

Fresh produce: A new prescription for hypertension in Cuyahoga County

By: Erika S. Trapl, PhD

SUMMARY

Access to healthy foods is a key strategy for reducing hypertension and other chronic diseases that disproportionately affect low-income communities of color in Cuyahoga County. However, half of all Cuyahoga's low-income residents live in "food deserts," neighborhoods with severely limited availability of produce and other healthy foods. To address this problem, the Produce Prescription Program provides individuals who are at risk of food insecurity and have hypertension with vouchers to purchase fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets at no cost. The program also trains staff at community clinics to provide resources and information that empower residents to eat healthier.



CHALLENGE

While most nutritionists would agree that eating more fresh fruits and vegetables is an important part of good health, this recommendation can be difficult to follow for patients who don't have access to – or simply can't afford – healthy foods. To help residents stay healthy, it's important to create environments that make it easier to buy and eat healthy foods. To this end, Cuyahoga County has expanded the number of farmers' markets in low-income areas, and required that these markets accept food stamps. Yet despite these efforts, farmers' markets remain underutilized.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

Local communities around the country are finding creative ways to bring fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers directly to schools and neighborhoods, and helping residents grow their own. Join groups in your community working to bring fresh produce to areas of need. You can help them inform business leaders, policy makers, and your neighbors on how this simple transformation will create a healthier environment for everyone.

"Doctors can now provide patients with the means to eat healthy."

- Kakul Joshi

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SOLUTION

The Produce Prescription Program offers an innovative strategy for connecting Cuyahoga County residents who are at risk of hypertension with farmers' markets in their area. The program enrolled 75 residents who have hypertension at each of three clinics. Staff at clinics were trained to deliver healthy eating information to their patients, and vouchers that allowed patients to get fruits and vegetables at no cost. The initiative also helped patients set nutritional goals with their healthcare providers and locate farmers' markets in their area. According to Kakul Joshi, program coordinator, "Doctors could now provide patients with the means to eat healthy".

RESULTS

The 224 patients enrolled in the Produce Prescription Program showed significant positive outcomes. Between July and December, eighty five percent of participants visited at least one farmers' market; the average participant visited a farmers' market twice; and seventy nine percent of participants reported trying a new fruit or vegetable. In addition, average daily servings of fruit increased from 1.6 to 2.3, and average daily servings of vegetables increased from 1.7 servings to 2.5. Additionally, participants reported a significant reduction in weekly fast food consumption from 1.4 average days at baseline to 0.7 days at follow-up. These improvements are proof positive that when healthy foods are made more accessible, they are more frequently consumed.



SUSTAINING SUCCESS

To build on the successes the Produce Prescription Program experienced in 2015, the program seeks to expand its collaboration in 2016 from three community clinics to six. In addition, program organizers are seeking to increase access to fresh produce and other healthy foods by further increasing the number of farmers' markets that accept food stamps from 20 in 2015 to 28 in 2016. There is also interest in involving other local small food retailers selling fresh produce. Finally, funding is being sought to bring this intervention to a larger number of Cuyahoga County residents.

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