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**MEMBERS OF COMMUNITY ACCESS UNLIMITED GROW DEEPER COMMUNITY ROOTS
THROUGH JOINT GARDENING PROJECT**

Youth Garden funded by community organizations to create greater community connection

Elizabeth, NJ – June 29, 2012 – "Gardens, scholars say, are the first sign of commitment to a community," according to Anne Raver, longtime gardening writer for the *New York Times*. "When people plant corn they are saying, let's stay here. And by their connection to the land, they are connected to one another."

Furthering its mission of enabling people with disabilities to live more fully within the community, Community Access Unlimited (CAU) this week launched a Youth Garden project at one of its member residences in Roselle intended to help members with developmental disabilities build self-esteem and social skills while interacting with people from the neighborhood and the greater community, according to Joseph Calabrese, an assistant director at CAU who is overseeing the project.

CAU provides support programs and services to people with disabilities and at-risk youth to enable them to live independently in the community. Support comprises housing, vocational and life-skills training, education, advocacy and recreation.

Since adding activities involving nature and science to CAU's recreation and education programs, the agency's behavioral health team has noticed significant positive behavioral changes and improved interaction with others among younger members, a group that has been difficult to involve in activities in the past, according to Calabrese.

"We determined that a community garden project like this would be an ideal way to allow our members, especially our younger members, to join forces with the community," Calabrese said.

The garden entails two 8 feet by 4 feet raised garden beds for vegetables and herbs that sit in the front yard of the Roselle property that is home to two 17-year-old CAU members with developmental disabilities. The placement will encourage interaction and participation in tending the garden by other CAU members as well as youth and adults from the neighborhood, according to Calabrese.

CAU members and staff were joined at the garden's initial planting this past week by representatives of several community outreach groups involved in and helping to fund the project, including the Union County District Rotary; the Rutgers Cooperative Extension Gardening Project; and Groundwork Elizabeth, a community-based organization that promotes environmental, economic and social well-being. Rutgers and Rotary have teamed to create the Growing Lives One Seed At A Time project that will have sites in Union, Middlesex, Somerset, Morris and Hunterdon counties targeting selected groups that can benefit from the project, such as youth, seniors or people with disabilities.

"CAU was selected to be the Rutgers-Rotary pilot program for Union County," said Madeline DiNardo, the county agricultural agent for the Rutgers Cooperative Extension. "We thought it had great potential to reach our target audience, people with disabilities, so they could enjoy the benefits of gardening."

"This is a sustainable program that will help participants and continue to grow," added Jonathan Phillips, executive director of Groundwork Elizabeth. "Our mission is to change places, change lives. Our greater mission is to build sustainable communities."

While more locally focused, the goals of CAU's Youth Garden project in Roselle are the same, according to Calabrese.

"Our short term goals are to provide young people with disabilities the benefits of working with plants and to provide young people and adults from the community the opportunity to interact with people with disabilities in a positive and mutually productive manner," he said.

"In addition, CAU members from all our programs and residences will be able to visit the garden, help tend it and participate in activities such as nutrition education. Finally, the garden will beautify the neighborhood and create a focal point of neighborhood interaction."

Funding for the project also was supplied by Home Depot through the Youth Gardens Grants program of the National Gardening Association and kidsgardening.org.

About CAU

Community Access Unlimited (CAU), celebrating its 33rd anniversary in 2012, supports people with special needs in achieving real lives in the community. CAU provides support and gives a voice to adults and youth who traditionally have had little support and no voice in society. CAU helps people with housing, life skills, employment, money management, socialization and civic activities. CAU also supports opportunities for advocacy through training in assertiveness, decision-making and civil rights. CAU serves more than 4,500 individuals each year. For more information about CAU and its services, contact us by phone at 908.354.3040, online at www.caunj.org or by mail at 80 West Grand Street, Elizabeth, NJ 07202.

Photo – [CAU Garden]



Clenston Brazile, 17, a member of Community Access Unlimited (CAU), is joined by Cara Pavia, CAU marketing/fundraiser coordinator, at the recent launch of the agency's Youth Garden in Roselle, planted to encourage increased community interaction.