

WINDHAM EDITION

ReminderNews

GROW Windham hosts Community Dialogues

By **Melanie Savage**
Reminder News

MARCH 3, 2015, 11:09 AM

GROW Windham/The Windham Regional Community Council hosted the first in a series of two Community Dialogues on Saturday, Feb. 28 at Windham Middle School. The dialogues are part of a USDA-funded planning project called The Windham Community Food Network, a collaboration led by GROW Windham/WRCC "that brings together diverse community members and partners to develop projects that improve access to healthy food, generate economic opportunities, and build a forum for ongoing community problem solving," according to Sally Milius, director of GROW Windham.

Milius said the first step in the process is to conduct a series of Community Dialogues that will bring together diverse community members, merchants, farmers, and organizations, to identify local food needs and project ideas. WRCC has contracted with Everyday Democracy to support the events, including creating a discussion guide, assisting with facilitator training, and leading the dialogues.

"The two dialogue sessions will build on each other, so participants will have the opportunity to build relationships with people who are different from them, identify community needs and barriers to accessing healthy food, and come up with unique community solutions," said Milius. "We hope the dialogues will lead to new community relationships, community leaders and action on many levels."

In the Middle School cafeteria on Saturday afternoon, approximately 60 people were gathered at tables in groups of about 10 each. Participants represented a diverse group, with students from Windham High School, UConn and Eastern Connecticut State University joining older members of the community. Aida Alavez and Antonio Lopez helped facilitate a discussion for a group of mostly Spanish-speaking residents of Willimantic. A paper plate at the center of the table sported brightly-colored crayon drawings of healthy foods, including broccoli, water, tomatoes and spinach, labeled in both Spanish and English.

Lopez said he learned about GROW Windham through Alavez, who attends his

church, Iglesia Del Sagrado Corazon de Jesus. Alavez has been volunteering with GROW Windham for approximately three years. What piqued his interest, said Lopez, was the potential for helping Spanish-speaking residents gain access to healthy, affordable food. Many of them have land, said Lopez, but are unaware of the laws pertaining to growing food. "They're afraid. They don't know what they're allowed to do," said Lopez. Many are also unaware of locally-grown options such as are available at local farmers' markets, said Lopez.

Alavez said that she was "happy to help the Windham community and help them understand what GROW Windham is." One of Alavez' goals is to provide people with an awareness of the health detriments associated with eating non-healthy foods. She especially wants to reach parents, "because children have the right to healthy food," said Alavez. Alavez and Lopez said they were happy with the turnout at the first conversation, "But I'm hoping that they spread the word so that there are more people at the second session," said Alavez. Alavez said there were many mothers who were unable to attend the sessions due to work obligations, so one of her goals will be to develop methods to spread the word via media sources such as newspapers, fliers, radio and local television.

Miles Wilkerson is currently an Eastern student who heard about GROW Windham through a professor. "I love this town, and I want to make sure that the people here eat well and eat affordably," said Wilkerson.

Dianne Sprague, project manager at WAIM (Windham Area Interfaith Ministry), said that she's been volunteering with GROW Windham for years. "I'm passionate about feeding people," said Sprague. "Anybody that knows me knows that." Sprague was pleased with the event. "To get input from all these folks, UConn students, Eastern students, others, it's fabulous," she said.

George Hernandez, serving as a group facilitator, is a local business consultant and coach. Having been involved in developing local businesses, first through the Spanish American Merchants' Association, then on his own, Hernandez was enthusiastic about the GROW Windham project. "Anything that is about helping the community and improving the quality of life, I'm all for it," he said.

Malana Rogers-Bursen, from Every Day Democracy, said that the main goal of the project is to build capacity within the community. While the official goal of the conversations is to develop two or three projects that can be completed in a relatively short period of time, "we hope that there will be many more projects that will come out of this," said Rogers-Bursen.

Ricardo Alavez, an AmeriCorps VISTA Service Member and the lead organizer for the community discussions, agreed. "This is a community that has a lot of potential, a lot of resources," said Alavez. The goal of the community dialogues is to get the diverse community resources together to solve problems, said Alavez.

Anyone is welcome to attend the second Community Dialogue, whether they were able to attend the first or not. It is scheduled for Saturday, March 7 at the Windham Middle School Cafeteria (123 Quarry Street, Willimantic), from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Transportation, food and childcare will be provided. For more information contact the Community Food Network @ 860- 423-4534 x 312 or info@growwindham.org.

Copyright © 2015, Hartford Courant
