

Spring Has Sprung Garden plots grow vegetables and trust.

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

Temperatures hover around 40 degrees on Saturday, March 5, but the Central Library auditorium is packed with signs of spring.

Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) is hosting its seventh Annual Garden Kick-Off event which Charles Meng, Executive Director and CEO, explains “is for our families to provide health and nutrition with fruits and vegetables which is essential.” AFAC serves low-income families by providing supplemental groceries, including fresh produce, to about 2,200 families in Arlington each week.

Along the wall of the auditorium volunteers are filling small containers with compost and a basil or collard greens plant for free distribution to attendees at the event. Sophie Rier, wearing her “When All Else Fails Manipulate the Data” T-shirt, says she attends Bishop Ireton High school, and they require community service so she volunteers here. She explains her T-shirt is a joke since she has been taking physics.

Kelley Williams, volunteering beside her, says she is doing this for fun in the community. “No I haven’t grown anything but I’d like to.” She shares her dad’s ongoing battle with deer. “He has a noise machine that lets out a high pitch squeal.”

Jackie Bonilla has chosen a basil plant. She says she wants to learn more about how to grow in her garden. Currently she grows tomatoes, radishes and cucumbers but sometimes has trouble with the tomatoes.

Stephanie Hopkins, the new AFAC Director of Programs, stands at the podium outlining the AFAC Plot Against Hunger program which yields donations from local gardens, farmers’ markets and gleaning at farms across the region. She says since July, 2019 they have received 82,949 pounds of fresh produce. Along the window there is a



Kelley Williams volunteers at Saturday Garden Kick-Off event.



Sophie Rier fills small containers with compost and plants for attendees at AFAC event.



Charles Meng, CEO and executive director of AFAC.



Garden Kick-Off event for all ages

table offering free seeds for individuals, community groups and faith-based organizations to grow for contribution to AFAC during upcoming months.

Hugo Mogollon, Executive Director of FreshFarm Markets, will be the keynote speaker. FarmFresh Markets is the largest farmers’ market organization in the Mid-Atlantic region with 4 markets in Arlington that donate excess produce to AFAC.

A Virginia Cooperative Extension table provides seed packets with zinnia, spinach,

zucchini, radishes, milkweed, larkspur, poppies. Molly Gregory, a Master Gardener, says usually vegetable seeds are the most popular. “But not this year,” Vicki Atkins interjects. “It seems to be a particular kind of flower.” The table also provides information on propagation from seed with the annual Arlington County vegetable gardening calendar. Advice includes planting of onions, collards, peas, radishes and spinach in early March. Cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes and squash should wait until late

April with the average last killing frost in USDA hardiness zone 7b between April 1-10 each year. In addition, another fact sheet gives dates of appearance for seedlings at various soil temperatures.

Meng adds that an upcoming AFAC event at the end of March will be assisting their families to register their information with the U.S. Census. “Our clients are typically one of the hardest to reach. They usually don’t participate and don’t trust the government. They trust us.”



AFAC garden plot at the Central Library.