

## OER Delivers Free Topsoil to NYCHA Farms

In December 2021, OER delivered ten cubic yards of topsoil through the [NYC Clean Soil Bank](#) (CSB) to two farms at NYCHA developments in Brooklyn. The two sites—Howard Houses Farm in Brownsville and Bay View Houses Farm in Canarsie—are part of a citywide public-private partnership known as *Farms at NYCHA* and are run and staffed by AmeriCorps members from Green City Force (GCF).

GCF used CSB topsoil to reconstruct raised beds and serve as the base for a new year of fresh produce. GCF sources their soil for the NYCHA farms from bulk deliveries, NYC Compost giveaways, and private companies, but they intend to use OER's CSB again. As GCF Operations Manager Chloe Lazarus said, "It's always amazing when you can just source clean materials...and it's nice to partner with other organizations willing to do that for free." In addition to being free, she noted that the CSB delivery was reliable and easy to coordinate.

GCF is an AmeriCorps organization that trains public housing residents for green sector employment opportunities. In six- or ten-month terms, corps members from public housing developments receive professional training and participate in service initiatives within the corps and partner organizations, including the Bay View and Howard Houses gardens. Together, GCF corps members, volunteers, and residents maintain plant beds to broaden access to fresh produce in NYCHA developments. GCF has operated the 0.75-acre farm at Howard Houses since July 2016, and the 2-acre farm at Bay View Houses since September 2016.



Bay View Houses Farm, courtesy of Chloe Lazarus, GCF



Bay View Houses Farm

In the spring, summer, and fall, volunteers and GCF staff members spend the day distributing flyers, hosting events, planting, tending beds, and harvesting. Every year, the gardens provide produce such as collard greens, peppers, squash, garlic, oregano, and mint. NYCHA residents receive this fresh produce from weekly farm stands in exchange for compostable waste and volunteer time. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, residents could simply walk downstairs, help harvest in the morning, and collect a bag of produce in the afternoon. Toward the end of the growing season, residents complete surveys and suggest crops for next year. Harvest festivals in October offer games, refreshments, and giveaways. Cooking demonstrations at the farm stand provide meal ideas to residents.

Further, demonstration beds enable residents to grow their own seeds, and popular produce can become part of the regular bed rotation.

GCF corps members are often assigned to the NYCHA building where they grew up. Members work at the same site throughout their training, involving themselves in growing and maintenance, distribution, cooking, and recipe demonstrations to further their professional and educational development. They receive additional workforce development training including OSHA training and GoPro certifications. Career training in the green jobs sector is included and other certifications are available depending on members' career goals. In 2018, 94% of members transitioned to full-time school or work after completing the corps program.

As of 2021, GCF has built six community farms on NYCHA developments, five of which are still operated by GCF. GCF runs the farms as Eco-Hubs, an ongoing project transforming the farms into closed-loop systems combining infrastructure, agriculture, and economic development to promote sustainability in NYCHA developments. At Howard Houses and Bay View Houses, raised beds reduce stormwater runoff, while community composting reduces food waste. Howard Houses is powered via solar panels attached to growing containers, and GCF aims to sustainably power all its Eco-hubs.

These NYCHA farms illustrate how the benefits of urban farms extend beyond the borders of their developments. Per Howard Houses' resident and farm site manager, Kyara Grant, people from neighboring housing developments walk to the farm to get produce, and it binds the people from neighboring developments together. The 2,000–5,000 pounds of produce that the farm produces every season are shaped by resident volunteers, GCF corps members, and members of the neighboring community. Kyara says that the program "really helped me shape who I am as a person and helped me better navigate the professional world."