

Oasis in the desert

By JESSICA O'BRIEN Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, July 8, 2015 12:21 pm



Grace Learning Center

Volunteers help construct community gardens at Grace Learning Center. The gardens are intended to teach clients and others the benefits of self-sufficiency and healthy eating. Pictured, from left, are Willie Flowers, Javier Trevino and Bill Nulf.

MICHIGAN CITY — This week, Grace Learning Center began planting vegetables and herbs in their very own backyard community garden.

Kristen Patterson, director of Grace Learning Center, which operates as part of Citizens Concerned for the Homeless, said her reasons for starting this garden were three-fold: Providing easier access to fresh

produce, teaching healthy living and helping the needy and disenfranchised population become more financially and economically educated.

"There is a food desert in the west side, which means there's not a grocery store within a one mile radius," Patterson said. The nearest market store is Petti's Grocery, which sells limited fresh produce.

"Most of our folks walk to the corner store which sells all these processed, sugary foods," she said.

"They're heavy and not healthy and they're not doing anybody any good."

These gardens will be planted, tended to and harvested by Grace Learning Center clients and others in the community and will benefit those pitching in as well as clients of Keys to Hope and Sand Castle Shelter for Homeless Families.

The plan is to include beans, tomatoes, basil, peppers, carrots, potatoes and onions in the first year. Patterson said she would like to include more fruits and vegetables "off the beaten path" as the gardens expand — watermelons, strawberries and Concord grapes.

Four garden boxes are being built to get the project moving forward — all measuring 4 by 8 feet.

Gardening will be made handicap accessible as well, with foldable tables and pop-down gardens set up in the Grace Learning Center driveway. Take-home containers also will be made available so people may tend to their gardens at home.

As a place of teaching and learning, Grace Learning Center wants to do more than simply grow fresh fruits and vegetables and pass them out to the community. Patterson would rather empower the community, teaching people to grow their own food — feeding their families healthy food while also saving money.

Patterson said the homeless population is typically a health-conscious group of people, aware of what is lacking from their diets. She said the poor also are statistically more likely to visit the emergency room.

"If we can do some preventative health by putting some antioxidants and vitamins into people's bodies, that would be a game-changer alone in itself, let alone allow our citizens to have access to delicious food and save money to boot," she said.

This project has been in the works for more than a year, and in that time Patterson has managed to bring together several community partners to share in this vision.

Master gardeners from the Purdue Extension will help advise the gardening aspects — teaching what to plant, when to plant it and how to tend to the crops. The city has donated lumber for the production of garden boxes, which will be constructed by offenders recently released from prison who are learning a new trade.

"It's so beautiful to see everyone working together," Patterson said. "We've got tons of community support. It's so great, yet again, to see Michigan City going above and beyond what we ever could ask or imagine."

Those interested in helping with the community gardens, or anyone looking for more information, may contact Grace Learning Center at 219-879-6788, visit www.citizens4homeless.org or stop by the office at 1007 W. Eighth St.