



Athens County Grocers Role in their Customers' Health

At a Glance

To address food access and chronic disease, Hopewell Health Centers and the Athens County Creating Healthy Communities (CHC) program partnered with Wholesome Wave to develop a produce prescriptions pilot, called Wholesome Rx. Physicians and behavioral health specialists at Hopewell Health, a local Federally Qualified Health Center, provided vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables to patients with pre-diabetes and diabetes. More than 250 people, in 115 households, participated in the Athens County Wholesome Rx program.

Public Health Challenge

Residents in Athens County have limited access to healthy foods, especially fresh produce at an affordable price. According to Feeding

America's Map the Meal Gap, Athens County has the highest food insecurity rate in the state of Ohio. Risk factors like obesity, high blood pressure, and lack of fruit and vegetable consumption are major contributors to increased risk of chronic disease and poor health outcomes. According to the Athens County Community Health Assessment, only 1.5% of Athens County residents report eating five or more servings of fruit per day and 8% report eating five or more servings of vegetables per day. Of those who don't eat five or more servings per day, 34% say it is because these foods are too expensive. With regard to chronic health conditions, 40.5% of adult Athens County residents have at some point been told by a health professional that they have high blood pressure, and about 39.4% have been told they have pre-diabetes or diabetes.

Approach

Healthcare professionals often recommend changes in diet, but they can be limited in their ability to address patients' social drivers in making a diet change. Writing a prescription for free fruits and vegetables is an effective tactic that can address the challenge of healthy food access. The CHC coalition partnered with Hopewell Health Centers to pilot a produce prescription program in Athens County. Hopewell received funding to pilot the program from the Ohio Department of Health, with technical support provided by Wholesome Wave. CHC provided additional local support to retailers throughout the pilot to address any technical issues, such as voucher reimbursement, and created additional access to redeem vouchers in more geographically isolated areas, through



a pop-up farm stand (Country Fresh Stop). For this pilot, patients received \$30 a month to use toward fruit and vegetable purchases for each person in their household. They also were given access to nutrition and cooking classes, grocery store and market tours, and diabetes support groups. Participating retailers were chosen based on location, since transportation and food access are issues in Athens County. These vouchers could be redeemed at seven retail locations across the county, which included a farmers' market, a larger grocery store, a small local grocery store, a pharmacy, and a farm stand at a Hopewell Health clinic.

Results

More than \$62,000 of vouchers were redeemed during this pilot. This dollar amount represents the added produce in residents' diets and the added dollars in the local economy. Throughout this pilot, it was easy to see that a relationship developed between participants and retailers. Many retailers commented on how they were asked questions about produce and how to cook different items. Key to the success of this program was the excitement retailers shared with their customers to encourage participation in the pilot and engage in conversation about food. Enthusiasm was shared over trying new items, purchasing favorite fruits or vegetables, and sharing new recipes. More than 80% of retailers said they would like to continue participating in this program, and the majority of retailers said they wanted to be involved in helping provide healthy food to their community and customers. This pilot not only helped provide more experience with cooking and eating fresh produce, it assisted in creating

access to fresh fruits and vegetables when, normally, most would not be able to afford these items. Early health outcomes included significant weight loss and a reduction in A1C levels, a measure of blood sugar.

What's Next

Hopewell Health Centers will be running another cohort in 2020, as a result of this pilot's success and additional funding from the Ohio Department of Health. Partners are reviewing what went well and are looking into areas for improvement in the next cycle. Partners are working to create permanent food access in the Village of Coolville, after a successful farm stand was piloted through this Wholesome Rx program. Produce prescription programs work to address food access when local retailers, community partners, and the medical community work together. The hope for all partners is to make this a sustainable part of the community and a clinical collaboration.

Find Out More

To learn more about the produce prescription program and how to implement it in your community, visit <https://www.wholesomewave.org/how-we-work/produce-prescriptions>. Residents of all socioeconomic backgrounds deserve to live in a place where nutritious foods are accessible and affordable. Help create this environment in your community by letting store owners know there is a demand for healthier food items and encouraging them to offer these foods. To get even more involved in healthy food access, join the Athens County CHC coalition.



"We participated in this as a retailer because we think it's important to help provide healthy food for our customers and it brings money into our community."

—Local retailer in Athens County



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