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Sarah French

University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine

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Health Care Share: Fighting Food Insecurity with Local Farm Shares

Sarah French

University of Vermont Medical Center

Milton Family Practice

August - September 2019



Problem Identification: Food Insecurity

Definition: Unreliable access to sufficient nutritious food due to lack of money or other resources

10% of Vermonters lived in homes with food insecurity in 2017

➤ Compared to 11.8% of US households in 2017

15% of Vermont children live in homes with food insecurity

According to the Vermont Foodbank, 25% of Vermonters utilize the food shelf or meal service programs

Contributing factors

- Lack of public transportation
- Low wages
- Lack of affordable housing
- Unemployment

Problem Identification: Access to Healthy Foods



- ▶ According to the Vermont Foodbank, 71.8% of households that use the food shelf buy unhealthy foods because they are more affordable than healthier options
- ▶ Only 8000 children participate in summer meal programs, of the 36,423 Vermont children who receive free or reduced lunches during the school year

Public Health Cost

▶ Health costs:

- ▶ Children are at risk of:
 - ▶ Nutritional deficiencies
 - ▶ Developmental delay
 - ▶ Poor academic achievement
 - ▶ Depression
 - ▶ Increased aggressive or hyperactive behavior
 - ▶ Poor overall health
- ▶ Adults are at risk of:
 - ▶ Diabetes
 - ▶ Depression
 - ▶ Poor overall health

▶ The finances:

- ▶ 27% of Vermonters qualify for federal nutrition assistance programs
- ▶ 56% of Vermonters using the food shelf had to choose between paying for medical care and food in 2017



Community Perspective

- ▶ **Andrew Whitehead, *Food and Farm Manager, Vermont Youth Conservation Corps***
 - ▶ “We are all well aware that food insecurity...is a problem in Vermont and there was an opportunity to...create an impact in that area while also train[ing] the next generation of youth to get workforce readiness skills to get a job, learn about food, learn how to cook, learn how to eat healthy; ...[this program is] treating diet-related illnesses and disease with not only medicine but also eating healthy.”
 - ▶ “If the Health Care Share is intended to be preventative and healthcare to some extent... providing medicine like a prescription program to patients is amazing, but [we also] provide the next generation with the tools... and the education to potentially break the cycle of preventative diet-related disease. If we are teaching them how to cook and how to eat healthy and how to be passionate about food and the environment, then hopefully we can save a few people from going down the road of... developing preventative diseases in the first place.”



Community Perspective

- ▶ **Holly VanWinkle, *Practice Supervisor, Milton Family Medicine***
 - ▶ “Family Medicine Milton is excited to work with our patients regarding healthy food choices and food preparation tips. We have been involved this program for five years and see a positive impact with patients and families. I love that the curriculum introduces new vegetables, samples and recipes.”

Intervention: Health Care Shares

- ▶ Health Care Share provides farm-fresh boxes of produce to families through primary care offices
 - ▶ Made up of a network of healthcare professionals, farmers, non-profit organizations, and volunteers
 - ▶ Providers identify patients with food insecurity, and “prescribe” farm shares
 - ▶ 14 weekly boxes of 12-15 lbs of fresh produce
 - ▶ Also:
 - ▶ Recipes
 - ▶ Cooking instructions
 - ▶ Nutritional information
 - ▶ Weekly newsletter

Intervention: Milton Family Practice

- ▶ An alert was created to inform providers of the registration period for the farm share in 2020
 - ▶ Providers will receive biweekly reminders throughout the duration of the registration period
- ▶ Dotphrase was created to make it easier to provide information to patients with food insecurity regarding the program in sign-out instructions
 - ▶ Background information on the Health Care Share program
 - ▶ Farm share dates
 - ▶ Registration dates

Response



- ▶ Health Care Shares has provided fresh produce to over 1000 families since its inception in 2012, including 25 annually in Milton
- ▶ Providers endorsed alert as a helpful tool for providing patients with access to farm share
- ▶ Patients receive information on sign out instructions about farm share, raising awareness in an environmentally friendly, easy to access tool for patients and providers

Evaluation of Effectiveness and Limitations

- ▶ Evaluation of effectiveness:
 - ▶ The number of applications in 2020 can be compared to previous years, taking into consideration fluctuations between years
 - ▶ Current recipients can be sent a survey on how satisfied they are with the farm share given the information they were provided
- ▶ Limitations
 - ▶ Project length does not allow for implementation of project while application is open
 - ▶ Providers get email/alert fatigue
 - ▶ Though more applications may be made, there are a limited number of farm shares

Recommendations for Future Projects

- ▶ For patients:
 - ▶ Expansion of farm share to provide for more families
 - ▶ Families who received a farm share in previous years automatically get it in the next years
 - alternating families between years may provide equitable shares among patients
 - ▶ Families without children are currently not eligible to apply
 - ▶ How to get farm shares to families who are unable to get to the practice to pick it up each week - implementation of a home delivery
 - ▶ Garden education on how to grow healthy produce
- ▶ For providers:
 - ▶ EPIC pop-up alert could be created for patients who screen as food insecure

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