Food is Medicine:
Integrating Food Assistance into Safety-Net Health Care
Makeover Montgomery
Thursday May 10, 2018
Food is Medicine

The *Food Is Medicine* project is a part of the Transforming Communities Initiative (TCI), focused on making policy, system, and environment change to improve health.

The *Food is Medicine* project aims to:

Create a **permanent pathway** that effectively links the **safety-net health care** programs in Montgomery County with **food assistance & nutrition education** services.
Primary Care Coalition

The Primary Care Coalition of Montgomery County (PCC) works to build and strengthen systems that can improve the health of all community members.

PCC manages public-private partnerships to deliver high-quality health care services and strengthen
Uninsured and Underinsured in Montgomery County

Since implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) began in 2014, the uninsured population has declined significantly.

Still tens of thousands of people without health insurance.
People of color in Montgomery County are much more likely to be uninsured than Non-Hispanic White residents.

- African American: 3.2 times more likely to be uninsured
- Asian: 2.1 times more likely to be uninsured
- Hispanic/Latino: 9.9 times more likely to be uninsured
Uninsured and Underinsured in Montgomery County

The populations with high uninsured rates also face more risk factors to their long-term health.

• Hypertension: 33% of African Americans & 20% of Hispanic/Latinos
• Overweight/Obese: 68% of African American adults & 76% of Hispanic adults.
• Adolescent obesity: 25% of African American teens & 30% of Hispanic teens.

Source: Healthy Montgomery, www.healthymontgomery.org
Safety-net health care in Montgomery County

Working with the Montgomery County Dept of Health & Human Services the PCC administers safety-net health care programs:

- **Montgomery Cares** serves over 24,000 uninsured adults.
- **Care for Kids** serves over 6,000 uninsured children.

To qualify, Montgomery County residents must be uninsured and earn <250% of poverty = ~$30,000 for a single person; ~$62,000 for a family of four.

Partnerships with eleven safety-net clinics, six hospitals, school-based health centers, school-based health centers, and a network of volunteer providers.
Safety-net health care

Health care and access to primary & preventive services are extremely important.

But we know that health care services alone will not close these disparities.

We must do more to address the social determinants of health.
Food Insecurity in Montgomery County

There are over 60,000 Montgomery County residents who are food insecure:

They do not have consistent access to safe, sufficient, and nutritious food.
Food Insecurity in Montgomery County

The disparities in food security align with the overall health disparities:

Lower income people are more likely to be food insecure.

People of color are more likely to be food insecure.

Foreign-born residents are more likely to be food insecure.
Food Insecurity and Health

• Hungry children get sick more often and have trouble keeping up at school.
• Hunger leads to stress and anxiety in children and adults.
• Food insecure children are 1.4 times more likely to have pediatric asthma.
• Food insecure adults have a harder time managing chronic diseases, like diabetes, and are twice as likely to have diabetes.
• One study estimates that food insecurity leads to over $1,800 in additional hospital costs for each person.
Food Insecurity and Health

The Cycle of Food Insecurity:
Lack of access to food leads to lower cost, more filling meals; skipping meals then binge-eating, and reduction in diet variety.

All contribute to chronic disease like diabetes & hypertension.
Food is Medicine

The Food is Medicine project is based on a simple set of facts described above:

• Health disparities persist in Montgomery County.

• Food insecurity contributes to these disparities.

• The population served by the safety-net clinics is also at highest risk for food insecurity.
Food is Medicine

The Food is Medicine program grew from an existing initiative, the Healthy Long Branch Food Access Program managed by CHEER and developed with funding from the Healthcare Initiative Foundation (HIF).

The Transforming Communities Initiative (TCI) funded an expansion of this model, aiming to make a systemic change that will address food security through the safety-net health care system.

The priority areas for TCI are Long Branch/Takoma Park and Gaithersburg/Germantown.
There are three primary goals to create a sustainable referral pathway from safety-net health care programs to the food system:

1) Implement food security screening and referral in safety-net health care providers.

2) Increase capacity for culturally appropriate care coordination after referral.

3) Identify system & policy changes that will support screening, referral, care coordination, & food assistance in the long-term.
Safety-net health care:
• Care for Kids (CFK) program, enrollment administered by PCC
• Mobile Medical Cares, UpCounty and Long Branch sites
• Mercy Health Clinic

Food assistance and nutrition education:
• Manna
• Crossroads
• University of Maryland EFNEP
• Montgomery County Food Council

Community-based care coordination:
• Community Health & Empowerment through Education & Research (CHEER)
The screening for food insecurity can be shortened to just two questions:

1. In the past 12 months were you worried that food would run out without money to buy more?

2. In the past 12 months did your food run out and you didn’t have money to buy more?”

Asking these two questions is sensitive and valid to screen for food insecurity, especially when used with low-income families.
Impact

1) Are the service areas integrated?
   • Patients in the participating providers are routinely screened and referred to food assistance and/or nutrition education.
   • Referred patients in the target areas receive care coordination
   • Referred patients access additional services after follow-up

2) Do services improve food security, eating habits, & patient health?
   • Reduce food insecurity among participants.
   • Increase consumption of fruits and vegetables among participants.
   • Lower HbA1C for diabetic participants.

3) Are the system changes sustainable?
   • Leaders from across sectors commit to a shared sustainability plan.
Initial Results

Screening and Referral
• By working with the Care for Kids program and two safety-net clinic partners, Food is Medicine will be screening a total of 1,500 families annually.

Food assistance
• To date, roughly 80% of patients who receive follow-up navigation after the referral are effectively linked with food assistance.
• For those receiving more intensive interventions, there are significant health outcome improvements.
Long Branch Support

A part of Food is Medicine is to integrate more intensive services. The Long Branch Healthy Food Access Program.

Targeted at diabetic and pre-diabetic residents, participants receive additional follow-up and support, including nutrition education and three months of weekly, no-cost food assistance.

Community partnership & engagement is essential.
Behavior Change

Nutrition habits
• None of the cohort was eating 5+ servings of fruits or 5+ servings of vegetables at the beginning of the intervention.
• 65% increased their intake of fruits or vegetables or reduced their intake of salty snacks or butter and margarine.
Change in outcomes

41 participants had a before and after measure of BMI
• 31 (76%) lost weight during three month intervention
• Average weight loss of 8.8 pounds in three months
Change in outcomes

21 participants had a before and after blood glucose test (HbA1c):

- All were diabetic or pre-diabetic
- 11 (50%) of participants improved their blood glucose control after three months of intervention.
- Average improvement of roughly one percentage point.
- Still tracking long-term impact.
What’s Next

Starting the second year of the program! Expanding to new clinics.

Innovation: continue to find ways to build on existing resources to address food insecurity.

Looking for more community partners to support integration & expansion

Business Leaders Fighting Hunger, commitment to working in East County
Thank You!

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