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Capital District Community Gardens Launches Veggie Rx Program in Collaboration with Whitney Young Health Center

Prescription Produce Coupons Increase Access to Nutritious Food for Diabetic and Hypertensive Patients in Our Region's Food Deserts

March is National Nutrition Month. The awareness campaign is designed to get our plates in shape, but for some Americans there are greater barriers to this idea than for most. Capital District urban neighborhoods are classified as "food deserts" or areas with limited access to nutritious food. Nationwide 92% of the population has access to fresh food, but only 44% of Rensselaer and 63% of Albany county residents do (www.countyhealthrankings.org.) Filling this gap, with a multi-prong approach, is Capital District Community Gardens, a 36 year old non-profit which nourishes healthy communities with nearly 50 community gardens and six other programs designed to improve public health and increase the consumption of fresh, affordable food.

"Most Americans are aware that there is a direct link between access to nutritious food and health, but few people know that, nationwide, 23.5 million Americans are living without access to fresh food," says CDCG's Executive Director Amy Klein. "This March, as the country observes National Nutrition Month, our hope is that area residents will be aware of those who are living in our region's 'food deserts' and will support initiatives that nourish those in need."

In 2007 CDCG launched The Veggie Mobile, a produce aisle on wheels that offers more than 90 fruit and vegetable varieties at wholesale cost. Each year The Veggie Mobile delivers 115,000 pounds of produce to 40,000 residents in our region's inner-city neighborhoods. In 2011 CDCG launched The Veggie Mobile Sprout, a second mobile market to bring fresh produce to even more families in need. CDCG also created The Healthy Convenience Store Initiative in 2011 to give produce a 24 hour presence in urban convenience stores.

Since most residents living in "food deserts" are low-income, cost and availability are the biggest obstacles to meeting the nationally recommended levels of fruit and vegetable intake. Inadequate

dietary intake exposes residents to health risks like diabetes and hypertension. With fresh food now available in our region's inner-city neighborhoods, CDCG is taking action to ensure that residents with nutrition related illnesses are in fact accessing and benefiting from it.

In December CDCG launched Veggie Rx in collaboration with Whitney Young Health Center, an Albany-based health center that provides innovative healthcare for low-income residents. Veggie Rx is a research initiative that will improve patient health and provide supportive evidence for the theory that there is a correlation between fresh food access and health. 50 patients, who are receiving treatment for type-two-diabetes or hypertension at Whitney Young, have been selected for the study. Each week they are given \$7 in coupons that can be used to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables from CDCG's Veggie Mobile.

"It is unfortunate that fresh fruit and vegetables are out of reach for so many people, especially those who suffer from chronic diseases that could be better managed with proper diet," says Nutritionist Elyn Zimmerman of Whitney Young Health Center. "CDCG's efforts to increase fresh food access in underserved neighborhoods are invaluable because, for many of my clients, nutritious food is medicine."

A study published by the American Dietetic Association, which evaluated the consumption of vegetables for low-income seniors, concluded that vegetable intake increased after shopping at the Veggie Mobile and that it is feasible to increase consumption by making fresh produce more available and affordable. This is encouraging data when just three months after the program's launch, CDCG's Veggie Mobile staff are seeing Veggie Rx coupons being redeemed on a daily basis by returning customers.

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Capital District Community Gardens is a 36 year old nonprofit organization that nourishes healthy communities throughout the Capital Region with nearly 50 Community Gardens, The Veggie Mobile and Sprout, The Healthy Convenience Store Initiative, The Produce Project, The Taste Good Series and Street Tree Planting.

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