

Teens put 'give back' in C-U Public Health District's Give Back Garden

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CHAMPAIGN — This mighty little garden already puts thousands of pounds of produce on the table every summer for those who can afford it least.

Now, the Give Back Garden launched in 2012 by the Champaign-Urbana Public Health District is weed-free and a lot safer for those who tend it, thanks to 10 teenagers with a heart for service.

The garden, planted in front of the health district's environmental health offices along Kenyon Road, has been a summer project for Catholic Heart Workcamp this week.

Visiting teens from several states have weeded 30 raised beds that grow produce given away at the health district all summer long and built a wooden picket fence around the entire garden area.

The fence was badly needed for safety, said Valerie Koress, a public health nutritionist who has long managed the garden program.

The garden beds are close to a busy road where traffic tends to move fast, she said. That has made it unsafe for any volunteers to bring children to the garden to work or for the health district to hold educational activities there for client families.

Catholic Heart Workcamp is a national church-based ministry intended to foster the Catholic faith through sacraments, prayer and involvement in service.

Teens who came to Champaign this week are from several states. They're set to wrap up at the health district today and will leave for home Friday.

What drew Saige Karastury, 17, of Conneaut Lake, Pa., to this trip was a chance to serve, and it has been as great an experience as her friends assured her, she said Wednesday.

"Everyone who has gone has said it's an amazing experience," she said.

Araceli Hernandez, 17, of Bronson, Mich., said this is her third time making a Catholic Heart service trip. It's all about her faith and meeting new people, she said.

"I really like the experience," she said.

C-U Public Health District Administrator Julie Pryde said the visiting teens planted a lot more vegetables and made the garden safer.

"I am beyond impressed at how they're working and what an amazing job they've been doing," she said.

The garden means a lot to an agency that encourages people to eat fresh fruits and vegetables and to its leaders, who understand fresh produce can be too expensive for the people they serve.

Last year, the Give Back Garden produced 2,000 pounds of produce that was given away to public health clients, Pryde said. Fruits and vegetables are picked whenever they're ready and left out for clients to take.

Pryde said something new always produces a lot of interest, and if it's produce people are unfamiliar with, recipes are included.

"It's a myth that kids don't like fruits and vegetables," she said. "I can guarantee you that if I had grapes and I had granola bars, the kids would go for the grapes every single time. The only thing is, it's just super expensive."