

RAO's Doula Impact Program: A Pilot Program to Increase African American Representation and Access to Breastfeeding Support

Ashley Carmenia

At A Glance

In North Carolina, the prevalence of breastfeeding declines steeply when comparing breastfeeding initiation rates to the 12-month marker. In further disaggregating the data, it is shown that African American women have breastfeeding rates that are significantly lower than those of women from other races. In 2021, RAO partnered with Johnson C. Smith University and Novant Health to develop and implement a pilot Doula training program to:

- Create a strategic program model to increase the number of African American doulas in the greater Charlotte region.
- Increase continuity of care and community support for breastfeeding and maternal health by incorporating services into existing community support services.
- Increase the presence of African American doulas in the local hospital systems to help diversify the field of lactation.
- Help address breastfeeding and health disparities and inequities.

To date, we have had over 100 applicants that applied to the pilot program scholarship. From the applicant pool, ten African American women were selected from Mecklenburg and Cabarrus counties. Selected recipients in this pilot program completed: 1).16 hours of initial DONA-certified doula training at JCSU; 2). 12 weeks of additional training on lactation, breastfeeding, preconception, pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum and newborns; and, 3). Clinical rotations at Novant Presbyterian Medical Center in Charlotte, NC.

Find Out More

To find out more about RAO Community Health and the work that they are doing with local community partners, visit www.raoassist.org. You can also follow them on Instagram @RAO_Health and Facebook.

Contact

Ashley Carmenia
RAO Community Health
321 W. 11th Street Charlotte, NC
Phone: 7042378793
Acarmenia@raoassist.org

Public Health Challenge

In North Carolina, the overall prevalence of breastfeeding initiation was 80.3% having ever breastfed. This rate decreases significantly to 50.3% breastfeeding at six months, and 29.2% breastfeeding at 12 months. Breastfeeding has been shown to improve health outcomes for women and infants; yet, black women initiate and continue breastfeeding at lower rates than their counterparts from different racial groups Asian mothers had a prevalence of 90.3% in comparison to 73.6% among black mothers. While efforts and interventions targeting breastfeeding initiation and sustainability have been successful and resulted in a positive increase in rates, there are still racial disparities that exist and contribute to the difference in rates – most notably, a lack of providers of color in the field of lactation.



Approach

RAO Community Health partnered with Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU) and Novant Health Presbyterian Medical Center to develop the inaugural Doula Impact Pilot Program. The goal of the program is to create a strategic program model to increase the numbers of African American doulas in Mecklenburg and Cabarrus County. The program was implemented in the spring of 2021 with RAO Community Health offering scholarships to applicants interested in the program. Additionally, leveraged funding from community partners provided capacity to cover other expenses that the REACH cooperative agreement did not cover. The scholarships and donated funds worked to ease the financial burden for the cost of training and business creation – one of top barriers identified by current doulas. Selected recipients in this pilot program completed 16 hours of initial DONA-certified doula training at JCSU, 12 weeks of additional training on lactation, breastfeeding, preconception, pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum and newborns. Additionally, they are receiving direct mentorship from a certified Doula at Novant Health as they complete their clinical experience and work towards certification. Furthermore, RAO created media that was boosted to recruit expecting mothers and offer them free doula services by the doula students to aid them in gaining real-time clinical experience.

Results

We are currently tracking the progress from three cohorts of doula students. From the first cohort, one has submitted all requirements and is fully DONA certified. The scholarship program received overwhelming interest with over 100 applicants. Media designed to recruit for the second cohort of students was boosted via Facebook and Instagram, and received 1,012 clicks, 49,574 reach, and 135,140 impressions. Of the applicants for the second cohort, five were selected (4 from Mecklenburg County, and 1 from Cabarrus County). The third cohort of students were selected from individuals that had already completed their DONA training, but had not completed the remaining steps to become DONA-certified. The second and third cohorts have completed all training and clinical rotations, and are currently working to complete the remaining requirements for DONA certification. Additionally, we trained six doulas from the New Hanover Medical system that expressed interest in wanting supplemental training on lactation, breastfeeding, and other topics covered.

"More programs like the Doula Impact Program are needed and necessary to truly make an impact in our community"

-Mary- Catherine Ballard

First Cohort Student, RAO Doula Impact Program

What's Next

Through REACH funding, RAO will continue to work to Novant Health and other community partners to formally evaluate the pilot year of the program, as well as begin work to recruit the next cohort of students. Additionally, RAO has several other potential project ideas with community organizations that took interest in the pilot doula program, and would like to work to further expand the reach and impact.

Success Stories <http://nccdqa.cdc.gov/nccdsuccessstories/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, September 17). *Breastfeeding report card*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/reportcard.htm>.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019, August 29). *Racial disparities in breastfeeding initiation and duration among U.S. infants born in 2015*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6834a3.htm>.

PROVIDING ACCESS TO FRESH PRODUCE THROUGH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Photo Documentary Success Story By RAO Community Health

PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGE: FOOD ACCESS FOR CHILDREN IN MECKLENBURG COUNTY

Consuming a healthy diet complete with fruits and vegetables is essential for the physical and mental growth of children under the age of 18. Having limited and inconsistent access to nutritious foods, can have negative long term impacts or stunt a child's growth and development. According to One Charlotte Health Alliance, it was projected that 17.9% of children live in a food insecure home in Mecklenburg County (2019). Of those children, approximately 34% live in homes that are ineligible for food assistance program like SNAP or WIC, and 3.6% live in homes with limited access to grocery stores. Neighborhoods within priority zip codes such as 28208 are populated with communities of low income families that receive SNAP benefits. Data shows that 44.1% of SNAP recipient households in the area have children under the age of 18.

APPROACH: INCREASING FOOD ACCESS

From November 1, 2021 to July 30, 2022 our team developed, implemented, and evaluated a three part educational series for an under-served early childhood education (ECE) center in Mecklenburg County (Charlotte, North Carolina). Our goal was to provide family gardening education to both children that attend the ECE and their parents -- with emphasis on underutilized resources such as gardening using SNAP/EBT benefits, benefits of shopping at farmers markets and county-designated healthy corner stores to encourage the transition of community gardens into the home. Additionally, we worked to identify possible barriers Black/African Americans may face in maintaining home gardens.



APPROACH: PARTNERSHIPS

ASPHN provided funding to four REACH recipients via their Capacity Building Grant (CABBAGE) to build community-level Farm to ECE initiatives.

Bright Future Early Learning Center has two locations: Bright Future Early Learning Center (BFELC) for children ages 0-3 and Bright Future Learning Center (BFLC) for children ages 4-6. In combination, both locations provide care for 40 to 60 students per school term. The majority of students are Black/African American, and 93% of guardians/parents receive SNAP/EBT or WIC food assistance.

Demetria Cox-Thomas is a local master gardener from the Charlotte Metro area. She holds a master's degree in human nutrition and a wealth of knowledge on urban gardening.

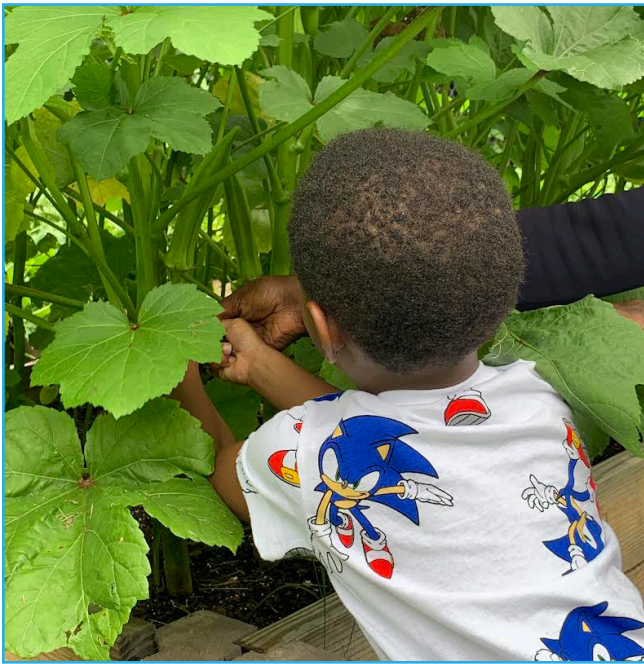


APPROACH: THE BUILD

In March 2022, Demetria and RAO began construction and design of the raised garden beds that were built at both ECE locations. Two small 4x4 beds were placed at BFELC and two 4x16 beds were placed at BFLC. This allowed opportunities for children to engage in hands-on educational activities that were appropriate for each age group.

APPROACH: LET'S EAT

While the garden beds were built, BFLC was encouraged to implement the “Color Me Healthy” curriculum -- a program developed for children ages 4-5 that utilize all five senses: touch, smell, sight, sound, and taste. The program is designed to teach children about physical activity and healthy eating through classroom activities related to fruit and vegetable consumption. Thus, preparing students for hands-on work in the gardens.



RESULTS: SEEDS FOR THE FUTURE

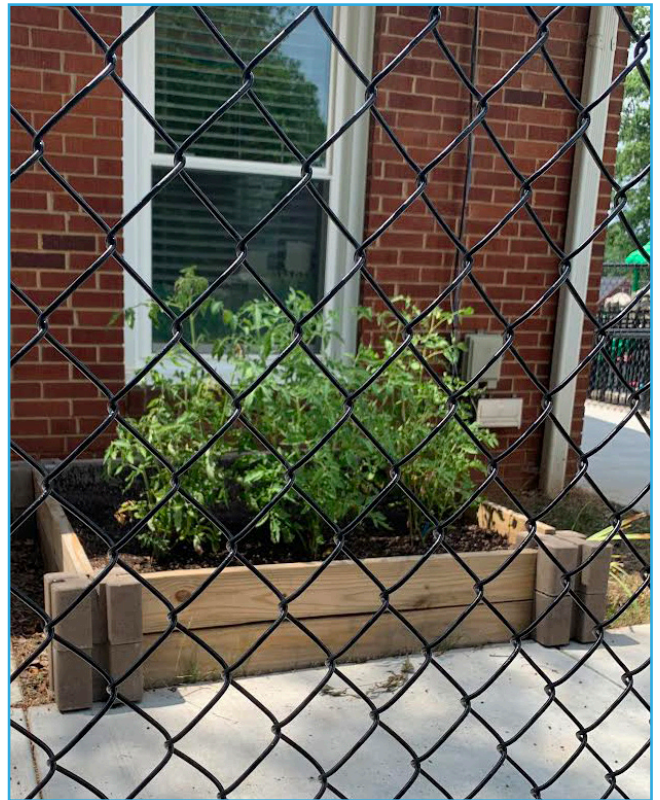
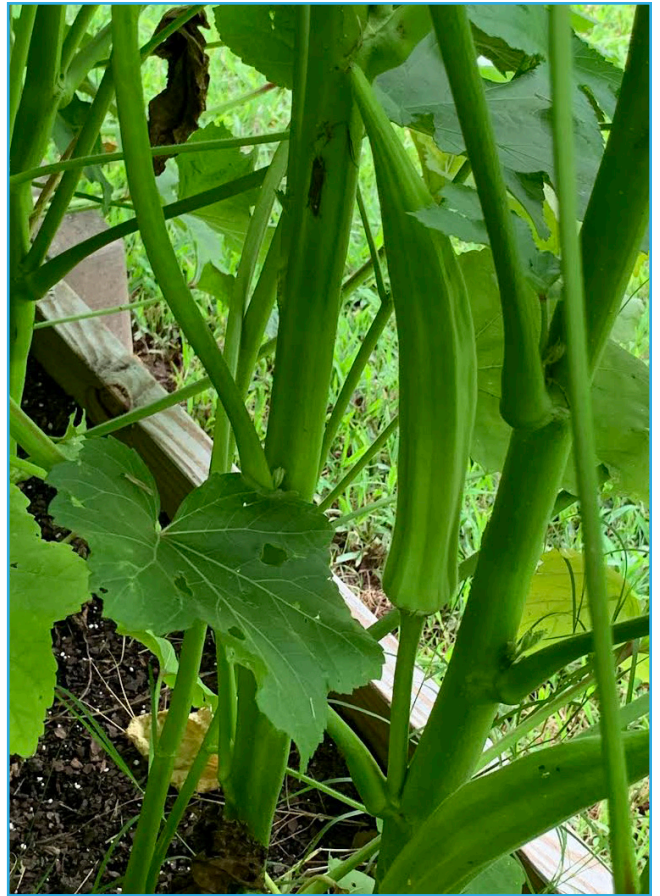
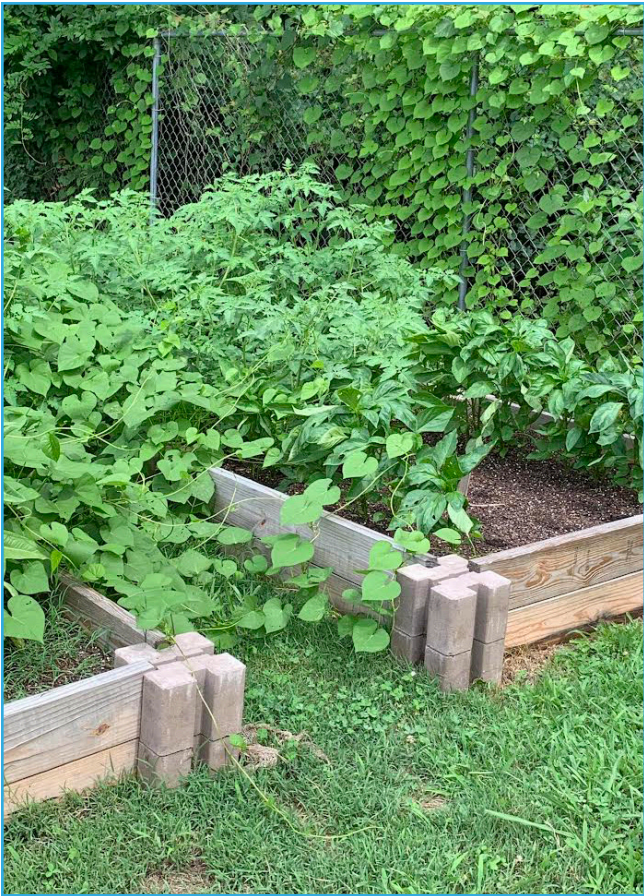
We hosted three family garden afterschool training sessions to give guardians/parents and children an opportunity to experience hands-on gardening education. Training focused on planting, garden maintenance, and crop harvesting. Guardians/Parents witnessed how fun and easy it was to plant seeds, pull weeds, and pluck produce with their children. After each session, families were able to take home fresh fruits and vegetables from the garden and learning materials on home gardening and how to purchase seeds with SNAP/EBT benefits.



RESULTS: SEEDS FOR THE FUTURE (CONT)

At the completion of all sessions, three virtual training videos were released for guardians/parents to watch. Upon watching all videos, they received mini take home garden kits, complete with a planter, seeds, and soil. The RAO CABBAGE program was successful in providing garden education and access to fresh produce to over 53 ECE families.





REACH GRANT RECIPIENT:

RAO Community Health

321 W. 11th Street.

Charlotte, NC 28202

www.raoassist.org

