

The Augusta Chronicle

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By

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Programs share ideas about increasing access to local healthy food

Aisha Ralph McDonald and her colleagues have a vision of not only growing organic produce but creating more people to produce it.

"The demand is there" for organic produce," she said. "We're trying to increase the number of organic growers in Augusta and the CSRA."

McDonald and the Boggs Growing Growers Farmer Training Program in Keysville was the winning program picked by those who attend a "pitch night" sponsored by Augusta Food Oasis and Georgia Organics for five local programs to share their ideas about increasing access to local healthy food.

With the winnings, Growing Growers will create an on-site harvest and cleaning facility on its 11-acre training farm in Keysville and look at ways of marketing its produce beyond the sites it sells now, McDonald said. One idea is to start a farmer's market in Keysville but she would also like to sell in the Laney-Walker neighborhood where she lives.

"We know there's a food desert there," she said, an area that lacks access to a full-service grocery store and lacks fresh fruit and vegetables and healthy food.



Aisha McDonald "Making the Pitch!"



Produce from Boggs Organic Farm Below Boggs Inspiring Farmer Tianna Neal at Farmers Market

The data show that much of the Augusta area has a major and food access. In the Georgia 12th Congressional District that includes Augusta and the South Carolina 2nd Congressional



District that includes Aiken, more than one in 10 families receive help from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, according to the U.S.

Department of Agriculture. As of January in the 12th District, that was 46,193 households, or 18.7 percent of homes, with 56 percent having at least one child under the age of 18, and more than 75 percent were working families. In the 2nd District, it was 33,527 households, 12.7 percent of homes, with nearly 60 percent having a child under 18 and 78 percent are working families, according to the USDA.



Boggs Inspiring Farmers made a perfect pitch on pitch night, L-R Nekia McDonald, Aisha McDonald, & Robert Sims, not in photo Tianna Neal & Tamika White

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Program Partners & Boggs Farmer Training Instructors Loretta and Sam Adderson from Adderson's Organic Farm

While there are vast swaths of inner-city Augusta like the Laney-Walker area that would qualify as food deserts, those same areas also have the highest levels of obesity. While the overall level of obesity was 28.8 percent, it can range as high as 49.5 percent in Census tracts that lack ready access to healthy food, according to 2014 data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Augusta is one of two projects, along with Columbus, that Georgia Organics is sponsoring this year to begin to address those issues, said Executive Director Alice Rolls.

"What's

interesting about Augusta is you've got really strong grassroots efforts already in play," she said. And it can go in many different directions, Rolls said.

"We like to say food is the answer," she said. "Because if you want to address rural development, community development, health, the environment, climate change, jobs, then food is a vehicle we have lost track of in our big global food system," she said. "It's really about communities taking ownership of their food system."



For information on where you can purchase fresh produce from Boggs Organic Farm, contact Boggs Rural Life Center at (706) 554-9656