



2020 ShiftMeals GrowTeam Report

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Why we started GrowTeams

Our original goal:

The goal of ShiftMeals has been to make nourishing food available to everyone in our state: from the newly food insecure to Vermont's most vulnerable populations. Delivering meals is one way to address food insecurity, another is to empower communities to feed themselves and their neighbors through GrowTeams. This initiative invites Vermonters onto local farms and gardens across the state to grow their own food. By providing access to land and education, ShiftMeals hopes to foster a more sustainable local food system and empower others to take the same actions in their own communities.

Our goal is to develop access to land and gardens for Vermonters who are experiencing unemployment and food insecurity. Through community partnerships, we are supporting food access gardens and farms across Vermont in order to

- provide volunteers with education and access to land needed to grow their own food for themselves and their neighbors
- support farms facing labor shortages.
- help build stronger, and more resilient community food systems.

We laid out the following expectations for partner sites and participants:

The role of ShiftMeals

Site Partners:

- Find and recruit volunteers for the season.
- Support garden infrastructure through partnerships and community donations.
- Help to organize teams and plan garden space if needed.
- Assist in securing farm mentors.
- Standard Operating Procedures for hosting volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Provide educational opportunities to volunteers.
- Lead community outreach and help identify resources.
- Recruitment of extra hands for big work days (ex: Large plant out, slaughter day, building a greenhouse, etc)
- Nurture a community of hundreds of people growing food across Vermont!

What GrowTeam Members receive:

- Direct access to land/fresh produce for the season
- Educational workshops and resources
- A chance to build community around local agriculture

GrowTeam sites by the numbers

VCGN- Co-op Victory Garden

- More than 1000 lbs of produce harvested on 1,200 sq ft.
- 3 educational workshops for GrowTeam members
- End of season redesign of garden for 2000 sq ft of plantable space for next season
- 6 Paid GrowTeam members, 10 hrs, 4 weeks- 240 labor hrs
- 15 volunteer GrowTeam ~2 hrs per week - 30 hrs a week maintenance
- Organization provided coordinator staffing

VYCC- The Farm at VYCC

- Harvested 31,338 lbs of produce from 6/14-8/21
- Distributed 2,784 Health Care Shares
- Raised and Processed 500 chickens
- Transplanted 4.4 miles long worth of crops.
- VYCC hired 4 staff for their fall crew that were original GrowTeam members
- 8 paid GrowTeam members, 4 weeks, 30 hrs - 960 labor hrs
- 12 volunteer GrowTeam ~8hrs per week - 96 hrs weekly
- Organization provided coordinator staffing

Intervale Center- People's Farm

- Staffed farm team for 1 acre plot (aside from 2 managerial positions) that supplemented 200 person gleaned CSA share.
- Harvested over 10,000 lbs of produce
- 6 Paid GrowTeam, 3 weeks, 16 hrs - 288 labor hours
- 8 Volunteer GrowTeam members ~ 8hrs per week -64 hrs weekly
- Organization provided coordinator staffing

Shire Beef- Broad Acres Farm

- Broke ground and created a permanent bed system on a new 900 sq ft community garden space.
- Harvested and donated over 2500 lbs of produce
- 7 paid GrowTeam members, 2 weeks, 40 hrs- 560 labor hrs
- 5 Volunteer GrowTeam members volunteering varying times
- ShiftMeals provided coordinator staffing 10 hrs/week

VLT- Bluffside Farm

- Created ¼ acre community garden on land that would have gone unutilised this growing season

- 2 educational workshops for GrowTeam members
- Harvested approx 500lbs of produce
- 10 volunteer GrowTeam members ~2 hrs per week -20 hrs weekly
- Organization provided coordinator staffing

CGO- NorthStar Collective

- Broke ground and created a permanent bed system on a .5 acre farm.
- Creation of North Star Collective: mission-driven collective that addresses racial justice and food sovereignty in Vermont
- Distributed weekly produce through Migrant Justice/local food shelf/farmstand
- 3 educational workshops for GrowTeam members
- 10 Paid GrowTeam members, 4 weeks, 35 hrs - 1400 labor hrs
- 20 Volunteer GrowTeam members volunteering varying times
- ShiftMeals provided coordinator staffing 10hrs/week

Distribution

Plant Starts

All of our sites (with the exception of VYCC) were heavily reliant on donated plant starts and seeds to fill their farms and gardens

Shiftmeals sought out and distributed starts across the state from the following partners:

- The Farm at VYCC, Richmond VT
- Barber Farm, Jericho VT
- Jericho Settlers Farm, Jericho VT
- Red Wagon Plants, Hinesburg VT
- High Mowing Seeds, Wolcott VT
- UVM Catamount Farm, South Burlington VT
- UVM Greenhouse Facilities, Burlington VT
- Cate Farm, Plainfield VT
- HoneyField Farm, Norwich VT
- Valentine Farm, Montpelier VT
- Philo Ridge Farm, Charlotte VT
- Burnt Rock Farm, Huntington VT
- Intervale Center Farm, Burlington VT
- Little Wood Farm, Plainfield VT
- Provender Farm, Cabot VT
- Half Pint Farm, Burlington VT
- Blue Heron Farm, Grand Isle VT

Produce

Not only did the food grown by the hands of these 6 GrowTeams feed themselves but were distributed back to Vermont communities through the following **community connections**:

- Health Care Share
- Fair Share CSA
- Feeding Chittenden
- Plants for the People
- NECKA Food Shelf
- United Church of Newport Food Shelf
- Migrant Justice
- North Star Collective Farmstand
- Capstone
- WISE
- VYCC Farmstand
- ShiftMeals
- Willing Hands
- Abenaki Land Link Project
- Food Not Bombs
- Everyone Eats

GrowTeam manager as farm hub

One of the unique abilities that resulted from being in contact with so many farms and gardens came the ability for the GrowTeam Manager to act as a source of connection between gardens and enable resource sharing, reduce produce waste, and supplement CSAs, and community programs.

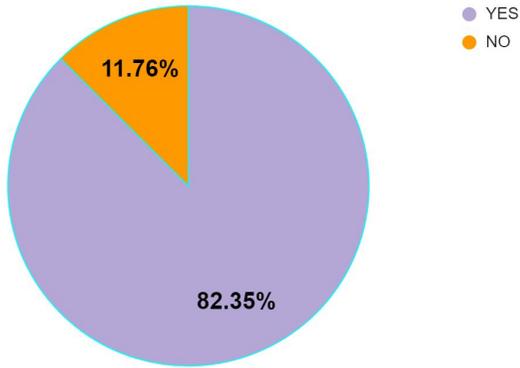
Some examples:

- VYCC harvested and distributed over 1000 heads of lettuce that would have gone to waste at People's Farm
- VYCC was able to distribute 1000 lbs of corn and 100 lbs of peppers that were gleaned by the Intervale Center
- Approx 500 lbs of extra produce from UVM's Catamount Farm went to ShiftMeals meals, or into FairShare CSA
- Bluffside Farm used fencing material/tools from VYCC and labor from both VYCC and CGO GrowTeams to break ground this season
- VCGN used produce from UVM Catamount Farm and VYCC for educational workshops

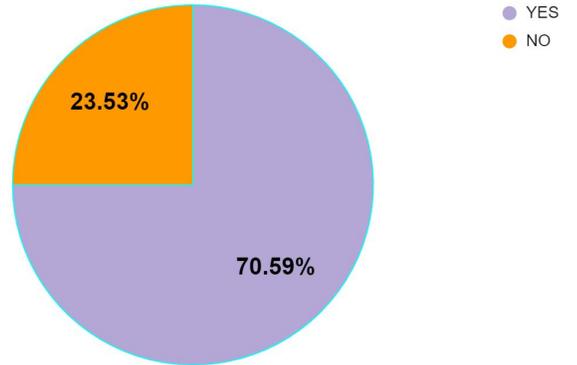
GrowTeam Member Feedback

Survey Results

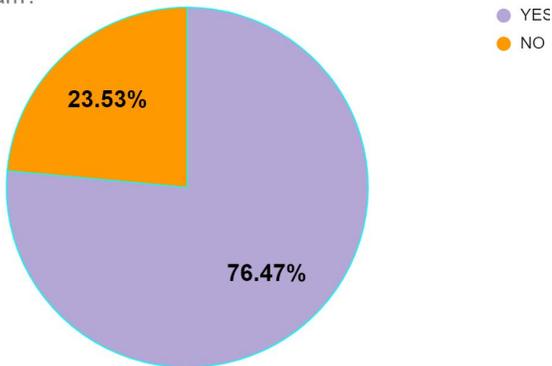
Do you feel more empowered to feed yourself?



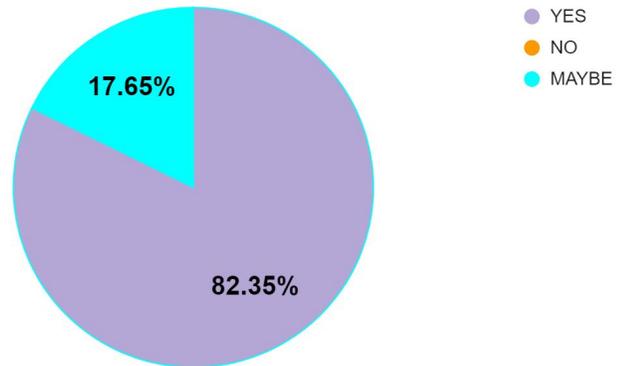
Have you been eating differently since joining a GrowTeam?



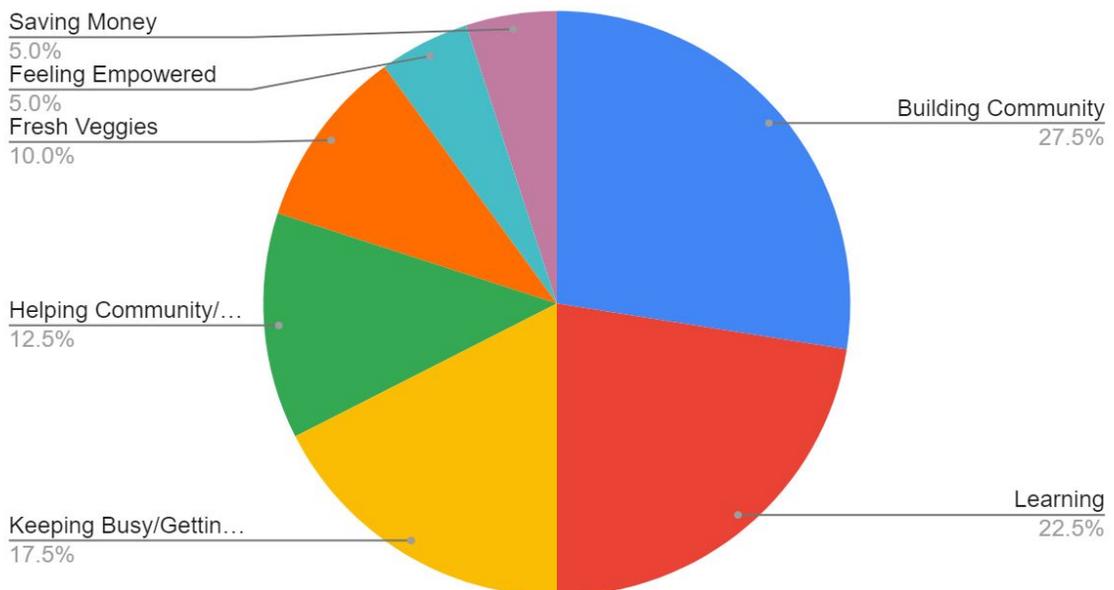
Have you been purchasing food differently since joining a GrowTeam?



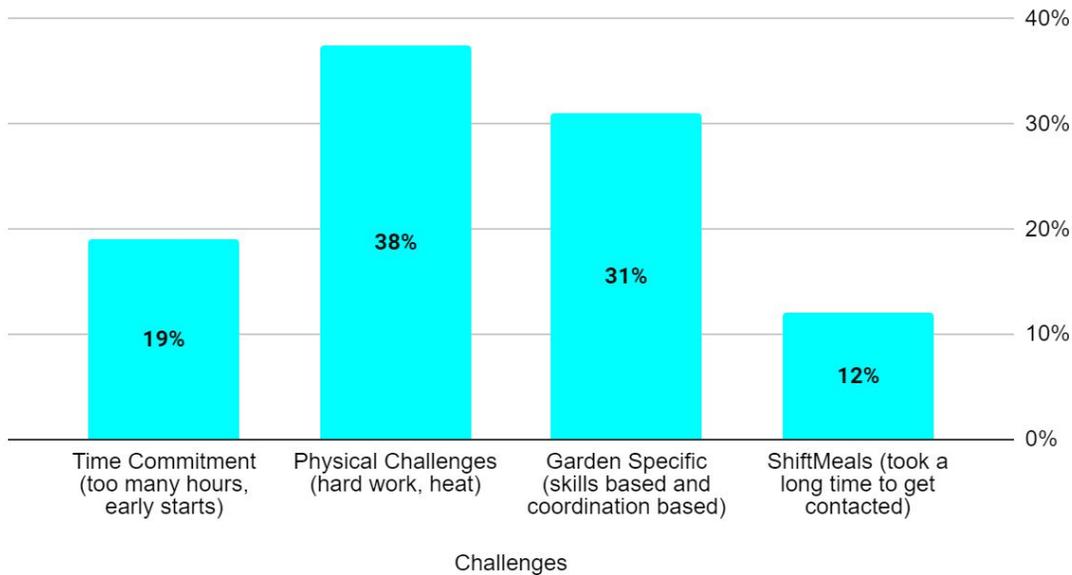
Would you join a GrowTeam again next year?



Top Benefits of Participating in GrowTeams



Hardest Part of GrowTeams



“I want to grow my own food forever, and teach others. I feel 100% more comfortable growing food. I eat cleaner and pay more attention to what I am eating.”

-Sharon Newman, VCGN GrowTeam member

“It’s super grounding to learn about where your food comes from, in a humbling way. We don’t need fancy \$10 tomatoes, you can just pick this weed in the forest and it will taste delicious...after being involved in the project from the beginning I felt personally responsible for the success of the garden, and wanted to keep showing up. I had to push myself to show up some mornings but it was so worth it, I feel more confident in growing and know now that I can have a garden, which is something I’ve always wanted but never felt like I could do before!”

-Sarah Pell, People’s Farm GrowTeam member

It is hard to quantify the experience of GrowTeam members participating in this program. All of the GrowTeam members came in with different levels of experience, reasons for wanting to grow food and goals for what they hoped to get out of the experience- so I offer the following feedback from end of season interviews with GrowTeam members and conversations throughout the season.

The positive experiences of GrowTeam members were based on the community they developed, the knowledge they gained, and the connection to the earth that they developed. The most empowering experiences came from sites with garden coordinators that were communicative and knowledgeable, provided clear task lists, had flexible scheduling, provided the most community and allowed folks to give back to their friends and neighbors.

Community and Land Connection

Sharon, a GrowTeam member and now part of the fall farm crew at VYCC reflected “Growing up in DC my friends and I had no connection to growing food- so as a first time farmer seeing the process was really touching and really special to me. I cried when I harvested my first head of lettuce- and it’s sad to think about my friends still in DC that might never have that experience.”

That introduction to land and growing food I see as the most important impact this program offers. Once folks have access and connecting to land and growing food- it is a natural process and connection they want to keep being involved with.

For Susan, a GrowTeam member in Vershire it was about sharing the garden and bounty with friends. “It was so awesome to bring food back to my community, my friends that are essential workers and be able to give and share without a financial barrier. I brought my friends to the garden with me to pick cherry tomatoes and green beans. I stopped at Berlin pond on my way home one day and met a woman - my car was full of produce and I asked if she wanted some tomatoes and peppers, she was so grateful - I got to deepen my community, make connections and share about the program and learn about each other's lives and family. I loved sharing the spirit of ShiftMeals.”

Education

Kendall Ross, a GrowTeam member at the People’s Farm looks back on the workshops and garden gatherings as some of her favorite moments from the season. “Especially during the pandemic, being able to gather in beautiful outdoor spaces and learn new skills, was so fun.”

During the season, at VCGN and Bluffside farm, there were a total of 5 educational workshops along with our webinar series, A Force To Be Reckoned With: Womxn in Vermont’s Food System. Topics of the workshops included making sauerkraut, pickles, hot sauce, fire cider, aronia syrup, herbal salve, medicine making, and seed saving.

Other topics that GrowTeam members have expressed interest in learning about are:

- Preserving Food/Cooking
- Herbalism/Plant Medicine
- Collective Community Livestock Production
- History of Food/Ag in Vermont
- Community Programming
- Different Growing Systems/ Regenerative Practices
- Farm Management

All of the educational opportunities this season were organized at the interest and capacity of site coordinators and I think an important component of feeling compensated for volunteering time and creating community. Educational opportunities should be a priority for future GrowTeams.

Tough Parts of the Experience

Most of the negative experiences that GrowTeam members had were due to the physical nature of farming- the heat, long hours, early mornings, etc and were to be expected. An issue that appeared at our GrowTeam site in Vershire was the inability to have a garden mentor dedicated and invested to the community garden. It is the garden coordinators role to inspire volunteers, answer questions, set tasks, and coordinate garden time. The amount of volunteers in this garden was small due to ShiftMeals volunteer reach being largely based in Chittenden County and Broad Acres not having a ton of capacity for community outreach. The inconsistency of the coordinator position in Vershire, combined with the small number of volunteers led to some frustration and confusion in GrowTeam members. The physical distance from me as GrowTeam manager to this garden limited my ability to support with this role, and is something to consider in the future.

Paid GrowTeam vs. Volunteer GrowTeam members

Many of our GrowTeam members came on during the phase of the season in which they were paid employees of the Skinny Pancake and then transitioned into participating in a volunteer capacity- with a shorter weekly time commitment in exchange for produce.

There was a clear difference in the experience from paid GrowTeams to volunteer GrowTeams. For many, It is easier to be held accountable, show up consistently and on time, and continue to do hard work when they are getting paid and the time commitment is short (2 weeks to 1 month depending on GrowTeam site)

For the rest of season, July-September GrowTeam members committed to a longer term agreement without the traditional financial agreement of employment. This was difficult for some folks to hold themselves to, especially as school restarted in the fall, COVID life began to feel more "normal" and folks went back to work.

Aspects of GrowTeams that kept people accountable besides money were starting a project from the beginning- and wanting to see it through, agency and flexibility in the garden, and feeling like their community relied on them.

GrowTeam Site Feedback

“The People’s Farm at the Intervale Center would not have been possible without our GrowTeam, our GrowTeam was able to prep and plant 3 different fields for Fair Share CSA and Abenaki Heritage Garden. Without the GrowTeam we would not have been able to grow nearly as much food- and thus not donate it back into the charitable food system. It was a great experience to work with the GrowTeam and learn more about members of the community who are interested in Growing Food and working hard and working together- for others.”

-Lauren Weston, Assistant Farm Manager, People’s Farm.

One of the most dynamic aspects of the GrowTeam project was how different all of our garden and farm partner sites were, and with this came support created specifically for each site. Some sites were more heavily reliant on both physical resources and organizational support from the ShiftMeals team. All site coordinators felt that the expectations laid out at the beginning of the season by ShiftMeals were met.

Besides VYCC, it is safe to say that none of these sites would have existed this season without ShiftMeals- and specifically the paid GrowTeam phase, in which many of these gardens were created, and planted out due to the influx of labor, money, and plants we were able to provide.

Carolina, garden coordinator with VCGN reflected on the season “It’s been so exciting to have collective gardening be in the forefront of conversations in different spheres coming together. There are so many directions it could go - the scale of vcn is garden - education, community, and production are equally important...There’s been a lot of space for that with this ShiftMeals group- we have had to trust people more and we have learned to be able to trust in our team, things continued to get in weeks without mentors and for the most part the same people continued throughout the whole season because this garden existed for them.”

Tracy, of the Vermont Land Trust, was grateful for the spark of energy that ShiftMeals provided and the framework to think differently about how Bluffside Farm can serve the community. Their mission is to support what works for the NEK community, and allow for community flavor to determine the use of the space. There is now a collection of people that feel connected to the land at Bluffside, with more folks from the area being on the farm this season and is inspired to think about using local efforts to steward and drive ideas.

All sites have expressed interest in partnering with ShiftMeals again in the future and also have the capability to exist and thrive on their own.

ShiftMeals Reflection

As the GrowTeam Manager it has been such a unique opportunity to see and work so closely with different sites, using different growing practices, operating at different scales, and working towards different goals. To be able to individually cater to each site, create links, provide custom resources, and derive successes from a concept that was completely dynamic and innovative allowed me to think about Vermont's food system in a completely new way. The creation of this position was vital to the success of this project and I believe could exist on a larger scale within the community of farms and gardens in Vermont. It was also quite challenging to support sites that were farther away, and to be able to equally distribute support.

Introducing the concept of the collective community gardens which on so many levels was custom to each community was its own challenge. The vision of collective farming is so dependent on those that are participating, and on scale that it is difficult to provide a clear outline of a space beforehand. It is important in the future to think about what model will truly support the needs of each community.

The web platform (website and social media) that was developed is a beautiful, easy to use, and engaging brand that could continue to be developed and used as a statewide platform to connect folks with agricultural related volunteer opportunities.

ShiftMeals GrowTeams were hugely successful in acquiring resources and inspiration for new community gardens as well as getting more people than ever before involved in growing their own food. Throughout the season ShiftMeals GrowTeams farms and gardens had over 150 hands in the earth, that would not have been there otherwise.

Scale

When thinking about the scale of our smallest site (VCGN- 1200sq ft) and our largest site (VYCC- 10 acres) I see vastly different opportunities and outcomes for GrowTeam participants. I think the small scale of the communal garden plot allowed for deep earth connection, relationship building, agency and confidence to grow at a home scale, and a manageable time commitment. The large scale of VYCC allowed perspective on what it means to grow food organically at a production level - where efficiency and yield are a larger priority, to experience working on a farm crew team, and to have a much larger impact on food insecurity in Vermont.

GrowTeam Commitment

The time commitment required at certain sites was too big for a volunteer commitment. Full days or even two half days would not be manageable in a pre-covid existence when most folks were working full time jobs. It is impossible to know the longer term impacts that this pandemic will have on employment in Vermont- but I believe the collective model- where folks only have to commit 2-4 hours of work a week on a garden or farm will be a longer lasting model.

What Models Worked?

Because of the dynamic nature of this project we were able to work with each garden so closely to provide specific support, and create slightly different programs suited to each site. In this sense- none of the models didn't work. In each case we were able to provide land access and education to those that were interested in learning how to grow food for themselves.

The smaller scale and more collaborative garden spaces, specifically the model of collaborative gardening led by Carolina Lucak of VCGN, best met our original goals because:

- This scale provided the most out of the experience for GrowTeam members
- The knowledge they gained was more transferable to a home scale
- The time commitments for volunteers and coordinators were not overwhelming
- More workshops and community building opportunities
- Needed the least amount of weekly maintenance, while still providing more than enough food for everyone involved
- Did not place an undue burden on the charitable food system

Going forward

After reflecting on the season with the ShiftMeals team, GrowTeam members, and site coordinators the following questions guide my thoughts about what GrowTeams look like in the future:

- How can we share resources and learn from each other's models, mistakes, and successes?
- How do we make collectivism and mutual aid more normalized?
- How do we best support community food needs?
- What are the infrastructure needs?
- How is the demand for local food changing?

Visions for 2021 ShiftMeals GrowTeams

What could GrowTeams look like?

- Restaurant Specific Gardens - Skinny Pancake could model this for other restaurants next season, with the idea being based on the VCGN collaborative garden at Tommy Thompson. Each restaurant could create a ¼ to ½ acre- garden with one staff member to manage the space (10 hours a week) SP staff can participate as wanted- food goes to employees and in restaurant specials. This model allows the opportunity to highlight produce specifically grown for staple menu items or allows the exploration to try to grow locally special menu items that at the moment cannot be sourced locally. Produce from this garden not harvested by staff could be preserved in the commissary kitchen and be used in products all winter.

- Online Platform - This online platform could perform two functions, as a mutual aid network (similar to VT veg and berry growers) and as a volunteer database. ShiftMeals social media brand could continue to highlight awesome community projects and provide resources statewide.
- Grassroots Gardens Grants - These grants would serve the role that the initial partnership with ShiftMeals filled for site partners at the beginning of this season. Sites apply grant (\$2000) for startup funds for infrastructure and labor as well as have access to plant start/seed donations and ShiftMeals network- ShiftMeals becomes more hands off with sites as season progresses, except for working on educational opportunities with different sites
- Continuing with any/all of existing site partners - ShiftMeals could work collaboratively with each existing partner from this season to create individual support programs to ensure success of these projects in their second years.