

# Growing For Chicago – Project Summary

## Partnerships, Successes and Lessons Learned

March 2022

**Grantee Name:** City of Chicago

**Project Activity:** December 2016 to December 2021

**Award Number:** 69-3A75-17-55

**City Project Team:** Department of Planning and Development  
Chicago Department of Transportation - GreenCorps Chicago  
Department of Assets and Information Systems

## Background: The Urban Agriculture System in Chicago

Chicago businesses have a rich history of innovation in the industrial food processing sector, with the city leading the way in meat and grain processing. This is mostly due to its proximity to the farms of the Midwest, the City's historic access to water and rail transportation assets, as well as its existing robust transportation networks and expansive workforce. The food and beverage sectors continue to be a large component of the regional economy.

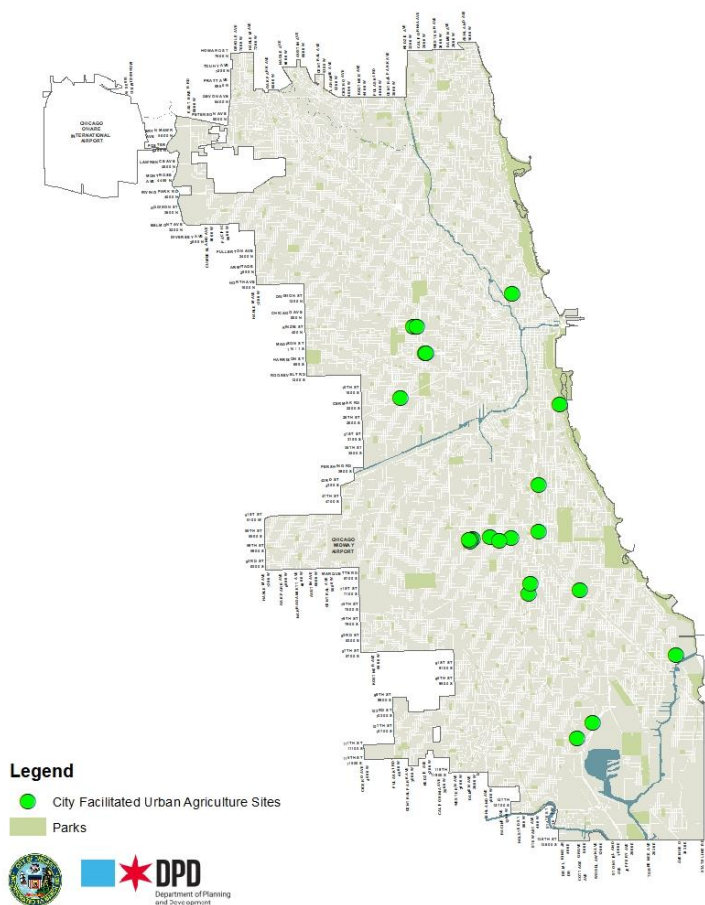
Chicago is now leading the way in a different type of food production, urban growing. Multiple farms and gardens have been developed throughout the City, ranging in size from small community gardens to high-tech hydroponic farms. These spaces are producing food within the urban fabric at a surprising pace. Much of this production is led by the innovation and entrepreneurship of urban growers re-using formerly vacant spaces for outdoor farming, repurposing roof tops for cultivation, or even constructing climate-controlled greenhouses for intensive indoor growing operations.

Previously adopted policy changes have helped facilitate these growing operations. In 2011, the City Council amended the zoning ordinance to formalize urban farms and community gardens as approved land uses, providing clear guidelines on their size and where they can be located. Some notable land use plans such as [Green Healthy Neighborhoods](#), a plan for the Greater Englewood area, and citywide policy plans such as [A Recipe for Healthy Places](#), Chicago's food plan, have strategies that recommend

developing a system of public spaces used for growing.

Programs such as Large Lots, a City of Chicago neighborhood stabilization initiative to help property owners, block clubs and non-profit groups in select Chicago neighborhoods to purchase City-owned land for \$1, also help provide private spaces for growing. The lots may be used to expand the yards of existing homes, for beautification, for gardens, and other uses. To date, the City has sold over 1,000 lots and many of these owners have expressed interest in using their land for gardens or food growing.

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) has worked with other city departments and agencies and nonprofit partners such as NeighborSpace, a nonprofit land trust, to develop community gardens and urban farms in many Chicago neighborhoods. DPD has also worked with or provided resources to nonprofit and for-profit growers, such as Herban



Map 1 City-facilitated Urban Agriculture Sites

Produce and Gotham Greens to develop large hydroponic operations in select locations. Through these partnerships, the City used its resources, city- owned vacant land and financing tools to leverage private investments to establish these growing spaces. The result of these partnerships and projects is the development of nearly 27 acres of City facilitated growing space (see Map 1).

Much of this work formed the foundation for the Growing for Chicago grant program. The following is a summary of the accomplishments of that grant program.

## USDA CIG Program and achievements

### Growing For Chicago Program

In 2016, the City was awarded a \$1 million USDA grant through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) to explore ways to build on these successful partnerships and expand the urban agriculture system, with a focus on historically underserved communities. The goals of this project were to improve the urban farming system in Chicago by assisting farmers to establish businesses; preparing and placing more land into land trusts or cooperative tenure arrangements; expanding recruitment of historically underserved individuals for training; and hiring an urban agriculture coordinator to be housed at the City of Chicago.

The grant program included three main components to support the goals:

1. Hire an urban agriculture project manager
2. Create and implement a training program for urban growers
3. Increase the number of urban farm and garden sites in Chicago

The City of Chicago used the grant funds to hire a full-time staff person to develop and implement new procedures and policies for assisting urban growers to access city owned vacant land and other resources to set up more spaces for growing. Additionally, the city partnered with a coalition of nonprofit organizations to develop an urban grower training program focused on business planning and management to support local growers. The City of Chicago leveraged these grant funds through use of approximately \$1 million of local funding to construct new urban growing space primarily in the Englewood Neighborhood of Chicago.

The Covid pandemic had a major impact on the scope of work during 2020 and 2021 causing delays in meeting program deadlines. Modified programming was implemented, however, many of the initial program components such as hosting a national conference were not achievable due to public health protocols and restrictions. The construction schedule was also impacted by Covid and other field related delays. As a result, the City of Chicago requested a time extension for the grant on two occasions. Despite the challenges of the pandemic there were several notable successes which are described below.

#### *1. Hire an urban agriculture project manager*

One of the primary components of the CIG program was to hire a full-time urban agriculture coordinator to be housed in the Department of Planning and Development. Without this funding the City of Chicago would not have been able to fully implement the successful components of the grant program. The objective was to have a dedicated staff person in the City structure that would focus on identifying issues and barriers to establishing growing spaces and develop partnerships to build the capacity of local growers. In late 2017 the City hired Micheál Newman-Brooks, a grower/resident of Englewood on Chicago's south side. Micheál brought both professional experience as a home-based grower and urban agriculture business planning trainer and lived experience to her position.

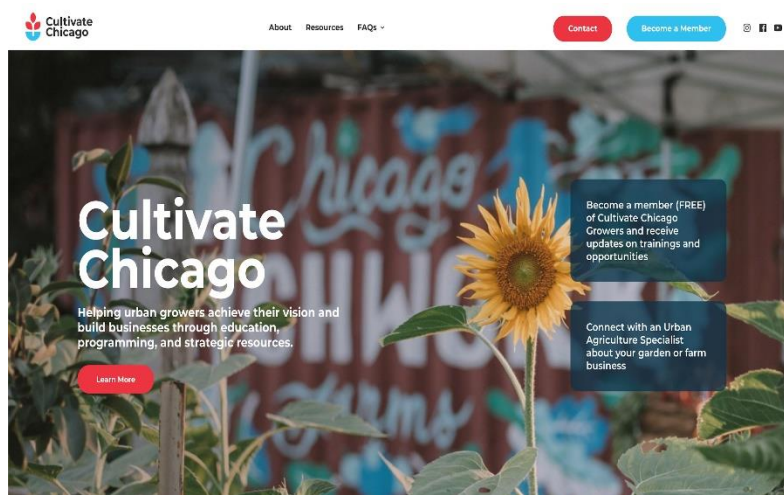
The primary role of the Urban Agriculture Project Manager position included:

- Providing oversight and management of the Growing for Chicago program
- Serving as a liaison between City departments and urban growers and stakeholders to help address issues by providing technical assistance to growers on site location, business planning, access to land and other resources and regulatory compliance.
- Participating in working groups to help develop policies and programs for growers to access land and resources such as water for irrigation.
- Managing the Cultivate Chicago program (described below) including selection of the consulting team, day to day coordination of work products and payment processing.
- Identifying opportunity sites for garden and farm construction by working with community-based organizations, growers and other stakeholders for City-led farm and garden construction and overseeing project design and development. This included working with the Grow Greater Englewood, local growers and NeighborSpace on the Englewood Village Farm sites (described below).
- Implementing community outreach events such as the Farm to Festival exhibits at the [Taste of Chicago](#) and online programming.

While the position was not retained in the City budget many of the job responsibilities, related to policy development and land transfers for urban farms and gardens have been distributed among other departmental staff.

## *2. Create and implement a training program for urban growers*

One of Growing for Chicago's goals was to develop and implement a training and technical assistance program for urban growers. In 2018 the Department of Planning and development hired a consultant team led by [Together Chicago](#), a coalition of nonprofit organizations focused on education, economic development and violence reduction. The Together Chicago team assisted the City to develop and launch Cultivate Chicago, a training and technical assistance program designed to better equip urban growers with the skills they need to build successful urban farm businesses and home gardens.



*Cultivate Chicago Website*

The team developed a website, [www.cultivatechicago.org](http://www.cultivatechicago.org), to provide information about the program and to collect applications from growers interested in participating in the training program and assistance available. The website also included helpful resources and documents from local and national urban agriculture related organizations, as well as instructional videos on growing and horticultural techniques. Information was also distributed via Cultivate Chicago social media, on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [YouTube](#).

The Cultivate Chicago program had three Components

1. Develop and implement a grower training program
2. Provide technical assistance to Large Lot owners interested in growing
3. Collect programmatic data on urban agriculture and Large Lots sites

### Grower Training Program

The first Cultivate Chicago outreach happened at the City of Chicago's Invest South/West kick-off meetings in 2019 and early 2020. The team continued to reach out to recruit urban growers to participate in the program.

The team received 14 applications and 11 applicants, representing seven urban agriculture businesses, enrolled in the program. Table 1 includes the businesses and number of applicants that completed the program. Classes began in March 2020 and almost immediately, Chicago and much of the world entered lockdown for the Covid Pandemic and the team had to change to an online based curriculum. The program included a four-month training curriculum, from March to July, that included classes on business plan development, financing, accounting, operations and product marketing. At the end of the curriculum each business was expected to have a draft business plan for review and refinement in the next phases.

Table 1 - Businesses and staff participants that completed the Cultivate Chicago Training Program.

Participating Businesses and Staff	
Organizations	Staff Participants
We Sow We Grow	2
Green Queen	1
Welax/The Green Mosaic	2
MD Ventures	1
Star Farm Chicago	1
Sunflower City	1
Healthy Place	3

Table 2 – Business accomplishments noted by Cultivate Chicago Participants.

Select Business Accomplishments
<b>Healthy Place</b>
Two lots acquired for production
<b>Green Queen</b>
Launched wellness product line
Developed plan for cultivation
Developed improved branding model and packaging
<b>Star Farm Chicago</b>
Expanded growing space
Partnered with other businesses to sell value-added products
Applied for and received Neighborhood Opportunity Fund grant from City of Chicago

Since each business had a unique approach to growing and were in different stages of development, the participants were asked to identify individual goals. The Cultivate Chicago team worked with each participant to tailor a mentoring program with the resources and support they would need to accomplish these goals. Beginning in July, each business received 1-on-1 coaching with Cultivate Chicago staff to further refine their business plans and goals and receive in-depth training on financing and cash-flow, licensing and permitting, setting up operations, and marketing and branding.

Upon completion of the program, participants were asked to provide feedback on how the program functioned and look back on how the training helped improved their business. Table 2 has a list of select results or milestones three participating businesses achieved during the program.

### Large Lot owner technical assistance

The Urban Agriculture Project Manager and Cultivate Chicago staff reached out to several Large Lot owners to discuss ways to assist with setting up their newly acquired land with small growing spaces for native plants and personal food production. Large lot owners were selected from a pool of owners that

indicated they were interested in using the new space for growing food or other plants. The team was able to recruit 11 residents to participate in the program.

The team made a visit to each site and met with the owner to discuss their short and long-term goals and to assess the lot for growing. The site assessment included a review of the existing conditions such as, existing vegetation, soil characteristics and light conditions at each location. A garden plan was developed based upon the owner's goals and information collected from discussions and site visits. Three participants requested growing beds to be installed at their sites. The GreenCorps team installed 22 growing beds including soil at the three locations (more details listed below).

#### [Collect data on urban farm and Large Lot sites](#)

One of the challenges the Together Chicago team encountered was identifying and connecting with growers that would potentially be interested in participating in training. The data collection focused on gathering information for the purposes of connecting with current or interested urban growers. One of the best sources of data on farm and garden sites is the Chicago Urban Agriculture Mapping Project (CUAMP). This useful dataset includes self-reported information on location and operations of a variety of growing sites from backyard gardeners to high-tech indoor facilities.

Rather than attempting to create a new system the team decided to build upon the CUAMP dataset by adding data points of interest. The team began by filtering projects to focus on community gardens or urban farms. Then the team conducted field visits and remote observation to verify the types of operations occurring at the site. For example, verifying whether the project presented as a community garden or more of a commercial farm, or if there were other types of activities like native plantings/habitat or if they were producing plants for ornamental purposes. The team identified over 60 farms and gardens that may be potential participants in future training or assistance.

A similar exercise was completed with the City of Chicago Large Lot dataset. The Urban Agriculture Project Manager developed a survey for Large Lot purchasers that asked whether they intended to use their new space as a community garden or to grow food or ornamental plants. Emails were sent to participants that either asked for more information via the survey or were engaging in gardening or growing on site. The team also conducted additional research on Large Lot locations and conducted site visits to better understand the uses of these newly acquired spaces. The Urban Agriculture Project Manager used this list as a starting point to contact individuals that might be interested in participating in the Cultivate Chicago Program.

The team also began investigating the potential of hosting a Producer's Directory, in an effort to further support local agriculture-based Chicago business. The tool was developed to allow business owners create and manage company profiles, categories of sales, and business contact information in a searchable directory. Buyers and those interested in sourcing locally could utilize this curated information to support local economies and business relationships. While the tool had some promising utilities the pilot was not completed due to lack of participation from potential users.

### *3. Increase the number of urban farm and garden sites in Chicago*

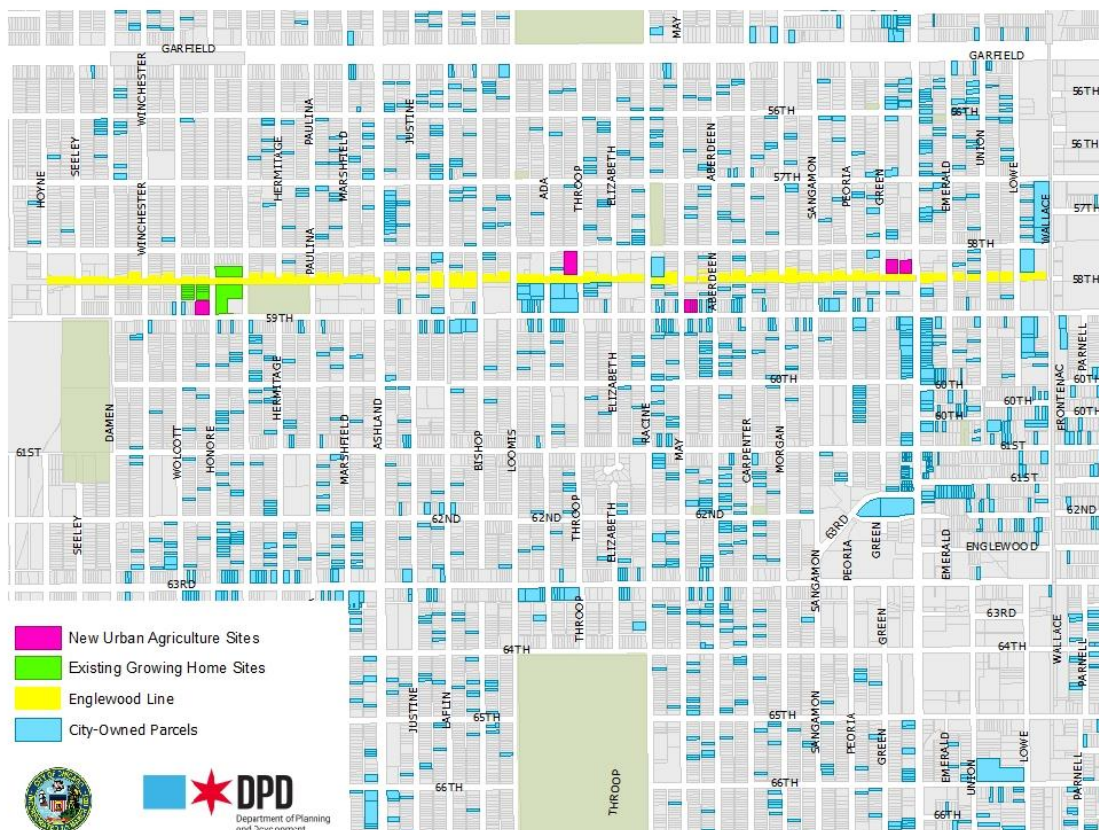
Establishing farms in urban areas can be an expensive venture. Vacant land may contain many barriers that can increase the costs of redevelopment to a level that is unattainable for most urban growers. Examples of these barriers include land costs, site contamination and remediation, access to water, and site preparation to make the site suitable for growing. This component of the grant program was designed to help reduce these costs by leveraging local funds to clean and prepare sites for growing.



The City of Chicago has done this many times for both community garden and urban farm spaces by arranging funds for site preparation and then transferring the land to NeighborSpace, a nonprofit land trust, that takes on the role of landowner. NeighborSpace holds the land in trust and has the capacity take on the day-to-day activities of owning land such as paying taxes and providing insurance. NeighborSpace partners with community-based organizations to program and manage the spaces. This model allows the managing organization focus on growing and programming without the need to handle the responsibilities associated with owning land.

During the grant period, the City of Chicago invested approximately \$1,000,000 of local funding to construct four urban farm sites, totaling almost 2 acres of new growing space, in the Englewood community. This part of the City has experienced significant population loss and has an overabundance of vacant land, both city-owned and privately held.

The new farm sites are all located in a proposed urban agriculture district and are located along a former rail embankment that will be reimagined as a nature trail. This idea was first conceived in the original [Englewood Quality of Life Plan](#) (2005), which identified an Urban Agriculture District near the abandoned rail line. The urban agriculture district idea was further developed in the [Green Healthy Neighborhoods Plan](#) which included a recommendation to develop urban farm spaces bordering a proposed nature trail, the Englewood Line. Map 2 shows the location of the new farm sites and their proximity to the potential Englewood Line.



Map 2 - New Farm Sites and the Englewood Line

### Environmental Contamination and Stormwater Management Issues

Environmental contamination is always a concern for vacant land in urban areas and is typically the largest cost of redevelopment. Additionally, there are other considerations such as stormwater management that need to be addressed. Due to the limited amount of funding available for urban farm site preparation the City has been examining alternative methods to address these concerns. Part of this project involved assessing the methods used to prepare urban farm sites for reuse with the goal of reducing these costs while still achieving an adequate engineered barrier and potential stormwater co-benefits. Detailed stormwater data was not collected as part of the project. The comprehensive site reports are available as an appendix to this report.

DPD and the Department of Assets and Information Systems (AIS), completed environment assessments for each site and developed a remediation and site preparation plan based on these conditions. Each plan involved designing and installing an engineered barrier to remediate the site and obtain a no further remediation (NFR) letter through the State of Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's voluntary [Site Remediation Program](#).

### Growing Home Farm Stand Site

One of the sites constructed during the grant period was an expansion of the Growing Home cluster of farms in West Englewood. Construction began in late 2017 and was completed in 2018. Construction included site remediation and installation of an engineered barrier of stone and concrete, a concrete retaining wall and fencing system, water service, and other site preparation. After construction the site was issued a NFR letter from the Illinois EPA (IEPA) and the site was transferred to Growing Home for long-term operation as an urban farm. Growing Home built out the site over time. The Growing Home Farm Stand site now contains two hoophouses, outdoor growing beds, and space for an onsite market.

The site preparation implemented at the Growing Home site, while providing a very effective engineered barrier, was a costly solution, approximately \$22 per square foot. Due to the impervious nature of the engineered barrier the site was also required to comply with Chicago's Stormwater Management Ordinance, which added cost to the project for stormwater calculations and permit review. The site was designed to retain stormwater in the 24 inches of wood chips and growing material above the engineered barrier. Additionally, the site was built so that the grower could use a commercially available pump to remove excess water for potential reuse. The goal was to provide a low-tech method of removing excess water that didn't require expensive equipment or training for staff. This approach has proved difficult to manage during extreme rain events. The site managers have found it simpler to add wood chips or adjust plantings to accommodate excess water.

### Englewood Village Farm Sites

Three additional sites were constructed during the grant period. The three Englewood Village Farms sites were identified through planning processes led by the City of Chicago and community partners, including, [Grow Greater Englewood](#) and [NeighborSpace](#) and a group of urban growers called the Englewood Village Farmers. Concept plans were developed through a series of meetings and with input from the community partners and the farmers that would be operating the growing spaces. Together DPD and AIS developed site preparation plans for each site based on environmental assessments and the concept plans developed with the stakeholders. The plans included installation of an engineered barrier consisting of a geotextile fabric and 18-inches of wood chips as the barrier with a gabion basket retaining wall and wood and wire fencing system. Concrete and asphalt were used in some parts of the site to facilitate parking, loading and multi-use spaces for farming activities.



The approach employed at the Englewood Village Farm sites reduced the cost per square foot by half, or approximately \$11.00 per square foot, on average for the three sites. Table 3 lists the sites, cost per square foot and notes on site preparation for comparison. This method

*Table 3 - Urban Farm Sites Costs Comparison*

Sites	Site Preparation Costs	Size (sq. ft.)	Cost/sf	Site preparation notes	Stormwater notes
58th & Halsted	\$231,583	27,566	\$ 8.40	geotextile, 18 inches of wood chips, gabion retaining wall and fence system, and timber ramp	not regulated, no calculations
58th & Ada	\$290,885	27,155	\$ 10.71	18 inches of wood chips, geotextile, gabion retaining wall and fence system, concrete drive, and timber ramp	not regulated, no calculations
59th & May	\$217,229	15,572	\$ 13.95	18 inches of wood chips, geotextile, gabion retaining wall and fence system, concrete drive, and concrete steps	not regulated, no calculations
Growing Home Farmstand	\$367,155	16,549	\$ 22.19	concrete slab, retaining wall and chain link fencing system, 24 inches wood chips, and water service	Regulated project, zero release, complies with SWO,

minimized the need for excavation and other site work that is needed for a paved barrier. The new treatment provided a sufficient engineered barrier as well as some potential stormwater co-benefits through the storage capacity of the wood chips. It was determined that the sites were not regulated by the Stormwater Ordinance, which eliminated the need for calculations and permitting. The gabion perimeter holds the wood chips in place to minimize erosion or loss of material. They also allow for release of excess water that is not absorbed by the wood chip ballast.

[GreenCorps, Chicago](#), a City of Chicago job training program, installed the engineered barriers and completed all other construction activities on the Englewood Village Farm sites as part of their yearly work program. Prior to construction NeighborSpace used private funds to install a water service and electrical conduit at each farm, at a cost of approximately \$ 45,000 per site. Construction began at the Halsted site in Spring 2019 and the last site at 59<sup>th</sup> and May was completed in Summer 2021. Once the construction work was completed each site received an NFR letter from the IEPA and was then permanently transferred to NeighborSpace. The three sites are now being managed by Grow Greater Englewood and three local growers, Sistas in the Village, Your Bountiful Harvest, and DuSable Ancestral Winery.

The Covid pandemic had a major impact on this component of the grant. The planning work and concept and site design occurred during 2018 and 2019. Construction began in late 2019 and was not able to resume until late 2020 due to Covid restrictions which impacted how GreenCorps was able to schedule and complete work. As a result, construction of the Englewood Village Farm sites was significantly delayed. A fourth Englewood Village Farm site was planned but due to Covid and other site related delays, the project partners were unable to complete the construction during the grant period.

#### Community garden and Large Lot support

Many organizations recommend that urban growers use raised beds to separate the growing media from existing soil, which may have some level of contaminants. During the grant some of the participants in the Cultivate Chicago program expressed interest in obtaining resources to help them grow more effectively on their site. DPD was able to use some of the grant funds to install growing beds at select locations to support growers that received land through the Large Lot program or were operating a community garden site. The

*Table 4 – Raised Garden Bed Installation Sites*

Recipient	Number of Beds	Type of Site
The Dye Family	6	Large Lot
Five Loaves Community Garden	6	Large Lot
Healthy Place	15	Community Garden
Williams Family	2	Large Lot
Halsted Plaza	20	Urban Farm
Davis Family	8	Large Lot
<b>Total raised beds installed</b>	<b>57</b>	

GreenCorps team installed 57 raised garden beds at six locations across Chicago's west and south sides. A list of garden bed recipients is shown in Table 4.

## Lessons Learned and Next Steps

The Growing for Chicago program was successful in helping to build capacity and expand the urban agriculture system. There were challenges and lessons learned from this experience that can be applied in future efforts and programs.

The greatest lesson learned relates to the creation of urban farm spaces in Englewood. The City of Chicago utilized a proven method of developing vacant land by transferring completed spaces to NeighborSpace or other organizations. However, the pace of development and the inflexibility of the site preparation plans made it difficult for the community partners and growers to effectively utilize the growing sites. While some of the delays were a result of covid others resulted from administrative processes and miscommunications between the City agencies and the community partners and growers. Community partners and urban farmers need to be engaged earlier and more effectively in the process of concept development, site design and construction. The roles and responsibilities of project stakeholders in this process should be clearly defined to keep the project on track. Clear site development plans and realistic timelines for construction need to be documented and communicated to project partners. Many of these items are being discussed as part of a City of Chicago task force that is examining ways to streamline the process of repurposing vacant land for redevelopment. This includes finding more efficient methods to address environmental contamination, site construction and transferring vacant land to interested organizations.

Throughout the Cultivate Chicago training program the team asked participants to identify barriers they faced to establishing their business. One of the biggest challenges identified by the urban growers is the lack of access to funding. The City has been able to utilize public funding mechanisms for individual urban agriculture projects, but local funds are limited and may be difficult to access for most growers. Funding from nonprofit and more importantly private sector investors will be needed to facilitate a larger scale expansion of urban agriculture in Chicago.

Urban growers face many challenges from growing to financing to obtaining land. The result of this work illustrates a strong need for additional programming to support urban agriculture and urban growing. There are many programs in Chicago that focus on grower training and advocacy. While some programs have courses in business development, there appears to be no comprehensive programming that focuses specifically on the business side of urban growing. The curriculum and process set up could be replicated and potentially scaled up in future efforts.

It became clear during the Covid Pandemic that there is a need to develop more space for food production and distribution to help mitigate food insecurity. In early 2021 Mayor Lightfoot released the Chicago Food Equity Agenda, which outlines Chicago's efforts to build a more resilient food system especially in BIPOC communities. The City of Chicago worked with the Greater Chicago Food Depository and other local food stakeholders worked to establish the [Food Equity Council](#), which seeks to transform the food system by removing barriers to urban farming, supporting BIPOC food entrepreneurs, and better connecting residents with nutrition programs and healthy, affordable food. The City will continue to participate with this group and other stakeholders to support local growers and to create more spaces to grow food.

## Acknowledgements

The City of Chicago is thankful for the continued participation, patience and persistence of the community partners and growers, Grow Greater Englewood, DuSable Ancestral Winery, Sistas in the Village, Your Bountiful Harvest and NeighborSpace. Thank you to the staff at the Department of Assets and Information Services (AIS), the Department of Transportation (CDOT) and the GreenCorps Chicago team for completing the remediation plans and farm site and garden bed construction. Without the contributions from all of these groups the Englewood Village Farm sites would not have been possible. Thanks to the Cultivate Chicago team and all the participants that completed the training and technical assistance programs. We are also grateful for the participation and comments from the urban agriculture community such as Advocates for Urban Agriculture, The Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council, Chicago Urban Agriculture Mapping Project, Fresh Taste, and the Urban Growers Collaborative to name a few.