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FEATURED

Partnership, grant expected to fuel growth at CreekTop Gardens

Tim Johnson
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Council Bluffs Boys & Girls Club students sit up front as Iowa Total Care Community Relations Coordinator Matthew Beitelspacher, third from right at top, cuts the ribbon at CreekTop Gardens, a community garden run by local nonprofit The 712 Initiative, on Wednesday, July 21, 2021. That afternoon, The 712 Initiative announced a partnership with Iowa Total Care, which will help educate local students on how to grow food and give them access to fresh produce.

Staff photo/Joe Shearer

Tim Johnson

A new partnership and a two-year, \$15,000 grant will help the CreekTop Gardens reach its potential, The 712 Initiative CEO Sheryl Garst said Wednesday.

“This is a tremendous new chapter for the CreekTop Gardens,” she said during a ribbon-cutting ceremony held to celebrate a partnership with Iowa Total Care, which provided the grant.

The local vision has been to make the gardens not only an opportunity for gardening enthusiasts but an outdoor classroom for children and adults, Garst said. In 2019, 712 partnered with local Master Gardeners and Iowa Prairie Network to help provide summer programming for Council Bluffs students.

After being cancelled in 2020, programming for students is again being offered this year, Garst said. Next year, Boys & Girls Club members will also have an opportunity to participate in programming at the gardens.

“Now that the CreekTop Gardens are financially powered by Iowa Total Care network, our dreams will become a reality — with a way to sustain the garden, repair and enhance it with programming and materials,” she said. “Hopefully, this will open the door to a long-term relationship.”

The gardens, first tilled in 2010, have been well liked by local residents, Council Bluffs Mayor Matt Walsh said.

“It’s been a great amenity for the community to help people eat healthy — and to teach kids to eat healthy is equally important,” he said.

The site has 90 4-by-8-foot raised-bed garden plots that can be rented for \$25 each per season, according to Julia Woods, 712 director of programming and events, who oversees the garden.

“We want to keep it affordable so people keep coming,” she said.

All 90 plots were planted this spring, and 51 people rented one or more plots to tend. Seven plots are being used to grow produce for local homeless people, Woods said, and will now be marked with signs that read, “Pick me! This plot can be harvested by anyone.”

There is a community orchard at the north end that produces fruit that is free for the taking. There is a shelter house where weary gardeners can rest or take refuge from sudden downpours or the hot sun. Produce left on a table in the shelter house is understood to be up for grabs, Woods said.

“We have lots of gardeners that put stuff on the table for the homeless,” she said.

Garst expressed her thanks to volunteers, who have already put in 380 hours at the garden site this year. Iowa Western Community College cheerleaders helped prepare the beds this spring, and football and volleyball players help clean them up in the fall, as do TS Bank employees. The Trip family cut and painted the plot markers. City Serve repaired some of the beds.

She thanked Susie Opperman and Elizabeth Hunter “for being our garden angels among so many and leading on feeding the most needy with excess produce” and Judy Dittmar of ISU Extension “for her leadership and vision for the space.” She also thanked the TradeWorks Academy at Thomas Jefferson High School for taking on the task of building a shed for the site.

Focusing on nutrition for a few minutes, Garst said, “80% of our health depends on what we eat. Council Bluffs, you answered our call and began moving in 2020 with our 5k Fridays, Shamrock Shuffle and Biketober. Now is the time to solidify our future and improve our health outcomes as a community with changing our relationship with food. We can (control) our own destiny on our health.)”

While Pottawattamie County now ranks 92nd healthiest of Iowa’s 99 counties — up from 98th a few years ago --the county and state still rank higher than the national average in obesity, she said.

The 712 Initiative offers programming ranging from how to plant a vegetable garden to how to can vegetables for winter, according to its website. Educational videos on various aspects of gardening and beekeeping are available for viewing on the website at **[the712initiative.org](https://www.the712initiative.org)**.

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