



Farm Service Agency Library Hours Give Cleveland Residents Chance to Learn about Opportunities in Agriculture

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By Farm Service Agency, Ohio

Out of an office in suburban Ravenna, Ohio, the Cleveland USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) serves a community that is two counties away. Cleveland's USDA Urban Service Center was announced in fall of 2023 as part of USDA's effort to broaden agriculture opportunities in large cities. It was one of 17 announced at that time.

Since then, Tristam Mizak, the Urban County Executive Director for the Cleveland office, has been operating from an office in neighboring Ravenna, as officials work to secure appropriate space in the heart of Cleveland. But that hasn't stopped Tristam from reaching out to potential urban customers.

"One of the biggest challenges we'll face until our permanent office opens is our separation from the community and our partners," Tristam said. "With our suburban location, our farmers aren't able to simply stop by and talk to us about what they're doing in their gardens and on their farms. While telephone, email, and virtual meetings help us bridge the divide, nothing replaces talking to someone face-to-face."

That is where the Cleveland FSA's bi-weekly Library Office Hours come in. In partnership with the Cleveland Public Library, Tristam and coworker Benjamin Potter set up every first, third, and fifth Thursday of the month at a local branch. This allows Cleveland's farmers a location and time where they know they can speak with FSA representatives in person.

"The office hours also give us an opportunity to reach out to community members who may not be aware of us," Tristam said. "One of the biggest successes we've had is talking to new producers and connecting them with our partners at Central State and Ohio State Extension."

The Cleveland FSA works with multiple library branches, rotating the event through the city. In doing so, they hope to ensure every person can find a location that works for them.

The turnout varies, based on the time of the month, the weather, and the neighborhood, but each time, Tristam said, they have had great discussions.

"Every person we meet has their own unique story. During library hours in West Park, we met with people who were interested in community gardening, a landowner from southern Ohio who wanted to

learn more about conservation programs, and two brothers who were interested in doing a market garden," Tristam said. "At Fulton, we talked with someone about doing a pollinator garden, a man who wanted to start farming but needed a push to take the next step, and a woman who needed advice for growing in her shaded backyard. We average eight or so serious conversations per event."

He said the library office hours have proven so valuable, he intends to continue them even after a location has been found for the Cleveland USDA Urban Service Center. He views the office hours as a way to open doors for further interaction with budding farmers.

Tristam said he tries to be flexible. Follow-up, on-site visits allow him to learn more about each unique farming operation, as well as allow the farmers to highlight the challenges they are facing, such as deer, irrigation needs, or repairs to a high tunnel. But sometimes, a farm visit is simply not feasible, either because of scheduling conflicts or because the farmer is not at a point where they have something they want to show.

"The important thing is that when we meet someone at the library, it isn't the end," Tristam said. "Whether they're a new producer or one that's worked with us before, we emphasize we're willing to meet them where they can meet us."

From community gardens to indoor vertical production, USDA can provide resources to those who want to start or expand a farm or garden. To learn more about what USDA is doing to support urban producers, visit farmers.gov/urban. USDA Urban Service Centers are located in [17 major cities](#). In addition, USDA has 2,300 Service Centers at locations across the United States. To find your nearest location, visit farmers.gov/service-locator.



Cleveland FSA Urban Executive Director Tristam Mizak, right, talks to a library patron about FSA programs available for new producers, as well as the opportunities offered by Ohio State and Central State Extension. Photo by Benjamin Potter, FSA.

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