

Teens 4 Good: Positive Youth Development Through Urban Community Gardening

Katelyn Hurley, MPH¹, Nancy Chernett, MA MPH¹, Colleen Payton, MPH CHES¹, Diane Cornman-Levy, MS PT²
 Jefferson School of Population Health, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania¹
 The Federation of Neighborhood Centers, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania²

Background and Rationale

- Teens that grow up in poor, blighted neighborhoods are at risk for a variety of negative outcomes, including poor health.¹
- In Philadelphia and many other urban communities, disparities in race, income, and education impact access to and consumption of fresh, healthy foods.²
- Youth development programs (YDP) have grown as a viable solution to ameliorate negative outcomes among at-risk youth.³
- Community gardens have been introduced in many urban environments to address issues of food insecurity.⁴

Teens 4 Good (T4G) is a youth-led entrepreneurial program that converts vacant city lots into community gardens.

- T4G was founded in 2005 by the Federation of Neighborhood Centers.
- The program targets urban at-risk youth attending Philadelphia public high schools.

T4G Summer Internship:

- Teens are paid to plant, harvest, and sell produce to local communities.
- Teens are also involved in designing marketing materials, managing finances, and other business operations.

Program Goals:

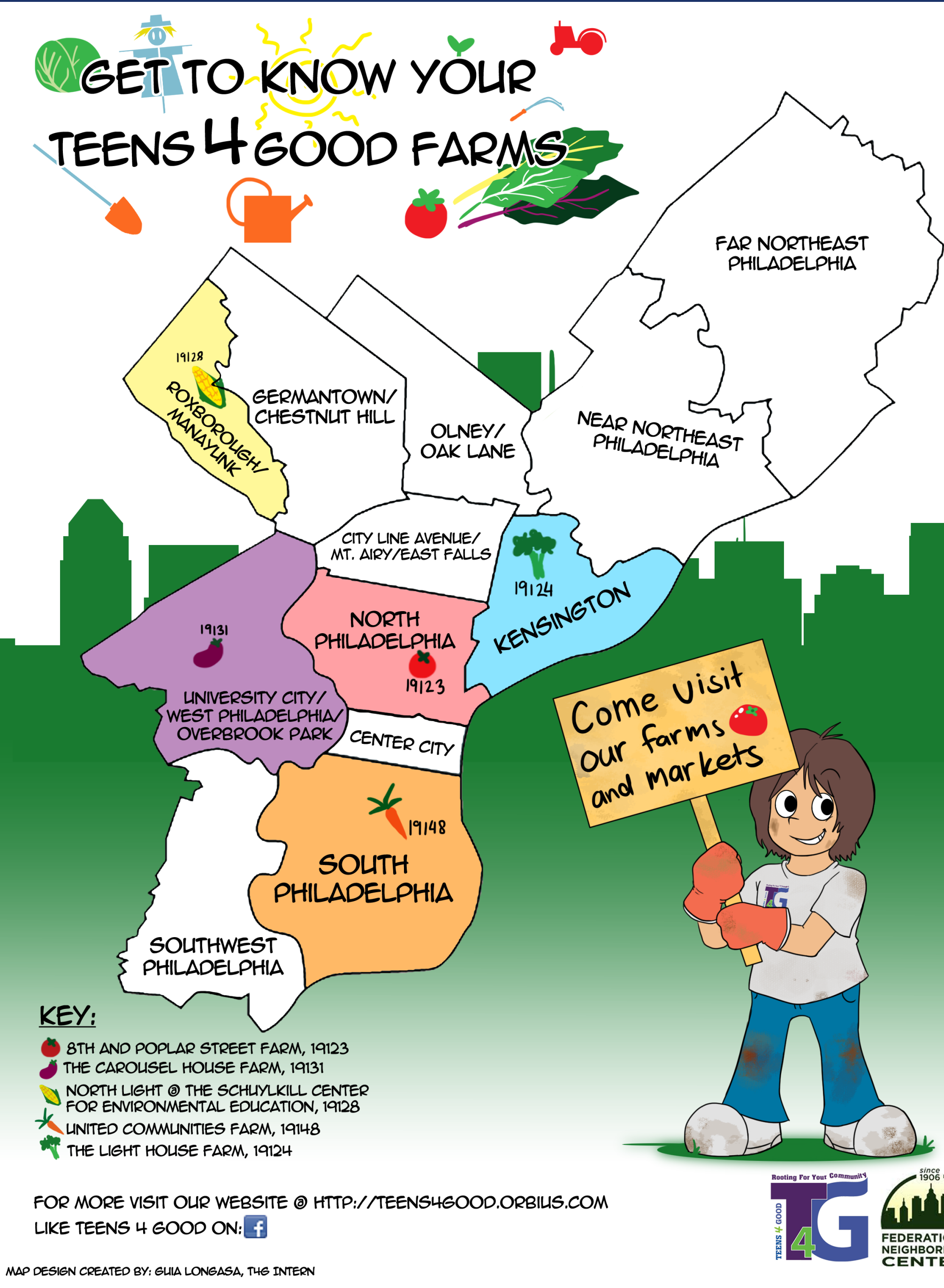
- Improve leadership skills, self-efficacy, and work readiness skills in youth, empowering them to become healthy young adults, and leaders who give back to their community.
- Ameliorate income and place barriers to accessing healthy affordable food by converting vacant city lots into community gardens.

In 2013, 40 teens participated in the 6-week T4G summer internship program (June – August). During this time the study authors conducted a supplemental program evaluation to describe how and to what extent T4G is contributing to Positive Youth Development (PYD), and how and to what extent T4G is impacting teens’ families and the community.

Objectives

- Determine the impact of T4G on teen participants specific to nutrition knowledge and healthy eating behaviors, and the development of work-readiness, leadership, and life skills;
- Explore how participation in T4G impacts participants’ families and communities.

Methods



-We conducted a qualitative program evaluation using semi-structured interviews with T4G staff and focus groups with T4G interns.

-We recruited youth and staff from five T4G community garden sites in Philadelphia in August 2013.

-Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed, and coded to reveal themes.

-A three-person panel (KH, CP, NC), coded transcripts separately using a Grounded Theory approach.⁵

-NVivo 10 qualitative software was used for coding tracking and analysis.

-The study received approval from the Thomas Jefferson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and City of Philadelphia IRB.

Results

Participant Demographics

T4G Interviews	Staff	T4G Focus Groups (FG)	FG1	FG2
Participants (n)	6	Participants (n)	4	6
Gender	3 Male 3 Female	Gender	2 Male 2 Female	2 Male 4 Female
Farm sites	8 th and Poplar Carousel House North Light United Communities Light House	New to the program (n)	1	6
Average # of years with the program	3.5 years	Returning interns (n)	3	0
		Farm sites	North Light Carousel House 8 th and Poplar	United Communities 8 th and Poplar
		Average # of years with the program	3.75 years	<1 years

IMPACT: YOUTH

*What kinds of things do you think the teens have learned at Teens 4 Good? **

Overarching Themes:

- Professional development skills
- How to be a good employee
- Work readiness skills
- Life skills
- Leadership skills
- How to work in groups
- Farming
- Cooking

Nutrition and Healthy Eating

*What kinds of things, if any, have you learned about nutrition and healthy eating? **

Major Themes:

- Learned about new and different kinds of fruits and vegetables
- Learned the importance of eating a balanced meal

8 out of 10 teens in the focus group identified eating more fruits and vegetables since joining the program.

Leadership Skill Development

*Without using names, are there any kids that you feel you have seen a change in since they started the program? **

“I had one youth last year who was, kind of quiet... and did a great job last year but the other personalities in the group were sort of a little overwhelming. And this year on my team he’s definitely the leader. He’s super outgoing, super smart, definitely like sort of leads the way guiding the rest of the team through a lot of different tasks. Because all my kids this year are new, he’s the only one, he’s the only rollover student.”

◇ = Staff interview question
 * = Teen FG question



*Have you taken on any new leadership roles in school or joined any new clubs since you started the program? **

“I feel like I’m more of a leader now...I like to now take charge because most of the time at my site I’m the only one that’s been there long. We usually get new people every year at our site. I’m more of the leader figure [also] in school, whether it be a project or a club, like I’m the head of our National Honor Society.”

Work Readiness and Life Skills

*Can you think about ways T4G might impact your future? **

“Well when I get older I’m gonna be doing a lot of business planning and stuff because I want my own business. So it’s good for me to learn how to do a business plan, and how to do a nice PowerPoint, and show people, and actually talk in front of people, so it’s good for me.”

*How would you describe the teens that you work with? **

“I would say a lot do really like the professional atmosphere. So while they are excited to have a job I think they also look forward to the work that they get to do in the office. They’re excited for, yeah just feeling grown up; putting on nice clothes, [and] getting to go to work in a nice space.”



IMPACT: FAMILY

*Do you think this program has made an impact on teens’ families? **

“I believe, yes, in a way ‘cause some teens they tell their parents ‘Yeah you got to eat healthier,’ and stuff like that. Then there’s teens that [are] doin’ good, their parents see it and they’re like ‘Oh this is brining a change, my little boy and girl is growing up,’ and then they feel as though ‘Dang, let me try to do better for them.’ So it’s like, it’s a domino effect.”

IMPACT: COMMUNITY

*Do you think this program has made an impact on the community? **

Major themes:

- Farm stands impact community
- Increased access to fresh healthy food
- Visible presence in the community
- Community supportive of youth
- Opportunities for the community to get involved

Discussion

- Results indicate that T4G is contributing to positive youth development (PYD) in teen participants.
- Results suggest that both the business and farming/gardening aspects of T4G are contributing to PYD:
 - T4G interns build confidence, and learn communication, leadership, and professional development skills through business training, hands-on farming, and team-based experiences.
- The T4G summer internship has positive influence on nutrition habits in participants, and their families.
- T4G positively impacts the community by increasing access to healthy food in underserved neighborhoods, and by being a visible presence in the community; contributing to neighborhood beautification and a sense of pride in the community.

Study Limitations:

Limited sample size

- Only spoke with 9 out of 40 current interns, and 1 former intern of T4G.

Scope of the project

- Given the time and resources, we would have liked to speak with community members and family members of program participants.

As qualitative research is said to be “an inch wide and a mile deep,” the findings of this study are not intended to be representative of all community gardens or youth workforce development programs; however, knowledge gained sheds light on the influence of a unique program that simultaneously impacts urban youth and urban communities.

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Author Contact:
 Katelyn Hurley
katelyn.hurley@jefferson.edu

