Access Alliance
Multicultural Health and Community Services

New Beginnings for Newcomers.

SUSTAINABLE LIVING / GREEN ACCESS PROGRAM

Program Evaluation Report

August 2026

Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services
Toronto, Canada
August 2026

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary 4

Background and Objectives
Methodology
Key Findings
Recommendations
Conclusion

Background 6

Purpose
Program Description

Methodology 8

Client Profile 10

Findings 11

Program Reach
Access and Participation
Program Outputs and Effectiveness
Client Satisfaction
Impact
Garden Stewards

Recommendations 26

Conclusion 28

Limitations 29

References 29

Executive Summary

Background and Objectives

The Sustainable Living/Green Access Program is an environmentally focused health promotion program designed to support newcomers, immigrants, and refugees' access health programs and services. It aims to increase individuals' access to green spaces and healthy foods, as well as their knowledge and skills in environmental stewardship and sustainable living. The purpose of this evaluation was to assess the program's reach, accessibility, effectiveness, impact, and client satisfaction.

Methodology

The evaluation applied a mixed-methods approach, including a review of program documents, an online survey with clients (N=14), a focus group discussion with clients (N=12), and interviews with staff and management, to assess the program across five domains: **reach, access and participation, effectiveness, satisfaction, and impact.**

Key Findings

- **Reach:** The program is reaching its intended population as it aims to reach all community members, with the majority of clients predominantly identifying as South-Asian or Black African, female, between the ages of 25-44, and citizens, permanent residents or refugee claimants. Outreach has been driven primarily by email or through staff of Access Alliance. However, a decrease in registered clients was observed from fical years 2022/23 and 2023/24.
- **Access and Participation:** 28.6% (n=6) of survey respondents attended the program in the past 6 months. Barriers to program access include clients' lack of information on program sessions/workshops, transportation difficulties, and the timing of services conflicting with activities of daily life. Facilitators include the friendly environment and helpful staff.
- **Program Effectiveness:** 80.0% (n=12) of survey respondents began growing their own food after participating in the program. Those who don't report not having enough space to grow food. Overall, clients report meaningful improvements in their knowledge and skills across all program areas (gardening, sustainable living, environmental stewardship). Staff noted the lack of program funding impacts the effectiveness of services by restricting the number of staff who can be hired and support the program work.
- **Client Satisfaction:** 100% (N=14) rate the program as excellent, very good, or good, and 100% (N=14) would recommend the program to family/friends. Some experiences of a lack of inclusion were reported by survey respondents.
- **Perceived Impacts:** 71.4% (n=10) report improved overall health and wellbeing, and 71.4% (n=10) have an improved sense of belonging. Clients report a perceived reduction in some household expenses due to activities of the program such as grocery costs, gardening costs, and increasing use of reusable materials.

Key Findings

- **Garden Stewards**
  - The majority of volunteers were identified as being within the 25-44 age group and heard about the program through a third-party organization.
  - Barriers to volunteering included competing priorities (i.e., work); facilitators to volunteering included the supportive environment and opportunities for friendships.
  - Volunteers reported having the necessary trainings and resources, and good working relationships.
  - Overall, volunteers indicated positive experiences with the program.100% (n=7) of respondents rated it as either 'Good', 'Very Good', or 'Excellent', and 100% (n=7) would recommend it to others. When asked for suggestions for improving the program, respondents expressed positive feedback, offering no specific recommendations for improvement.

Recommendations

1) Maintain and Sustain Practices that are Impactful for Clients

Continue practices that have demonstrated positive outcomes for clients, including the welcoming environment, opportunities to engage with others, and the practical and informative workshops.

2) Improve Communication of Program Sessions

Clients noted not having information about upcoming workshops or sessions. Providing clearer, more accessible information about program sessions can reduce some barriers that prevent clients from participating.

3) Address Experiences of Exclusion

Establish clear approaches to addressing experiences of exclusion and ensuring clients feel comfortable, safe, and supported. The program could also ensure that clients and volunteers have ways to raise concerns and provide feedback about their experiences.

4) Establish Clear Registration Guidelines and Improve Data Entry Practices

Develop a guideline or framework to identify which types of sessions or events require registration. Additionally, standardizing data entry procedures for recording attendance and participant information would help improve consistency and data quality across programs.

5) Secure Stable Funding to Invest in Program Sustainability and Growth

The program's funding instability presents a barrier to the program's sustainability and growth. Obtaining stable, long-term funding to maintain effective services, respond to client needs, and support the program's continued growth will be beneficial to the program.

Conclusion

Overall, this evaluation shows that the Sustainable Living/Green Access Program is making a meaningful difference in participants' lives. By securing long-term sustainable funding, the program can reach more equity-deserving people and significantly strengthen its impact.

Background

Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation was to assess the reach, accessibility, effectiveness, client satisfaction, and impact of the Sustainable Living/Green Access (SL/GA) Program. As the program's first in-depth evaluation, the findings will be used to better understand client experiences. The report will also serve as a resource to inform staff and management's future decision-making, funding applications, and support quality improvements.

Program Description

The SL/GA program is a community-led, environmentally focused health promotion initiative implemented by Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services (Access Alliance).

As a community development initiative, the program aims to increase individuals' environmental knowledge and stewardship, and access to healthy food through community gardening and green space access activities. It promotes community engagement, social inclusion, and capacity building while advocating for improved access to healthy and culturally appropriate food. The program promotes leadership and delivers educational initiatives that foster awareness of health, sustainability, and environmental responsibility.

Overall, the goal is to provide necessary resources to encourage and promote sustainable living. It envisions communities that experience equitable access to healthy food, sustainable living opportunities, environmental stewardship, and community-led systems that support health, wellbeing, dignity, and resilience. This is planned to happen through the following **objectives**:

- **Community Development:** Build community connection, environmental awareness, and leadership capacity among participants.
- **Education:** Strengthen community leadership and participation in food justice and local food systems work. Foster ecological awareness and reciprocal relationships with land through sustainable and land-based programming.
- **Social Action / Advocacy:** Improve access to healthy, affordable, culturally-relevant food and sustainable living resources. Address systemic barriers contributing to food insecurity, inequity, and environmental injustice.
- **Sector and Organizational Collaboration:** Strengthen partnerships, organizational alignment, and integrated approaches to food justice and sustainability.

The SL/GA Program delivers support through three main components:



Environmental Initiatives

Participants have opportunities to engage in community events and educational activities offered throughout the year, including Seedy Saturday, Earth Day, Pollinator Week, Waste Reduction Week, and Circular Economy Month. These initiatives promote environmental awareness and sustainable living practices while providing opportunities for community engagement, social connection, and leadership development. The Enviroleaders program is part of this component, where individuals are trained to become organic gardening, food security, and environmental peer trainers within their communities.



Food Security

This component focuses on improving access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food through meal programs, education, and advocacy efforts. The food cultivated in the gardens is used to support the community dinning program and is provided to community members at no cost. Other activities include raising awareness about food insecurity and advocating for policies and systems that enhance equitable access to nutritious food.



Green Access

This component increases participants' access to and awareness of green spaces for food cultivation, recreation, and general urban ecology knowledge. Through community gardens and other outdoor initiatives, participants develop gardening skills, strengthen their connection to nature and social networks, and benefit from the physical, mental, and social health advantages associated with spending time in green spaces. The Garden Stewards program is part of the Green Access component, where volunteers operate the rooftop garden at AccessPoint on Danforth. It focuses on organic food production, environmental education, and community health.

Methodology



Evaluation Focus

The evaluation focused on assessing the program's performance between the fiscal years (FY) of 2022-2023 and 2025-2026 and was guided by an evaluation framework and plan (see **Appendix B**) developed to address the evaluation questions outlined in **Table 1** (next page).

Approach and Scope

Applying a mixed-methods approach, the evaluation process began with a program background review with staff and management to identify evaluation priorities and areas of interest. Program documents and existing data were reviewed to understand program activities, outputs, and client demographics. Of note, the food security component of the program was assessed solely through the activities of the SL/GA program (e.g., land access and cultivation). Access Alliance addresses food security more specifically through other organizational activities and a dedicated logic model. Those food security activities or initiatives were not assessed as part of this evaluation. The Enviroleaders program was not assessed in this evaluation, as it has been paused since FY 2024-2025 due to a lack of funding.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data collection included connecting with those who participated in the program activities during the years of interest. Specifically, one online survey was distributed to registered program clients (N=94), a separate online survey was sent and Garden Steward volunteers (N=44), yielding 14 and 7 responses, respectively. To better understand client feedback, a focus group with 12 participants; and interviews with program staff and management were conducted.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive and thematic analysis, and findings were synthesized to identify key themes and inform program recommendations.

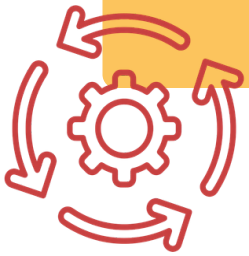


Table 1. Evaluation Questions	
Domain	**Question**
Reach	1. What is the reach of the program population? 2. What are the characteristics and demographics of the participant population?
Access/ Participation	3. What are the facilitators and barriers to accessing the program?
Effectiveness	4. Is the program being implemented and achieving its outputs as intended? 5. What are the strengths and areas for improvement of the program's activities? 6. To what extent does the program build participant capacity, and in which areas? 7. What is the current food security status of participants?
Satisfaction	8. What are the participants' overall experiences with the program? ◦ Satisfaction, engagement, respect, sense of belonging, etc. ◦ Culturally inclusive/relevant program delivery
Impact	9. What are the real/perceived impacts of participation on participants' overall well-being and behaviour changes related to sustainable living/food practices? 10. What is the program's capacity to advance advocacy efforts, and in what ways do participants want to participate in advocacy activities?
Garden Stewards	11. What is the perspective and experience of Garden Steward volunteers?

Client Profile

Table 2 presents key demographic indicators, including gender identity, age, racial/ethnic background, immigration status, and sexual orientation. Client demographic characteristics for the 2025-2026 fiscal year were not pulled as it was not ready for analysis at the time of the evaluation. See Appendix D for the full demographic trend analysis.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the Sustainable Living/Green Access program clients

Demographic Indicator	Category	FY 2022-2023	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Gender	Female Male	73.7% (n=73) 24.2% (n=24)	84.4% (n=38) 15.6% (n=7)	72.2% (n=26) 27.8% (n=10)
Age	Up to 14 15-24 24-44 45-64 65+	6.0% (n=6) 35.0% (n=35) 38.0% (n=38) 13.0% (n=13) 8.0% (n=8)	Suppressed (n<5) Suppressed (n<5) 63.4% (n=26) 24.4% (n=10) Suppressed (n<5)	Suppressed (n<5) Suppressed (n<5) 55.9% (n=19) 29.4% (n=10) Suppressed (n<5)
Racial/Ethnic Group	Asian - South Black – African Middle Eastern	48.2% (n=41) 20.0% (n=17) 5.9% (n=5)	80.0% (n=36) Suppressed (n<5) Suppressed (n<5)	74.3% (n=26) Suppressed (n<5) Suppressed (n<5)
Immigration Status (Current)	Refugee Claimant or Refugee Citizen Other	30.0% (n=27) 23.3% (n=21) 6.7% (n=6)	Suppressed (n<5) 63.6% (n=21) Suppressed (n<5)	Suppressed (n<5) 69.6% (n=16) Suppressed (n<5)
Sexual Orientation	Bisexual Lesbian Heterosexual DNK/PNA	11.0% (n=9) 9.0% (n=8) 31.0% (n=26) 44.7% (n=38)	12.0% (n=5) 0 56.0% (n=24) 32.6% (n=14)	Suppressed (n<5) 0 55.0% (n=16) 37.9% (n=11)
Income	Less than 30K Between 30-60K 60K or more DNK/PNA	26.1% (n=23) 5.7% (n=5) Suppressed (n<5) 66% (n=58)	27.3% (n=12) 13.6% (n=6) 13.6% (n=6) 45% (n=20)	44.1% (n=15) Suppressed (n<5) Suppressed (n<5) 35% (n=12)

Findings

Program Reach

As outlined in the **Client Profile** and presented in **Appendix D**, the program reaches a range of different clients across the years, with a majority identifying as South Asian and as women. One program participant noted in their survey response that the program seemed to focus "more on Indigenous people or Bangladesh people". This suggests that while the program maintains a broad appeal, it gravitates to a specific, culturally distinct demographic as its primary user base. However, this does align with the general population living near the AccessPoint on Danforth location where the program is based and mainly operates (Access Alliance, 2023).

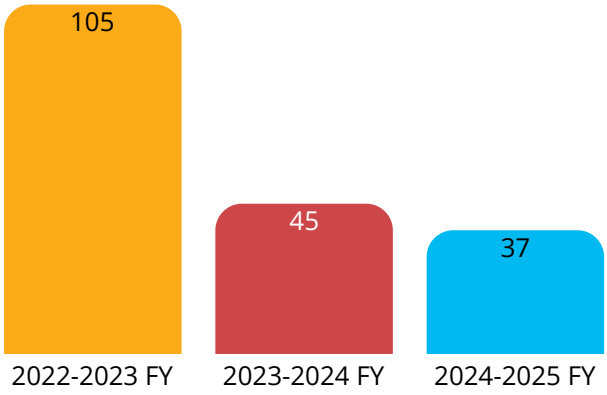


Figure 1. Total Number of Unique Clients by Fiscal Year

Client Growth

- There was a significant decrease in registered unique clients between FY 2022/23 and 2023/24 (Figure 1).
- Another slight decrease in unique clients is shown in FY 2024/25.
- From FY 2022/23 to FY 2023/24, **28** new clients joined the program. From FY 2023/24 to 2024/25, **16** new clients joined the program (see Appendix E).
- Retention of registered clients is not high, with 62.2% (n=28) of the clients being new in FY 2023/24, and 43.2% (n=16) in FY 2024/25.

REDUCED CLIENTS

The decrease in unique clients registered is in part due to the funding of registered programs offered in 2022-2023 not being continued in subsequent fiscal years. Staff report that the funding cut from TD Bank in FY 2022-23 led to certain programs being stopped, and as a result, a reduced number of registered programs offered for clients. In addition, the program has been offering more drop-in or event-style group programming, such as Seedy Saturdays.

How Clients Hear About the Program

Staff of Access Alliance is the most common way clients learn about the program, a strong indicator of the effectiveness of internal referrals. Staff noted that although flyers are shared and posted on bulletin boards and social media, outreach has evidently been more successful when staff and existing clients are actively referring others within their programs or social networks. From the survey, 38.1% (n=8) of respondents reported hearing about the program through staff at Access Alliance. Other common pathways include: Email, family/friends, and flyers/posters (Figure 2).

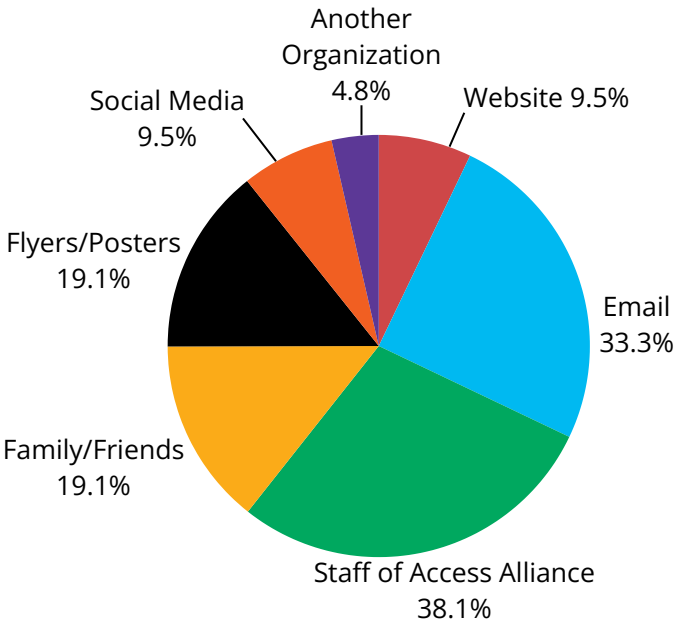


Figure 2. Survey respondents' indication of how they heard about the program (N=14).

> I find that a really good [outreach method]... is to just go to my colleagues' programs and ask them just to tell people that, 'hey there's A, B, and C going on' ... because we deal with so many different cohorts of people, with some people, word of mouth works better.
>
> **– Program Staff**



Access and Participation

Overall, clients can access and engage with the program, and they report a positive experience with the registration process. The majority of survey responses described registration as **simple**, **clear**, and **easy to complete**.

28.6% (n=6) of respondents attended the program in the past 6 months

76.5% (n=13) "agree" or "strongly agree" the registration process was easy

Why Clients Stay

Clients continue to participate in the program as it offers a space where clients can learn new skills about an activity they enjoy. Staff noted other reasons clients come back to the program, including:

Community Connection
Opportunities to connect with others and build meaningful connections with people who share the same interests.

Gain Skills and Knowledge
Its a space where clients can increase their gardening and sustainable living knowledge and skills, learning from staff and peers.

Supplements Learning
Teachers who bring their students to the site (curriculum-linked outdoor programming) shared that their students learned better and learned more about the environment as it supplemented their teaching.

> To connect with the people, to gain extra knowledge, to gain new knowledge about sustainable living, to connect between nature.
>
> – **Program Participant (Focus Group)**

> My kids were part of the gardening program... last year they joined, and I see the interest in them, and so I now have a garden [at home].
>
> – **Program Participant (Focus Group)**

Barriers and Facilitators

Clients who have taken a break or stopped attending most often expressed that it was due to having **competing needs and priorities**, such as employment and education. Being uninformed about the program events was also identified as a reason for not attending. This highlights that reduced engagement is often not due to a lack of interest, but rather to the realities of individuals' experiences and the lack of awareness. 73.3% (n=11) of survey respondents noted that they plan to attend future programs and events.

> For a program, [we] just don't have the funding to give people tokens, so [we] think that's a huge barrier. A lot of people won't come to a program where they ... are paying to come here.
>
> – **Program Staff**

> I don't normally receive the emails and stuff... I see people have a lot of physical flyer ... but not like the soft copy electronic version. So I think it will help like to send it out as a flyer to the email.
>
> – **Program Participant (Focus Group)**

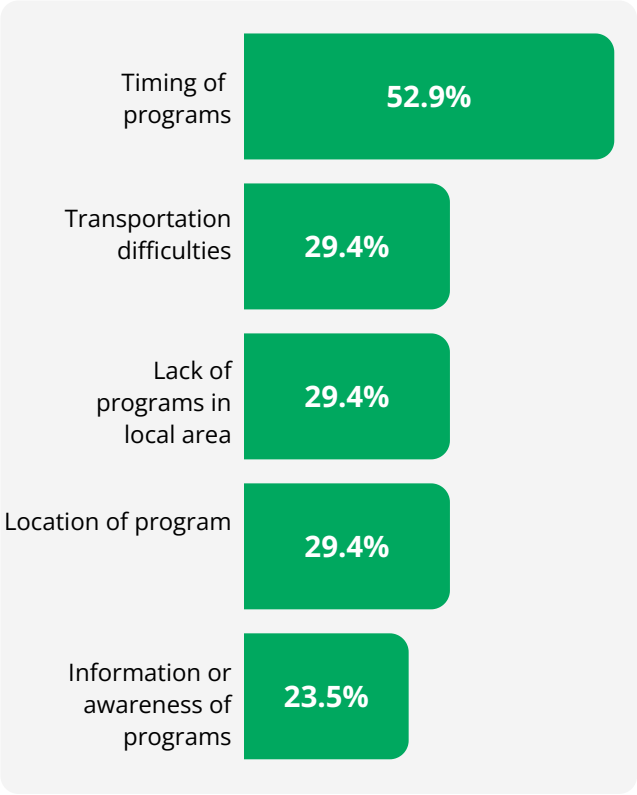


Figure 3. Top barriers to access SL/GA programs (N=17).

A **friendly and welcoming environment**, along with **clear communication** on the available services and supports were highlighted as access facilitators by survey respondents. In addition to that, helpful staff, easy registration, and the availability of the program at no cost were also noted as important facilitators in attending the program.

Program Outputs and Effectiveness

The program is highly effective in meeting the needs of Sustainable Living/Green Access program attendees. Both survey and focus group respondents emphasize that across all program components, they have gained **knowledge, skills, and connections** to support their overall health and well-being.

Why Clients Join

Survey responses indicate that clients come to the program mainly because they are interested in gardening, growing food, sustainability, learning practical skills, and becoming more self-sufficient. Generally, the name of the program aligned with their expectations of the program. Survey respondents were interested in learning about "growing green" and "living green", including practical ways to live more sustainably.

One survey respondent mentioned concerns about the global economy and wanting to "do something myself," suggesting that the program allows them to learn practical skills and become self-sufficient in gardening.

TOP REASONS FOR JOINING

#1 Gardening and Growing Foods

#2 Connecting with the Environment

#3 Sustainable Living

#4 Learning Practical Skills

#5 Self-sufficiency



> To connect with the people, to gain extra knowledge, to gain new knowledge about sustainable garden, for example, to connect between the nature ... the information is new to me, and definitely I'm gonna apply today, and definitely I will try these things, because these things I really don't know before.
>
> **– Program Participant (Focus Group)**

Group Programming

Group sessions and activities play a key role in helping participants increase their knowledge and build community. They consistently describe these sessions as welcoming, inclusive, and accessible, where participants feel their needs are being met through the program. These sessions cover a wide range of topics, including gardening and sustainable living practices, environmental stewardship, climate change, and more.

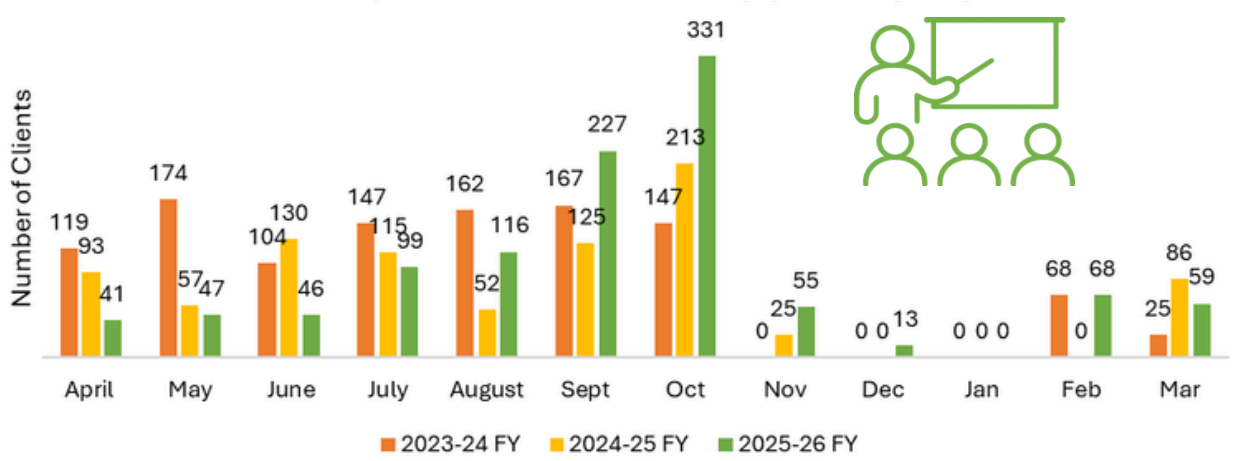


Figure 4. Monthly Session Attendance (by fiscal year)

As seen in **Figure 4**, monthly attendance for group sessions generally builds from spring to fall across all fiscal years, with September and October being the months with the highest numbers. After October, attendance significantly drops with very low or no attendance (or sessions) from November to January (see **Appendix E** – Group Sessions for number of monthly sessions). This is reflective of the fact that the community garden doesn't operate during the winter season, but has a popular "Back to School, Back in the Garden" program in the fall. Fiscal year 2025-26 had high numbers, specifically in September and October. This high level of participation demonstrates the need for the program and how engaged community members are with the program.

Staff noted that most ongoing programs are dependent on funding, and thus their intended outputs are only achieved when funding is available (i.e., the Enviroleaders program was paused due to the lack of funding). However, single-day events occur as planned as support is provided from Access Alliance as a whole, with support from other organizational resources such as the volunteer department.

73.3%
(n=11)
have not attended in the past 6 months but plan to attend a session/event in the future

64.7%
(n=11)
indicated that the program activities aligned with their expectations

82.4%
(n=13)
"strongly agree" or "agree" their awareness of resources/services in the community increased

Clients' Suggestions for Improvement

- More programs, activities, and events on site
- Increase hands-on and practical demonstrations
- Increase incorporation of community leaders within the gardening programs
- Advertise and promote the events more, and with clarity for what to expect
- When gift cards are available through the program, offer a variety of stores/locations
- Offer TTC fares to support participation and access

See **Appendix F** – Question 8 for the full list of suggestions

> I would say the strengths of the program is that we have a community that is really invested in urban agriculture. So ... it meets the community, in that it's a community that has the interest in the first place.
>
> **– Program Staff**

Staff Capacity

The program currently relies on one staff member who is responsible for the administrative work, program and workshop delivery, grant writing, and the ongoing maintenance of the rooftop space, with some support from gardeners and volunteers during the busier growing months. Unlike programs that are primarily office- or workshop-based, the rooftop requires regular and ongoing care because it is a living environment that cannot simply be left unattended.

Staff capacity is an important factor affecting the delivery of the program. The range of the staff's responsibilities creates challenges in balancing program delivery with operational and maintenance needs. Funding is closely connected to the program's staffing capacity, as additional funding can support the hiring of staff to share these responsibilities.

Knowledge and Capacity Building

Survey findings indicate that clients experienced improvements in both knowledge and access-related areas, demonstrating how the program supports their independence and confidence. While some community members report being aware of various resources for their needs, others report being less aware, and uptake is limited by the inconvenience of those other resources.

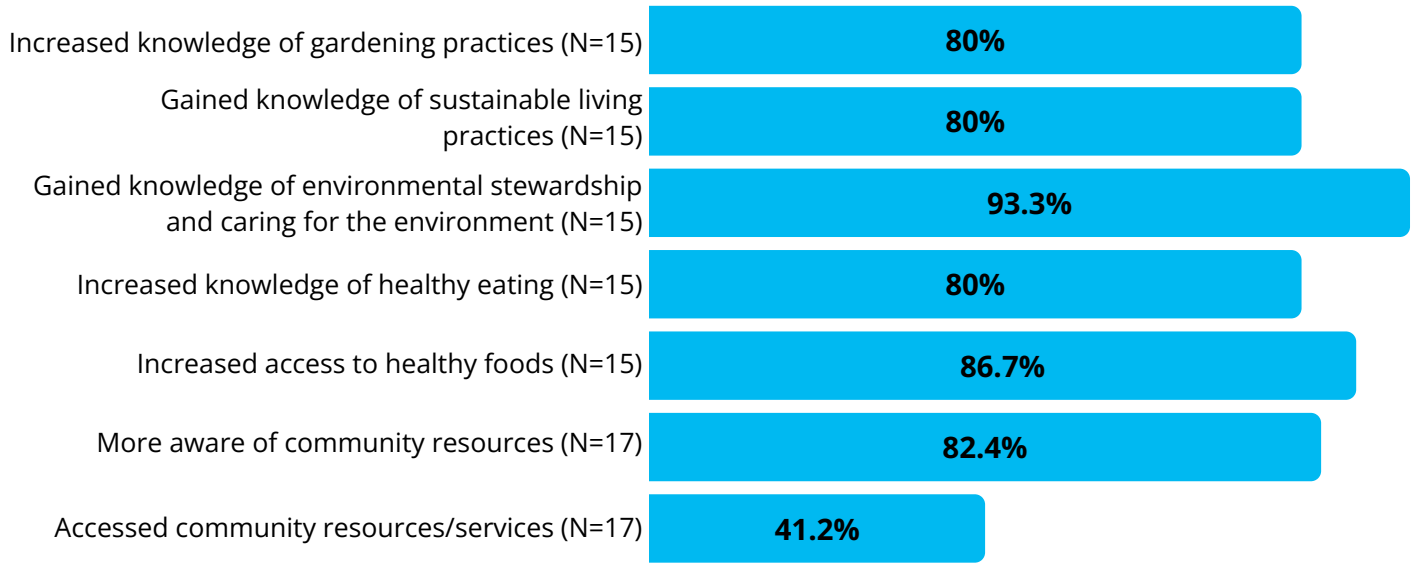


Figure 5. Client's self-reported increased access, knowledge, or awareness of healthy practices through program education.

Note: The data presented in the charts above represent the combined total percentage of survey respondents who selected "agree" or "strongly agree" for the statements.

Focus group participants also noted that the information being shared at the Sustainable Living/Green Access programs are also being adopted by the family members. The shows that the impact of the program extends beyond individual clients, as participants are sharing and applying the knowledge gained with their family members. One participant also noted that they sometimes grow an abundance of crops, which they then share with or sell to neighbours and friends. This highlights the effectiveness through emphasizing how knowledge and skills gained through participation can contribute to sharing within the community.

> This year, I got the [garden] plot as well, so my daughter is like more taking interest, saying things like 'okay, mama, this is the things that we can grow'. So, that reduces her screen time ... So now, everyone, like me, my husband, my daughter, we are taking part in this, and that's really helped me a lot.
>
> **– Program Participant (Focus Group)**

Food Security

The Sustainable Living/Green Access program addresses food security through the food access component, where clients are provided the opportunity to take home some food grown in the garden. The knowledge gained through the program can also help address food security as it provides clients with skills to grow their food by increasing access to garden plots or educating clients on how to grow food with limited space (e.g. on balconies). When survey respondents were asked about their current food security status,

- **42.7%** (n=6) indicated that **they worried that their household would not have enough food because of a lack of money**.
- **42.7%** (n=6) also indicated that they **skipped meals, ate less, or stayed hungry because they did not have enough money to buy food**.

However, **80%** (n=12) of survey respondents **began growing their own food** and **73.3%** (n=11) feel **more confident finding and using food programs** in their community (e.g., food banks, community gardens) after participating in the program. This demonstrates how the program supports individuals and families to be aware of and access resources to become more food secure. In addition, the food cultivated in the garden is also used to support Access Alliance community members through community dining programs.

169lbs

of food were produced by the Green Access garden in FY 2025-2026. This food was shared with the weekly Community Dining program, community members affected by food insecurity, and Garden Stewards (Access Alliance, 2026).





Client Satisfaction

Clients were satisfied with the overall program. Survey and focus group respondents described feeling comfortable and welcomed, and noted their satisfaction with the variety of workshops/sessions offered. Focus group participants also indicated they felt respected for their culture and background, and that the material learned was relevant to them. While many did feel included and welcomed in the program, increased efforts can be made to ensure all clients, regardless of racial or ethnic group, feel inclusion and belonging. Increasing community governance through the activities of community garden leaders may increase a sense of ownership and community governance of the program.

With that, a majority also expressed that they would definitely recommend the program to others. More than 60% (n=6) of respondents did not have suggestions. They highlighted that the program has been good and they are satisfied with the current services.

100% (n=14)	100% (n=14)	100% (n=14)
feel comfortable and welcomed in the program	**rate the program as "excellent", "very good", or "good"**	**would recommend the program to others**

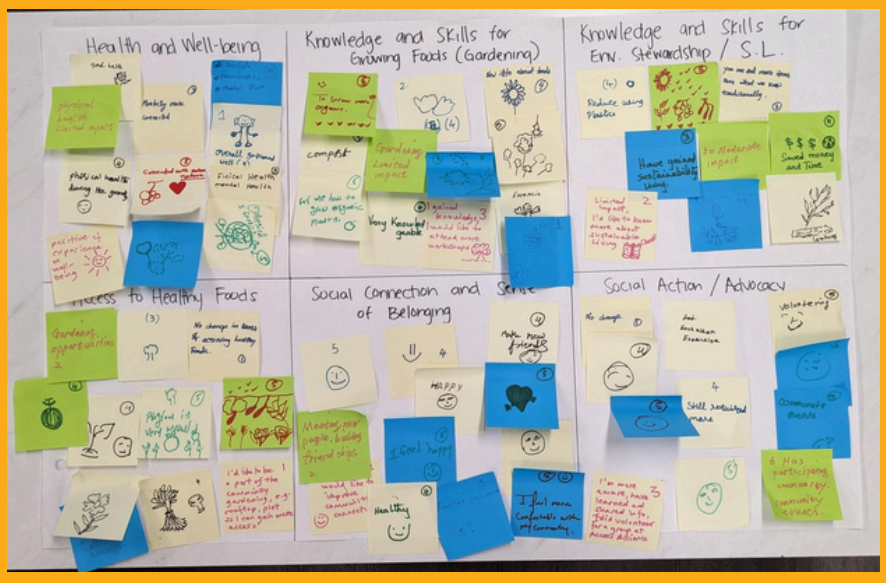


Photo of the arts-based activity done by focus group participants.

> "I can express myself without the fear of being judged."
>
> **- Program Participant (Survey)**

> "Social [life] has improved as I [have] improved language."
>
> **- Program Participant (Survey)**

Perceived Impacts

The program has had a positive impact on clients' health, well-being, and sense of belonging. These benefits are extending beyond the individual as participants share their knowledge and skills gained through the program with family members. Participants have also reported that the program inspired entrepreneurial business ideas related to mental health and environmentally friendly services and products. In addition, clients are becoming more engaged in their communities, with a growing interest in advocacy and community involvement noted.

Health and Well-being

71.4%
(n=10)
"strongly agree" or "agree" their overall health and wellbeing has improved

Improvements in mental health were most commonly described among survey respondents (50.0%, n=7). Clients commented about having increased self-confidence, reduced low mood and a sense of joy from watching their plants and gardens grow. Many also noted improved physical health as they are more physically active when gardening and have learned healthier and more sustainable habits. See **Appendix F** for a full description of survey responses.



> "The program had a positive impact on my overall well-being. I learned healthier and more sustainable habits, felt more connected to my community, and became more confident in making environmentally friendly choices in my daily life."
>
> – **Program Participant (Survey)**

Sense of Belonging and Community

71.4% **(n=10)**
"strongly agree" or "agree" their sense of belonging has improved

78.6% **(n=11)**
made at least 1 new positive relationship through the program

Clients indicated that the program has improved their social well-being and helped them build community through new friendships and networks/connections. Clients described feeling a greater sense of belonging as the program connected them to the community and supported their social skills. For example, it helped them improve their English language skills, which resulted in increasing their overall confidence and sense of belonging. See **Appendix F and G** for a full description of survey and focus group responses.

Household Expenses

As the program's goals include helping clients build skills and self-capacity, one of the reported outcomes was **reduced expenses** and **increased access to cost-saving resources**. Focus group participants particularly noted the cost savings that arise from household/community gardening. One participant noted the time and money saved from having to make fewer trips to the grocery store as their food-growing harvest was sufficient for their needs.



When asked about the ways in which the program helped reduce expenses, survey respondents indicated (42.9%, n=3 to 71.4%, n=5):

- Reduced grocery costs by growing their own food
- Reduced gardening costs through access to seeds and tools
- Reduced costs through the use of reusable household materials
- Reduced costs through access to free community activities and events

> "If I grow some spinach [in] my garden, it's fresh. And again, save money, save time. And also next year, again, keep the seeds... So I can save [on] everything."
>
> **– Program Participant (Focus Group)**

Advocacy

Survey respondents indicated through this program an increase in their knowledge or understanding of advocacy for:

- Food security (64.3%, n=9)
- Food justice (78.6%, n=11)
- Environmental sustainability and stewardship (85.7%, n=12)
- Land access (64.3%, n=9)

One strength staff have observed in the Sustainable Living/Green Access program was that clients are well invested in their community and in protecting the environment.

85.7%
(n=12)

are interested in supporting environmental advocacy efforts with Access Alliance

The types of advocacy activities that clients would like to engage in include participating in research/surveys/focus groups, sharing information with others, volunteering at events, attending community meetings or events, and joining an advisory committee or working group. Clients already take part in increasing awareness by engaging family and other community members through knowledge sharing. See **Appendix F** for a full description of survey responses.

Organizational Impact

The SL/GA program impacts Access Alliance as an organization through supporting the community dining program with the cultivated foods, and through implementing zero-waste across the organization. It is working to embed zero-waste practices across the organization by implementing it into all programs, while recognizing that each program has different challenges. Zero-waste practices were previously fully integrated into the youth team's activities which resulted in the use of reusable cups, plates, and other materials. However, the sustainability of these practices has varied across programs, highlighting that individual program staff may not have the authority, resources, or capacity to implement systemic changes on their own.

- For example, community dining has returned to disposable materials in response to practical challenges related to the availability of volunteers to wash and sanitize reusable items. These experiences suggest that achieving organization-wide zero waste requires **leadership-level commitment, clear organizational expectations, and systems that enable staff** to implement them.

Overall, the program is contributing to a broader organizational shift toward zero-waste, but its full impact will depend on embedding zero-waste principles into organizational policies. As such, the zero-waste implementation efforts have been reduced.



Garden Stewards

Garden Stewards generally expressed positive experiences volunteering at the community garden. A separate survey was sent to 44 Garden Steward volunteers, of which 7 completed it. A majority of survey respondents identified as South Asian, female, aged 25-44, with Canadian citizenship. 57.1% (n=4) indicated hearing about the Garden Steward volunteer program through a third-party organization (such as VolunteerToronto), showing that third-party organizations play a role in raising awareness of the program. Survey respondents also indicated their interest in gardening as their reason for volunteering as a Garden Steward. This highlights the importance of emphasizing gardening opportunities in future recruitment efforts to attract volunteers with similar interests. See **Appendix G** for the full survey results.

> The program was welcoming and inclusive, and the staff and coordinators were friendly and supportive ... Clear instructions, guidance, and the tools provided also helped me feel confident and able to participate.
> **– Garden Steward Volunteer (Survey)**

Access/Participation

- 71.4% (n=5) of survey respondents volunteered for less than 6 months, while 57.1% (n=4) were still volunteering as Garden Stewards at the time of survey completion. This suggests that volunteer retention may be relatively moderate.

Barriers & Facilitators

- Respondents noted that long work hours and other personal health reasons (42.9%, n=3), along with confusion about who to go to for help (28.6%, n=2) and the time of the services/program (14.3%, n=1) were factors that prevented their volunteering.
- Majority of respondents noted the location of the program and the supportive environment as factors that encouraged their volunteering. Flexible scheduling of shifts, clear instructions/guidance from staff, TTC tokens, and the opportunities for friendships were other noted supportive factors.

Effectiveness

Knowledge & Capacity Building

- 85.7% (n=6) of respondents indicated increased knowledge of gardening, and 100% (N=7) indicated increased confidence in caring for plants. This shows the program is achieving its goal of increasing environmental education and organic food production.
- Garden Stewards generally reported having proper support, training, and guidance, including the necessary materials to carry out their volunteer activities.

Satisfaction

- 71.4% (n=5) of respondents indicated they feel comfortable and welcome in the program, while 28.6% (n=2) do not. Among those who did not feel comfortable and welcome, respondents identified concerns including experiences of disability-related barriers and perceptions of emotional unsafety among staff.
- 100% (n=7) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed to having a positive working relationship with their staff supervisor and with other volunteers. However, one survey respondent identified a need for greater staff support to help build a stronger network of mental and emotional support for volunteers alike.
- Garden Stewards also reported a sense of satisfaction from their volunteer work. 85.7% (n=6) felt that their volunteer contributions made a positive difference in the community, and 71.4% (n=5) reported that their volunteer work was acknowledged and appreciated. Additionally, 100% (n=7) of respondents noted that they would recommend the program to a family/friend, showing that the program provides a good and meaningful experience for the volunteers.
- Overall, the program was positively rated with 100% (n=7) of respondents rating it as either 'Good', 'Very Good', or 'Excellent'. However, one respondent reported feeling discriminated against based on their race and disability, highlighting an important area for continued attention and improvement.

Suggestions for Improvement:

- Improve volunteer hours tracking website and make it more user-friendly.
- More support for staff to help create a better network of mental and emotional support for volunteers.
- To see the remaining suggestions, see **Appendix G**, question 7.



Impact

- Survey respondents indicated improved mental health with reduced stress and improved moods; improved social well-being, as they feel more connected to the community and improved their social skills; and improved physical health as they became more physically active while working.
- Majority of respondents noted gaining new positive relationships through volunteering in the program.

> Seeing the gardens grow because of our efforts gave me a sense of accomplishment and motivated me to continue caring for the environment.
>
> – **Garden Steward Volunteer (Survey)**

Recommendations

1) Maintain and Sustain Practices that are Impactful for Clients

The evaluation findings suggest that the Sustainable Living/Green Access program is having a positive impact on clients. Clients highly appreciate the welcoming environment, opportunities to engage with others, and the practical and informative workshops on gardening, sustainable living, food security, and environmental advocacy.

These components should be maintained and sustained so that a bigger impact can be made among more individuals. The program should continue using client feedback and monitoring and evaluation processes to identify areas for improvement and adapt activities to the community's needs.

Maintaining these practices will allow for positive client experiences and greater program effectiveness.

2) Improve Communication of Program Sessions

Evaluation findings suggest that there are opportunities to improve clients' awareness of available sessions and reduce barriers to participation. Clients identify they do not always have information about upcoming workshops or sessions and what they entail.

Specific suggestions include providing clearer and more detailed descriptions of upcoming sessions where information about the topic or activity, intended audience, date, and time is mentioned. Email reminders could be used to help clients plan their participation, along with other communication channels where appropriate.

These changes may contribute to increased awareness, participation, and engagement in program activities. More timely and accessible communication can help clients better understand the opportunities available to them and use them to their advantage.

3) Address Experiences of Exclusion

Although the overall client experience was positive, the evaluation identified feedback from both the program participants and Garden Steward survey responses reporting experiences of feelings of exclusion based on race and disability. While these experiences may represent a small proportion of respondents, they highlight the importance of ensuring all clients and volunteers feel welcomed, respected, and safe regardless of their background, identity, or disability-related needs.

Considering Access Alliance is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment, it is recommended to identify any opportunities to strengthen inclusive practices and prevent similar experiences in the future. Staff and volunteers could review and receive further training on topics such as cultural humility, inclusion, and responding to discrimination. The program could also ensure that clients and volunteers have clear, accessible ways to raise concerns and provide feedback about their experiences, with appropriate follow-up when concerns are identified.

Strengthening these practices can prevent future occurrences and can contribute to a safer, more inclusive environment.

4) Establish Clear Registration Guidelines and Improve Data Entry Practices

The evaluation identified an opportunity to strengthen data entry and data quality practices. While the reduction in registered client data is explained by fewer registered programs due to a lack of continued funding, accurate data about program participation and client demographics can be beneficial for program evaluation, planning and funding purposes, among others. Clear and consistent approaches to determining which sessions and events are to be registered or non-registered will support a clearer understanding of program participation.

As such, it is recommended to develop a guideline or framework to identify which types of sessions or events require registration. Factors such as program goals, expected attendance, capacity, and administrative workload should be considered within the guideline. In addition, standardizing data entry procedures for recording attendance and participant information would help improve consistency and data quality across programs.

Collecting consistent information through registered sessions can help the program better monitor participation trends and make evidence-informed decisions about future programming. At the same time, maintaining drop-in options where appropriate can make services more accessible and flexible for clients and reduce administrative work for staff. Together, these practices can support better-quality, and more reliable data.

5) Secure Stable Funding to Invest in Program Sustainability and Growth

Evaluation findings indicate that funding instability presents a barrier to the program's sustainability and growth. Inconsistent funding has made it difficult to plan future activities, maintain sufficient staff capacity, and provide additional supports to clients, such as TTC passes. At the same time, staff have demonstrated initiative in seeking alternative funding opportunities and developing partnerships to strengthen program delivery.

It is recommended to continue pursuing longer-term and more stable funding opportunities while continuing to strengthen partnerships with external organizations, community agencies, and potential funders. Additional resources could be directed toward increasing staffing, expanding client supports, strengthening resources at the current site, and exploring opportunities to extend programming to other sites.

With additional resources, the program could serve more clients, offer a broader range of supports and activities, and reduce barriers to participation. It could also create more opportunities for advocacy and community engagement, strengthening the program's longer-term impact.

Conclusion

The Sustainable Living/Green Access Program at Access Alliance is doing impactful work that is benefiting clients and community members. The findings of this evaluation demonstrate that the program has been generally effective in meeting its objectives. Across all five evaluation domains, the evidence consistently shows that the program is reaching its intended population, building trust, and making a real impact on the lives of participants, including increasing their knowledge, confidence, and community connection. At the same time, the demand for this program continues to grow, and current staff and funding capacities are not enough to keep up with this trend. Securing stable funding will be a key factor in maintaining service quality and improving clients' access and experience. In addition to addressing concerns of access and equity. Overall, this program is creating positive change by impacting many lives, and one that has the potential to impact many more with the right supports.



Limitations

When interpreting this evaluation's findings, the following limitations should be considered. First, the program survey link was sent to 94 clients of which 21 attempted the survey and 14 completed it, and the Garden Stewards link was sent to 44 clients, of which 9 attempted the survey and 7 completed it. This may limit how representative the findings are for the full client population, as clients who are more engaged or satisfied may have been more likely to complete the survey. Second, client demographic program data for the 2025-2026 FY due to the timing of this evaluation was not available, which limits full comparisons across each year. Third, the food security component of the program was evaluated specifically in relation to the activities delivered through the Sustainable Living/Green Access program (Land Access), rather than a comprehensive measure of participants' overall food security. This is because Access Alliance addresses food security through other more dedicated programs and services. Lastly, although the program has four main objectives (noted in the background section of this report), *Sector and Organizational Collaborations* were not part of the scope of this evaluation. Despite these limitations, the consistency of findings across all data sources supports the conclusions of this evaluation.

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