

Food Insecurity, Poor Health, and Solutions We're Seeing For Both

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In 2017, more than 40 million Americans experienced food insecurity. Defined as “limited or uncertain access to food” by the USDA, food insecurity has serious implications for people who are already dealing with health issues. In addition to negatively affecting health outcomes, food insecurity can also lead to significant increases in healthcare costs. A four-year assessment that included more than 14,000 case studies showed that healthcare costs were 11 percent higher for adults experiencing food insecurity compared to those who weren't.

And as confirmed in multiple studies, food insecurity increases the development and prevalence of chronic diseases such as diabetes and asthma.

Here at Aunt Bertha, we're able to see how Seekers connect to different community social care programs that help make food accessible for their families.

Let's consider Philadelphia, for example. According to Feeding America, about 20 percent of Philadelphia

residents live in households designated as food insecure. Our data confirms this. As you can see in the graph below, while the number of searches per month on the Aunt Bertha website grew throughout 2018, the percentage of those that were food-related searches remained relatively consistent. This indicates to us that current food programs like community kitchens, while preventing food insecurity from growing, are not enough to reduce food insecurity, at least not in Philadelphia. For the Philadelphia community dealing with health issues or rehabilitation, this ongoing issue of food insecurity poses an even greater risk to the overall health of the community.

Aunt Bertha Searches - Philadelphia, PA 2018



As more Seekers on Aunt Bertha’s site search for resources such as “Emergency Food” and “Food Pantry,” we have been looking at ways the Philadelphia and surrounding community is taking on the challenge of addressing food insecurity. With an incentive to lower costs and improve health outcomes, some hospitals and other organizations in Pennsylvania are now taking it upon themselves to create innovative programs for their patients to have greater access to healthy food.

Innovative Developments

One way food insecurity is being addressed outside of conventional means is through a sponsor program by

Temple University Hospital (TUH). TUH has a Farms to Families program that allows people in the community to sponsor boxes of fresh fruits and vegetables for families in North Philadelphia. These donations have large-scale impact, feeding families from a week to one year. If patients screen positive at their doctor's office for weight problems or food insecurity, they'll receive a prescription to the Farm to Families program. Made possible through food stamps, a "prescription" from a Temple doctor, and generous donors, families can buy fresh, organic produce year-round at a reduced price through the program. Serving over 350,000 adults and children, this program by TUH demonstrates how traditional hospitals are extending their models beyond in-office treatment, focusing on nutritional support and counseling for families confronting food insecurity.

The research coming out of some of these programs is encouraging: for example, MANNA, an organization that provides food and nutritional counseling to people with serious illnesses in Philadelphia revealed that their clients' health care costs decreased by \$10,764 per month in the first three months of receiving nutritionally-tailored meals.

Two hours west, Shamokin Area Community Hospital operates a unique program for diabetic patients. Diabetic patients at a certain risk level who are food insecure are given a "prescription" by their primary care physician for the Fresh Food Farmacy. With food purchased mainly from the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, Shamokin offers a stocked "food farmacy" in-house, allowing patients to pick up foods meant to support their health and combat food insecurity as soon as they leave their doctor's office. Each week, patients receive enough food to prepare healthy meals for their whole family, twice a day for five days.

These revolutionary approaches highlight how some healthcare providers are looking for new ways to improve the health of their members by addressing food insecurity.

The Future

Aunt Bertha is excited about these innovations. Programs like these offer insight into the evolving healthcare reimbursement model, something we identified in a previous blog post.

The implementation of creative models like community food sponsors and medically-tailored food prescriptions being offered by healthcare organizations themselves is exciting because patients get greater support in addressing food insecurity. This can lead to better clinical and functional outcomes and lower healthcare costs. Aunt Bertha will continue to keep an eye on the cool things happening not only in Pennsylvania, but across the country. We're excited to see the positive impacts these innovative models are going to have on Seekers' quality of life.

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