

CITY OF BURLINGTON
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT - 2024 APPLICATION

*Application must be no more than 12 total pages (including cover page) with 12-point font.
Refer to NOFA for required information for each question.*

Project Name: Village Hydroponics: Resiliency Reserves

Project Location / Address: Intervale, 111 Intervale Road Burlington VT 05401

Applicant Organization / Agency: Village Hydroponics

Mailing Address: 14 Decatur Street Burlington VT 05401

Physical Address: 111 Intervale Road Burlington VT 05401

Contact: Nour El-Naboulsi Title: Executive Director Phone #: [REDACTED]

Web Address: villagehydroponics.com E-mail: [REDACTED]

EIN #: [REDACTED]

CDBG Funding Request: \$43,000

Total Estimated Program/Project Cost: \$132,950

Choose one category from Development OR one category from Public Service:

Development: (choose one) Economic Development Affordable Housing
 Public Facilities/Improvements

OR

Public Service: (choose one) Early Childhood Ed/Childcare Youth Services Health
 Economic Opportunity Housing and Homelessness

1. Type of Organization

- Local Government Non-Profit Organization (please provide copy of your
 For-Profit Organization IRS 501(c)(3) tax exemption letter)
 Faith-Based Organization Institution of Higher Education

Certification

To the best of my knowledge and belief, data in this proposal are true and correct.

I have been duly authorized to apply for this funding on behalf of this agency.

I understand that this grant funding is conditioned upon compliance with federal CDBG regulations.

I further certify that no contracts have been awarded, funds committed or construction begun on the proposed program, and that none will be prior to issuance of a Release of Funds by the Program Administrator.

Nour El-Naboulsi

Signature of Authorized Official

Nour El-Naboulsi

Name of Authorized Official

Title: Executive Director

Date: 1/9/2023

I. Demonstrated Need

1. What is the need/opportunity being addressed by this program/project and how does that contribute to CDBG's national objectives?

The need being addressed by this program is that there is an ever-increasing discrepancy in access to dignified living standards. For our community, and communities around the country, this lack of access falls most heavily on low-income, immigrant, and communities of color. By addressing both the symptoms and root causes of this discrepancy, our project contributes to CDBG's national objectives of stronger and more resilient communities.

II. Program/Project Design

1. Give us a short summary (2 sentences) that describe the program/project.

Village Hydroponics seeks to provide underserved community members with local, nutrient-dense, and culturally-relevant produce when other farms cannot do so. Using state of the art Controlled Environment Agriculture methods inside of a shipping container and participatory mutual aid, Village Hydroponics will grow a variety of vegetables alongside community members even in the coldest and darkest winter months.

2. Explain why the program activities are the right strategies to use to achieve the intended outcomes. Why is the program designed the way it is? (cite evidence, best practices, or community input)

Village Hydroponics was created by community members who sought to expand upon the work of existing food access initiatives that take advantage of Vermont's robust and generous agricultural community. Project partners The Peoples Kitchen and The Peoples Farmstand have cultivated an inclusive and community-led free of charge farmers market experience for low-income neighborhoods throughout Burlington during the growing season. However, due to Vermont's short farming season, these 65+ families are suddenly cut off from this experience by November at the latest. In coordination with these families, project leaders determined that finding a way to continue this access to culturally-relevant produce and neighborhood connection was an appropriate next step in bolstering our community's resilience.

3. How will this program/project contribute to the City's anti-poverty strategy? If this activity is to respond to COVID-19, please also describe how this activity prepares or responds to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This project will contribute to the City's anti-poverty strategy in a number of ways. For one, during the winter utility prices increase exponentially. It is no secret that the local produce movement is not an inexpensive one. The families that we work with have repeatedly stated feelings of stress when having to decide between healthy options from the grocery store during the winter or keeping up with increasing utility costs. Providing hundreds of individuals with a weekly portion of vegetables from their countries of origin is a physical and mental stress reducer. Further, all of our initiatives are totally community-engaged. Children and adults alike are active in agricultural work, planning, and community outreach activities. These activities serve as both volunteer experience for resumes as well as hands-on education for job prospects and/or academic applications. Village Hydroponics seeks to expand on these aspects through more formal school group visits, internship opportunities, and adult learning activities.

4. How do you use community and/or participant input in planning the program design and activities?

As stated earlier, no decision is made nor any action taken without input and participation from the community. We have fostered a relationship with these families for almost four years at this point and our mutual trust and respect is sacred. The community helped guide us from a handout of random vegetables from mostly white farmers to a weekly meal and market of vegetables from around the world grown by farmers from their countries of origin. During the planning and farming season, community members are active in seed selection, crop planning, farm work, and staffing the weekly distributions. Village Hydroponics itself was born from community members who did not want to see their hard work cease simply because of Vermont's short growing season. It just so happened that some of our leadership were also involved in hydroponic farming to make this motivation a reality. We have community members on our leadership committee and board of directors and regularly meet with community matriarchs when a new idea is proposed. However, this novel initiative does present new challenges regarding community participation. In our existing work, it is easy enough to involve community members with farm work and distribution logistics because it is pleasant enough to have people outside. Therefore, we will have to be creative and truly community-engaged to make individuals feel involved in the work. Some community members may still want to transport themselves to the container farm to take part in harvesting and other farm practices, but others may wish to take more behind the scenes work. Some ideas include working with community leaders on outreach and language translation, crop selection, recipe writing, and word of mouth outreach. For those physically able, how can they help us design and implement winter produce distributions? This will be a new endeavor for us and therefore will pose new barriers that we must address collaboratively.

III. Proposed Outcomes

1. What are the intended outcomes for this project/program? How are people meant to be better off as a result of participating?

The intended outcomes for this project are to expand the number of families receiving mutual aid free shares of vegetables, convert our initiative into a year round endeavor, and continue to build a sense of trust and inclusion amongst the most vulnerable members of our community. Aside from people being better off by introducing more culturally-relevant vegetables into their diet, people are also meant to feel more safe and welcome in their own community. Relying on community trust and long-standing networks of support, we give ourselves and our community members the space to be loud, proud, and different from the perceived notion of what a "typical Vermonter" looks like. By empowering our neighbors from all around the world to be involved with farming, food distribution, and social activism, we reject the notion that we are solely recipients and givers of charity. Renouncing the white supremacist idea that capitalist gains are the only way a project can demonstrate worth, we share our cultures and own sense of value through family, food, and inclusion.

2. List your goals/objectives, activities to implement and expected outcomes (# of units, # of individuals, etc.)

For this project, we are currently developing a research and development crop plan with community members for culturally-relevant produce that will work in a hydroponics system. We plan to construct the container farm in the Spring of 2024 and initiate the R&D crop plan through the summer. During the summer we will also create a crop plan with community members based on lessons learned from the R&D phase. By early Fall we will begin executing the crop plan in order to provide a weekly portion of vegetables throughout the entire offseason. Based on funding, we will minimally be able to supply 65 families with a family sized portion of 2-3 different vegetables. If completely funded without having to sell any produce, the number of families can increase to nearly 100 families receiving family-sized portions of 2-3 vegetables each week.

IV. Impact / Evaluation

1. How do you assess whether/how program participants are better off? Describe how you assess project/program outcomes; your description should include: what type of data, the method/tool for collecting the data, from whom you collect data, and when it is collected.

In many ways, this assessment will be both straightforward and ambiguous. For the straightforward piece, we will in part be a production farm. We will plan, seed, plant, harvest, and distribute just like any other farm. We will track weights, bunches, pieces of produce served, and business transactions completed. In large part, our output of vegetables and ability to keep the lights on will be a strong measure of success. Our leadership team has combined farm management and agricultural accounting experience of over 10 years and have been running The Peoples

Farmstand for almost four seasons. Our practices include a robust record keeping system to track amounts of produce received and distributed, number of individuals benefited, economic value of said produce, and anecdotal impact tracking. However, given the underlying vision of Village Hydroponics, much of our success will come through observation and human anecdotes. Success will take the form of an intern's concentration as they complete their first harvest. It will look like the face of joy and surprise on a recipient's face when we trudge through the snow with bags of Nepali mustard greens and East African collard greens on a cold January day. And as long as we pursue this work in a manner that continues to make our community proud, that is success enough.

- 2. How successful has the project/program been during the most recent reporting year for your CDBG project? Report the number of beneficiaries you intended to serve with which activities (as noted in your last Attachment A) and your final outcomes (as noted on your Attachment C) from June 2023 (or June 2022). For non-CDBG participants – report on your achievements from the previous year.**

As The Peoples Farmstand, during the 2023 farm season we provided 70 families (approximately 250 individuals) with full-size free mutual aid shares for 24 straight weeks. Even faced with devastating floods to our own farms and greater agricultural community, we remained steadfast and flexible and worked with our community to continue our mission.

V. Experience / Organizational Capacity

- 1. What is your agency's mission, and how do the proposed activities fit with your mission?**

The mission of Village Hydroponics is to provide underserved community members with local, nutrient-dense, and culturally-relevant produce when other farms cannot do so. Using state of the art Controlled Environment Agriculture methods inside of a shipping container, Village Hydroponics will grow a variety of vegetables alongside community members even in the coldest and darkest winter months. Utilizing longstanding and robust relationships with community members and partner organizations, this BIPOC-led endeavor will serve, and be served by, those most affected by systematic inequities in high-quality food access and agricultural ownership.

- 2. Explain how your agency has the capacity to carry out the proposed activity (i.e. staff qualifications, years of experience related to this type of activity, etc.)**

Our board is made up of community leaders and experts in the fields of hydroponics and agricultural systems. The board is made up of community members and organizers, energy efficiency experts, hydroponic growers, and nutritional researchers. We have hired a full time Executive Director with 10+ years experience in agricultural management, hydroponic growing methods, and community project engagement. He is the founder and Co-Director of The Peoples Farmstand, Vice Chair of Rural Vermont, and has designed our shipping container farm from scratch using years of research and hands-on experience.

3. What steps has your organization/board taken in the past year to address racial equity, inclusion, and belonging internally? What new commitments have been made to address racial equity, inclusion, and belonging internally in the year ahead?

Village Hydroponics (VH), along with partner organizations The Peoples Kitchen (TPK) and The Peoples Farmstand (TPF) were founded by BIPOC community members and have BIPOC in various leadership positions. The following BIPOC leadership % are as follows: VH: 60% (3/5), TPK: 66% (4/6), TPF: 50% (2/4). Of the aforementioned 9 BIPOC individuals, 100% are either immigrants or first-generation Americans. We have not had to make any new commitments because these commitments are at the heart of our foundation and serve as our guiding principles every step of the way. Learned from both our own lived experiences and the years of relationship building with these families, the society we live in can be unfriendly and downright hostile to recently-arrived immigrants and families of color. Refugees are expected to become self-reliant within four to six months of arrival and imagine the culture shock of a Somali family's first Vermont blizzard. In many ways, the liberal state of Vermont goes above and beyond to make itself a welcoming and accessible home for BIPOC communities. But we know this is not always the case. Facing cultural insensitivity, language barriers, and blatant racism even in our well meaning home state, BIPOC families tend to insulate themselves and fly under the radar. As a result, many of these families don't get informed about food access and other community initiatives, let alone how they can take ownership in them. VH and our partner organizations strive to close this gap through dignified and participatory mutual aid. Aside from the physical act of food and produce distribution, we provide a platform for other BIPOC-led organizations and opportunities to spread their messages.

4. Have you received Federal or State grant funds in the past three years? ___Yes No

5. Were the activities funded by these sources successfully completed? ___Yes ___No N/A

If No, please explain:

VI. Proposed Low & Moderate Income Beneficiaries

1. Will the program solely serve a specific group of people? If so, check ONE below:

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Abused Children | <input type="checkbox"/> Elderly (62 years +) | <input type="checkbox"/> People with AIDS |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Battered Spouses | <input type="checkbox"/> Homeless Persons | <input type="checkbox"/> Illiterate Adults |
| <input type="checkbox"/> People with Severe Disabilities | | |

If this activity/project is designed to serve the population experiencing homelessness through housing or supportive services, is your organization or entity partnered with the Chittenden County Continuum of Care and participating in the Coordinated Entry system for the project:

- Yes No Not applicable to activity/project

2. a. For your proposed project, please estimate how the Burlington residents will break out into the following income categories during the total grant period. Use the Income Table at <https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/CEDO/2023-HUD-Income-Limits>

Service / Activity	Unduplicated Total # of Burlington HH / Persons to be Served	# Extremely Low-Income (30% median)	# Very Low-Income (50% median)	# Low-Income (80% median)	# Above Income Limits (above 80% median)
Mutual aid produce distro	65 HH	55 HH	10 HH		

b. All CDBG grantees serving limited clientele will be required to use CEDO’s *CDBG Beneficiary Self-Certification* form to collect beneficiary data including race, ethnicity, annual income, and family size. Is your organization willing and prepared to add this documentation to the intake process for your CDBG funded program by July 1, 2024?

Yes NO Not Serving Limited Clientele

VII. Commitment to Equity, Inclusion and Belonging

1. Who is the project/program designed to benefit? Describe the project/program’s target population, citing (if relevant) specific age, gender, income, community/location, race or ethnicity, or other characteristic of the people this program is intended to serve. How do you select and reach your target population?

This project is designed to benefit low-income families from refugee and other immigrant backgrounds living in Champlain Housing Trust neighborhoods. 90% of these families are BIPOC and 100% are either extremely low or low income. These neighborhoods were originally selected during the onset of COVID-19, which occurred during the month of Ramadan in 2020. These families, including members of our leadership team, were subsequently cut off from break fast meals provided by local Mosques because of gathering restrictions. We thus started The Peoples Kitchen weekly meal delivery service for the month of Ramadan and quickly saw a need greater than displayed by simple COVID alone. We reach these neighborhoods by going to them directly, diminishing barriers to access based on transportation, work schedule, etc.

2. Describe the steps you take to ensure the project/program is accessible, inclusive, addressing racially equity, and culturally appropriate for the target population.

As stated earlier, we do everything in our power to make our distributions fun, inclusive, and accessible. We set up directly in the neighborhoods we serve and bring produce, hot meals, music, and groceries. We try to recreate a vibrant market experience where children and parents can feel involved, comfortable, and welcome. Neighbors share recipes, stories, and meals together across cultural lines and we have refined our logistics to ensure each family receives an appropriate and fair amount based on crop availability and family size.

VIII. Budget / Financial Feasibility

1. Budget Narrative: Provide a clear description of what you will do with CDBG’s investment in the project/program. How will you spend the money? Give specific details.

CDBG’s investment into the project will ensure that we have a successful and complete first season of operation. These funds will pay the salary of our Executive Director as well as the utilities for our season of operation, allowing us to focus on providing the maximum number of families with produce and project participation and not on selling produce to help achieve our budget. Further, these funds will also go towards a backup power generator in the event of winter storms that may cut off electricity to the farm. If the plants even go a couple of hours without the pumps running we will lose the entire crop so this piece is crucial.

2. If you plan to pay for staff with CDBG funding, describe what they do in relation to the specific service(s) / activity(ies) in your Project/Program Design.

a.

Specific Service / Activity	Position/Title	Work Related to CDBG-Funded Activity	# of Hours per Week spent on this Specific Service / Activity	% of Hours per Week spent on this Specific Service / Activity to be paid with CDBG
Farm design and construction	Executive Director	All	8	80%
Farm daily operations	Executive Director	All	24	80%
Community engagement/weekly distro	Executive Director	All	8	80%

b. All CDBG grantees that use CDBG funds for salaries must submit timesheets that capture total time and effort of staff members funded with CDBG. These timesheets must record hours worked on CDBG-funded programs, hours worked on non-CDBG funded programs and the corresponding program name/funding source(s). Timecards must include a narrative for all CDBG and non-CDBG funded activities, and must be signed by the employee and supervisor. Does your organization have the ability to implement a timekeeping system for CDBG funded staff that meets these requirements by July 1, 2024? Yes No Not funding salaries

3. Program/Project Budget

Line Item	CDBG Funds	Other	Total
Farm equipment	\$5,000	\$117,950	\$122,950
Farm staff	\$32,000	\$8,000	\$40,000
Farm utilities	\$6,000	\$	\$6,000
	\$	\$	\$

4. Funding Sources

	Program/Project		Agency	
	Current	Projected	Current	Projected
CDBG	\$	\$ 43,000	\$	\$
State (specify)				
Federal (specify)				
United Way				
Private (specify) various funders	64,000	85,000		
Program Income				
Other (<u>specify</u>)				
Total	\$ 64,000	\$ 128,000	\$	\$

5. Of the total program/project cost, what percentage will be financed with CDBG?

$$\frac{\$ \underline{43,000}}{\text{CDBG Funding}} \div \frac{\$ \underline{122,950}}{\text{Total Program/Project Costs}} = \underline{35} \% \text{ Percentage}$$

6. Of the total program/project cost, what would be the total cost per person?

$$\frac{\$ \underline{122,950}}{\text{Total Program/Project Cost}} \div \frac{\underline{250}}{\# \text{ Total Proposed Beneficiaries}} = \$ \underline{491} \text{ Cost Per Person}$$

$$\frac{\$ \underline{43,000}}{\text{Total Amount of CDBG Funding}} \div \frac{\underline{250}}{\# \text{ Total Proposed CDBG Beneficiaries}} = \$ \underline{172} \text{ Cost Per Person } \underline{\text{CDBG}} \text{ Investment}$$

7. Why should CDBG resources, as opposed to other sources of funding, be used for this project?

CDBG resources should be used for this project because it is hyper-locally specific. What we are trying to achieve is an intersection between technology, community engagement, and agriculture that can serve as a model for communities around the world. To the best of my knowledge, CDBG funding is specifically intended to be used for projects that uplift and strengthen vulnerable portions of communities through dignified participation and real action. Through Village Hydroponics, we are attempting to both act on the symptoms of a root cause through growing vegetables in a novel manner, but also uplifting our community as a means of addressing the root causes itself.

8. Describe your use of community resources, including volunteers. Include any resources not listed in your budget. Will CDBG be used to leverage other resources?

We occasionally use volunteers outside of the members of the neighborhoods that we operate in. We primarily use volunteer support from within the neighborhoods because this is the heart of mutual aid, not charity. We all work together in these projects for the betterment of all involved; recipients, project organizers, and other community members behind the scenes.

IX. Collaboration/Efficiency

1. Give 1 or 2 examples of key successful collaboration(s) between your program/project and another agency/program/group to address the needs of the people you serve.

Village Hydroponics (VH) was created by community members involved with, and who sought to expand upon, the work of The Peoples Kitchen (TPK) and The Peoples Farmstand (TPF). TPK is a year-round hot meal, grocery, and diaper distribution provided on a weekly basis to refugee, low-income, and other underserved community members of Burlington, VT free of charge. TPF, seeing the importance of TPK but recognizing the gap in a fresh produce option, partners with refugee, immigrant, and other farmers to grow and distribute local, organic, culturally-relevant produce alongside TPK. We have also collaborated with the Intervale Food Hub, Vermont Food Bank, and Food Not Bombs to ensure that our efforts are reaching the most amount of community members while avoiding “stepping on each other’s toes”. The result has been a robust “free food” network in Burlington where we support and uplift each other’s initiatives without double dipping.

2. Do identical or similar community programs exist? How does this program complement or collaborate rather than duplicate services? What makes this program unique?

As stated above, we avoid duplicating services by extensively communicating with other project partners and mapping “territories” of the city. Similarly, we operate on different days of the week to ensure that by the end of the week there has been no produce left behind to waste. Our program is unique because we operate directly in two neighborhoods and provide a full market experience rather than pre-making produce bags and having recipients come to us.

3. Provide 1 example of how your agency has become more efficient in achieving your outcomes or managing your project/program.

One example is how we manage “crowd control”. Early into our second season we quickly realized that we had an issue in how we were physically giving out produce. People were getting so excited about the produce we were providing, that the friendly market atmosphere became a battle of who could impose their way most effectively to the front of the crowd. Those who were comfortable doing this would get the most produce and those more timid would be left feeling bullied out of the process. After convening the matriarchs and translators of the different cultural groups, we came up with a two table and two line plan to ensure that the market would be smooth and equitable. We had these community leaders disseminate the information and two lines quickly formed with a collective sigh of relief as everyone realized there was enough to go around and no need for the shoving matches that were causing some stress. None of this could have been achieved so easily without the years of trust building between our team leaders, the community leaders, and the trust formed between the neighbors themselves.

X. Sustainability

1. How will this project have a long-term benefit to the City of Burlington? If this program/project ends, how will that benefit continue?

This project will have a long-term benefit to the City of Burlington because it will be the first of its kind in the state, let alone the city. This idea will put Burlington on the map in terms of food self-sufficiency, community-led agriculture, and climate change adaptation in the wake of devastating agricultural flooding this past season. We will continue to pursue the city’s value of inclusion, mutual aid initiatives, and technological innovation. If this specific project ends the benefits can continue in a myriad of ways. For one, we hope that this project will inspire the next generation of children in Burlington to be excited about agriculture, science, and technology. Also, as a non profit we plan to be an open-source center of hydroponic and agricultural learning. We do not intend to hide the lessons we have learned and how to inspire our community and others in Vermont to try similar initiatives of their own. In this age of information, who knows who will be inspired to take the next step in their community’s food sovereignty by way of what they learned from us.

2. CDBG funding is intended for new or expanded services. If CDBG funding ends, will the project be able to continue?

In just under 7 months we have raised \$64,000 just from Vermont grant providers written by our team before we have even constructed the container farm. What this tells us is that people believe in our vision, see our track record of community engagement, and are willing to take a chance on us. When we harvest our first round of vegetables, we predict that the grant funding will increase substantially. Similarly, we will at our core be a production farm and can sell portions of our produce if necessary to aid in our financial sustainability.

3. How will you prioritize the proposed project activities if you do not receive the full amount requested?

Other than the backup generator, we have requested funding in lump sum forms that will last us throughout our first season of operation. The funds we are requesting are for our “reserve fund” as we are nearly at our goal of funding for complete construction of the farm. We will prioritize the funding by adjusting for shorter terms that the funding will satisfy, and continue to apply to other

grants to make up the difference. We subscribe to annual grant searching subscriptions and allocate time to our organization nearly every week to select and apply to different sources of grant funding.