

New collaboration opens doors for economic security for women

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GREENFIELD — Greenfield Community College and area women's and domestic violence resource advocacy groups are partnering to empower at-risk women in transition in Franklin County.

The Franklin County Women's GARDEN (Growing Agricultural Resiliency and Developing Economic Networks) Project is a new three-year partnership, funded through a \$20,000 grant from the Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts.

Partner members include GCC's Sustainable Agriculture and Green Energy (SAGE) Education Center, Montague Catholic Social Ministries in Turners Falls, the New England Learning Center for Women in Transition in Greenfield and Orange, and Seeds of Solidarity in Orange.

The project is designed to empower at-risk women in transition through new skills attainment in sustainable agriculture and food preservation to take steps towards food security and economic independence.

The goal of this collaboration is to open doors to economic security for women by building resilience, food security and economic independence based on ecologically sustainable skills and relationships.

"The goal is to help them with food security," said NELCWIT Executive Director Cheryl Rogers. "We've heard from many women that they struggle to afford food. Many are living in poverty or working, but they are not receiving living wages. They struggle to pay for basic necessities."

The program features a food co-op business component and teaches participants how to grow their own food and fruits.

The program helps address many issues that impact women and children in the community, especially victims of domestic violence, Rogers said. It is designed to help promote economic justice and opportunity for women.

"We're trying to address a need we identified by building resilience," Rogers said.

The program is also meant to build community.

Each year's group of women will create a garden space in the respective communities of Greenfield, Turners Falls and Orange that will be used as the site for the Organic Gardening and Permaculture Landscape Installation courses each successive year, and will provide home-grown food for the participants well beyond the life of the project.

"The idea is to create and sustain these gardens which can be a point of gathering for women," Rogers said.

Each of the three years of the project will see one cohort of women, selected by MCSM and NELCWIT, taking a cluster of existing 1-credit courses offered by GCC in organic gardening, permaculture landscape installation, food preservation and farm, and food cooperatives. The grant will pay for instructor costs, allowing participants to take the courses free of charge, and GCC will arrange for instructors to attend a one-time training with NELCWIT and MCSM on how to understand trauma triggers, recognize signs of physical and emotional domestic violence, and other factors affecting women in transition.

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