

# Care for the Common Good

## Improving Healthy Food Access

### A Pillar of Good Health



Trinity Health is one of the largest not-for-profit, Catholic health care systems in the nation, serving diverse communities across 25 states. We advocate for public policies that promote care for the common good including expanding health care coverage and care, investing in public health, paying for high-value care, and improving the health of communities.

### Healthy Food Access Impacts Health Outcomes

Improving the health of individuals and communities is at the core of Trinity Health's Mission. This includes addressing social needs like access to healthy and affordable food. Food insecurity is defined as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. It is linked to some of the most common and costly health problems for all age groups including diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and obesity.

The pandemic has increased the acute social needs of individuals across the country, which we have seen first-hand in caring for the patients. At the onset of COVID-19, requests for emergency food assistance were increasing dramatically. Food banks across the country experienced shortages in the staffing, supply, and funding necessary to support the increased need. Additionally, states have been challenged to keep up with the volume of applications for public benefits like unemployment, Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

### What Can Policymakers Do?

#### *Increase Access to Healthy and Affordable Food*

- Strengthen federal nutrition programs (i.g., SNAP; Women, Infants Children (WIC).
- Increase support for programs that link food insecurity to health such as "prescriptions for food" where patients are provided direct access to local food resources.
- Reimburse for evidence-based community nutrition, food-as-medicine, or medically-tailored meal programs in state Medicaid plans, 1115 waivers and managed care contracts.
- Strengthen access to and quality of school meal programs, including summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT).
- Reduce food deserts to improve accessibility to healthy, affordable food.
- Promote community gardens as empowering, economical and environmental opportunities.
- Provide incentives to manufacturers, retailers and farmers to reduce food waste by donating surplus healthy food.
- Ensure immigrants have access to nutrition program benefits without a waiting period.
- Support domestic efforts to promote climate resilience in food systems.

#### *Strengthen SNAP*

- Modernize SNAP eligibility guidelines to the low-cost food plan to provide critical food assistance and help promote economic stimulus.
- Improve access points for SNAP customers to receive healthy food, including online purchasing.
- Invest in technology and other administrative supports to promote SNAP benefit access.

### By the Numbers<sup>1</sup>

- More than 42 million people in the United States, including 13 million children, are projected to experience food insecurity in 2021 due to COVID-19.
- In 2020, rates of food insecurity were higher for Black (21.7%) and Hispanic (17.2%) households than the national average (10.5%).
- 33% of Americans who experience food insecurity do not qualify for federal or state nutrition programs.
- The direct and indirect health-related costs of hunger and food insecurity in the U.S. have been estimated to be \$160 billion.
- Annual health care expenditures are \$1,400 lower in the case of SNAP participants versus non-participants.

<sup>1</sup>Sources: Feeding America. "The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity." 2021; USDA, Economic Research Service. "Food Insecurity by Household Characteristics." 2020; FRAC. "Hunger & Health: The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being." 2017; Berkowitz et al. "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Participation and Health Care Expenditures Among Low-Income Adults." 2017; CHWB Data Hub. "Food Insecurity - Food Insecure Population Ineligible for Assistance." 2021.

# Improving Healthy Food Access: a pillar of good health

- Maximize participation of diverse retailers by maintaining cost-neutrality and helping them upgrade their technology to accept multiple payment methods, as needed.
- Streamline the SNAP application and renewal process.

## *Expand Nutrition Education*

- Provide funding for heightened awareness and education about cultural and seasonal food preparation.
- Incorporate nutrition education into school meal programs.

## *Address Whole Person Needs*

- Expand investments in social influencers of health (SIOH) including access to transportation, childcare, affordable housing and environmental health.
- Design population-based payment models that support care management and enable providers to identify and address SIOH.
- Provide stable opportunities for those who are uninsured to enroll in health insurance through marketplaces and Medicaid, including increasing the Medicaid Federal Medical Assistance Percentages (FMAP).
- Provide reimbursement for community health worker education and outreach to address social and health needs.
- Expand access to broadband for all Americans with priority to those in medically underserved communities, including rural and tribal communities.

## Trinity Health's Best Practices in Healthy Food Access Programs

### Trinity Health Michigan: The Farm at St. Joe's

The Farm at St. Joe's Hospital in Ann Arbor, Mich. grows a healthy community by empowering people through food, education and relationships. The collaborative farm share program aggregates produce from local farms allowing members to receive up to 36 weeks of food. The Farm Share Assistance program connects more than 100 families to free or reduced-cost memberships every year. Participants have reported eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, preparing more meals at home, and becoming more confident in cooking fresh foods. More than 6,000 pounds of produce from The Farm at St. Joe's are donated to local clinics to be distributed to patients. In 2020, over 4,500 servings of produce were donated to patients in need.

### Trinity Health Of New England: Joan C. Dauber (JCD) Food Pantry

The food pantry has been supporting the Saint Francis community in Hartford, Conn. for more than 40 years and serves an average of 1,500 individuals per month. It was originally organized to support patients who were impacted by food insecurity. Now, in addition to patients, the pantry serves the public, senior living centers and employees. The JCD Food Pantry also offers a limited supply of clothing and toiletries; and once a month it provides disposable diapers to families in need. The food pantry was recent redesigned into a client choice model allowing participants to choose which foods best meet their needs. This redesign will include referral connections to providers who treat chronic illnesses such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, all of which are impacted by dietary choices.

### Trinity Health Mid-Atlantic: Fresh Connect

The Fresh Connect program links families with food and nutrition resources. The free mobile farm market provides fresh produce to low-income families and seniors weekly at three locations throughout Bucks County, Pa. The collaboration is a partnership with the Bucks County Opportunity Council, Rolling Harvest Food Rescue and Philabundance, with support from the United Way of Bucks County. During the COVID-19 pandemic's initial surge (March-May 2020), up to 13,864 persons were served through Fresh Connect. The program currently provides weekly produce to 650 families.

## Mission

We, Trinity Health, serve together in the spirit of the Gospel as a compassionate and transforming healing presence within our communities.

## Core Values

Reverence • Commitment to Those Who Are Poor • Safety • Justice • Stewardship • Integrity