

# Geisinger

**Food as Medicine: Current Efforts and Potential Opportunities**  
**U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry**  
**Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research**  
**December 13, 2022, 10:00 a.m.**  
**Testimony provided by John Bulger, DO, MBA**  
**Chief Medical Officer, Insurance Operations and Strategic Partnerships**

Good morning. I would like to thank you Chairman Booker, Ranking Member Braun, and members of the subcommittee for the invitation and the opportunity to participate in today's discussion on the challenges of food insecurity and food as medicine as a viable solution to help treat chronic health conditions.

My name is John Bulger, DO, MBA and I am the Chief Medical Officer, Insurance Operations and Strategic Partnerships for Geisinger. Prior to my appointment at the Health Plan, I served in various clinical roles at Geisinger including Chief Medical Officer, Population Health; Chief Quality Officer; and I continue to be a practicing physician for General Internal Medicine.

Geisinger serves more than one million people and is committed to making better health easier for those we serve. Founded more than 100 years ago by Abigail Geisinger, the system now includes ten hospital campuses, 130 primary care and specialty clinics, a statewide health plan with more than half a million enrollees, two research centers and the Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine. With nearly 24,000 employees and more than 1,700 employed physicians and 7,000 nurses, Geisinger is one of the largest, rural, vertically integrated health delivery systems in the nation.

## **Food for Health**

Geisinger has a long history in population health. We are proud to have developed a social determinants of health strategy to align data collected from patient screenings and electronic health record information with our work alongside community partners to develop a multisectoral approach to addressing access to care and health disparities for our patients and our communities. Through these pathways and more, we are building the foundation to create tools to effectively address social determinants of healthcare in our populations.

One intervention we created is the Fresh Food Farmacy® which was developed with the following goals in mind:

- Improve healthy food access for residents in our communities with chronic conditions to improve overall health

- Educate members on the connection between nutrition and health through clinical interactions and evidence-based programs
- Reduce the burden of Type 2 diabetes and related medical complications, optimize prescription use and ultimately lower the cost of total care
- Narrow the meal gap for those who are food insecure by ensuring participants have access to at least 10 fresh and healthy meals per week for them and their household
- Collaborate with community partners to align and enhance the offerings of the Fresh Food Farmacy®

To start, we focused on how food could be used to manage Type 2 diabetes – a problem facing patients and the healthcare industry nationwide. For instance, based on reporting the American Diabetes Association estimated the total cost of diagnosed diabetes in 2017 was \$327 billion, including \$237 billion in direct medical costs and \$90 billion in reduced productivity. Through the Fresh Food Farmacy®, we looked to empower chronic diabetes patients facing food insecurity to manage their medical condition through food-related behavior change, education, and clinical management. As you know, lifestyle change is the cornerstone of treatment for diabetes, which includes weight management, nutrition, physical activity, tobacco cessation and reduction in alcohol use. Additionally, healthy behaviors help to improve blood pressure, cholesterol, blood glucose (blood sugar) and hemoglobin HbA1C, (or HbA1C) a blood test that provides information about a person’s average levels of blood glucose over the past three months. And lastly, a nutritious diet is a great way to manage – and prevent – diabetes and other serious health issues. But we know healthy food can be expensive and inaccessible. That’s why we created the Fresh Food Farmacy® as a community-based food pantry, so our patients can get fresh food, at no cost, for themselves and their entire household. A prescription to our Fresh Food Farmacy® also gives the participants access to health and wellness classes along with clinical support. At a high-level, this is how the Fresh Food Farmacy® program works:

- Patients are screened in a primary care setting, and if they have A1C level greater than 8.0 and indicate they experience food insecurity, they are given a “prescription” or referral by their primary care physician for the Fresh Food Farmacy®.
- Once enrolled, patients are connected to clinical interventions including care management, diabetes education and consultations with our clinical care team.
- They are also given access to a Geisinger Fresh Food Farmacy® facility which only offers healthy products that meet the American Diabetes Association (ADA) recommendations, which include lean meats, whole grains, fruits and vegetables and limited sodium, saturated fat, and cholesterol. They are able to select from a variety of food options connected to healthy recipes available on site and through the mobile app.
- Each participant has access to our Fresh Food Farmacy® digital app, which maintains over 200 recipes, connection to the clinical care team, and the ability to track health metrics, like blood sugar.

- The program provides enough food to cover 10 meals per week for the patient and their household members.

In addition, we quickly realized that food insecurity was not the only social determinant our patients were facing and continue to develop relationship with community-based organizations to offer support. We also rolled out another solution called Neighborly, a digital platform available to any member of the community that allows them to connect to free and reduced cost local resources such as transportation, housing assistance and other food access options, including but not limited to SNAP benefits.

Today, we have a network with more than 17,000 resources that are available to any member of any community across Pennsylvania. This work has allowed us to partner closely with food banks and other community-based organizations in a more meaningful way and learn from one another. We are focused on identifying the needs and issues of our community members, using data to drive programming, all while getting the care our patients and community members need closer to where they live and work.

### **Initial Findings**

While the Fresh Food Farmacy® is still in its nascent stages, we are encouraged by some of the early findings and successes. The results of the program include:

- Almost 1,600 patients have been enrolled in the Fresh Food Farmacy Program so far, with an average of 3 household members, in both urban and rural locations in Pennsylvania, including Scranton, Shamokin and Lewistown.
- To date, we have screened more than 800,000 patients and members for food insecurity.
- The program has provided over 2 million pounds of food, resulting in almost 1.7 million meals for patients and their families
- Our preliminary internal data suggests the program:
  - Can lower one's A1C on average 2.5 points (for those who begin with a baseline A1C value greater than 9)
  - Can reduce readmissions by 15%; result in 29% fewer ED visits; and improve glucose measures an average of 28%
- One example of the impact this kind of program can have is best expressed with our very first Fresh Food Farmacy® graduate, Rita, a 55-year-old widowed grandmother, caring for her grandchildren, enrolled in this program with the following medical attributes:
  - 13.8 A1C; 181 lbs; 209 LDL and 312 Triglycerides.
- After going through our program, working with a case manager on a healthier diet and exercise management curriculum, she now has the following medical attributes:
  - 5.4 A1C; 135 lbs; 47 LDL and 76 Triglycerides.

Building on our own assessment and monitoring to date, we are working with MIT and have partnered to complete a randomized control trial to continue to collect and analyze data to demonstrate impact, identify opportunities, and refine the program. We have expanded the Fresh Food Farmacy® to test additional disease state populations and engage with existing community-based food pantries on alternative models of delivery.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to present before you today on this critical health care issue. Geisinger stands ready to be a resource for the Committee on this issue and welcomes further discussion. For the benefit of the Committee, the attached provides further information about Geisinger's Fresh Food Farmacy program. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.



Are you ready to live a healthier life? Ask your doctor about our Fresh Food Farmacy or call or visit one of our three locations.

**Fresh Food Farmacy Shamokin**  
4200 Hospital Drive  
Coal Township, PA 17866  
**570-486-2955**

**Fresh Food Farmacy Scranton**  
3 W. Olive St., Suite 127  
Scranton, PA 18508  
**570-207-6297**

**Fresh Food Farmacy Lewistown**  
106 Derry Heights Blvd.  
Lewistown, PA 17044  
**717-363-9280**

**Fresh Food  
Farmacy®**

**A fresh prescription for  
managing diabetes.**

**Fresh Food  
Farmacy®**



A nutritious diet is a great way to manage — and prevent — diabetes and other serious health issues. But we know healthy food can be expensive. That's why we created the Fresh Food Farmacy®, so you can get fresh food, free of charge, for yourself and your entire family. We'll also show you how to prepare your food and give you recipes the whole family will enjoy.

## Yes, your whole family benefits.

A prescription to our Farmacy also gives you access to health and wellness classes along with clinical support. We'll even help with transportation, housing and food stamp programs.

Imagine how not having to worry about any of that would change your life.

## How to be part of the Fresh Food Farmacy.

Your doctor may refer you to see if you qualify for the program, or you can call directly to learn more about the Fresh Food Farmacy. There are a few requirements, including but not limited to:

- You're at least 18 years old
- You've been diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes
- Your HBA1C is 8.0 or higher
- Paying for healthy, nutritious food is a challenge
- You're able to attend onsite classes and work with the care team to manage your diabetes



## The program is already changing lives.

These three stories show what's possible with the Fresh Food Farmacy. Each story is different, and each person had their own set of challenges. But thanks to the support of their Fresh Food Farmacy care teams, they're now living healthier, more active lives.

### 51-year-old truck driver



**HBA1C dropped from 10.1 percent to 6.8 percent**

When this man's sugars rose, his vision deteriorated, causing him to lose his commercial driver's license (CDL) and his trucking job.

Unemployment made food of any kind difficult to afford.

The Fresh Food Farmacy team worked with his caregivers to help him understand his medications by developing and personalizing a medication list that included a color-coding system for sliding-scale insulin dosages.

Today, he's feeling much better, his sugars are within a normal range and his medications have been adjusted. Best of all, he's getting his CDL back and is looking forward to returning to work.

### 55-year-old caregiver for grandkids and spouse



**HBA1C dropped from 13.8 percent to 5.8 percent**

This woman is raising three grandchildren and is the primary caretaker for her husband, who has kidney failure and is on dialysis. In the past, she struggled with being underinsured and uninsured, which made it difficult — sometimes impossible — to get the medication she needed.

Thanks to the Fresh Food Farmacy, she's lost 40 pounds, her sugars and weight are within goal and she's achieved a normal BMI of 25. She's even started exercising and is cutting back on smoking with the goal of quitting completely.

### 55-year-old with fibromyalgia



**HBA1C dropped from 8.3 percent to 6.7 percent**

Because of her fibromyalgia, this woman needed walking assist devices to get around and was leading an inactive life. She'd had

bariatric surgery twice before entering the program, with little improvement in her blood sugars or weight.

Today, she walks without assistance. She's lost 30 pounds since entering the program and has maintained her A1C improvements despite her other health concerns.





## Patient Responsibility:

- Pickup disease appropriate foods on a biweekly basis at assigned FFF location
- Regular clinical care appointment compliance. (Could include a combination of RD, RN, Health Coach, or Community Health Associate services)
- Participate in disease management education opportunities
- Willingness to utilize program to make lifestyle changes to improve health

## Patient Eligibility Criteria:

- Age 18 and older
- Type 2 Diabetes Diagnosis
- Currently following with a primary care provider
- **If satellite location\***: Patient must see either a Geisinger primary care physician or have Geisinger Health Plan insurance
- HBA1c  $\geq 8.0$ , drawn within the last year
- Food Insecure

## Exclusionary Measures:

- Cannot be on hospice or the current resident of a skilled nursing facility or another facility that manages their dietary needs, such as a rehabilitation center or a shelter that provides meals.
- Cannot be receiving active cancer therapy
- Must have an eGFR  $\geq 30$  (Kidney Function)
- Mental health/cognitive concerns that would preclude participation

## Food insecurity survey questions:

- Within the past 12 months, I/we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.
- Within the past 12 months the food, I/we bought just didn't last and we didn't have the money to get more.

## How to enroll:

Within Geisinger electronic medical record you can send a **Pool** message by searching 35504 or typing Fresh Food Farmacy; or route a telephone encounter to 35504 or Fresh Food Farmacy. Please include the patient's name, DOB, and MRN.

If you are outside of the Geisinger provider network, you should visit the Fresh Food Farmacy website, linked below, utilizing the Contact us function. Please include the patient's name and contact information.