

Fire Station Gardens and Food Donation: Building and scaling community resilience

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This brief paper presents the unique idea of firefighters growing gardens at local fire stations and then distributing much of the produce to local food banks to help address food insecurity in local communities. The central idea is to build and scale resilience across local communities. Gardening is a health benefit to firefighters, and food and proper nutrition is a resource helpful in resilient communities.

A review of research and literature confirms the health benefits of gardening. Benefits include reduction in stress and anxiety, lower risk of cancer and chronic disease, and improved mental health and mood.

A review of research and literature confirms higher than average rates of anxiety, specific cancers, cardiovascular disease, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep disorders, and chronic stress within the US fire service as compared to the general population.

Fire stations are unique in that full-time fire departments in urban and suburban centers are typically staffed 24x7 by firefighters. Even volunteer and combination fire departments are frequently staffed by on duty firefighters. There are opportunities for firefighters to grow gardens and realize the health benefits gardens and gardening have to offer.

While fire station gardens are rare, they are not entirely unique. A good example of this is demonstrated in an article written by Isabella D'Emilio in [MyLondon](#) titled, *"The heartwarming reason firefighters have created gardens in 50 fire stations across London."* (D'Emilio 2021)

While there is evidence of firefighters growing gardens at fire stations, there is little information available on firefighters growing produce at local fire stations and then distributing the produce and fruit to local community foodbanks and helping to address food insecurity in local communities.

The idea of a fire station garden and food donation to local food banks was presented to two Heartland Certified Public Management© cohort programs offered through the Public Management Center at The University of Kansas. In an Introduction to Creativity 101 instructional unit, students were asked to "build upon the idea" of a fire station garden and improve it.

In addition to fire station gardens and donating produce to local food banks, the following ideas were generated by students in the KU Edwards Campus and Online 2023 CPM© cohorts:

- Make it a community garden, allow members of the community to help in the gardening process.
- Develop collaborations with local law enforcement to help with the gardening.
- Work with retirement communities. Allow members living in care homes to come to the fire station and garden.
- End the growing season with a Bash at the fire station.

- Team up with local FFA and 4H groups to help with the gardening project.
- Host a farmers' market at the fire station.
- Develop a fire station garden to table pipeline.
- Conduct classes on gardening for local high school groups or other groups.
- Grow fruit trees, in addition to veggies.
- Partner with local extensions.
- Have a competition between fire stations, which station can grow the most food.
- Work in partnerships with local schools.
- Community outreach.
- Write a firehouse cookbook.
- Have firefighters collaborate with community garden groups.
- The garden could become an outdoor speaker, music, and/or meditative space.
- Identify sponsors to donate to gardens.
- Write grants.
- Conduct an Iron Chef style cookoff competition at the fire station.
- Add bee boxes.
- Allow local elementary school students to plant and come back and see growth.
- Use upcycled materials to build gardens.
- Fruit trees/orchard- tied to children's literature.
- Add aquaponic gardens and fish.
- Use composting.
- Also develop a water garden, use it to educate on the water cycle.

Fire stations are not community centers, this is understood. While acknowledging this reality, there are many opportunities for fire departments to tie into the community and help build community resilience, including firefighter resilience.

References:

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