



2023 ANNUAL REPORT

 REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

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DEAR FRIENDS OF THE REC,

As I reflect on the past year, I am filled with gratitude for your unwavering support of our mission to bring people together to create a just food system and to build healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities in Worcester, Massachusetts, and beyond. Your dedication has been instrumental in driving the success of our organization, and I am truly thankful for your continued partnership.

Despite the challenges of a rainy growing season, our community has demonstrated remarkable resilience and solidarity. Together, we weathered the storms and celebrated the shared harvest that embodies the spirit of our collective efforts.

None of this would be possible without your generous support. Your contributions have enabled us to sustain our programs and expand our reach to deepen our impact in the communities we serve.

As we look ahead to the coming year, I am inspired by the resilience and determination of our community. Together, we will continue to work towards a future where access to healthy, sustainable food is a fundamental right for all.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve Fischer'. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Steve Fischer
Executive Director



Our mission is to bring people together to **create a just food system** and to build healthy, sustainable and equitable communities in Worcester, MA and beyond.

YouthGROW • Farmers Markets • UGROW Community and School Gardens

THE REC TEAM

Directors

Steve Fischer, Executive Director
Grace Sliwoski, Director of Programs
Tracy Andryc, Development Director
Steven Murphy, Administrative Director

Administration

Efrain Viera, Office Associate
Emery Jeffreys, Program Evaluator

YouthGROW Team

Stacie Brimmage, YouthGROW Coordinator
Tom Trepanier, Farm Manager
Valeria Niyonkuru, Farm Mentor
Abhinav Ahlawat, Commonwealth Corps
Farm and Market Specialist
Alyssa Johnson, Youth Mentor
Nathaniel Lewis, Youth Mentor
Na'ama Sarfati-Magill, Youth Mentor
Zev Breen, Youth Mentor Intern
Cameron Gill, Youth Mentor Intern
Zoe Newman, Youth Mentor Intern
Alisa Olivia, Youth Mentor Intern
Charlotte Zieselman, Youth Mentor Intern
Richlove Boateng, Junior Staff
Cynthia Rodriguez, Junior Staff
Kimora Scott, Junior Staff
Ray Zeda, Junior Staff

UGROW Team

Noel Allen, Community Gardens Coordinator
Eliza Lawrence, School Gardens Coordinator
Cameron Gill, Commonwealth Corps
School and Community Gardens Engagement Specialist

Farmers Market Team

Ashley Carter, Farmers Market Program Coordinator
Erika Akerson, Farmers Market Manager

Farmers Market Staff

Annabel Boateng	Madeline Lawrence
Brian Brennan	Sadie Price-Elliot
Emma LeMay	Emery Jeffreys
Teddy Mitchell	Emmett Royce
Shanice Nelson	Chris Schoen
Alexis Lamontagne	Zac Davis
Nick Rozowsky	

Development

Gwen Weissinger, Marketing Coordinator
Katie Flanagan, Development Associate



YOUTHGROW

Youth Growing Organics in Worcester

2023 was a busy year full of growth, collaboration, and learning for the REC YouthGROW program. We continued to expand our 10-week spring and fall employment sessions, increasing youth employment opportunities and training as well as improving our ability to grow produce at the YouthGROW Farm year-round. We built community, with monthly retreats including a visit to Night Lights at New England Botanic Gardens at Tower Hill.

YouthGROWers worked hard to harvest nearly 4,500 pounds of produce across 50 crop varieties including new crops such as ginger, potatoes, carrots, and beets. Youth cared for gardens at the Main South YouthGROW Farm, Bell Hill Farm at Grant Square Park, WooSox Farms, and Worcester Public School gardens this year.

Partnership and collaboration were key to the success of the YouthGROW program this year. Youth provided support to four area farms through service-learning trips and worked in small groups on specific projects led by REC staff and community partners. Youth supported neighborhood organizations fighting food insecurity such as El Buen Samaritano and the Worcester Free Fridge Network by delivering weekly produce donations.

We concluded the summer program with our annual Block Party celebration! Neighbors, parents, siblings, and many program alumni came together to celebrate a successful growing season and to enjoy a youth drumming performance from members of the Crocodile River team project.

4,469

**lbs of food
grown**

50

**varieties of
crops grown**

41

**youth
employed**

\$15,723

**in YouthGROW
produce sales**



THIS YEAR AT YOUTHGROW

SPRING

This spring, the YouthGROW team welcomed 20 new youth into the program! The spring cohort helped execute the REC's Annual Earth Day Cleanups and Plant Sale. They also supported spring farming tasks, engaged in training, and represented the Central MA Youth Jobs Coalition alongside the Worcester Community Action Council for the 15th annual Youth Justice Rally.

Additionally, our youth leadership team led the hiring process for the upcoming summer program.



SUMMER

This summer, YouthGROW participants engaged in weekly discussions led by the youth leadership team on topics including financial literacy and local vs. conventional agriculture.

Highlights included service learning trips to area farms such as Mumbet's Freedom Farm, team projects ranging from salamander monitoring with Mass Audubon to West African drumming with Crocodile River Music, and a celebratory Block Party to close out the summer.



FALL

This fall, 21 youth participated in our fall cohort. They learned about cover crops and companion planting, harvested and stored produce for the winter, and more.

In partnership with Mihoko Wakabayashi from SAORI Worcester, YouthGROWers participated in a Seed to Fashion program. They grew fibers and used them in natural dyeing, spinning, and weaving, learning about sustainable fashion through the Japanese weaving method of SAORI.



FARMERS MARKETS

2023 was the second rainiest summer on record for Worcester, Massachusetts. Despite the relentless rainfall, our local farmers remained resilient. This enabled our team to offer a consistent supply of high-quality produce at REC Farmers Markets throughout the year. In the spring, the Farmers Market team conducted farm visits, which allowed us to foster stronger relationships with the farmers who grow the food that nourishes our community.

Both the Mobile Market and Standing Markets at Beaver Brook and University Park continued to be vital hubs for community connection and food security in 2023. At the Mobile Market, we observed an increase in customer numbers across all 17 stops. We also saw a notable 36% rise in SNAP customer participation at markets this year!

Every year we conduct customer surveys to ensure our programs are meeting our customers' needs. This year, 96% of survey participants stated that REC Farmers Markets help them access local fruits and vegetables. In addition, 97% of respondents who use SNAP reported that the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) and SNAP are important to their household food budget.

In addition to shopping at markets year-round, customers were able to use our online pre-order program with a variety of pickup locations open each week, including an after-work-hours pickup option at our office.

Our team worked in collaboration with the community to educate and advocate for food security legislation and programs in 2023, serving on the Worcester Food Policy Council, Central MA SNAP Coalition, Mayor's Food Security Taskforce, and Feeding our Neighbors Coalition.



151,409

**lbs of produce sold
on Mobile Market**

19

**unique market
locations**

94%

**of customers using
federal nutrition
programs**

5,798

**unique market
customers**

HIGHLIGHTS FROM MARKET

CUSTOMER ADVISORY BOARD

Our Customer Advisory Board entered its third iteration in 2023 with seven total members, including two new additions. Representing six different mobile market locations, the board played a pivotal role in providing valuable feedback on various aspects of markets, including customer outreach, awareness of SNAP and HIP programs, and crowd management. Additionally, they were instrumental in conducting customer surveys at the market, having received training in survey collection and advocacy. We're so grateful for these community champions!



LOCAL FOOD PURCHASE ASSISTANCE GRANT

In 2023, we were awarded a Local Food Purchase Assistance grant through the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources. This grant is designed to build resilience in the local food supply chain through the purchase of local food from farmers for free distribution to the community. Through this grant, we were able to regularly purchase produce from Dismas Family Farm, Misigaro Farm, Nuestro Huerto, and the YouthGROW Farm for distribution at area food pantries, including Jeremiah's Inn, Catholic Charities, and El Buen Samaritano.



VENDORS AT STANDING MARKETS

- *Barnabus Forndia, World Farmers*
- *Black Seed Farmers Market*
- *Bread Box Co.*
- *Bucket List Maple Syrup*
- *Coolidge Hill Farm*
- *Crown and Roots Farm*
- *Fay Mountain Farm*
- *Golden Goose Geoponics*
- *Harpers Farm and Garden*
- *Oakdale Farm*
- *Traveling Cap Mushrooms*
- *Valeria Niyonkuru, World Farmers*

VENDORS SUPPORTED THROUGH THE MOBILE MARKET

- *Backyard Farms*
- *Coolidge Hill Farm*
- *Cotyledon Farms*
- *EAT Center Growers*
- *Harpers Farm and Garden*
- *Kettle Brook Farms*
- *Little Leaf Lettuce*
- *Marty's Local Distributors*
- *Rota Spring Farm*
- *REC's YouthGROW Farm*
- *Traveling Cap Mushroom Co.*
- *Worcester Regional Food Hub*
- *World Farmers*



1. The newest addition to the Mobile Market fleet. This is one of three vans that travel across Worcester, Webster, and Southbridge to set up shop!
2. Customers purchase shelling beans at the Elm Park Towers Mobile Market site.



3. Jiló, also known as Brazillian or Tropical eggplant, is a crop sold at REC Markets. This vegetable is often grown in West Africa and Brazil and can be enjoyed in stews, sautés, or coated in cornmeal and fried!

UGROW

Urban Gardens Resources of Worcester

REC's UGROW program supports a network of gardens and gardeners across the city, enhancing both food access and urban green spaces.

UGROW began in 1995 with 1 garden and 1 volunteer gardener with a vision to grow food in the city. Today, the network has grown to include 74 network gardens throughout the city of Worcester involving more than 600 volunteer gardeners.

The **Community Garden Network** currently supports 43 gardens across Worcester, including neighborhood gardens, organizational/institutional gardens, and urban farms.

The **School Garden Network**, started in 2010, has grown to include 31 gardens at schools and childhood education centers.

37 Network Gardens, 5 Urban Farms, 31 School Gardens

2,651
students
impacted

74
gardens in
network

23
new raised
beds!

10,053
free seedlings
distributed



COMMUNITY GARDEN NETWORK

Peer Learning Cohort

One significant milestone this year was the establishment of our inaugural Peer Learning Cohort. This cohort consisted of 10 individuals representing gardens such as Grant Square, Colony Retirement Homes, and Winslow Peace Park. Our goal was to equip these site coordinators with new skills that they could then impart to gardeners within their specific communities!

Seed Saving Library

During the summer, we facilitated a Seed Saving event with the Peer Learning Cohort, which foreshadowed a community potluck in the fall, where participants shared their harvested seeds. This initiative, generously funded by the EPA, enabled us to launch a Seed Saving Library, housed at the REC Office. All are welcome to donate seeds from their garden to the library and help build this important community resource.

Gardening Workshops

Our Community Gardens team also hosted 16 engaging gardening workshops throughout 2023. Among these, ten were held at the YouthGROW Farm and six were conducted in various community spaces, including sites affiliated with our network of community gardens. These workshops covered a diverse range of topics such as "Cultivating Mushrooms at Home," "How to Grow Your Own Microgreens," and "How To Make Herbal Teas and Salves".



SCHOOL GARDEN NETWORK

Bed Builds

This was the most fruitful year yet for School Gardens in the UGROW Network, with a total of 31 member gardens. Thanks to the help of volunteers and partner organizations, the School Gardens team built an astonishing 23 beds at new and existing sites across the city!

Expanded Partnerships

Our partnerships with Head Start, Mass Farm to School, and Tower Hill expanded in 2023, positively shaping our curriculum and community connections. Furthermore, our growing partnership with Master Gardeners was instrumental in providing mentorship and support to schools such as Jacob Hiatt Magnet School, Goddard School of Science & Technology, Clark Street School, and North High School. From pruning fruit trees to leading weekly garden clubs, these experienced gardeners have played a vital role in nurturing the next generation of green thumbs.

YouthGROW Farm Field Trips

The School Gardens team hosted 420 students from 8 Worcester schools on the YouthGROW Farm for field trips in 2023. These trips showcased to students how lessons learned in their school gardens can be applied to urban farming on a larger scale. Students participated in farm tours, seed planting, and tree identification exercises, experiencing both outdoor nature education and hands-on learning activities. Additionally, these trips introduced students to the YouthGROW program as a potential option for future employment during their high school years.



FARM TO EARLY CHILDHOOD

What is Farm to Early Childhood?

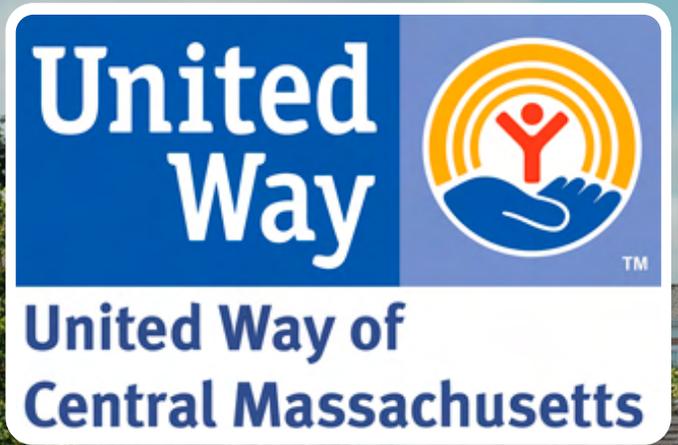
The School Garden's Farm to Early Childhood Project provides curriculum, garden support, and enrichment activities, including school-based farmers markets and farm field trips, for preschool partners in Worcester, including all four Head Start programs. This exciting initiative began taking root in January of 2022, thanks to a generous investment from the United Way of Central Massachusetts Community Challenge grant program.

Mini-Markets

The School Gardens team collaborated with our Farmers Market team to host mini-markets at 11 Worcester schools in 2023. At these markets, students are read a story about growing food and “shop” for their families, each child taking home a bag of local fruits and vegetables! Their bags also contain important resources about SNAP, HIP, and REC Farmers Markets, so their families can shop fresh and local all year long.

Headstart Partnership

Worcester’s Headstart program provides inclusive and supportive educational programs for some of the highest-need young learners in our city. We’re proud to support all 4 Worcester Headstart locations, connecting with 400 students through this project. We are also grateful to work with the Headstart parent leadership team for the collaborative spirit they bring to this project!



REC EVENTS

33rd Annual Earth Day Cleanups

In partnership with the City of Worcester Department of Public Works and Parks, the 2023 Earth Day Cleanups were a huge success! Over 1400 volunteers cleaned up 71 sites across the city. Together, we picked up 25 tons of trash!



Plant Sale

278 local gardeners purchased seedlings through the REC Plant Sale in 2023! Thanks to our community, over \$23,000 was raised! These funds allowed us to donate over 10,000 vegetable seedlings to community and school gardens across Worcester.



We continue to offer sliding scale payment and accept HIP/SNAP for seedling purchases as part of our comprehensive efforts to increase access to affordable local food here in Central Massachusetts!

Farm Party

It rained, it poured, but we partied on! Nearly 200 friends and supporters of the REC trekked in the pouring rain to join us for a night to remember. The 2023 Farm Party was filled with delicious food, live music, raffle prizes, scholarship awards, and time spent in community. We can't wait for Farm Party 2024!



VOLUNTEERS

On the YouthGROW Farm

This year, 77 volunteers dedicated 143 hours to turning compost, planting, weeding, and harvesting, washing, and packing produce for both the REC Mobile Market and for donation. This was the first year we had scheduled family volunteer work days that were given as holiday gifts! Warm thanks to Student Programs for Urban Development (SPUD) from Holy Cross who volunteered a total of 82 hours during our fall session.

Hanover Insurance Group & United Way of Central MA

United Way's Day of Caring was one of our largest volunteer days in 2023! Thanks to dozens of employees from Hanover Insurance Group, over 400 bags of produce were sorted, packed, and delivered to the Boys & Girls Club of Worcester, Central Community Branch YMCA, Friendly House, MA, Yes We Care, and the Southeast Asian Coalition for distribution. What an impactful day!

In the Gardens

During 2023, 23 new raised beds were built and added to Community & School Gardens across Worcester. At the Greendale Head Start Bed Build, it was all hands on deck! A mix of Head Start Staff and families from Worcester Family Partnership came together to build five raised garden beds. Their team told us this project was a long time in the making and that they were very excited to have students begin gardening in the spring!



FY23 FINANCIAL REPORT

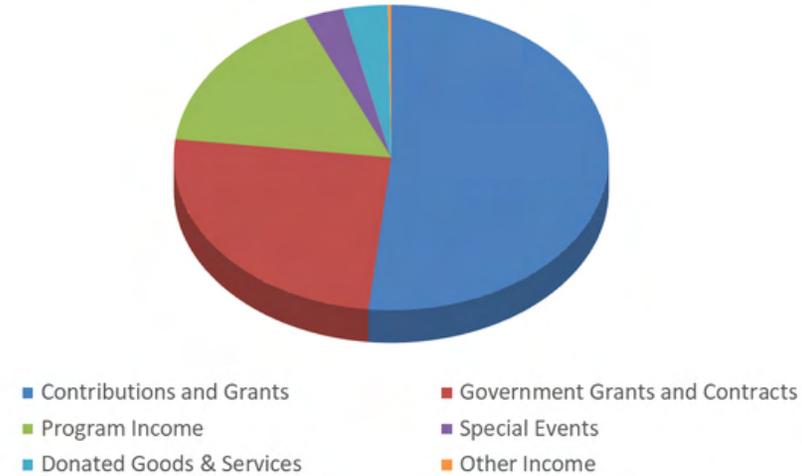
Fiscal year 2023 (July 1, 2022 - June 30, 2023) marked another robust period for the REC, reflecting significant growth in total revenues. We maintained our commitment to augmenting program expenditures annually, with our Farmers Markets serving as an important revenue stream that reached customers across the greater Worcester area, including Southbridge and Webster.

Total revenue increased by 24% compared to the preceding fiscal year, underscoring our sustained upward trajectory. Program revenue, primarily stemming from REC Farmers Markets, amounted to \$393,252, reflecting an impressive increase of nearly 30% from the prior year. Notably, our investment in program initiatives grew substantially by \$365,301, while fundraising expenses saw a modest uptick of \$40,469 compared to FY22.

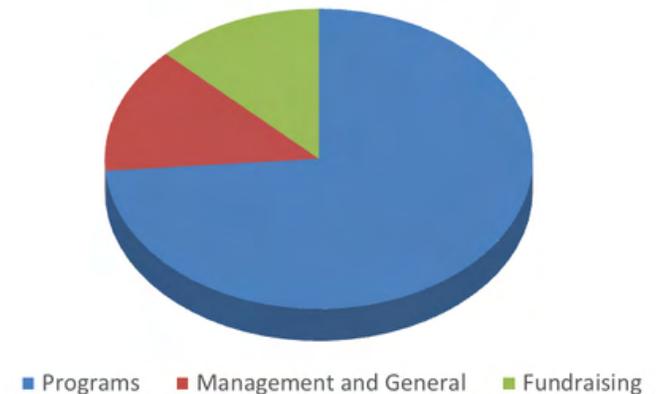
Emphasizing sustainability as a core strategic objective, our year-end cash position stood at \$1,064,350, representing a notable 10% rise from FY22, further solidifying our financial resilience and capacity for future growth.

STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES		
SUPPORT and REVENUE		
Contributions and Grants	\$1,228,074	51.7%
Government Grants and Contracts	\$599,733	25.2%
Program Income	\$393,252	16.5%
Special Events	\$70,218	1.8%
Donated Goods and Services	\$78,703	3.3%
Other Income	\$6,281	0.1%
Total Support and Revenue	\$2,376,261	100%
EXPENSES		
Programs	\$1,486,281	73.7%
Management and General	\$274,154	13.6%
Fundraising	\$255,680	12.7%
Total Expenses	\$2,016,115	100%
Increase (Decrease) in Net Assets	\$360,146	

SUPPORT & REVENUE



EXPENSES



STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

CURRENT ASSETS

Cash and Cash Equivalents	\$668,911
Grants and Contracts Receivable	\$313,257
Capital Campaign Contributions Receivable	\$51,389
Prepaid Expenses	\$32,551
Total Current Assets	\$1,066,108

NONCURRENT ASSETS

Restricted Cash	\$5,000
Capital Campaign Cash Proceeds	\$390,439
Capital Campaign Receivables	\$85,200
Property and Equipment	\$334,580
Investments/Security Deposit	\$5,032
TOTAL ASSETS	\$1,886,359

LIABILITIES and NET ASSETS

CURRENT LIABILITIES

Accounts Payable	\$47,798
Accrued Expenses	\$79,686
Deferred Revenue	-
Current Portion of Notes Payable	-
Total Current Liabilities	\$127,484

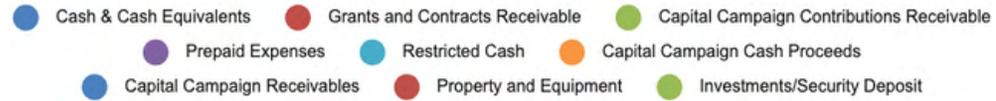
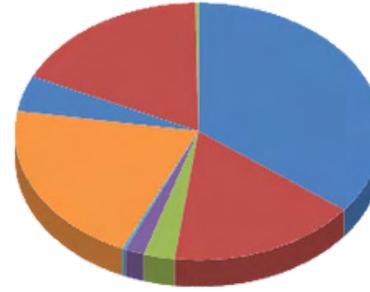
LONG-TERM LIABILITIES

Long Term Debt	-
TOTAL LIABILITIES	\$127,484

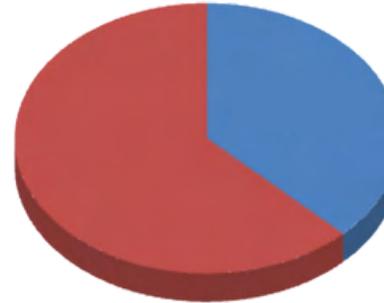
NET ASSETS

Unrestricted Net Assets	\$569,494
Board Designated Assets	\$180,443
Restricted Net Assets	\$1,008,938
TOTAL NET ASSETS	\$1,758,875
TOTAL LIABILITIES & NET ASSETS	\$1,886,359

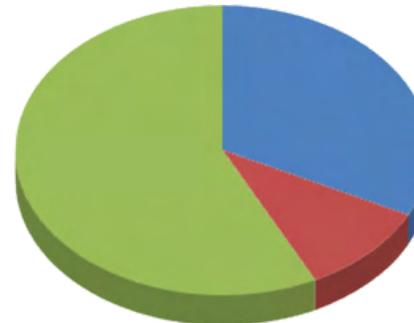
ASSETS



LIABILITIES



NET ASSETS



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We are proud to share our 2023 successes, which illustrate the culmination of decades of dedication by countless individuals.

There is still much to be done to end hunger and to realize community food security and sovereignty in Central Massachusetts. As the REC progresses into its next chapter, together we can forge a just food system that empowers people of all ages to access, cultivate, and procure healthy, affordable, culturally relevant local food, while enhancing the resilience, sustainability, and beauty of our communities and neighborhoods.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our community of supporters whose generosity has been instrumental in our achievements in 2023. **Here's to creating a just food system, together.**

LET'S CONNECT!

 508-799-9139

 info@recworchester.org



@recworchester