



## *The beginning of the ACGA coalition*

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THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY GARDENING ASSOCIATION (ACGA) is a product of two national community gardening conferences organized by the City of Chicago Department of Human Services in 1978 and 1979. At that time, Chicago was in the vanguard of municipally sponsored gardening programs and recognized the value of sharing information and resources on a nationwide basis. These conferences were extremely successful in creating a foundation for a national network of urban gardening program sponsors.

Hundreds of programs from across the country were represented at the Chicago meetings. During the 1970s, thousands of community programs had been organized to provide land and resources to people without property of their own to use for gardening. Programs developed under the sponsorship of municipal parks departments, local Cooperative Extension services, nonprofit organizations, churches, schools, social service agencies, and neighborhood associations. The majority were subsidized or funded entirely by federal grants-in-aid. Many were staffed by CETA or similar federal job training programs.

This over dependence on federal funding led to serious problems for many programs when social service cutbacks became commonplace in 1980. At the same time that program development funds were disappearing, community gardening organizers reported a growing demand for their services. Higher unemployment, rising food costs and the trimming of social services placed an extraordinary demand on sponsors of programs that were ill-equipped to meet the challenge. Many program leaders, originally trained

only in horticulture, increasingly found it necessary to master local politics, land acquisition techniques, business administration, and public relations skills as well.

A National Community Gardening Task Force, a legacy of the Chicago meetings, responded to the situation by organizing an emergency steering-committee meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, in the fall of 1980. Over 35 sponsors and coordinators of prominent programs across the country attended this meeting and resolved to form the American Community Gardening Association to support community garden development nationwide through facilitating the formation and expansion of state and regional community garden networks; developing an information clearinghouse for programs; developing resources in support of community garden projects; consulting with organizations involved in establishing new programs; and conducting regional and national workshops and conferences for program coordinators.

By the end of 1982 the ACGA had incorporated as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization with a grant from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society in Philadelphia. Project Grow, Inc., a nonprofit community gardening organization in Ann Arbor, Michigan, provided a central office for ACGA business under the direction of Ken Nicholls, president and a founding member of the coalition. A 16-member board of regional directors was also established to network across the country. ACGA directors have donated countless hours of their time, and the support services of the organizations they represent, in the building of this coalition. 🌱