The ability and potential to celebrate food gets people excited. The garden is for the community so that they can learn to grow their own. Events like this one build energy to grow more capacity and build relationships within the community.”

– Jonathan Hamm, community garden manager, Greener Partners

The recently expanded community gardens in downtown Chester, Pennsylvania are helping poor, underserved residents live healthier lives. Located on the grounds of Catholic Social Services, the gardens are providing produce for people who utilize the charity’s services, as well as local residents who lack reliable access to affordable vegetables and other nutritious food. Nearly two out of three area residents recognized a dearth of grocery stores in Chester in a 2016 survey conducted by the American Heart Association. They also believe that community leaders should take steps to make sure everyone has access to healthy foods. The Chester community garden initiative aims to help fill this food access gap: it is expected to yield five times more produce than earlier harvests from the previous, smaller garden. The collaboration between the American Heart Association, Greener Partners, and Catholic Social Services to build the community garden initiative provides an opportunity to bring affordable produce to those struggling to feed their families.

Chester, Pennsylvania, is a former shipyard city that saw unemployment rise as shipping companies left town, taking jobs with them. Today, only about half of all working-age residents in Chester are employed. Unemployment and low-wage jobs have left many residents living in poverty and without dependable access to healthy food and beverages. Because the city houses only one traditional grocery store, finding healthy, affordable options can be especially difficult for Chester residents. Food pantries can partially fill the needs for many of these underserved families, but they still fall short when it comes to providing access to fruits and vegetables to people with poorly nourished diets.
The Solution
The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships program team worked closely with local partners who have the expertise to expand an existing garden on the grounds of Catholic Social Services in downtown Chester. With technical assistance from Greener Partners, a local nonprofit dedicated to sustainable farming and farm-based education, space was made to accommodate additional garden beds housing crops that will ultimately yield five times the amount of the harvests of previous gardens. The food will be provided to pregnant women, parents with young families, recent refugees, the homeless and other beneficiaries of Catholic Social Services. The produce also will be available to anyone who stops by the garden during the day when it is open to the community. Regular recipients of the produce will also receive training on what kinds of food they are receiving, their nutritional value, and how they can be stored and prepared.

Sustaining Success
To support the local efforts, Greener Partners has compiled a simple, comprehensive manual with easy-to-follow gardening techniques and tips broken down by season. Community partners and organization leaders also have been working to provide hands-on training to Catholic Social Services staff so they will know how to tend the garden by themselves throughout the year, even during winter months, when the soil will still need to be worked on and prepped for approaching planting seasons.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
Building a community garden allows for a system for Catholic Social Services, which houses the garden, and environmental change for the residents who live within a one-mile radius of the organization. Charity beneficiaries, guests, and local residents now have access to more healthy produce than they’ve had in many years.

Results
Leaders from Greener Partners estimate that approximately 250-300 pounds of produce will be harvested from the newly expanded community gardens by the end of the year. In addition to the tomatoes, peppers, and cabbage the gardens grew previously, the new garden beds now offer squash, kale, lettuce, collard greens, Swiss chard and other vegetables that can produce multiple times within a season and can stretch into the end of the year. A garden party was held to celebrate the expansion of the garden and the ability to bring more fresh foods directly to Chester residents.

“There are no supermarkets or anywhere they can get fresh produce, so this garden has the ability to provide both fellowship and access to a healthy lifestyle,” said Liz of Catholic Social Services.

Get Involved
Various classes are available to residents and clients at the community garden every Wednesday. The classes provide insight into the agricultural science of plants being grown, as well as cook-and-taste demonstrations so that people can learn more about the produce being discussed.

All the classes are open to the public. To learn more about these and other efforts to help increase access to healthy food, please check out https://hearhealthychester.org or http://greenerpartners.org.