

Volunteers of America of Western New York, Inc. - Pat Drake

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Organization Profile

Organization Name	Mail Address
Volunteers of America of Western New York, Inc.	214 Lake Avenue, Rochester, NY 14608

Exec. Name	Contact Name	Phone	Email
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Mission/Vision Volunteers of America's mission is to empower people to rise out of poverty, move toward self-reliance, and reach their full potential. Our agency's vision is to be a pre-eminent community-based organization that helps to end homelessness and poverty in the community.

Receive County Funds? YES - Volunteers of America currently receives Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) funding from Monroe County for our Emergency Shelter, which provides temporary housing and support services for homeless families. We were awarded a grant of \$32,998, and our contract year was from August 1, 2021 through July 31, 2022.

Div. of Corp. N/A? no

Proposal Information

Project Name VOA's Hydroponic Farm

Summary Volunteers of America (VOA) plans to build a hydroponic farm in Rochester to provide healthy food for homeless, formerly homeless, and impoverished households. The farm, which will be built as a replicable model for future hydroponic farms throughout the city and county, will provide fresh produce for people in the Northwest Quadrant of Rochester (an area of the city that is a known food desert) and for vulnerable populations throughout the county, including frail seniors and families experiencing homelessness. It will also provide jobs, vocational training opportunities, agri-therapy for veterans experiencing PTSD and other mental health challenges, nutritional programs, and serve as an educational/life sciences lab for programs at Monroe Community College's downtown campus and local schools, including VOA's Pre-K/Head Start programs, which serve more than 300 children daily. The farm will generate more than 300,000 units of fresh produce annually.

This project involves collaborations with numerous entities including Monroe Community College, Veterans Outreach Center, Anthony Jordan Health Center, Compeer, Foodlink, and local schools in a transformative effort to improve low-income households' access to fresh produce that contributes to their food security and health. The project will provide food assistance, job training, improve nutrition for more than 2,500 people annually, and contribute to improved mental health for veterans. This project is a health initiative that focuses on the overall well-being of Monroe County residents by improving food security, mental health, and job training for underserved individuals.

Workforce/Economic?	Health/Safety?	Infrastructure/Sustainability?
yes	yes	yes

Description Through the provision of our human services, VOA is well aware of the food insecurity experienced by impoverished, marginalized, and vulnerable populations. Individuals and families arrive at our shelters and supportive housing programs malnourished and in poor health in part from lack of food and the inability to access nutritional food. This has been exacerbated during the COVID pandemic. Impoverished households throughout Monroe County –especially in areas that are food deserts-- are struggling to access nutritious food. VOA plans to address this issue by building a hydroponic farm and making fresh produce available to community residents.

Our organization has a large complex at 214 Lake Avenue in Rochester. Our Children's Center, which serves more than 300 children daily, is located on the front part of the property and the back of the parcel is 3 acres that was formerly a brownfield but is now remediated through the efforts of VOA. It is our plan to use 1/4 – 1/2 of an acre of this land for a hydroponic farm that will generate at least 300,000 units of fresh produce per year.

VOA will collaborate with LocalDutch (LD), a developer of hydroponic farms, to build a Dry-Hydroponics system that is ideal for local production and educational purposes and allows for a high level of crop program flexibility and adaptability to local market demands/needs. The design also supports scalability. It is cost efficient, climate friendly and flexible, and will deliver top quality healthy and safe produce locally.

This project will advance Monroe County's goal for community wellness by supporting food security and health initiatives. It will

contribute to a skilled workforce through job training in a developing field and preserve our natural resources by optimizing land use.

Specifically, the project will accomplish the following:

- Help address the community's food deserts by providing impoverished and vulnerable populations access to healthy produce, contributing to health equity in disadvantaged areas;
- Provide green jobs and training opportunities;
- Serve as an educational facility for VOA's Pre-K program and local schools (teaching children to grow and eat healthy foods at a young age);
- Act as a healthy food source for VOA's programs (including our Children's Center and Family Shelter);
- Provide an educational life sciences lab for local colleges;
- Offer agri-therapy for veterans experiencing PTSD;
- Provide an accessible farmer's market with additional fresh food.

The project will be structured such that it can easily be duplicated throughout the county in areas with minimal food access.

The area's health statistics, particularly in low income neighborhoods are poor as reported by Common Ground Health. There are large disparities in the rate of premature mortality, and in some zip codes, the rate of Years of Potential Life Lost (YPLL) is more than 50% greater than the region average. Within the City of Rochester, a majority of the population lives in zip codes with this much higher rate of mortality. Access to locally grown produce at reasonable price points will help to increase the health of the population and improve mortality rates.

Growing and consuming locally has a positive effect on the environment. The vegetables grown in the hydroponic farm are harvested and distributed immediately, ensuring maximum preservation of nutrients and minimal waste due to optimum freshness. The farm will take maximum advantage of natural light, minimizing energy costs. Fresh produce will be grown, including lettuce, kale, leeks, radishes, collard greens, and onions. VOA will collaborate with other organizations to provide additional fruits and vegetables.

VOA's project increases accessibility to this fresh produce in several ways:

- Produce will be provided to the families served by VOA's Children's Center when they come to get their children, so they will not have to make another stop.
- VOA will invite other farmers/providers to distribute healthy food with our fresh produce to increase access and affordability.
- VOA will have a store front at the farm on Lake Avenue and will arrange delivery as necessary to people who have accessibility challenges (for example, the seniors who live at VOA's affordable housing complex in Webster).
- VOA will utilize our shelter, food pantry, and housing programs along with other housing providers and child care centers as distribution points.
- Product will be provided at a significantly discounted rate or at no cost to impoverished households to reduce barriers.

VOA needs ARPA funding to help build the greenhouse and support the initial operating years. The total cost to build the hydroponic farm is \$2.5 million, and Senator Schumer has prioritized a \$1 million federal grant for VOA. In addition, we are submitting a request to the NYS Consolidated Funding Application for \$500,000. VOA is requesting \$750,000 in ARPA funds for construction in Year 1, and \$532,500 in total for years 2-4 to help pay for supplies, seeds, and the initial costs of operating the farm, including a portion of personnel expenses. After the 4th year, VOA will no longer need operating support, as the farm will be at full production with revenue from several sources covering the operating expenses. These sources will include: shop sales; membership boxes; possible contracts with local charter school and/or business cafeterias; and workshops and events.

VOA plans to achieve the following outcomes:

- More than 2,500 people a year will receive fresh produce on a regular basis;
- At least 85% of households served will incorporate healthier foods into their diet on a regular basis;
- At least 25-30 veterans annually will benefit from agri-therapy, contributing to improved mental health;
- At least 9-15 people will be trained in green jobs annually;
- At least 90% of children who participate in educational programs will develop a better understanding about how to grow their own food and the importance of eating fresh produce.
- Improvement in the health of vulnerable and marginalized populations by increasing their access to nutritional food.

VOA will continue this project beyond 2026, and our plan is to replicate the model throughout the county.

Company Strengths Volunteers of America (VOA) is a non-profit 501(c)3 human services agency that has been serving Monroe County for more than 125 years. VOA serves more than 6,000 people annually, providing effective and innovative services that address and alleviate homelessness, poverty, and recidivism. VOA works to advance social and health equity by providing holistic, long-term solutions that remove barriers and promote housing stability, greater access to resources (including food, education and health care), and improved financial well-being.

The fiscal viability and health of VOA is very good. All of our programs are set up with strong, diverse revenue sources that are able to cover the operating expenses of our programs and result in balanced program budgets. As a result, the financial feasibility of our programs and their ability to successfully achieve outcomes is strong. In the past several years, VOA has expanded both our supportive housing programs and our early childhood development programs.

The VOA Children's Center is the largest community-based organization offering Pre-K programs and has been a top-quality provider for more than 20 years. Our center has multiple classrooms recognized as "demonstration classrooms" for the excellence of our programming.

VOA provides more than 60,000 nights of supportive housing annually, and we have long-standing working relationships with other service providers, the Dept. of Human Services, employers, and health organizations to ensure our program participants can access the resources they need.

Our agency's operating budget is \$13 million, and our administrative expense is 13%, which is very efficient. VOA successfully administers all of the financial and programmatic aspects of our programs, and our agency has successfully passed reviews and audits conducted by HUD, the VA, the federal Bureau of Prisons, the NYS Dept. of Corrections, the Office of Temporary & Disability Assistance, and the U.S. Administration for Children & Families.

Community Resources VOA will collaborate with multiple organizations:

- Conductor Construction: Will build the greenhouse/hydroponic farm and engage MWBEs as subcontractors.
- Local Dutch, The Netherlands: Serving as an adviser - this firm has extensive experience as a developer and operator of local greenhouse solutions, and VOA has been working with them for 1 year.
- Greater Rochester Enterprise: Has provided guidance in developing our business model and will provide funding connections and promotional support.
- Monroe Community College (and possibly other local universities): Will use the farm as educational space for life sciences and sustainability programs, and students in its hydroponic farming program can intern at the farm. Will help to train staff and volunteers.
- Compeer and Veterans Outreach Center: Will refer veterans with PTSD to the farm for agri-therapy and/or job training (15-25 veterans annually) – successful working relationship for more than a decade.
- The VOA Children's Center, other Pre-K providers (such as Ibero), and local schools, including the Vertus Charter School: Will use the farm as an experiential learning classroom.
- Rochester Works: Will refer individuals for job training in hydroponics - positive working relationship for more than a decade.
- Anthony Jordan Health Center: Will refer families to VOA to receive produce - successful working relationship of 7 years.
- Common Ground Health: Will provide data about health and nutrition; working together for 3 years.
- Foodlink: Will refer families, assist with distribution, provide additional fresh produce – long-standing working relationship for 2 decades.
- 490 Farmers: Will provide additional types of fresh produce at VOA's farm market - new collaboration.
- URMIC: will offer biometric testing for individuals who are interested – new working relationship.
- Cornell Cooperative: Agricultural guidance – have successfully worked together on various projects.
- VOA's Food Pantry and Supportive Housing Programs: Will assist in distribution of produce to people in need.

VOA has the following resources for the project:

- VOA owns the land for the project (1/2 acre of VOA's 3 acres that have been remediated) at 214 Lake Avenue and has 18% tax credits to use for developing it;
- VOA owns the rest of the property at 214 Lake Avenue, which includes our Children's Center and space to operate a farm market;
- VOA received \$55,000 from the Humana Foundation to assist with initial development expenses including market research and site design.
- Senator Schumer has prioritized VOA's project for a federal grant of \$1 million and submitted our request to the Senate Appropriations Committee. Funding will be used to help build the hydroponic farm.
- VOA is submitting a Consolidated Funding Application to New York State requesting \$500,000 in funding to help build the greenhouse.
- VOA will sell a portion of the produce grown at the farm, which will provide ongoing operating revenue for the program.

In addition to engaging MWBEs in the construction of the green house complex, VOA will engage MWBEs in ongoing operational support (i.e. HVAC provider, printer of training manuals, etc.)

Audience This project will serve individuals and families who are homeless, previously homeless, and impoverished. The majority will be minorities who have been historically underrepresented and underserved. Approximately 70% will be African-American, 15% Hispanic, 4% Asian-American, and 11% White. Households will include adults struggling with disabling mental, behavioral, and/or physical health conditions, people with a history of incarceration, individuals who do not speak English as their primary language, and people --including veterans-- who have experienced trauma. Many do not have primary care providers and have not had regular health care. They have very little income and limited access to healthy food options.

Populations who will benefit from VOA's proposed hydroponic farm include:

- 380 children who attend our Children's Center and their families (approximately 300 households), all of whom are impoverished – total of more than 1,000 people.
- 200 homeless families served by VOA's shelter annually (comprised of 700 people)
- At least 150 low-income households (comprised of more than 450 people) who have been referred from partner agencies, including Anthony Jordan Health Center and Foodlink. These include city and county residents
- 60 of the frail, impoverished seniors who live at VOA's affordable housing complex in Webster
- At least 30 veterans annually who will benefit from agri-therapy
- Approximately 50 families (with 200 people) and 80 people served by VOA's supportive housing programs
- Approximately 50-60 college students and 100 children from local schools who benefit from the educational learning lab.

The hydroponic farm will be built in year 1 and will engage about 20 construction workers. At least 2,500 people will benefit annually starting in year 2.

Some populations will receive the produce at no cost (those that are impoverished, homeless), while others will be asked to purchase the produce at a discounted/subsidized rate.

<i>Cost 1st Year</i>	<i>Cost All Years</i>	<i>Residents 1st Year</i>	<i>Residents All Years</i>	<i>FT Employees</i>	<i>PT Employees</i>
\$750,000.00	\$1,282,500.00	20	7,600	9	0
Volunteers					
15					

Staffing Staffing:

Program Manager: This position is responsible for daily operations of the hydroponic farm, including the greenhouse, market/store, classroom/educational space, and distribution. This position will require an Associate's Degree (a Bachelor's Degree preferred) in agriculture, sustainability or a related field. Two years of supervisory experience is preferred.

Program Assistant: This position will provide administrative support. A High School Diploma/GED is required and administrative experience is preferred but not required.

Hydroponic Team Members: The project will require 6 FTE staff members. To meet the needs of individuals reentering the workforce (who may not be able/ready to work 40 hours), VOA can adjust 1-2 of the positions to part-time. In these situations, VOA may have 4 FTE staff members and 4 PTE staff members to cover the 240 hours per week needed. These positions will work in the greenhouse, market, classroom, and handle distribution. No credentials are required because staff will be fully trained.

Agri-therapist: This position will work with the veterans who are utilizing agri-therapy to help deal with PTSD. A bachelor's degree in Social Work, Counseling or a related field is required.

In addition to paid staff, VOA will engage volunteers and interns from Monroe Community College and other colleges and universities.

The Program Manager will report to VOA's VP of Services for Children and Families, who manages programs that serve economically disadvantaged households. The VP position is required to have a Master's Degree in Education, Social Services, or a related field and at least 5 years of supervisory experience.