

Starting Small, Dreaming Big

Godwin Akpan, Kankakee, Illinois

Establishment of an Organic, Sustainable, Small-Scale Farm Producing Livestock (Goats/Chickens) and Vegetables for Niche Markets in Chicago

Coodinator: Godwin Akpan

Location: Chicago, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$5,991

Grant Year: 2007

Project Number: FNC07-685

Chicago's United Human Services Center purchased 25 acres near Kankakee and is using organic farming to improve the lives of youths and adults. It's a mixed-farming operation with livestock and vegetables, and they hope to be self-sustaining in three years.

Godwin Akpan has a dream—a dream to revitalize a struggling community in Central Illinois using specialty vegetables, pastured poultry, and goats.

Akpan is executive director of United Human Services Center (UHSC), a not-for-profit organization that has been operating within Chicago for more than three years. "UHSC caters especially to abused women and involves citizens in gardening activities," he says. "In the summer of 2007, the gardens produced enough vegetables for everyone and to share. Participants learned simple and effective techniques of vegetable production in small spaces, weeding, trellising, and storage of produce."

From this experience, UHSC recognized the need to educate more people in a larger area, so they purchased a 25-acre plot in Pembroke Township—a community about 60 miles south of Chicago in the southeast corner of Kankakee County. A number of the residents are African-American organic farmers.

Through organic farming, Akpan says he hopes to help create a community that will improve the general lives of youths and



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adults in Pembroke Township economically, socially, and educationally.

The interest in organically grown vegetables, herbs, and livestock is growing in Chicago and surrounding cities. The Muslim and Hispanic populations are a particularly strong niche market for goat meat.

With that in mind, Akpan and UHSC intend to develop a mixed-farming operation consisting of livestock and vegetables on a 3- to 5-acre model farm within the 25-acre farm—using the SARE grant to jumpstart his dream. The goal is to have a self-sustaining system in three years.

His plan is to start small and trust nature.

"We'll start with four does and a buck," says Akpan. "Assuming that they are good mothers, they will each produce twins. Half of those are expected to be females, ready to breed in a year."

By the end of the second year, he expects there to be approximately 20 goats in the herd. The males will be sold for meat and the income reinvested in the farm.

Vegetables to be planted in raised beds will include peppers, tomatoes, garlic, greens (turnips, mustard, collard, kale, and Swiss chard), okra, sweet potatoes, peanuts,

and various herbs. Plans also include planting blackberries, blueberries, and peach and apple trees. A major market will be the farmers market in Kankakee. Vendors at the farmers market can buy from the farm and eliminate transportation costs.

Structures on the small farm will be kept to a minimum. A water source will be established by sinking a borehole. Because of the presence of predators, dog- and coyote-proof fencing will be erected on two of the acres. A simple shed for a goat refuge during adverse weather and pasture poultry hoops will be constructed. Additionally, a simple set-up for vegetable washing and packing will be located within the farm.

Although it will be necessary to purchase some equipment to work the farm, the bigger machinery will be leased as needed.

To promote educational opportunities, UHSC will work closely with University of Illinois Extension to organize a twilight tour of the garden and a morning farm tour during mid-season crop production. UHSC has already initiated a 4-H Youth program for the area, providing each child with a small plot and the opportunity to plant a vegetable of their own choice.

"The people of Pembroke are organic farmers, and they will learn some simple techniques such as trellising for higher productivity from this project," says James Theuri, Extension educator at the Kankakee County Unit. "Godwin Akpan will also be an inspirer of younger people to get into farming. A lot of Pembroke people are aging and do not have young farmer entrepreneurs to take on the land after them."

Akpan is realizing his dream to bring sustainable agriculture practices to the residents of Pembroke Township—starting small in hopes of benefiting the environment and improving the lives of an underserved population in Central Illinois.

By Debra Levey Larson