

Access to healthy affordable food benefits thousands in Boston

Summary

Most Boston Housing Authority (BHA) households fall into 6 out of 7 household characteristics listed on the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s website for having very low food security. Boston REACH: Partners in Health & Housing is addressing food insecurity among BHA residents in partnership with 4 Community Health Centers (CHCs) who serve over 27,000 public housing residents and with Children's HealthWatch. Over 565 patients have been screened for food insecurity at these CHCs with over 7,174 healthy affordable on-site food transactions.

Challenge

About 1 in 3 low-income households in the U.S. are food insecure. In MA, that is about 675,000 adults and children who worry or do not have enough food to eat. Boston REACH: Partners in Health & Housing (PHH), a partnership between Boston Public Health Commission, Boston Housing Authority (BHA), and Boston University School of Public Health, is working with BHA residents and community partners to increase access to healthy and affordable food for BHA residents, its priority population, who have expressed difficulty obtaining and eating healthy food. With increasing gentrification, many grocery stores have become more unaffordable, and transportation just as difficult for low-income families. There can be stigma around living in public housing and using food stamps. It takes trusted partners and individuals to create environments where residents are comfortable reaching out for help.

"Ultimately at a community health center... it's about the mission to address health at different levels. But it's really hard to figure out how to do that sometimes... I think that this work we did around the hunger vital signs was a pathway."

- Community Health Center Representative & CoP member

Solution



Policy, System, and Environmental (PSE) changes contribute to long-term impact. One Boston REACH:PHH PSE has been partnering with Children's HealthWatch (CHW) of Boston Medical Center, to integrate screening questions into clinical workflow. Another has been partnering with 4 Community Health Centers (CHCs) that collectively serve over 27,000 public housing and rental assisted residents. Through Boston REACH: PHH, the CHCs have begun to integrate validated hunger screening questions known as the Hunger Vital Signs into their workflow to identify patients who are food insecure and make appropriate referrals while strengthening on and off-site resource referral capacity.

Results

With the commitment of 4 CHCs to integrate food insecurity screening (FIS) questions into the workflow of at least one of their departments and with technical assistance from CHW, over 565 residents have been screened for food insecurity in the first several months, with 3 out of 10 being referred to local food resources. Some CHCs chose to integrate screening questions during their intake process and others during a point of contact with a nutritionist or social service department. Additionally, 7,174 on-site free and low-cost healthy food transactions materialized through our non-profit food partners; that's about 800 transactions per month. Screening was made possible through personalized calls and trainings by CHW and the development of an operational online Community of Practice (CoP). FIS is the first of its kind in Boston.

Sustaining Success

Identifying a need and targeting resources can be a challenge. Food insecurity screening questions have been built into daily workflow of trusted clinical institutions in regular contact with our priority population. Not only has this helped many families in a sustainable way, this model is scalable to other departments within these CHCs and across the city and state. MassLeague, which convenes all Boston CHCs, is interested in scaling this to other CHCs, with potential to reach patients and BHA residents served at another 22 Boston CHCs. The online MA Community of Practice and virtual library remain open to those interested, and City of Boston colleagues have committed to strengthening food insecurity screening in Boston after REACH:PHH.

Your Involvement Is Key

Massachusetts clinics and organizations interested in joining the CoP can contact Aileen at ashen@bphc.org. If food insecurity is an issue in your community or neighborhood, consider partnering with your local health center to incorporate food insecurity screening into clinical workflow, or speak with your primary care about the importance of screening and healthy affordable resources available to you. You can learn more about Boston REACH: Partners in Health & Housing at www.bphc.org/reachphh.



Contact

Aileen Shen

Boston Public Health Commission
1010 Massachusetts Ave
Boston, MA 02118
617-534-2633 phone
<http://www.bphc.org/reachphh>