



African Alliance of Rhode Island

PROFILE: Value Added Producer Grant Recipient

Providence, RI

Grant Amount

\$37,000

Grant Period

2016

Grant Summary

A value-added producer grant to support a feasibility study and marketing plan for ethnic African products made with “bitter ball” a gourd vegetable native to Africa

About the Grant Recipient

The African Alliance of Rhode Island (AARI) is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to improving the lives of Africans living in the state of Rhode Island. AARI was established formally in 2004 and seeks to promote and celebrate the African culture while tackling the challenges facing the African communities in Rhode Island. AARI’s Community Gardens initiative aims at promoting healthy eating, environmental awareness, education about African foods and provide work to many low income persons on the South side of Providence.



How is the public engaged with AARI?

AARI manages five community garden sites in Providence, Rhode Island. The farmers are generally women refugees. They are not able to meet the demand for their produce. Each week, they sell out at the farmers market, and have restaurants and other customers waiting for them to scale up. The organization is hoping to secure additional parcels of land to support their scaling next season.

At the markets, the organization conducts health screenings and cooking demos. These successful programs engage shoppers with agricultural education.

GOALS of COMMUNITY RELATIONS:

“Goal one is to build trust. Goal two is to bring the community together so we talk to each other and say hello to one another, and get to build the vitality of the community. Goal three is to introduce fresh vegetables: seven, eight different types of African vegetables. We explain how to grow them, how to prepare them.”

- Julius Knowles, AARI President



MARKETS

Crops are sold at a summer and winter farmers' market, and a pop up market that they piloted in 2018. They also sell value-added relish made from a traditional African crop called "bitter ball" or "garden egg," which was the focus of their VAPG Grant.

"Because of the grant, we've acquired 'know-how'. We understand the marketing aspect. And once you step out to sell to customers, you have to keep feeding the sauces with your crop. That's why we're looking at how to have more crops to help us scale up the value-added products."

— Julius Kolawole, AARI Co-Founder and President

IMPACT OF VAPG FUNDS

"Because of the grant, we've acquired more 'know-how', " said AARI President Julius Kolawole. "We understand the marketing aspect."

AARI would like to apply for a USDA Working Grant, but they do not have matching funds available at this time.

ADVICE FOR OTHERS

"Nothing prepares you for how to sell your idea on paper so somebody else can understand the energy, knowledge, and skill-set you have," Kolawole said. He added that they were in a better position because many of their staff have backgrounds in academia and they have a strong relationship with Brown University.

"Navigating the VAPG application process was a challenge. We could have said, 'it's not worth it, they won't approve us anyway.' The trepidation was there all the way."

WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THE VAPG PROGRAM?

"Yes. Everybody should try, and not give up," Kolawole said. "We were successful because we didn't give up."

Kolawole particularly encourages those working in so-called "Food Desert" communities to apply. "You hear that everybody gets an equal chance, but the problem is that some of us are in the basement. If we're in the basement, and everyone else is on the first floor, we have a longer way to go."

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