

WEST HARLEM GROUP ASSISTANCE

HARLEM, MANHATTAN



ABOUT WEST HARLEM GROUP ASSISTANCE

West Harlem Group Assistance, Inc. (WHGA), a community development corporation, was established more than 45 years ago to revitalize West and Central Harlem. WHGA has developed 1,693 units of affordable housing and owns 43,676 square feet of commercial space. WHGA also manages housing, commercial and community spaces, and delivers an array of social and economic development programs and services. The organization's work has become even more crucial as the area, once riddled with dilapidated and abandoned buildings is experiencing rapid change and gentrification. WHGA seeks to quell the negative impacts of gentrification on their low to moderate income residents.



Mr. Foster is a 78-year old who has found a second home at WHGA's Community Healthy Food Hub.

Originally hailing from Jamaica, Mr. Foster lives a block away from the Hub. He stops by on a regular basis to say hello and talk about his health. Mr. Foster is also a customer of the Hub's client-choice food pantry. Mr. Foster shared, "I like that the pantry is set up like a regular supermarket and allows me to choose the foods I like or want to try."

Mr. Foster praised the WHGA team after noticing a marked increase in fresh produce available at the pantry. He wants to eat more healthily, but it's not always easy to find good affordable produce in the community. WHGA's food advocate, Antaeus Turns Ashcraft (Tia), and Mr. Foster have had lengthy conversations about the quality of produce at the supermarkets, compared to the quality of fruits and vegetables in his homeland. After noting how some fresh produce items spoil quickly after purchase, Tia was able to share more information about the shelf-life of different fruits and vegetables and how to store them to extend their lifespan.

He is now able to get the most from the products he picks up at the hub.

The Community Healthy Food Hub is part of a comprehensive place-based strategy to address resident health and economic development through food called Communities for Healthy Food NYC (CfHF). Launched in 2014 with technical assistance and funding through LISC NYC and Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund, this initiative integrates access to healthy and affordable food into every aspect of community development work—providing resident outreach, nutrition education, and cooking classes, and creating new or improved healthy food outlets. Cornerstones of the CfHF program are community food advocates, who serve as "boots on the ground" in each target neighborhood to lead planning, program management, stakeholder development, and advocacy efforts.

"I like that the pantry is set up like a regular supermarket and allows me to choose the foods I like or want to try."

—MR. FOSTER

WHY COMMUNITIES FOR HEALTHY FOOD?

WHGA's close ties to neighborhood residents and range of services made the organization ripe for an integrated healthy food initiative. WHGA and LISC NYC also identified commercial spaces early on with great potential to become home to healthy food outlets and training and educational programs. In 2014, with the support of LISC NYC, WHGA redeveloped one of their vacant storefronts at 625 Lenox Avenue, now called the West Harlem Community Healthy Food Hub, to serve as a portal to improve access to healthy food and advance educational prospects related to health for seniors, youth, families, and adults. The Hub's pantry serves over 2,000 neighbors monthly. WHGA has forged new partnerships to deliver a portfolio of nutrition and general health services from the site.

Due to rapid gentrification leading to high real estate values, long-term residents of West and Central Harlem struggle to remain in their community. At 28%, the rate of obesity in Central Harlem is over three times the rate in other higher income Manhattan communities. The long-term hope for WHGA is that CfHF will contribute to broader efforts to improve affordability and quality of life for low income residents.



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

WHGA's Community Healthy Food Hub is the cornerstone of its efforts to increase access to healthy food and enable community members to cook healthy meals for themselves and their families. Their work relies heavily on a strong network of food and health partners.



**HEALTHY
FOOD ACCESS**



**ADVOCACY AND
COMMUNITY
BUILDING**



**GOOD FOOD
JOBS**



**CULINARY AND
NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE
SHARING**



HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

The Community Healthy Food Hub client-choice pantry is the core of WHGA's healthy food work. Its central location in a storefront at Lenox and 141st Street drives regular new clients to its services.

WHGA partnered with the Food Bank for New York City to develop the pantry and continues to rely on the organization for food and its Tiered Engagement Network (TEN) which connects residents to a set of comprehensive services from access to medical care to immigration support. City Meals on Wheels provides a delivery service for seniors so that older

adults who are less mobile do not need to make the trip to the hub or stand in line waiting for their turn to shop.

“Through various state and federally funded grant programs, WHGA has been able to provide a great variety of produce from Driscoll Foods, a regional produce distributor. WHGA also purchases whole grain breads, almond milk, cheese, and even tilapia,” says Tia. A key to pantry success is identifying secure funding sources that allow WHGA to purchase sufficient amounts of fresh high quality produce through a distributor versus relying solely on food donations and surplus products.



ADVOCACY AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

WHGA's Hub has become a vibrant community center, with better health as its organizing principle. The CfHF team goes to WHGA residential buildings, partner agencies, community centers and schools around the neighborhood to meet residents and let them know the services offered at the Hub. At the same time, WHGA identifies 'Community Champions' - residents who want to take a leadership role in their community by volunteering at the Hub and becoming local leaders using their own life experiences to help their neighbors improve their health and well-being.



CULINARY AND NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE SHARING

At the hub, one can also take part in cooking and nutrition classes, join a farmers market walking tour, or get help with public benefits, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Because multiple services are offered in one place, residents are better able to take advantage of them, making it easier to prioritize their health.

WHGA partners with Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables, a collaboration between the New York State Department of Health and Food Bank for NYC to deliver nutrition education to people eligible for SNAP, which includes one in four West Harlem residents. Food Bank for NYC also teaches its Cookshop nutrition education classes at the hub. When clients attend the Hub's cooking demonstrations, they're provided with recipes and 90 percent of the ingredients.



GOOD FOOD JOBS

WHGA collaborated with the Partnership for Healthier Manhattan and the Sylvia Center to offer a Community Chef "train the trainer" program. Training is held in the industrial kitchen at WHGA's Dempsey Multi-Service Center. Chefs receive tools (such as a knife kit) and skills to teach residents how to cook healthy meals. After the training, Community Chefs are paid to teach cooking classes in the neighborhood.

Volunteers are critical to successful pantry days. In return for their time, volunteers are provided stipends and the opportunity to use the pantry an

extra time per month. Stipends are a helpful income supplement and the pantry work is a source of job training and work experience.

WHGA also partnered with Creative Art Works to bring their Public Art Youth Employment Program to the West Harlem neighborhood. Local youth were employed over a summer to create an outdoor mural around the corner from the Hub. The goal of the mural was to inspire residents to eat healthier and stay active. The youth gained important employment skills like leadership development and project management.

"Some people have been cut off from assistance. A lot of them don't get a sufficient amount [of food to maintain a healthy lifestyle], so they need extra food. The pantry is here to provide that for them."

—CHARLES JENKINS,
VOLUNTEER

NUTRITION EDUCATION AT THE COMMUNITY HEALTHY FOOD HUB

Umallah is a resident in WHGA's supportive housing portfolio who began visiting the Hub's client-choice pantry in 2015. He signed up for a nutrition education course. During a session, the food advocate asked Umallah what he typically ate alongside his favorite meal. His answer was fried chicken instead of a vegetable side. This exchange gave the entire group an opportunity to learn about the five food groups, sugar, cholesterol, sodium, and portion sizes.

Four months later, Umallah had distinctly changed his eating habits. He now prepares a salad or vegetable with his meals and is open to exploring other nutritious foods. He reads labels with ease and ensures that there isn't too much sugar in what he prepares. Before his experience at the Hub, Umallah was a picky eater who would not try new foods and was comfortable only with what he knew. Since he started going to the hub to take advantage of free nutrition workshops, he eats a wide range of nutritious foods.

WHGA PARTNERS

HARLEM GROWN

provides nutrition education workshops

NYS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH'S JUST SAY YES!

program provides nutrition education workshops through Food Bank for NYC

NYC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE

provides farmers market tours and distributes "health bucks" farmers market SNAP incentive coupons

NYC HUMAN RESOURCES ASSOCIATION

provides certified on-site SNAP enrollment

FOOD BANK FOR NYC

provides donated foods, access to support services and nutrition education workshops

FUNDING

The program launched with LISC and Illumination Fund support and has expanded its budget through city, state and federal grants including NYC Council discretionary funds, and Federal and NYC Emergency Food Assistance Programs. In addition, WHGA receives funds for fresh produce through the New York State Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), and FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP).

WHGA relies on a variety of sources for funding to cover food and additional staff time. One unique source of food dollars is the Food Bank's TEN program, which provides credits to purchase food with every referral a partner like WHGA makes to other organizations in the network. WHGA stresses that every bit counts and smaller grants have added up to increase fresh food options at the pantry.



OUTCOMES

- WHGA is especially proud of the client-choice "supermarket-style" food pantry. The program has successfully broken away from the stigma of food pantries by providing clients with a full grocery experience. Residents are also provided support in reading food labels and accessing other social services.
- By accommodating the different needs of residents, from older adults to families, the Hub has significantly impacted the community. The efforts have been particularly beneficial to seniors and those living in group housing.
- WHGA developed a partnership with City Meals on Wheels to provide a mobile pantry to homebound seniors. In 2017, the program served 60 seniors per month.
- The team is also proud of its success with grant procurement to sustain the work beyond LISC and Illumination Fund's four years of committed support. The team's focus on more complex state and federal grants geared to emergency food operations has allowed WHGA to exceed its own expectations of how much food they can provide to the community year after year.

LOOKING FORWARD



WHGA intends to grow the client-choice pantry program to serve more clients; they currently serve over 3,000 clients a month at the Community Healthy Food Hub.



WHGA is eager to provide more opportunities for clients to participate in farmers market walks which is very dependent on the allotment and distribution of SNAP farmers market incentives (Health Bucks).



The team also wants to expand complimentary services offered at the pantry. For example, the Hub distributes baby bundles for new mothers 2-3 times a year. There is high demand for formula, baby food, and diapers. The team is also in the process of partnering with a community health center that can provide a suite of health services from primary and dental care to behavioral health and substance abuse at the Hub.



The team is working to provide on-site SNAP enrollment at the pantry including installing a kiosk to make these services more accessible.

BEST PRACTICES/ADVICE

WHGA learned early in the process that it wasn't enough to set up a food pantry and wait for residents to visit it; they had to take their message to the residents by knocking on doors and hosting community events. "I know most of the clients who come in," says Tia, who was born and raised in West Harlem. She lives just three blocks away from the Hub, spearheading most of the current initiatives.

"We never turn people away," said Tia. "We always give them a produce bag, a follow-up day to receive full pantry, and a 'Neighborhood Guide to Food and Assistance' booklet, so they are knowledgeable about other food resources in the community."

Social media also works well for WHGA. The team started a successful Instagram for the Community Healthy Food Hub and, in general, has been growing its use of Facebook and Twitter to promote nutrition education, fitness, farmers market walks, and other events.

The Community Healthy Food Hub was designed to be more than a pantry - to meet a spectrum of resident health and wellness needs. WHGA's ability to nurture strong partnerships has resulted in quality educational programming and a diverse set of client-focused support services.

