

Executive Summary

Growing Works is a non-profit wholesale plant nursery that is the site for a vocational training program run by Turning Point Foundation. The program assists people with mental health challenges on a path to wellness with horticultural therapy, employment, and future job placement in the workforce. Growing Works employees are referred to the program by the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department and work in a supervised setting that rewards responsibility and initiative and strengthens social skills. While physical and at times demanding, working outdoors with plants has proven to significantly contribute to recovery.

That said, there were noted challenges the county faced with implementation of this project. The first major was finding a location that was both large enough to accommodate a nursery and remain accessible for our mental health clients. The best locations tend to be in more remote parts of the county which presented problems because many clients reside within the city. Another obstacle was ensuring the nursery had all the needed resources; due to the delicate nature of growing plants, it required access to non-reclaimed water. The location identified for this project was in an area without access to pure water requiring the added cost and installation of a reverse osmosis system. Finally, engaging the severely mentally ill in work experience type programs and trainings required creativity. With all participants in this project being required to be active clients of VCBH, transportation to and from the nursery was a hurdle to overcome, with public transportation being difficult because many of these individuals reside in cities.

Key to overcoming the identified challenges was the development of strong partnerships with several key members of the county. With the help from Board of Supervisor, Linda Parks, many volunteers (Navy Sea Bees, Firefighter, local farmers and community members), having land donated, a local nurse expert and partnerships with the local university for a business plan, Growing Works could be established. The partnership with Turning Point Foundation has been a key part of this project.

Growing Works: Mental Wellness and Job Readiness

Turning Point has a lot of experience working with mentally ill individuals that are on the path of Wellness & Recovery. Their programs focus on providing rehabilitative and supportive services through a three-phase approach consisting of volunteering while completing a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP), formal volunteering with an emphasis on teaching job development skills and coaching and ending with being a paid employee working from 3-12 hours per week with the hope of other unrelated employment in the future.

As of May 31st, there have been 81 active members and 27 discharges with 13 clients obtaining outside employment. Although early in operations, those that participate in Growing Works have made comments stating they, “are now able to get out of the house and strive for everyday positivity”... “I’m beginning to feel like I have a purpose in life. I feel good about having structure.”

In Ventura County, Growing Works benefitted from a strong partnership with the local Board of Supervisors, Behavioral Health Department, Turning Point Foundation, a community-based organization and countless dedicated and passionate community volunteers and supporters. This approach should be replicable in other counties that are interested in targeting the severe and persistent mentally ill individuals.

With anecdotal evidence showing improvements in self-esteem and accountability, the Growing Works program can be regarded as a best practice for the serious and persistently mentally ill population. The utilization of Wellness & Recovery principles embedded in a vocational training program will demonstrate a significant impact on how these individuals see themselves and integrate into the community.

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