

TACΦMA

Lessons Learned from Community Engagement



Community volunteers at HUG Grub, a program of Tacoma SEED June 2018

Tacoma SEED is a backbone organization created in 2018 for a network of organizations that include Hilltop Urban Gardens (<http://www.hilltopurbangardens.com>) and a resident-owned small business, Black Mycelium, LLC that are based in the historically redlined community of Hilltop in Tacoma, Washington. Our mission is to provide food security, housing, economic stability, educational opportunities, and wellness to those that need it in Tacoma, Washington.

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Tacoma SEED is the most recent culmination of grassroots community organizing that began with a story and the community relationships that followed. The first seed, Hilltop Urban Gardens was founded by Dean Jackson in 2010 as a master gardening project that proposed to organize neighbors to collectivize multiple neighborhood curbside gardens into one Urban Farm Network. The neighborhood happened to be Hilltop, just south of 19th Ave, between Sprague and MLK, a community that is historically black and remained so because of structural red-lining that occurred in 1935.

We see Tacoma SEED is a fractal of a larger black community organizing tradition that emerged in Mississippi during the civil rights movement (Brown 2017). This is the *community organizing tradition* of Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Fanny Lou Hamer and Bob Moses as opposed to the *community-mobilizing tradition* epitomized by the short-term mass mobilization strategy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The community organizing tradition, according to Bob Moses, has an "emphasis on the long-term development of leadership" of ordinary people, it is a tradition that is situated within the history of the community itself (Payne 2007, 3-4).

Hilltop Urban Gardens redistributed one ton of fresh produce produced in their urban farm network back into their community, the HUG Grub program asked beneficiaries of the harvest to offer in exchange talent, skill or labor, an act that has strengthened the Social Solidarity Economy and sustained relationships and social connections. The Black Folks Food School, a nutrition and education program that teaches culturally relevant *Afro-ecological* farming practices and revitalizes and proliferates the use of African diasporic first foods and medicines

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is the network's organizing home where deeper relationships are created among neighbors. As a backbone organization, Tacoma SEED was chartered to provide institutional support and financial oversight of the deep organizing work that network organizations are advancing.

Our network of organizations conducts a tremendous amount of evaluation that allows us to integrate community input. This includes evaluation on a programmatic level that seeks to improve the Urban Farm Network and Black Folks Food School, and evaluation to keeping a pulse on our community's civic engagement and basic needs. This reflexive process occurs regularly on the face to face level with neighbors every day that our team is cultivating the farm. We also have yearly events on MLK day and Earth Day where our community knows to look to us to plug in, we supplement this with full-fledged community canvassing operations where we have teams that meet our neighbors and invite them to participate. Since 2010, we have also conducted a couple of community-based participatory research projects that gathered focus groups of youth and LGBTQ people of color and have held our events in the People's Movement Assembly tradition in order to grow leadership in our community and create as many opportunities for meaningful community participation as possible.

Emily Benfer observed that "every aspect of society is dependent upon the health of its members" yet, she continues, the healthcare industry "cannot improve the health of the population without addressing the root causes of poor health" (Benfer 2015, 275). We understand power differentials and racism as key aspects of the social determinants of health that produce tremendous health disparities for our community. In Pierce County, the local health department found that life-expectancy is as much as five times higher in neighborhoods

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with a lower percentage (< 10%) of people of color than in communities composed primarily (>20%) of people of color (TPCHD 2015, 15). Based on this evidence, and continuous consultation with our community, we have come to the conclusion that in order to improve social determinants of health for our community, we must address basic needs first, these include food, shelter, and jobs reflected in the primary goals of Tacoma SEED.

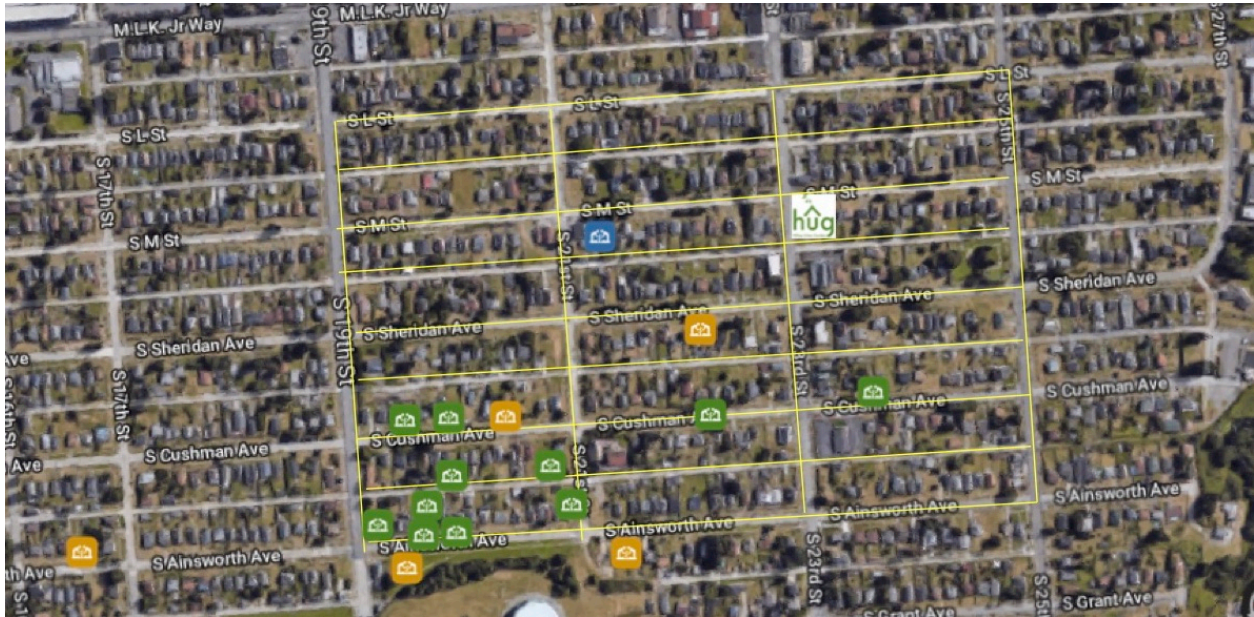
In regard to food security, the grassroots community organization in our network, Hilltop Urban Gardens has been able to grow the Urban Farm Network, this has allowed for us to redistribute over 1 ton of healthy and fresh food into our community in Hilltop over the last harvest. This is significant, as Hilltop is served by only one grocery store that carries mostly commodity food.

In regard to economics, Black Mycelium, LLC was chartered in order to encourage the growth of small, black resident-owned businesses in our community. This small business that is part of our network is developing a line of specialty-produce that we hope will provide a steady income for members of our community, in particular those who are institutionally excluded from civic and economic life because of the conditions of re-entry.

In regard to shelter, we see the root cause as a matter of access to land. Through our Urban Farm Network, we seek to structurally de-commodify land in our neighborhood, by creating a commons for local food production and distribution. Our strategy around housing in our historically red-lined community is to preserve black ownership of land within our portion of the Hilltop Neighborhood, to defend elderly and low-income neighbors from displacement, and to grow home ownership among the most impacted members of our community.

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The gem, of the network of organizations that Tacoma SEED serves as a backbone organization for is the Hilltop Urban Garden's Urban Farm Network. Presently, it is comprised of 10 curbside gardens, 1 urban farm, and 1 contributing independent garden (green on map) and we have been building 4 new curbside gardens and one new farm this year (yellow on map).

Our leadership is comprised of experienced grassroots organizers, they take their work so seriously, that from 7am-1pm during the peak growing season, they are fully dedicated to the cultivation of food and leadership in the community-organizing tradition outlined above. If it were not for this organization-wide cultural practice, we would not be able to cultivate as high quality of produce and quality of relationships in our community to continue to grow.

Our most significant challenge led to the founding of Tacoma SEED. Since 2010, Hilltop Urban Gardens operated on a small-scale, to this extent, the fiscal sponsorship of Tacoma Urban League was sufficient for the grassroots organizational needs regarding financing and

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Lessons Learned from Community Engagement administration. Over the years, along with the success of the Urban Farm Network, we experienced tremendous growth and the willingness of many people, foundations, and institutions to invest in increasing our capacity. Our network founded Black Mycelium, LLC in order to be able to hold some of the growing capacity through employment of community members with an added benefit of being able to compartmentalize the nutritional and cultural educational aspects of the Black Folks Food School and Black Mycelium project from the Urban Farm Network. Even so, we noted that as funding opportunities increased, so too did the amount we were contributing towards financial administration fees and insurance needs. We opted to form a 501(c)(3), Tacoma SEED, in order to hold the administrative responsibilities and financial components of the breadth of work that our network advances in our community.

Unlike many of the organizations that our members have worked with in the past, we have found that we are the people we've been looking for, in terms of generating real community solutions that directly address health disparities in Hilltop. We understand that we don't have all of the solutions, but our deep connection to our community gives us hope that together, we can find a way.

REFERENCES

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