



## **PHS Urban Greening Program Improves Mental Health of Residents**

*Findings of Penn study have implications for cities across the United States*

**PHILADELPHIA (July 2018)** – The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society’s effort to green vacant land also significantly reduces feelings of depression and improves overall mental health of surrounding residents, researchers from the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania have announced.

The findings published in [JAMA Network](#) (Journal of the American Medical Association) have implications for cities across the U.S., where 15 percent of land is deemed “vacant” and often blighted or filled with trash and overgrown vegetation.

The [PHS LandCare](#) program, operated citywide since 2004, is a strategic collaboration of PHS and the City of Philadelphia. The program was started by PHS with support from the city as a remedy to the more than 40,000 vacant lots that occupy communities. PHS devised a system whereby cleaning, planting trees and grass, and maintaining the sites allowed for a more strategic approach that was also cost-effective. Today, PHS maintains more than 12,000 parcels, 30 percent of the vacant land in Philadelphia. This work is supported by the City of Philadelphia’s Division of Housing and Community Development. The LandCare program engages professional and community contracting businesses, trains residents and returning citizens, and creates green jobs in an innovative collaboration that helps revitalize neighborhoods in many ways.

The new Penn study shows that transforming blighted neighborhood environments into green space can improve the trajectory of the residents’ mental health, the authors said. Adding green space to neighborhoods should be considered alongside individual treatments to address mental health problems in low-resource communities. Additionally, greening is an affordable approach, costing about \$1,600 per vacant lot and \$180 per year to maintain. For these reasons, the authors said, vacant lot greening may be an extremely attractive intervention for policymakers seeking to



address urban blight and promote health. The study was supported by the National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“We are very grateful to the researchers at the Perelman School of Medicine and their colleagues for spotlighting the impact of PHS’s LandCare efforts,” said PHS President Matt Rader. “Previous Penn studies have also confirmed the far-reaching effects of greening vacant land: reducing violent crime, reducing stress, and raising property values. LandCare is one illustration of PHS’s comprehensive approach to strengthening communities through gardening and greening, which leads to job creation, better access to nutritious food, and a healthier environment.”

In the recent Penn study, researchers measured the mental health of residents before and after nearby vacant lots had been converted into green spaces, as well as residents living near untreated lots and those that just received trash clean-up. They found that people living within a quarter-mile of greened lots had a 41.5 percent decrease in feelings of depression compared to those who lived near lots that had not been cleaned. Those living near green lots also experienced a nearly 63 percent decrease in self-reported poor mental health compared to those living near lots that received no intervention.

“Dilapidated and vacant spaces are factors that put residents at an increased risk of depression and stress, and may explain why socioeconomic disparities in mental illness persist,” said the study’s lead author, Dr. Eugenia C. South, an assistant professor of emergency medicine and a member of the Center for Emergency Care and Policy Research at Penn. “What these new data show us is that making structural changes, like greening lots, has a positive impact on the health of those living in these neighborhoods. And that it can be achieved in a cost-effective and scalable way – not only in Philadelphia but in other cities with the same harmful environmental surroundings.”



## **ABOUT PHS**

The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society is a not-for-profit organization, founded in 1827, whose programs connect people to horticulture and collaboratively creates beautiful, healthy and sustainable communities. PHS brings together people from diverse backgrounds to engage in horticultural projects that advance social equity, environmental sustainability, and urban livability. PHS is best known for its Philadelphia Flower Show, the largest flower show in the country, large-scale tree planting and street tree maintenance programs, LandCare and Roots to Reentry initiatives, community greening and gardening, public beautification such as Logan Square, the gardens at the Rodin, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and creative placemaking such as the PHS Pop Up Gardens and Farm for the City underway now on the Thomas Paine Plaza. PHS is supported by individual members and supporters, foundations, partners and government grants. For information or to support PHS, visit [PHSONline.org](http://PHSONline.org).

## **ABOUT PENN MEDICINE AND THE PERELMAN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE**

Penn Medicine is one of the world's leading academic medical centers, dedicated to the related missions of medical education, biomedical research, and excellence in patient care. Penn Medicine consists of the Raymond and Ruth Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania (founded in 1765 as the nation's first medical school) and the University of Pennsylvania Health System, which together form a \$7.8 billion enterprise. The Perelman School of Medicine has been ranked among the top medical schools in the United States for more than 20 years, according to *U.S. News & World Report's* survey of research-oriented medical schools.