

# Do Fresno County gardens improve mental health?

By Barbara Anderson / The Fresno Bee

Sunday, Nov. 06, 2011 | 11:04 PM

See Thao walked along the edge of a garden at the end of a block in central Fresno, her smile as big as the sunflowers growing among the rows of vegetables.

"I love farming," she said.

The garden at Fresno Interdenominational Ministries on Fresno Street -- one of six Fresno County horticultural therapeutic gardens -- is shared by 10 families, including Thao's. At a celebration for the first harvest last week, she showed what she'd planted: cilantro, onions and taum lag, a Hmong green bean.

And as the crowd watched Hmong dancers and ate a meal prepared from the garden's bounty, Thao talked about what no one could see growing.

"Coming here for farming helps me with my depression because staying home makes me feel very frustrated," said Thao, 37, who came to Fresno in 2004 from a refugee camp in Thailand. "Coming here makes me happier."

Mental health officials say reducing depression and isolation among the Hmong, Slavic, African-American and Hispanic communities is why Fresno County is spending thousands of dollars in mental health funds on therapeutic gardens.

"A lot of the elderly have a lot of feeling of helplessness and hopelessness here in America," said Ghia Xiong, a psychologist at the Fresno Center for New Americans and project director of a garden at McCall and McKinley avenues.

Xiong, who interpreted for Thao, said many Hmong refugees were farmers. Thao said she has farmed since she was 8 years old. But today, Thao lives in an apartment with her seven children.

Most refugees live in apartments, Xiong said. And many of the adults spend their days alone while spouses or adult children work and children or grandchildren are at school, he said.

A garden is a place where they feel at home, Xiong said. "They can go and help and do some farming or just go and walk around it."

For years, the Hmong community has asked Fresno County mental health officials to build a garden, said the Rev. Sharon Stanley, executive director of the interdenominational ministries. The six gardens are the first therapeutic gardens built in the county, and a state official said she knows of only one other built for similar mental health purposes -- in Calaveras County.

Fresno County officials say the gardens are natural places for mental health support groups to form and for people to learn about services in a non-stigmatizing arena.

Through the gardens, the county hopes to reach people who ordinarily shun mental health services, said Karen Markland, a manager in the county's Department of Behavioral Health. The county has budgeted \$180,653 in Mental Health Services Act funds this fiscal year for the six sites, she said.

Mental Health Services Act funds are collected from a tax on millionaires and distributed by the state to counties. Last year, the county received \$33 million. By law, 20% of the money must be spent on prevention and early intervention. The county spent about \$7 million for 12 such programs last year, including about \$135,000 for the gardens.

Horticultural therapy isn't a new concept. Gardening as a means of therapy for the disabled and others has been around at least 38 years. But some question whether spending mental health money on gardening -- especially during tight economic times -- is a wise use of funds.

Curtis A. Thornton, chairman of the Fresno County Mental Health Advisory Board, has been a skeptic.

"I've asked the department to furnish reports on what's been transpiring and what they've been doing to really ensure that there really is a mental health focus there," he said.

But, Thornton said, he's "hopeful that it's going to be something helpful from a mental health perspective."

Fresno County's gardens should work as a means of reaching out to people who otherwise would not have contact with the county mental health services, said Deborah Lee, a consulting psychologist at the state Mental Health Act Services Oversight and Accountability Commission. The commission provides technical assistance to counties.

"It sounds like a wonderful program," Lee said.

### **Growing a community**

Stanley, whose ministries oversee five of the six county gardens, said it's about more than tilling soil and planting seeds.

The gardens are designed to be places for the community, she said. Each of the six sites includes a "shelter" or place for people to gather and for classes in everything from English to substance abuse and stress management.

At the site on Fresno Street, preschool children from a day care center have been given a row in the garden so generations can work together and cultivate closer bonds.

At the Slavic garden at the House of Gospel Church in southeast Fresno, a fish pond and flowers have been added. And community meetings have been held to discuss mental health issues such as anxiety, substance and alcohol abuse, depression and suicide prevention.

The garden gives Maria Safronovna, 73, and her husband, Vasiliy Safronovna, 80, a place to go during the day. The couple came to Fresno nine years ago from the Ukraine. They are among the estimated 5,000 Russian-speaking people who recently have emigrated to Fresno, said Andrey Kovaleno, program director of the Slavic family support program at the refugee ministry. He interpreted for Maria.

"We used to have our own garden," Maria said. "Sunup to sundown -- every day it was our life."

At the Fresno Center for New Americans site, Xiong hopes to create a museum housing traditional Hmong farming tools.

"It is a garden and it is a community," he said, "and it also is a village of people coming together."

## Helping youths cope

The gardens also have a multi-generational aspect and one of the goals is to help kids cope with anger issues and catch signs of mental illness early.

And at the West Fresno Health Care Coalition garden site next to the Mary Ella Brown Community Center, 10 churches have planter boxes that were built by black and Hispanic youths who live in the area with help from Habitat for Humanity.

Seniors who come to the community center at Elm and Annadale avenues have their own box, and so does a group with mental disabilities.

The kids will have a couple of boxes, said project coordinator Karlton Brown. Last week, a group of youths came to the center after school to shovel soil into the 28 boxes they'd built for the garden.

Donquise McCoy, 13, wants to plant sage -- "it just smells good."

And he wants an orange tree. "It's good for the community," he said. "They can come in and get an orange instead of going into someone's backyard to get one."

Brown said he's had no problem recruiting youths for the garden project. So far, 15 are involved and more want to join. The participation is paying off, he said. "Grades are improving, and they're more focused and have a better outlook on life," he said.

Robert Aguilar, 14, said he's made friends at the garden. "When I first came, I had a conflict with a couple of students," he said. "Now, we're working as a team."

Lee, the state psychology consultant for the Mental Health Services Act commission, said county residents are building more than vegetable plots.

"They're planting plants and planting community," she said, "and planting a sense of connection and a sense of worthiness."