

Des Moines Register

DES MOINES

Urban agriculture project for at-risk youth springing up on Des Moines' north side

Chris Higgins Des Moines Register

Published 7:10 p.m. CT Dec. 12, 2021

A first-of-its-kind rooftop garden under construction in Des Moines will be the centerpiece of a program to provide at-risk youth with the skills to gain employment and earn a living wage.

Iowa Homeless Youth Center offers various services to homeless and at-risk youth between ages 16 and 24, but the group's director, Toby O'Berry, said one service was still missing: workforce training. At the rooftop garden, which will be located at 2705 E. Euclid Ave., youth will be able to grow fresh herbs and other produce year-round using hydroponic technology, all while making a stipend of \$12 an hour for 30 hours a week over a 3-month period.

The produce will be sold to area retailers so the project can be self-sustaining and avoid the cycle of grant searching. Meanwhile, O'Berry said, the youth involved will learn soft skills to help in the workforce, like communication and interacting with a supervisor, while providing opportunities for the youth to engage with the community and increase their access to nutritious food.

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"It's giving them the ability to plan and learn for their future," O'Berry said.

The \$3.5 million project, which has already broken ground, was started up with funds from a range of various organizations, companies and partners, and is expected to be up and running next year.

"It really touches a lot of different priorities and initiatives of different communities," O'Berry said.

The site will also serve as an educational space for schoolchildren to learn about hydroponic agriculture.

The project falls in the ward represented by Linda Westergaard on the Des Moines City Council. She said that she is completely supportive of the project and that it will help the youth in the community while providing jobs and fresh produce.

"It's 100% a good project," Westergaard said.

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