



## **MORE GREEN, LESS BLUES: DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH TO PILOT EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGY FOR LOWERING RATES OF DEPRESSION BY TRANSFORMING BLIGHTED VACANT LOTS TO GREEN SPACES**

**Volunteers and community leaders gather on World Suicide Prevention Day September 10, 2018 to transform Watts neighborhood empty lot into community garden**

LOS ANGELES, CA, Sept. 10, 2018 -- In recognition of today's World Suicide Prevention Day, volunteers and community leaders gathered to begin work on transforming a blighted vacant lot into a vibrant community garden, all in the name of mental health. The LA County Department of Mental Health (DMH) initiated the transformative pilot project in response to a new peer-reviewed study showing that the mental health of residents in urban neighborhoods can be dramatically improved by simply cleaning up and "greening" blighted vacant lots.

The Journal of the American Medical Association recently published a controlled randomized trial that documented a **41.5% decrease** in feelings of depression and a **62.8% drop** in self-reported "poor mental health" for those living near greened lots, when compared to a control group of similar people and neighborhoods where blighted lots went untouched.

"The results of this study are remarkable and a wakeup call to remind us how important the health of our neighborhood can be to our own sense of wellbeing," says Mimi Martinez McKay, Deputy Director of the LA County Department of Mental Health. "So many factors contribute to mental health problems and we need multiple prevention strategies. This program is so simple, with proven benefits at a relatively low cost."

The planned community garden at 9310 Wilmington Avenue in Watts will feature 26 raised planting beds, a tool shed, gathering area, a collective cooking space and colorful murals throughout. Project support comes from the Mental Health Services Act (Prop. 63), state funds dedicated to mental illness prevention and early intervention.

Partnering with DMH on the project is From Lot to Spot (FLTS), a local non-profit that transforms vacant lots into quality parks and community gardens in underserved communities. FLTS will also be involved in community engagement and programming around the project to ensure the garden's success as a community-driven space.

“We have long seen the negative impact that blighted vacant lots have on the health and mental wellness of communities, and are excited to partner with the Department of Mental Health to address this need and help ensure that everyone can access all of the benefits that urban greenspaces can provide,” said From Lot to Spot Executive Director Viviana Franco. “From Lot to Spot looks forward to engaging local families as they make this Watts garden a space of their own, and doing our part to see that it thrives and becomes a place for residents to find wellness.”

Watts has some of the lowest access to greenspace in LA County. A few blocks northwest of Jordan Downs, the 6,500 square foot lot where the garden will be built had become a neighborhood hub for trash and illegal dumping since the house at the location burned down several years ago.

In addition to significant mental health benefits highlighted by the study, the Watts green space project supports other LA County public health goals. Watts has long been known as a “food desert,” where access to fresh produce is scarce. In addition to growing produce, this project will also provide neighborhood nutritional programs, including healthy eating and active living workshops.

#### About LACDMH

LA County Department of Mental Health is the largest public mental health department in the United States. Consistent with the mission of LA County, the department provides services, including assessments, case management, crisis intervention, medication support, peer support, psychotherapy and other rehabilitative services to the County’s most vulnerable residents.

#### About From Lot to Spot

From Lot to Spot empowers, engages and involves communities in the building of quality parks, greenspaces and community gardens in park-poor neighborhoods. For a decade, FLTS has been creating paths toward more green space through comprehensive community engagement campaigns that have resulted in the development of multiple large-scale parks and community gardens for families in the greater Los Angeles area.

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