Walton Wellness received an $11,990 General Grant from ECF in 2018 in partnership with St. Alban's Episcopal Church (Monroe).

The mission of Walton Wellness is to make living a healthy lifestyle in Walton County, Georgia easier than living unhealthy. The organization works on a macro community level with community partners to promote systematic change.

Through its Field Garden Project created in partnership with St. Alban's Episcopal Church (Monroe), Walton Wellness is working to help Walton County respond to the local community's need for healthy food. Under the direction of Executive Director DeDe Harris, the organization distributes fresh produce it grows in its gardens and obtains from donations from local farms to members of the local community. Many of their members have chronic health problems but lack access to fresh, quality produce.

The gardens are located on property owned by the Walton County Sheriff's Office and the home of the Walton County Jail in Monroe, Georgia. Jail inmates may volunteer at the Field Garden Project alongside master gardeners, which gives them a chance to spend more time outside and learn new skills. Their sentences are reduced by a day for each day they perform this community service. DeDe noted how popular the program is among inmates, "Many come back after they leave the jail and do community service at the garden."

Inmates in the field garden.
Photo Credit: Walton Wellness

Staff and volunteers grow produce in outside beds from March to June. In 2018, the Episcopal Community Foundation provided a grant for hoop houses which allowed Walton Wellness to begin planting approximately six weeks earlier than usual. The produce grown on the jail property, as well as produce donated by local farms and retail distributors, was shared with the community via the Mobile Farmacy (a converted bus) from May through August. Distribution locations included Monroe, Loganville, and Social Circle.

Each weekend approximately 100 households shopped at the Farmacy. Partners helped create a sense of community and the sharing of healthy eating techniques. Teachers at the Athens Technical College Culinary Arts Program shared recipes for in-season vegetables and shared homemade bread.

Sadly, COVID-19 has curtailed Walton Wellness's operations:

- Distributors no longer have produce to donate to Walton Wellness, reducing the availability of healthy food
- Inmates' participation has been limited to helping out on market days; they have not been allowed to volunteer in the gardens this spring
- Walton Wellness members cannot select their own produce among the variety of items available; instead, they receive a pre-bagged selection of food
- Market days are held at the gardens, not at community sites
- Families served each weekend have been reduced by half, to approximately 50 households per weekend

During this time, Walton Wellness has found a silver lining. Executive Director DeDe Harris describes it, saying "One of our goals is to be able to support our local community through local resources, and we are making great strides in reaching that goal." Because Walton Wellness lost access to food distributors, DeDe reached out to the local community to help meet the need. Local organic farmers now share their harvest with us, and local churches have started "Grow a Row" gardens and share their bounty. So far in 2020, Walton Wellness has met 100% of its members' needs from local sources.

DeDe reflected on the model Walton Wellness is creating: "Every community can do this. No special knowledge is required. Field Gardens are sustainable and can fill the gap between haves and have-nots" when it comes to healthy food.

Current Needs:

- Donations of produce
- Spread the word, so more people know about the gardens and markets
- Volunteers to work in the gardens
- Funding to purchase more food from local farmers and hire help in the gardens

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Mary-Kathryn Boler, CFRE (she/her) is a past Board Chair for the ECF Board of Directors and is a member of St. Peter and St. Paul Episcopal Church in Marietta. She has 30 years' experience in education and economic development program creation and funding. She also shares her development expertise with other nonprofits as a grant writing instructor at the Georgia Center for Nonprofits. Learn more about the ECF Board of Directors.

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