



Roundtable on Hunger

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Written Testimony of
Iliana Garcia, MPH

Program Manager, The Food Pharmacy
Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

Chairman McGovern, Representative Scanlon and Representative Evans,

My name is Iliana Garcia and I am the Manager of the Food Pharmacy Program at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP). The Food Pharmacy program launched in 2018 at the Healthy Weight Program, which is a pediatric weight management program, and has recently expanded to the Nicholas and Athena Karabots Pediatric Care Center in March of 2021. Both sites are located in West Philadelphia and are part of the broader CHOP Care Network which saw nearly 1.3 million outpatient visits in FY20 and serves a primarily minority and low-income patient population.¹

Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) was founded in 1855 as the nation's first pediatric hospital. Through its long-standing commitment to providing exceptional patient care, training new generations of pediatric healthcare professionals, and pioneering major research initiatives, Children's Hospital has fostered many discoveries that have benefited children worldwide. Its pediatric research program is among the largest in the country. In addition, its unique family-centered care and public service programs have brought the 595-bed hospital recognition as a leading advocate for children and adolescents.

The Issue of Childhood Food Insecurity

Food insecurity, defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food to live an active and healthy lifestyle, is a pervasive issue that affects 14.3 million American households. The USDA estimates that 1 in 6 children live in food insecure households.² Rates of childhood food insecurity in Philadelphia (21%) are significantly higher than the national average (16%), and we have seen rates as high as 32% in our patient population. Childhood food insecurity is associated with poor health outcomes including obesity which can increase the risk for heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers. Children who experience food insecurity are also at increased risk of negative developmental outcomes including behavioral and emotional problems and poor academic performance.^{3,4} While the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has affected all aspects of life, it has had a particularly severe impact on the ability of families to

access food. During the pandemic, it is estimated that food insecurity has tripled among households with children.⁵

At CHOP, I am honored to work with passionate physicians such as Dr. Saba Khan, a dedicated pediatrician who established and directs the Food Pharmacy program at CHOP. As practicing physicians, Dr. Khan and her colleagues too often see the physical manifestations of food insecurity in their daily practice: complaints of severe headaches and stomachaches quickly cured by a sandwich; poorly controlled diabetes because a family has to choose between healthy food or medication; and young babies with seizures because of watered-down formula. CHOP is committed to addressing childhood food insecurity and in 2018 established the nation's first pediatric, hospital-based food pharmacy program. In addition, CHOP participated in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farmers to Families program in April 2020 in order to provide immediate food assistance to families who were impacted by COVID-19. I would like to share more about these food access programs as well as some of the valuable lessons learned that can be used to strengthen and sustain collaborative work to address hunger in our communities.

The Food Pharmacy Program

The mission of the Food Pharmacy is to increase food access for food insecure families while providing support to identify and address broader social determinants of health. The Food Pharmacy aims to accomplish this through three key program components: electronic screening for food insecurity, healthy food distribution, and resource navigation support. The Food Pharmacy operates at two locations in West Philadelphia: the Healthy Weight Program and the Karabots Pediatric Care Center. The newly expanded Karabots Food Pharmacy is the foundational program for the food access pillar of CHOP's Healthier Together Initiative which aims to address the social determinants of health as a path to improving the health of children in West Philadelphia.

Electronic food insecurity screening

CHOP utilizes the Hunger Vital Sign which is a two-item food insecurity screening tool that is used widely in medical and community-based settings to identify households experiencing or at risk of food insecurity. This screener is derived from the longer 18 item U.S. Household Food Insecurity Survey module and has been validated by the Children's Health Watch for use among families with young children.⁶ Research has shown that electronic food insecurity screening using an inanimate object (i.e. iPad, computer) can decrease the stigma associated with screening and increase the identification of food insecure patients.⁷ Feedback obtained from a focus group with Healthy Weight Food Pharmacy participants affirmed that this was especially important in a pediatric setting where the child is present during screening. We have successfully integrated the two-item food insecurity screening into the electronic check-in process for clinical visits at both Food Pharmacy locations. Families who screen positive for food insecurity are then referred to the Food Pharmacy Program where they receive healthy food and resource navigation support.

Healthy Food Distribution

The current Food Pharmacy model operates virtually and families who screen positive for food insecurity are contacted after their clinical visit to share more about the Food Pharmacy and enroll them in the program. Program staff aim to normalize screening for food insecurity by emphasizing that food is an important part of health and that resources are available to support families in accessing healthy food. Families are then scheduled to receive a box of fresh fruits and vegetables delivered directly to their home once a month for 6 months. In order to address immediate food needs upon enrollment, families receive an additional bag that contains staple pantry items such as canned fruits and vegetables, rice, beans, oatmeal, and tuna. We have worked very closely with CHOP registered dietitians to develop nutritional standards for the program in order to ensure that all the food sourced aligns with national nutrition guidelines and is also culturally appropriate and acceptable to families.

Resource Navigation

Food insecurity is a complex social need that often intersects with and is exacerbated by other social issues such as unemployment, housing and childcare challenges that make it difficult for families to meet their basic needs. That is why, in addition to food support, the newly expanded Karabots Food Pharmacy pairs participants with a resource navigator in order to provide broader support and resources throughout their time in the program. The resource navigator will work with each family to identify and address additional social needs and help them navigate and maximize community resources. The resource navigator is knowledgeable about the vast array of community resources that exist and is committed to building trust and rapport with families. The new addition of a resource navigation component to the Food Pharmacy model will be critical in allowing our program to go “beyond food” in addressing the root causes of food insecurity.

Program Outcomes

As of May 2021, the Healthy Weight Food Pharmacy has served a total of 425 patients in the program. The Food Pharmacy provides a three-day supply of food for the entire family. With an average household size of 4 this extends the impact of the program to over 1,700 people. We have distributed a total of 11,761 lbs of food to date, which is the equivalent of just over 1,000 meals. 49% of Food Pharmacy families are enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), 57% of families with children under the age of five are enrolled in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, and 72% participate in the school breakfast or lunch program. Patients who are not enrolled in nutrition benefit programs are provided with information about how to inquire about eligibility and assistance with enrollment. Patients who are enrolled in programs such as SNAP are provided with information about how to maximize their benefits and participate in incentive programs to facilitate access to healthy and affordable produce.

USDA Farmers to Families Program

COVID-19 has exacerbated the issue of food insecurity in our community. It was imperative that the Food Pharmacy Program model adapt to meet the needs of families and to ensure continued food access during the height of pandemic. CHOP collaborated with two food-focused organizations and received support from the USDA Farmers to Families Program in order to provide contactless home delivery of fresh produce boxes directly to families in need.

In April 2020, as part of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, the USDA announced the Farmers to Families program would work with national, regional and local distributors to purchase up to \$4 billion in fresh produce, meats, and dairy products from local farms and distribute to communities in need.⁸ In Philadelphia, the program was implemented through a cross-sector collaboration between CHOP, The Common Market, a mission-driven distributor of sustainable and local farm products, and Food Connect, a local nonprofit organization that uses technology to provide on-demand hunger relief solutions,.

Through this unique partnership, Common Market sourced and packaged produce from local farms, CHOP identified food insecure recipients to receive the box, and Food Connect provided contactless delivery of the food boxes directly to families' homes. Recipients of the food boxes were identified by CHOP through a combination of food insecurity screening and need-based referrals by providers and social workers. The Common Market served as the operational infrastructure to connect farms, in need of new distribution channels, to regional community organizations supporting families and impacted communities while Food Connect leveraged their texting and logistical resources to provide weekly home delivery of the produce boxes to CHOP families.

Through the Farmers to Families program, CHOP enrolled a total of 389 families across 20 zip codes to receive a weekly box of fresh fruits and vegetables delivered directly to their home. The program operated for 16 weeks, from June 1st until September 18th, 2020. Food Connect successfully delivered a total of 4,770 boxes, which translates to 95,400 pounds of food and just

under 10,000 meals. In addition, there were direct measurable benefits to the local economy. Common Market's mission is rooted in supporting local farmers and all produce was sourced from regional farmers in need of additional distribution networks. The program also supported additional jobs and created approximately 1,200 paid work hours for delivery drivers.

The use of technology was critical to the successful implementation of a virtual and contactless food delivery program. Food Connect uses an application that has integrations with multiple driver pools so that deliveries can be fulfilled efficiently. Another key feature was the use of a multi-language texting platform to facilitate on-demand communication and delivery tracking for recipients. On the day of each delivery, patients received text messages providing updated delivery arrival times. Patients had access to a driver tracker map to monitor the driver's progress and had the ability to confirm delivery through Food Connect's contactless delivery confirmation functionality. These features increased the reliability of the program and helped to ensure the successful delivery of weekly food boxes without additional risk of exposure to COVID-19.

Lessons Learned

While the USDA Farmers to Families support was temporary, this unprecedented program demonstrated the value and impact of investment in cross-sector partnerships to advance hunger-relief solutions during a crisis. Hunger in our communities remains a pressing emergency that requires continued attention, innovation and investment. Through the Farmers to Families collaboration, CHOP was able to provide 16 times more food to families in a 4-month period compared to the previous year of clinic-based food distribution alone. In addition, the use of a multi-language texting platform greatly alleviated language barriers during program communications. Given this impact, CHOP has continued the partnerships forged during the pandemic and has integrated the contactless method of food delivery into the Food Pharmacy model.

Hunger is a complex social need that often intersects with and is exacerbated by other social issues that make it difficult for families to meet their basic needs and prioritize health. These experiences are confirmed not only by the stories shared with us by our patients but also by the data that we have collected from Food Pharmacy participants, which found that 33% of families have had trouble paying for utilities, 11% worry about their housing situation and 32% struggle with feelings of depression and hopelessness. The addition of a resource navigation component to the Food Pharmacy model will be critical in allowing our program to go “beyond food” in addressing the root causes of food insecurity. Addressing the issues of hunger and food insecurity in our community rests on our collective ability to support both cross-sector collaborations and investments in multifaceted hunger relief programs.

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