviews at the champion’s garden site between April – June, 2018. Garden sustainability interview questions asked about the garden’s history, the champion’s role with the garden, and specific facilitators and barriers to keeping the garden going. The interview guide is included as an appendix to this report.

For non-garden PSE facilitators and barriers, we asked about six potential PSEs that may have been encouraged by SNAP-Ed staff at that site (**Figure 1**):

**Figure 1: Non-Garden PSE Changes Discussed with Garden Champions**



A focus group with LIA staff at the April 2018 AZ Health Zone Annual Conference also served as a data source for investigating questions about facilitators and barriers to garden sustainability, and LIA staff’s perspectives on defining and implementing non-garden PSEs.

## Data Analysis

Each evaluator coded interviews that the other evaluator conducted using a jointly developed thematic codebook. After meeting to discuss and resolve any coding discrepancies, relevant themes were synthesized from the coded data.

# FINDINGS

|  |
| --- |
| **Project Goals** |
| 1. Understand facilitators of, and barriers to, garden sustainability at SNAP-Ed non-school sites. 2. Explore the extent to which other SNAP-Ed PSEs have been introduced at non-school sites with gardens, and facilitators and barriers for adopting them. |

## Goal 1: Garden Sustainability

**Facilitators of garden success.** The majority of garden champions identified the following four factors:

1. Having the “right” garden box, location, and/or soil.
2. Being able to integrate garden care into the daily site routine.
3. Feeling love, faith, and/or enthusiasm for the garden.
4. Appreciating the adventure or problem-solving aspects of gardening.

One garden champion[[1]](#footnote-1) explained that it was easy to fit garden care into the daily site routine:

…we can do [watering] when we go during playground time. If we are doing centers and they want to go out and water, one of us will go water – we take them, taking turns.

Another champion elaborated on the problem-solving aspect of the garden:

For me and the others, it is something that we all want to do – we want to grow things,

we want do have something to do to get out of our apartments. It’s educational – I

know I am growing things I’ve never grown before. I never knew you could get greens

– I’d go online and learn – it’s learning to grow. It keeps my brain alert.

Beyond the facilitators listed above, garden champions at both **community centers** and **housing sites** identified the following factors as facilitating garden sustainability at their site types:

1. Partnerships (often including garden labor) and donations.
2. Support from site leadership.
3. Having an irrigation system set up.
4. Site participants taking pride in what is grown, or in eating from the garden.

For community centers, two additional facilitating factors included:

1. Having dedicated staff and/or volunteers to maintain the garden.
2. Having the garden open to all ages.

Speaking to the importance of partnerships, one garden champion commented:

We had been having a hard time with the weeds, because our residents are elderly: 62

years or older, so a lot of times they are not able to get in to maintain the garden.

We’ve been trying to come up with ideas. We solicited assistance from [the local] high

school. They came over and cleaned up the garden.

I talk the garden up. I try to get people to paint rocks, and I keep them here as a rock garden. Some of the gals in their scooters come down and check the soil – they tell us what needs water. Then we have others…they look out the window [to enjoy the garden].

At a different site, another champion spoke to the importance of engaging all staff and residents, and encouraging pride in the garden.

**Barriers to garden sustainability.** The graph below (**Figure 2**) depicts the barriers mentioned by two or more garden champions, with the number of sites (out of 8) where this barrier was mentioned.

**Figure 2: Common Barriers to Garden Sustainability**

Garden pests were a near-universal problem, with garden champions describing a variety of bugs and rodents, including an animated description of chipmunks scaling the wall surrounding the garden using their claws, and then dropping over into the raised beds to consume whatever was planted.

Maintaining a garden with volunteer labor and competing priorities at the site were largely raised by community center and housing site champions. There were a number of different problems related to “maintaining the garden with volunteer labor” – but the chief complaint was that site participants/residents did not want to put in the work necessary to maintain a garden:

[There were] more interested participants at first, but over time, they saw that gardening was work, and they wanted to see the results without participating in the process. When things were grown, they asked “Can we take that?” but I said “No.” We had good carrot crop, and when the I picked them, I distributed them to the ladies who had been involved in caring for the garden, but the other ladies [who didn’t get any carrots] were mad.

Some LIA staff in the focus group also described sites where participants made less effort in the garden, with a perception that “the garden will maintain itself.” One site champion, who was a Master Gardener, offered a common refrain heard in multiple interviews referencing either Master Gardener or LIA staff frustrations.

Everybody loves the *idea* [of a garden], but then it’s “the MasterGardeners will take care of it!

## Goal 2: Introduction and Adoption of Non-Garden PSEs

Understanding the extent of non-garden PSE changes was much more difficult with garden champions. We asked questions about “other changes at the site as a result of the garden or after the garden had gotten underway,” as our way of investigating each champion’s awareness of and experience with other PSEs that may have been implemented at the site. The most common activities described by garden champions were, in fact, not PSEs by SNAP-Ed’s definition: 1) nutrition education (mentioned at all sites) and 2) eating produce from the garden (mentioned at six sites).

To further explore whether SNAP-Ed PSE changes *beyond the garden* had been introduced at the eight sites, we presented six site-level PSEs related to food systems or active living to garden champions that we knew could be relevant to their site. The number of sites that had adopted each PSE are shown in **Table 2** below.

**Table 2. Non-Garden PSEs by Frequency across Site Types**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Introduction of PSE | # ECEs | # Housing Sites | # Community Centers |
| Encouraging healthy eating during mealtimes and other gatherings | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| Connecting site participants to local Farmers’ Markets | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Working with site staff/leadership to schedule regular physical activities | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Working with site staff/leadership to initiate a walking club or other regular physical activity club/class | Not applicable | 1 | 1 |
| Connecting site participants to nearby places to be physically active | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Working with site leadership to change policies to provide ongoing support for physical activity and/or nutrition | 0 | 0 | 0 |

If the garden champion knew about the PSE change at all, they typically only knew if it *happened* at the site. It was not possible to determine if the change was sparked by a SNAP-Ed staff member because the garden champions did not know.

For the sites in particular where **healthy eating was not as high of a priority**, addressing hunger by providing meals from donated foods was prioritized by two sites, and these sites did not have control over the foods donated. At the remaining site, unhealthier food was reported as a draw to get residents involved in the social aspects of community living:

We have movie nights – they offered pizza, and boy [was that event] full when they had pizza! There was also popcorn, candy, soda. The one thing they found out is if you offer food, [residents] will come.

For **connecting site participants to farmers’ markets**, facilitators for farmers’ market visits were having a farmers’ market nearby, and/or reaching a population that was already known to be active and interested in healthy eating options (for example, at one of the ECE sites). For housing and community center sites in particular (which in this study largely served seniors or populations in recovery), the reported barrier to farmers’ market access was lack of transportation.

There weren’t enough volunteers to teach the classes through the NAU Senior to Senior program…so it ended. We also had a walking club inside to walk equal to a mile. That fell apart – people got bored or tired– the novelty wore off.

Working with site staff to **encourage onsite physical activity (PA) opportunities** was the most common active living PSE discussed. For sites that didn’t have scheduled physical activities, many had tried them, but found them to not be very well-received by site participants or residents.

When asked specifically about **walking or other PA clubs**, responses from garden champions indicated these “clubs” were informal rather than institutionalized. A comment made in the LIA focus group illuminated why this PSE might have meet with less success:

A staff member [at the site] was excited about walking, and [the possibility of a] weight room but the women residents were just too tired – they had no interest or energy for walking/weightlifting. They did a lot of walking for transportation and had physical jobs. That PSE was not the right fit.

In most cases, **working with site leadership to change policy** was not even discussed by garden champions. In response to the interviewer bringing up this type of PSE change, two garden champions addressed it – one by saying that they were doing it at the site, without providing any specific example, and another who noted that while the site director was supportive of healthy living activities, her priority was not *policy change* specifically. Even at a housing site where such a policy change had been highlighted in the LIA’s semi-annual report narrative, *the garden champions interviewed did not know about their SNAP-Ed liaison’s efforts in this area*.

The main factors affecting the success of PSE adoption at sites are summarized in **Figure 3**.

**Figure 3: Factors Affecting PSE Adoption at a Site**

Ultimately, as is the case with many SNAP-Ed efforts, PSE facilitators and barriers appear to be specific to the characteristics and stakeholders at each site. In addition, even our small project showed that there are a lot of rules, regulations, and policies (formal and informal) outside of SNAP-Ed’s sphere of influence. For example, food procurement contracts may heavily shape food served at sites.

[LIA staff] spoke to senior site staff about increasing the nutrition of the food they served, but it is a long haul, because the senior site gets what they get for food – the manager is not averse to this change, but says “we’ll see.”

# IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While outside of the initial scope of this project, we found that certain garden site types displayed stronger or weaker characteristics for overall sustainability. ECEs were the most sustainable site type based on our eight-site sample, while community centers were the least sustainable. Housing sites fell in between. Different site types also fell along a continuum of readiness for adopting PSE changes. We found that ECEs exhibited the greatest readiness to adopt PSEs, while housing and community center sites had similar barriers to PSE adoption. See **Table 3** for a summary of sustainability characteristics and recommendations across site types.

**Table 3: Sustainability Characteristics and Recommendations across Site Types**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ECE Gardens** | **Sustainability Characteristics** | **Sustainability & PSE**  **Recommendation(s) for SIT** |
| * **Sustaining a garden requires 1 paid champion** (teacher or director) * Smaller plots/boxes * Short-term (seasonal) gardens * Many teachers/students involved and some integrate with other programs/curricula | Support LIAs in limiting the scope of ECE gardens, to be manageable by the site champion on a seasonal basis with occasional TA.  Encourage integrating non-garden PSEs that align with the EC focus area. |
| **Housing Gardens** | **Sustainability Characteristics** | **Sustainability & PSE**  **Recommendation(s) for SIT** |
| * **Sustaining a garden requires at least 2 champions: a resident + supporter(s)** (site staff, landscaper, site leader) * Larger, community-garden style plots * Year-round gardens * Small number of people interested in consistent, long-term participation | Support LIA staff in identifying at least 2 garden champions prior to initiation of a garden.  Support LIA staff in identifying even a single PSE most likely to gain traction based on Figure 3 or other factors, as well as a PSE champion who may not be the garden champion. The development of a *PSE Readiness Form* may serve as a resource to LIAs. |

**Table 3 (continued): Sustainability Characteristics and Recommendations across Site Types**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Community Center Gardens** | **Sustainability Characteristics** | **Sustainability & PSE**  **Recommendation(s) for SIT** | |
| * **Sustaining a garden requires at least 3 champions:** a SNAP-Ed staff member, and 2 (or more) active participants at the site to mobilize others to care for the garden * Larger plots * Year-round gardens * Can be difficult to identify even a small number of people interested in consistent, long-term participation | | Relative to other garden site types, SIT may want to consider discouraging gardens at community centers, given the distinct challenges to sustainability at such sites.  For LIAs who do seek to develop gardens here, support the identification of at least 3 garden champions prior to initiation of the garden as well as a strong sustainability plan that allows the LIA staff to transition out of active support in a reasonable period. | |

# Conclusion

All SNAP-Ed interventions evolve. Previously, SNAP-Ed gardens in Arizona were relatively easier to initiate, but a sustainability model was harder to identify. In the last three to five years, more LIAs have developed flexible garden sustainability models, and achieved greater success in supporting the efforts of garden champions at sites to maintain their gardens independently.

Non-garden PSEs at garden sites may simply be at an earlier stage of SNAP-Ed evolution in terms of the development of a model that bridges efforts from the garden PSE to other PSEs at that site. Furthermore, some garden sites, such as childcare sites, may be more ready to transition to other PSEs based on their programming and structure. The challenge moving into the future is to identify *which* garden sites or site types exhibit readiness to transition to other PSEs, and *what* that flexible model of adopting additional PSEs may look like.

# Appendix A. Garden Champions Interview Script

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Date: | Interview Method (Phone or In Person): | |
| Interviewee: | Site and Garden Name: | Role with Garden : |
| Evaluator: | Evaluator Notes: | |

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your involvement in [Name of Garden].

This interview is part of a garden assessment to better understand how to support garden initiatives in Arizona. I will be asking about your experience with various needs, barriers, and opportunities related to the garden at your site.

We plan to share information from these interviews with the Arizona SNAP-Ed program, but we will *not* be identifying interviewees by name. If we use direct quotes, only general characteristics like your county or type of garden will be linked to the quote. Today’s interview will take no more than one hour, and your participation is voluntary. You are welcome to stop at any time. **Here is a paper copy of information about this interview that is yours to keep.**

Given everything that I’ve just shared, would you like to move forward with the interview? [If yes, proceed.]

[If applicable] Great. I also want to let you know that I’m recording this interview by [using audio recording software/typing notes, so please excuse the keyboard sounds and occasional pauses while I catch up]. The actual [recording/notes] will not be shared and will only be reviewed by our evaluation team.

Do you have any questions before we begin? [If no, proceed.]

**[Objective 1: Explore Garden Sustainability]**

1. How long has this garden been going?
2. How was this garden first set up?
   * Possible prompts: with SNAP-Ed [name of LIA staff] help? Because you or someone else was interested in starting it?
3. What have been key things that have made this garden successful?
   * Possible prompt: what resources do you feel are available to support the garden?
4. What do you do in your garden that makes it sustainable – able to keep running without [name of LIA staff] stopping by every week or more often?
5. What are some of the challenges of keeping this garden running?
   * General prompt: What resources do you feel might be lacking? What are some of the biggest needs you have related to doing more with the garden?
   * Specific Prompts: Laurel’s Garden Challenges - do any of these things cause difficulty at your garden?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Challenge | Yes or No | Description |
| Site staff don’t have enough time to do garden activities? |  |  |
| Leadership has changed at the site and that affects the garden? |  |  |
| [Adult sites only] Residents or site participants don’t know about the garden, or don’t know how to become involved? |  |  |
| Residents/site participants were excited about the garden at first, but now their interest is declining? |  |  |
| Equipment/maintenance are expensive or complicated? |  |  |
| High temperatures affect plants and/or garden participation? |  |  |
| [Adult sites only] On-site theft has been a problem? |  |  |

Thanks, this is very helpful. I’ve heard you describe some of your biggest strengths related to sustaining the garden as [summarize responses] and some of your biggest challenges as [summarize responses]. Is that accurate? [If yes, proceed. If no, clarify.]

This next set of questions is about how the garden is or might be more closely connected to other things happening at the site.

**[Objective 2: Understand links between the garden and the site]**

1. In what ways is the garden linked to the ongoing activities of the site?
   * Possible prompts: Do you have a garden club that meets? Is produce from garden eaten here? Is the garden seen as a place to do physical activity? Are nutrition education lessons taught?
2. Are there other ways that the ongoing activities of the site and the garden could be more integrated? How?

**[Objective 3: Understand other health-related changes that have been made, or could be made, at the site]**

1. You may know that the (name of LIA)’s gardening program also supports other changes that could be made at this site to support residents/participants’ health, things like….[SHOW CARDS]
   * + Encouraging healthy eating during mealtimes and other gatherings
     + Connecting residents/site participants/families to local Farmers’ Markets.
     + Connecting residents/site participants/families to nearby places to be physically active.
     + Working with site staff/leadership to make changes to the site’s policy manual that reflect ongoing commitment to physical activity and/or improvements to nutrition of the food served.
     + Working with site staff/leadership to get regular physical activities on the site calendar/schedule.
     + [Adult sites only] Working with site staff/leadership to start a walking club or some other regular physical activity club or class.

Have you made any of these other types of changes at the site *since the garden was started* to help support residents/participants’ health?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| IF YES | If NO |
| Why did you decide to make these changes? | Do you think there is interest at this site in exploring these kinds of changes?  Why or why not? |
| If yes, Which ones do you think would be most helpful here (or, which ones might residents/participants be most excited about)? |
| Who at a leadership level was involved in agreeing to make the changes or helping to put them in place? | Who would need to be involved from this site to try and make these types of changes? |
| Were there any barriers to making the change(s) that you had to overcome? | What might be some of the challenges to making these types of changes? |
| How have the residents/participants responded to the other changes at your site? (maybe too tangential?) |  |
| What would you recommend to another (site type) like yours in Arizona that has started a garden but is perhaps unsure about making other changes like you have? | What would you recommend as the first step that (name of SNAP-Ed LIA or LIA staff person) could do to start exploring the possibility of making these types of changes at this site? |

Other than what we’ve already talked about today, *and other than the garden*, what would be your number one suggestion for a change to make at this site that could help support residents/participants’ health?”

Great, thanks. Before we close, is there anything else you’d like to share regarding your experience with maintaining this garden, or about how it is linked to other things going on at the site?

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. Your insights and feedback are going to provide valuable information to help us understand how to sustain gardens and link them more closely to other things happening at sites across Arizona.

1. Quotes from childcare garden champions are **blue**, housing garden champions are **gold**, and community center garden champions are **rose.** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)