

## “Growing People” Woodford Gardens – Waitakere Hospital

### GGHH Agenda Goals

- Food

### Hospital Goal

- Providing people who have experienced mental ill health with work experience and training opportunities through growing and selling produce.

### Progress Achieved

- *Human health benefit:* Many people who have experienced mental illness can become isolated, this project brings people together with a shared goal. Participant’s confidence in social skills and interactions grow. They also develop connections with the community through meeting customers at the onsite shop and stalls. Much of the work involves physical activity which improves health and well-being. Self-esteem also improves as participants see the results of their work.
- *Environmental benefit:* The produce is organically grown and there is an emphasis on reducing waste through compost production. The service’s philosophy is to have as little impact on the environment as possible which is reflected in the way participants are taught.
- *Financial benefits:* The project consistently meets its income target through selling the produce. The income is used to pay the participants a rehabilitation allowance which assists them to attend by covering transport costs.
- *Other benefits:* The project’s other benefits that include being able to provide participants with vegetables, developing a sensory garden and providing a stepping stone into employment or study.



The nursery

### The Issue

The challenges in the area of employment for a person who has experienced mental illness are many. These challenges include interrupted school and work histories, discrimination and stigma, distracting symptoms and sometimes physical difficulties. Wider factors in society such as the highly competitive labor market and economic forces mean that those who have experienced a mental illness are often disadvantaged and have few opportunities to change their situation.

### Sustainability Strategy Implemented

The service has been established for a number of years and the ongoing strategy is to provide those who have experienced mental ill health with opportunities for training and personal growth.

This is achieved by being easily accessible for participants. Interested participants can refer themselves and attend regular orientation days to find out if the project is right for them. The participants and staff members work together to overcome any potential difficulties which can include transport, physical stamina, concentration and work readiness.

The project uses organic production practices such as using chicken manure and compost, organic pesticides (only when needed), recycling vegetable refuse for compost production and minimal use of artificial heating in the green house to reduce the carbon foot print.

**Implementation process**

Woodford gardens started using organic practices in 2007. The first step was stopping using any synthetic fertilizers and producing its own compost. Lime was used to neutralize soil acidity and address club root. Crop rotation was also started.

The project brought in chicken manure which initially caused some difficulties. The garden is situated in the hospital grounds and the smell was noticed by patients and the neighbors. This was addressed by modifying the mixture of manure and potting mix.

The change to organics practices also affected the training that participants received particularly in crop production and maintenance. Participants were also taught about the philosophy of organic growing so that they could effectively market the produce in the shop and at the stalls.

The change to organic practices opened new markets for the service including organic shops, local vegetable shops and bakeries. The produce has a strong reputation as high quality and is popular with customers.

**Tracking Progress**

Success was measured though meeting the services income target, increased number of customers in the shop and employee progress assessments.

Success is also seen in the healthy produce and heard in the positive things participants say about their experience at Woodford Gardens.

Often the most rewarding indication of success is watching participants becoming empowered and taking the next step in their lives inside and outside the work environment.

**Challenges and lessons learned**

The market for organic produce has become much more competitive in the last 10 years and there is increased requirement for suppliers to become certified as organic.

This presents a challenge for the service in terms the cost, increased documentation and higher scrutiny of production practices.

These are significant challenges for a small horticultural operation in an increasingly competitive organic market. Woodford Gardens has learned, in order not be distracted from its primary rehabilitation focus, that it is important to proactively address problems with conditions, pests and disease based on dynamic evidence- based organic growing methods.



The shop

The Field

### **Next Steps**

Even though there are challenges in becoming certified organic the service is looking at how these can be overcome and which new markets can be explored.

A new initiative for the project is to provide participants with an opportunity for socializing and doing gardening as a leisure activity. The emphasis for this group is about enjoyment rather than crop production and income. The group would have responsibility for a separate part of the garden which would eventually become a “show garden” to demonstrate the service.

Another step for the service and participants would be to become an affirmative business. This would mean that the participants would move from the current training incentive to a proportion of the minimum wage. The project would then have an extra income target to cover the costs of the participant’s wages.

### **Demographic information**

Woodford Gardens is a half hectare market garden on the grounds of Waitakere Hospital in West Auckland (New Zealand’s largest city). Woodford Gardens is part of the Regional Work Rehabilitation Service: Work Foundations. Work Foundations includes Wrap n Pak and Zoo Doo (Affirmative Businesses), Te Ata (a peer-led social and recreational center), Work Liaison (Career counselling and job seeking support) and literacy, numeracy and computer skills tuition.

Participants come from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds and life experiences. With over 40 people a year participating in the project, there are 18 people enrolled at the gardens at any point in time. The project operates Monday to Friday, with service users usually working a 7 hour day. Overseeing the project are 3 staff members: a Senior Horticultural Supervisor, a Horticultural Supervisor and an Occupational Therapist.

### **Quotes:**

“Working at Woodford Gardens has helped reduce my anxiety and panic attacks a lot. I have become more confident and learned so much about growing and caring for plants”

Please, list all contacts named in this case study.

Keywords / topics:

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