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## Dual Launch of Innovative Web Tool and New Coalition Will Create Pathways for Philly Residents, Activists, and Community Gardeners to Organize Around Vacant Land

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PHILADELPHIA—Two new initiatives — the Healthy Foods Green Spaces coalition and a new web mapping and organizing tool called Grounded in Philly — will help Philadelphia residents come together to turn vacant lots into productive community spaces.

On Wednesday, June 26, residents, community gardeners, and market farmers of all ages; advocates for green space; techies; and housing and labor activists will gather to mark the launch of these initiatives at an event hosted by the Federation of Neighborhood Centers' Teens 4 Good Farm at 8<sup>th</sup> and Poplar in Philadelphia. The event is from 4:30 - 7 p.m., with a press conference at 5:30 p.m.

Healthy Foods Green Spaces brings together a growing, city-wide coalition of individuals and organizations that support community-managed green space, gardens, and urban agriculture to build collective action through advocacy, grassroots organizing, and community education. This group grew out of the successful grassroots campaign organized earlier this year by the Garden Justice Legal Initiative, Weavers Way Co-op, the Philadelphia Horticultural Society, Norris Square Neighborhood Project, and many others to stop a zoning amendment that threatened twenty percent of Philadelphia's existent gardens.

Healthy Foods Green Spaces is now moving forward on short and long-term advocacy campaigns. First on the list is the passage of Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sánchez's comprehensive bill to create a land bank for the city, with clear policies that are transparent and equitable. "Healthy Foods Green Spaces wants to see urban agriculture grow exponentially in Philadelphia," says Glenn Bergman of Weavers Way Co-op, a member of the new Healthy Foods Green Spaces coalition. "Dealing with vacant land is one of the most important public health and crime prevention projects this city can take on. We want to see empty lots and blighted areas put into the hands of people so they can develop it and grow their own food."

The second initiative, Grounded in Philly ([www.groundedinphilly.org](http://www.groundedinphilly.org)) is an innovative web-based mapping and organizing tool that provides easy access to data on vacant lots and resources to individuals interested in starting land-based projects. "Folks in Philadelphia know how to use the land in their neighborhoods," says Amy Laura Cahn, Skadden Fellow and director of the Garden Justice Legal Initiative at the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia. "The problem is finding the information needed to make those spaces secure. Grounded in Philly consolidates information about vacant land from multiple sources, connects people to the land around them, and identifies routes to legal access."

Created through a partnership between the Garden Justice Legal Initiative and 596 Acres in Brooklyn, New York, Grounded in Philly allows users to understand the status of a vacant lot in terms of ownership, zoning, and liabilities, among other characteristics. Grounded in Philly is also designed to connect online users so neighbors can work with neighbors on specific parcels. And, for neighborhoods with already established gardens, Grounded in Philly provides resources on how those spaces might be made more permanent.

Paula Z. Segal, director and lead facilitator of 596 Acres, has seen firsthand how this type of organizing can help individuals respond to urban blight. “People and organizations that are the most affected by vacant land in their neighborhoods are the ones situated closest to that land,” says Segal. “Grounded in Philly provides information and pathways to those individuals and is crucial to making space for those communities to create vibrancy in their own neighborhoods. Since our launch of a similar mapping tool in Brooklyn two years ago we have seen local residents come together to manage 14 new vacant land spaces that were once mysteriously hidden behind fences and we have created opportunities for 99 other groups to engage with the project locally.”

Philadelphia is home to more than 40,000 vacant parcels, many of them tax delinquent, unproductive, unsafe, and damaging to neighborhoods. Residents have watched for decades as empty homes on their blocks crumble and neighborhoods suffer extended disinvestment. Healthy Foods Green Spaces and Grounded in Philly provide two unique, proactive responses to the city’s catastrophic vacant land problem.

“We’ve seen the renovation and conversion of neglected, trash-strewn lots galvanize our community and make our neighborhood safer, greener and beautiful,” says Mark Berman of the Manton Street Park & Community Garden. “However, researching which agency owned the lots and learning how to secure green space was overwhelming, confusing, and plagued by miscommunication and misguidance. It is essential to have Healthy Foods Green Spaces and tools like Grounded in Philly to offer advocacy, resources and knowledge to enable communities to preserve and promote the safety and beauty of their neighborhoods.”

Together, Healthy Foods Green Spaces and Grounded in Philly provide comprehensive platforms for people to organize around creating and preserving essential community institutions and reinvest in neighborhoods. All are welcome to attend the launch party and press conference.

**The Garden Justice Legal Initiative** (GJLI) is a project of the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia. GJLI provides pro bono legal support, advocacy, coalition building, and policy research to community gardens and market farms in Philadelphia’s historically disinvested neighborhoods in an effort to increase food access and community self determination. GJLI is funded by the Skadden Fellowship Foundation, the Merck Family Fund, and the Claneil Foundation. Learn more at [www.groundedinphilly.org](http://www.groundedinphilly.org) or @Grounded215.

**The Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia** is a nonprofit law firm that uses high-impact legal strategies to improve the well-being and life prospects of the region’s most vulnerable populations by securing access to six deeply intertwined resources – education, healthcare, employment, housing, clean and healthy neighborhoods, and the right to vote. Learn more at [www.pilcop.org](http://www.pilcop.org) or @PILCOP1969.

**596 Acres** builds online organizing platforms for land access advocates and facilitators and acts locally in Brooklyn, New York as an advocate and a facilitator through their online platform. Learn more at [www.596acres.org](http://www.596acres.org) or @596Acres.

**Teens 4 Good**, a program of the **Federation of Neighborhood Centers**, is a youth-led entrepreneurial farm and nutrition business that transforms vacant lots into urban gardens and farms, improving access to healthy food for communities, creating meaningful jobs for at-risk youth and empowering youth to become healthy responsible stewards and leaders who give back to their communities. Learn more at [teens4good.orbius.com](http://teens4good.orbius.com) or @t4gphilly.

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