

My name is Dominique Bernardo, and I am the CEO of nonprofit Variety the Children's Charity of the Delaware Valley (Variety) located outside Philadelphia. Our mission is to enrich the lives of children and young adults with disabilities through social, educational, and vocational programs that nurture independence and self-confidence, and prepare them for life. We serve individuals with disabilities from age 5 through 24 from throughout the Greater Philadelphia region. We are located on our owned 77-acre campus in an agriculturally zoned area that includes 2 greenhouses and an organic garden totaling approximately 1 acre.

Variety has been the recipient of funding from the Department of Agriculture since 2019. We have received a total of \$36,500 from the Youth and Agriculture grant and a total of \$10,000 from the Urban Ag Collaboration Grant. Let me share with you how impactful this funding has been for the individuals served, our organization, and the community at large.

For the individuals served: Our 2 greenhouse and paved gardens serve as living classrooms for the youth and young adults participating in our vocational training programs. Let me briefly paint a true picture – each summer approx. 35 high school students participate in an intensive 7 week, all day training program. They are broken into groups. In one day, the garden group takes compost from the kitchen group and feeds the plants/produce, plants new seeds with adaptive tools to address tremors and balance issue, harvest zucchini plants, and transport them to the baking crew. That baking crew makes zucchini bread with the zucchini, packages it, and transports it to the pop up crew who operates a weekly pop up shop at a local corporate partner and offers the items to the community. Later that week the pop up crew will deliver excess produce to a local food pantry.

Horticultural activity helps participants develop a sense of responsibility and achievement through seeding, watering, weeding, and harvesting. Furthermore, it can positively impact their mental health and provide stress relief through breathing fresh air, and cooking from the harvest. (*paraphrased from study – do I cite? Growing from the Roots Up – the Benefits of Horticultural Therapy* <https://potentialabilitygroup.com.au/growing-from-the-roots-up-the-benefits-of-horticultural-therapy/> Author: Briony Lucas Published: August 11, 2020

For our organization: Support from the Department of Agriculture has been critical in providing educational materials to and key supplies to operate the greenhouse and make the space more accessible, including for example construction of raised beds that allow for ALL students to participate even those in a wheelchair. We are able to utilize our ample property for an agriculture purpose that brings awareness to our mission and benefits to the community. In addition, Variety collaborates and partners with various businesses in the industry to host our students on their sites for internships, assessments and future job placements. Having our own garden and greenhouse as training ground ensures our job candidates are competitive.

For the community at large: Volunteers from the community, local corporations, master gardeners have provided hundreds if not thousands of hours onsite to help maintain our gardens and greenhouses. Engaging individuals in community service while building awareness of our mission is mutually beneficial. Produce grown at our greenhouse is offered to the community at pop up shops and also to local food pantries for distribution. In addition, most of the native plants and produce grown on Variety's campus represent a vital food and habitat resource for pollinators.

Finally, I leave you with a few impressive stats from our last fiscal year alone:

- Bees from 3 hives pollinated our garden and produced over 70 jars of honey
- 40 different vegetable and flower crops were planted
- Students with disabilities planted over 5,000 seeds
- Students in the summer reported watering as the favorite gardening task of the summer

On behalf of the hundreds of youth and young adults with disabilities benefitting from our gardens and greenhouses, their families, and the dozens of community business partners who hire our vocational students, I express my gratitude for the support from the Department of Agriculture and truly hope that there will be funds in the future to continue this important work.