

Lifeside Farms: Evaluating the Feasibility and Impact of Care Farms in the Flathead

Emerging in Europe in the early 1990's, care farms (CFs) are actual working farms where adults with disabilities engage in activities ranging from feeding and caring for animals to harvesting vegetables and preparing fresh meals. In most cases, participants visit the CFs two to three times per week on average. In a much smaller number of cases, participants actually live on the farms and receive care in situ. The intention of CFs is to provide meaningful and therapeutic activities and experiences to clients in non-institutional, natural settings. CFs also offer opportunities for community engagement, social inclusion, skill building, and even paid employment for clients in sheltered work programs. In the winter of 2012/2013, Maarten Fischer of A Plus Healthcare initiated the first CFs in the US based on the model developed in the Netherlands. The program has since grown into serving between 40 and 60 clients at any given time on 10 involved farms. In the summer of 2015, Maarten teamed with researchers from the University of Montana to conduct an initial evaluation of the Lifeside Farms program.

To explore the feasibility and impact of the program, the researchers conducted interviews with 19 people associated with Lifeside Farms, including participants, family members, program administrators, funding administrators, and farmers. The following bullet points and quotes illustrate our findings:

- CF participants and family members were enthusiastic about participation. As one CF participants stated: *“And they told me about it and I jumped on it right away because it sounded awesome because I like this kind of atmosphere, you know. I love being outside. Being outside is my thing.” “I mean I would probably be here every day if I could.”*

- CF participants and family members identified an array of benefits, including improved mood and respite (i.e., a break for family caregivers). As one family member commented: *“Oh, it just gets them out and they have a specific purpose for going out.”* *“But just in general I think it’s been a huge mood booster. She has something to look forward to and then she loves just talking about it.”*
- Administrators and farmers indicated that the CF model challenged the status quo of funding, programming, and farming operations. As this funding administrator stated, it took time to fully grasp the concept: *“God that sounds really cool but how’s he doing it? How does it work? There’s no staff, it’s a farmer. So it really took me going on a tour with [Maarten] and seeing it in action to become like, “This is amazing stuff, this is really cool!” And now it makes sense what’s going on.”*
- Adoption and implementation of the CF program required acceptance and management of risk. One farmer summed this up with his comment: *“Yeah, you can get hit by a truck walking across the street, and you have to have some faith. And there has to be a little bit of an approach in that direction, especially if you’re stepping out into new territory. But, of course, we’re set up with insurance and liability and workman’s compensation...”*
- Administrators speculated that the continued operation and expansion of the CF program relies upon administrative expertise, local relationships, and managing liability. One funding administrator stated: *“Maarten is a force unto himself. Having said that, I fully believe with all my heart...that this model could be replicated all over the country. I don’t think that it needs someone exactly like Maarten in every place to do it. He can be the father, the guru.”* *“I think there are people out there who are really hungry for this kind of creative approach.”*

While this was a small pilot study, the findings suggest that CFs appear to be feasible in the US and represent an innovative and potentially effective alternative to traditional adult day services. Several key elements will be needed to expand the GCF model to other communities, including well-versed administrators, local knowledge and relationships, and a shift in our way of thinking about caring for younger and older adults with disabilities. It is essential to recast individuals with disabilities as capable and worthy, to support autonomy and avoid paternalism, and to accept that growth is rarely realized without risk. There is undoubtedly therapeutic value in caring for plants, animals, and each other. “Being in nature” can also evoke the primordial soul and provide harmony, peace, and healing. These intangibles will certainly be difficult to measure, but they are perhaps the most powerful benefits provided by GCFs. As the writer, environmental activist, and farmer Wendell Berry once wrote, “The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life”.

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