

Alameda County urban farm program expands, to add kitchen

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Updated: 03/30/2015 09:18:47 AM PDT

ContraCostaTimes.com

SAN LEANDRO -- Dig Deep Farms broke ground last week on a commercial kitchen that will help grow its program that employs former inmates while supplying healthy food to low-income neighborhoods.

"We will take some of our produce from our urban farms and create packaged goods, such as tomato sauce, jams and a fire-roasted salsa that's very good, that we will sell," said Lt. Marty Neideffer of the Alameda County sheriff's office. Neideffer was a major force in starting the farm in 2010.

Dig Deep Farms, a project of the Alameda County Sheriffs' Activities League, hires former inmates and others from nearby neighborhoods to grow produce on its sites in the unincorporated Ashland community. The farm supplies much needed low-cost fresh fruits and vegetables to low-income residents in Ashland, Cherryland and other locations through its Community Supported Agriculture program. It also runs weekly produce stands, including at the county's Social Services offices.

Dig Deep Farms has provided jobs or internships for more than 40 people since it started in 2010, and currently has eight employees.

One of those is Michael Silva, who had been in and out of jail almost half his life. He credits Dig Deep Farms and the Sheriff's Office Youth and Family Services in helping him escape the revolving door of crime and jail time.

"It will be four years on March 31 since I was last arrested," the 35-year-old said.

He works in the urban farm fields, and bags and delivers CSA orders.

Silva was aided by Operation My Hometown, created to keep former inmates from reoffending by giving them much needed support, connecting them with housing, health care, education, job training, legal assistance and other services.

When Silva was last released from Santa Rita Jail, Operation My Hometown arranged to have him enter a drug rehabilitation program. His Youth and Family Services case manager also hooked him up with Dig Deep, where he started training.

"I had no farming background whatsoever," the San Lorenzo resident said. "I like doing what I'm doing. It's a good job. You're working outside, making food; you can't complain -- you're not in an office."

Silva also is eating healthier since starting at Dig Deep.

"Last Lent I became a vegetarian," he said.

Opening the new kitchen will create four full-time jobs and 10 internships.

Former inmates have a much higher likelihood of success if they can land a job and support themselves, Neideffer said.

"You need economic development to create jobs. And you need jobs to bring down recidivism rates and therefore crime rates," he said.

The kitchen also will serve as a small-business incubator.

"The idea is to identify people from the Ashland-Cherryland area and throughout Alameda County who believe they have a product to sell, maybe an old family recipe. We can help provide the infrastructure to get them going," Neideffer said.

The county Community Development Agency will help link the entrepreneurs with microloan sources, and the Small Business Development Center will run business training programs.

The kitchen on Fairmont Drive in the hills east of Interstate 580 also will be used for culinary job training. The Tri-Valley Regional Occupational Program runs a culinary arts program at Santa Rita Jail in Dublin, but inmates often get released before they can finish the training, Neideffer said.

"This will allow them to pick up where they left off," he said.

The Deputy Sheriffs' Activities League sponsors several programs to steer young people away from crime. Its free soccer program attracts hundreds; it also has swimming, boxing and basketball programs, and hosts activities such as poetry slams and open mike.

The 3,200-square-foot kitchen should be complete by this fall. Most of the \$1.3 million cost of the facility is being paid for with a Community Development Block Grant and donations from charitable foundations and large and small companies. Donations are still being accepted.

The Oakland Builders Alliance is a major contributor, Neideffer said. The advocacy alliance includes design professionals, contractors, real estate agents and construction managers.

"This is a natural fit for us. We're intent on raising awareness and having construction companies pledge either labor, materials or donations for this project," said Laura Nasca, the alliance's operations director.

"The Deputy Sheriffs' Activities League has this wonderful project that is progressive policy, creating jobs and bringing fresh food to this community that needs it," she said.

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Dig Deep Farms

To donate, order a CSA box or learn more about Dig Deep Farms, go to www.digdeefarms.com or call 510-614-3337.