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Client Perceptions of a Therapeutic Garden at an Inner-City Substance Abuse Recovery Facility: Findings from a Community-Engaged Qualitative Evaluation

Objective: To present client perceptions of a therapeutic garden at an inner-city outpatient addictions recovery center using community engaged qualitative methods. Long-term addiction recovery requires discovering new modalities that are healthy alternatives to substance use. Healing gardens provide opportunities for creativity, mindful reflection, physical movement, and the creation of social networks, which may aid recovery. We used qualitative methods to gather clients' perspectives of their experiences in a healing garden, information that will be used to guide design of future programming.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten members of a community advisory board comprised of current clients at a Chicago-area outpatient substance abuse treatment clinic. Interviews were conducted by telephone and recorded. Following transcription, Grounded Theory qualitative methods were used for data analysis.. Using DeDoose, team members developed a coding scheme collaboratively then openly coded one transcript together to create an initial code book. All coders subsequently demonstrated acceptable inter-rater reliability scores (kappa>.70) in order to proceed to code the following 2-3 transcripts independently. Selective and axial coding followed, in which team members created high-order categories and themes.

Results: One hundred forty-seven codes were applied, which were grouped into 14 unique categories, and then elevated into 4 overarching themes. The themes included: Personal Transformation, which represented 35% of all passages coded (e.g. codes: emotionally invested, expressing gratitude); Sensory Experiences, representing 33% of all passages (e.g. smelling tree bark, hearing birds); Garden Engagement, representing 24% of coded passages (e.g. Comes naturally to me, gardening not hard); and Garden Features, representing 7% of coded passages (e.g. Benches in the garden, flowers/flowerbeds seen in the garden).

Conclusion: Overall participant enthusiasm for engaging with the garden was high as was enthusiasm for participating in the interviews. Results will be presented to clients and facility staff as part of future program planning steps.