

Improving Hunger and Health Outcomes in Minnesota

Summary:

Second Harvest Heartland is partnering with the health care system to provide access to food to more people, with the goals of greater efficiency, improved outcomes and lower overall health care costs.

Situation:

There are currently more than half a million hungry people in Minnesota who access existing hunger relief programs. The programs include the Emergency Food System (food banks, food shelves and hot meal sites), SNAP (income-based Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and other federal nutrition programs. In spite of all these access points, hungry Minnesotans still miss more than 100 million meals each year, with 40% of the gap in meals existing within rural areas.

Hypothesis:

Do health care systems offer a unique advantage to address this meal deficit?

Background and Research:

That's the very question The Boston Consulting Group set out to answer when it embarked on its *Improving Hunger and Health Outcomes in Minnesota Study*, a pro bono contribution to understand the potential meals that could be provided through a new access point using Minnesota health systems. According to the study, integration between health care and hunger relief sectors to increase food access could add an estimated 30 - 45 million meals for food insecure patients annually.

According to the study, two types of problems drive the meal gap.

- **Coverage gaps:** where food shelf and meal program geographic coverage is relatively low.
- **Participation gaps:** where people who are food insecure have relatively low utilization of hunger relief programs for which they are eligible, including SNAP and other federal nutrition programs.

Of those people who do not participate in the Emergency Food System:

- 30-50% are not aware of the programs and/or do not believe they are eligible
- 10-30% report social stigma as a participation barrier
- 10-15% find access (i.e. limited service hours and/or transportation) a barrier
- 1-10% feel language is a barrier

Opportunity:

One of the ways hunger relief organizations like Second Harvest Heartland can increase the meals available to food insecure individuals is to partner with the health system to reach a larger audience. Partnering with the health care sector, which already reaches people of all income levels and socioeconomic backgrounds, could improve the coverage of the Emergency Food System. Better outcomes could be achieved by providing greater effectiveness in increasing participation and being more efficient when working with the Emergency Food System.

According to the Boston Consulting Group, health systems have four distinct advantages to address hunger:

- **Improved coverage:** A recognizable and trusted presence across communities, consistent transportation services and hours and an existing volunteer base and infrastructure
- **Greater effectiveness:** Addressing barriers to participation (e.g. awareness, stigma, transportation, registration, etc.) given their unique position as a trusted source across communities
- **Higher efficiency:** Using large scale, professional staff, access to volunteers and existing infrastructure and capabilities
- **Better outcomes:** Reinforcing the positive connection between improved nutrition and better health outcomes, especially for chronic diseases that disproportionately affect food-insecure patients such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease

The study suggests that there are also a number of potential benefits to health systems in partnering with hunger relief agencies. Health systems can begin to address population health outcomes by addressing the needs of food-insecure patients, benefiting communities in the long-term as well as improving patient health and satisfaction. Addressing food insecurity in high-risk patients and those with chronic disease could result in fewer hospitalizations and ER visits, and improve well-child status in children – reducing health care costs and improving quality of life.

