

CASE STUDY JANUARY 2020

# Health Care and Food Partnership

**VeggieRx:** Windy City Harvest, Lawndale Christian Health Center, Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion, Proviso Partners for Health, PCC Wellness Center



# Organizational Overviews

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**Windy City Harvest (WCH)** is an urban agriculture initiative of the Chicago Botanic Garden, focused on job training, building a local food system and healthier communities, and contributing to the mission to “cultivate the power of plants to sustain and enrich life.” Windy City Harvest recognizes the power of accessible green spaces and high-quality nutritious food to impact physical, mental and social well-being. Windy City Harvest specializes in food production, food access, and urban agriculture job training and education.

**Lawndale Christian Health Center (LCHC)** is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) located in the North Lawndale community area of Chicago that is committed to “promoting wellness and providing quality, affordable health care for Lawndale and the neighboring communities.” LCHC partners with Windy City Harvest on both VeggieRx and the Farm on Ogden. The Farm on Ogden, located across the street from the health center, supports and sustains a healthy urban community by bringing food, health, youth development, and jobs together in one location.

**Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion (CPHP)** is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) implementation agency for the city of Chicago. The mission of CPHP is “to provide high quality nutrition education and health promotion programs, in partnership with SNAP eligible individuals, families and communities in Chicago.” CPHP led the development of the cooking demonstrations and nutrition education for VeggieRx.

**Proviso Partners for Health (PP4H) in partnership with Loyola University Health System, and Loyola University Chicago Marcella Niehoff School of Nursing** is working in Proviso Township to build capacity to address racial, health, and economic inequities through partnerships while leveraging community assets and wisdom. PP4H partners with WCH to operate VeggieRx in suburban Cook County.

**PCC Community Wellness Center** is an FQHC comprised of 12 clinics serving the West Side of Chicago and the near west suburbs. PCC’s mission is to improve health outcomes for the medically underserved community through the provision of high quality, affordable and accessible primary health care and support services. PCC partners with WCH on both VeggieRx and the PCC Austin Farm. Located within a food desert, the PCC Austin Farm brings fresh, organic, sustainable produce to the West Side of Chicago.



## Partnership History

The VeggieRx program began as a partnership between Windy City Harvest and Lawndale Christian Health Center in 2016, with Loyola/PP4H in 2018, and PCC launched a program in June 2019. Windy City Harvest was looking to enhance their ability to address food insecurity and diet-related disease, as well as increase demand for fresh, local food. For Lawndale Christian Health Center, supporting improved food access is an integral aspect of supporting community wellness and working to foster a healthy community. For PP4H and Loyola, the partnership with WCH aligns with both the food justice and economic justice aspects of their work. PCC has integrated urban agriculture and VeggieRx initiatives with their diabetes action plan to address priority needs of the patients and communities they serve.

## VeggieRx Program Operations

### OVERVIEW

VeggieRx provides participants with a bag of produce, vouchers (“Produce Perks”) that are redeemable for additional produce at onsite farm stands, and a nutrition lesson and cooking demonstration using produce participants are receiving that week, with samples. The cooking demonstration is used to spark discussion on healthy cooking and nutrition.

In 2019, Windy City Harvest collaborated with three healthcare partners to operate VeggieRx: LCHC’s Farm on Ogden in North Lawndale, in Maywood with PP4H and Loyola (this site operated in Elmwood Park in 2018), and in the PCC Farm in Austin. WCH also worked with West Side United to pilot programs with two additional healthcare partners- Rush and Sinai health systems. The VeggieRx programs run from June through November as this is when local produce is available.

### COMMUNITY SNAPSHOTS

Source: 2012-2016, 5-year estimates American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau)

	Maywood, IL	North Lawndale (CHICAGO, IL)	South Lawndale (CHICAGO, IL)	Austin (CHICAGO, IL)
<b>Total population</b> <small>(2016, 5-year estimate)</small>	24,029	35,423	73,983	97,611
<b>Largest population</b>	70.9% African American	87.8% African American	84% Hispanic or Latinx	81.6% African American
<b>Median Household Income</b>	\$44,126	\$26,076	\$31,697	\$32,492
<b>Individuals below poverty level</b>	20.9%	44.8%	34.8%	30.3%
<b>Food stamps/SNAP participation</b>	34.4%	51.4%	36.9%	35.2%
<b>Risk for food insecurity</b>	37.6%	37.4%	44.6%	51.6%



## PARTICIPANTS

The majority of VeggieRx participants live in and around Lawndale, Austin, and Maywood where the program sites are located. The program is focused on serving low-income households that are at risk for food insecurity. At the LCHC “Farm on Ogden” site, approximately 60% of the VeggieRx participants are African-American, and 40% are Hispanic/Latinx, and the nutrition and cooking classes are offered in both English and Spanish. One challenge is assuring access to the full program for individuals who do not have a Link card (Illinois’ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] benefits), particularly individuals that are undocumented (see [“Lessons Learned and Recommendations” on page 7](#)).



Participants who are referred into the program are given a “veggie prescription” by their health care provider which includes the date, time, and location of the next VeggieRx distribution event. When the participant arrives at the event, Windy City Harvest registers them into the program. VeggieRx sessions begin with a nutrition class and cooking demonstration. Following the class, each participant receives a bag of produce grown by Windy City Harvest to take home, and \$10 in “Produce Perks” that can be used to match purchases from their Link card at an onsite farm stand. Participants are encouraged to come to VeggieRx up to 10 times per year. For 2019, there has been one

weekly distribution per site in Maywood and Austin. VeggieRx has run twice weekly distributions in North Lawndale since 2017.

VeggieRx is largely funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) through a Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant. This grant began in 2016 with a two-year pilot that was subsequently extended through 2021. Health care organizations support VeggieRx through staff time and provision of space and onsite logistics for VeggieRx distribution events. CPHP developed the nutritional education, cooking demos and recipes for VeggieRx distributions. Other supplemental funding has been provided by the American Heart Association through PP4H, Loyola University’s health equity grant, and PCC Wellness Center’s foundation to provide boxes for qualifying patients who do not have an active Link card. The Humana Community Benefit Fund provided the funding to start the PCC Austin Farm in 2014.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Consumer feedback is instrumental in shaping the strategies of VeggieRx. Participant preferences drive what is included in the weekly produce bags and what is sold at the farm stands. Feedback was also the impetus for the way the classes are now scheduled at the North Lawndale site. VeggieRx was piloted with a cohort model, but both the participants and LCHC found that classes which facilitate participants dropping-in when it suits their schedule is preferable. Additionally, Windy City Harvest and LCHC added an evening class for those who could not make it during the traditional workday. To build on the feedback model and engage community members beyond those currently participating in VeggieRx, Windy City Harvest and LCHC have employed a few different strategies. Windy City Harvest reports it was helpful to follow-up with those who were referred to VeggieRx but came rarely or never came to determine what was not working for them. However, staff time limitations have made it difficult to make this practice consistent.

Each VeggieRx distribution site has a farm nearby, bringing visibility to the program and strengthening participants' understanding of the seasonality of the produce.

One of the unique aspects of VeggieRx is the way it is integrated and overlaps with existing farms, programs and healthcare partners. VeggieRx is integrated and valued throughout Windy City Harvest. WCH Youth Farm students grow the produce for and run the farm stand in North Lawndale. WCH Harvest Corp participants help to grow much of the produce for VeggieRx bags and assist with VeggieRx distributions. The North Lawndale VeggieRx Program Assistant is a graduate of the North Lawndale Youth Farm and lives down the street from the Farm on Ogden. Additionally, each VeggieRx distribution site has a farm nearby. This helps to bring visibility to the program and strengthen participants' understanding of the seasonality of the produce.

### ORGANIZATIONAL ROLES

For the North Lawndale site, Windy City Harvest provides the program administration and the produce – both the weekly bags and the food for purchase at the farm stands. This is how the Austin site operates as well. On the other hand, PP4H runs the farm stand in Maywood with produce grown at their Giving Garden. Some of the vegetables are grown from the farms on site, but produce is also aggregated from multiple Windy City Harvest farms. For all the sites, the health care organization takes the lead on screening and referring patients to participate in the program and provides the physical space for the program to operate. All the health care organizations use the 2-question Hunger Vital Sign™ screening tool<sup>1</sup> and provide a “veggie prescription” via their electronic medical record (EMR). Screening and participation criteria vary slightly among the health care partners. For example, LCHC identifies patients who are experiencing food insecurity, have an active Link card, and have a diet-related chronic disease. While PCC specifically prioritizes patients with diabetes.

For the programs in the City of Chicago, LCHC in North Lawndale and PCC in Austin,

Nutrition Peer Educators from CPHP provide the nutrition education and cooking demonstrations. For the PP4H program in Maywood, suburban Cook County, a Loyola registered dietitian and dietetic interns provide the nutrition and cooking education.

The clear roles for each partner allow the program to run effectively and sustainably; however, successful implementation at each site hinges on trusted relationships between the health care organization, Windy City Harvest, the nutrition education provider, and program participants. The partners have worked together to adapt and evolve the program over time (see [“Lessons Learned and Recommendations” on page 7](#)). In the case of the North Lawndale VeggieRx program, which has been operating the longest, the team at Windy City Harvest sends the LCHC medical providers weekly summaries of who participated in the program and what they received during their visit. The summaries support the providers in staying involved with the happenings of VeggieRx outside of the clinic, and how their patients are benefitting.

### ADAPTATIONS OF THE MODEL

In January 2019, Lil VeggieRx was piloted in Maywood through the partnership between PP4H, WCH, Loyola University Health System, Loyola University Chicago and the American Heart Association to provide a produce distribution, along with cooking demonstrations and nutrition lesson to 30 SNAP participants, as well as an additional 65 residents of Maywood, Broadview, Melrose Park, and Bellwood over the course of 10 weeks. Programs are facilitated by Loyola Dietetic interns and by medical students enrolled in a Culinary Medicine elective.

In 2019, PCC began implementing an adapted version of VeggieRx. They coupled the VeggieRx program with a group medical visit. Aligning with the drop-in model, PCC

<sup>1</sup> Hunger Vital Sign™ screening tool: <http://childrenshealthwatch.org/public-policy/hunger-vital-sign/>

paired the VeggieRx curriculum with an education session for patients with diabetes. The education session was facilitated by a PCC medical provider, a registered nurse and a social worker. It is PCC's vision to develop a long-term, sustainable program built on the partnership of VeggieRx and a medical reimbursement model. This pilot project aligns with PCC's diabetes action plan, in which the purpose is to implement programming that will provide long-term impact in the treatment and management of diabetes. Because of the community PCC serves, this is a priority population.

### EVALUATION

Data collection for VeggieRx includes participant demographics, frequency of participant attendance, records of health care provider participation, food distribution, and self-reported consumption and behavior change. Demographic data collected includes participant age, race/ethnicity, family size, and patient status. Records are kept on how many

patients are being served, as well as which providers are taking part in referring those patients. For food distribution, information is collected on the number of bags distributed, in addition to what proportion of those bags the participants are using. The redemption rate of Produce Perks for each farm stand and for individual participants is also tracked. To measure behavior change, VeggieRx participants are asked to complete a fruit and vegetable checklist on their first, fifth and tenth visits. Windy City Harvest and their health care partners are currently exploring additional evaluation methods to understand impacts on health and quality of life for the participants.

### Impacts and Benefits

During the operational season from June – November, VeggieRx serves a total of approximately 200 people per month. The majority of participants are low-income, African American and Hispanic/Latinx. In Cook County, these demographic groups have historically

## IMPACT TESTIMONIALS

*The following have been lightly edited for spelling and grammar.*



VeggieRx helps our neighbors to understand so many things we need to know to live a healthier lifestyle. They do not just stop there, at the end of each class; they give out a FREE produce bag and produce perks... The Farm on Ogden and Windy City Harvest is something that is honestly life changing. The amount of people I see shopping, attending the classes, signing up for programs is just remarkable. It is something that I am proud to have in my community and something that is making a huge difference.”

–VEGGIERX SURVEY



I appreciate the box and the program. The box helps me to provide good nutrition to my kids and myself and I'm thankful because it's expensive to eat healthy. I can't afford to eat healthy as often as I'd like because of the prices and availability in my neighborhood. The program gives me valuable information that I can understand and incorporate in meals at home for my family.”

–VEGGIERX SURVEY



I'm totally in love with the program. Most grateful because I love veggies and fruit."

-VEGGIERX SURVEY



The bag of veggies helps me because I don't have extra money to help with cooking healthy foods."

-VEGGIERX SURVEY



We've been able to lose/maintain our weight goals set by doctor for our family and reduce/stop much of our medicine because we've changed our habits because of fresh veggies. Thank you!"

-VEGGIERX SURVEY

Increase in the number of people who reported eating two or more cups of vegetables per day:

18%

been underserved and are disproportionately burdened by poor health outcomes. In 2018, 763 produce bags were distributed in North Lawndale in partnership with LCHC, and 186 were distributed in Elmwood Park and Proviso Township in partnership with PP4H and Loyola. Among participants at the North Lawndale site, VeggieRx saw a 18% increase in the number of people who reported eating two or more cups of vegetables per day, the lowest end of the range recommended for adults by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Through VeggieRx, patients who are identified as food insecure are given a tangible way to access healthy foods which may otherwise be unfamiliar, unattainable and/or unaffordable.

Partnering to implement VeggieRx also benefits the food and health care organizations involved. Each organization provides expertise that the others may struggle to deliver as effectively on their own. Windy City Harvest has the knowledge and skills around food access and urban agriculture. VeggieRx helps Windy City Harvest fulfill their mission to allocate a substantial portion of the produce they grow to residents of the communities their farms are located within. In addition to providing a convenient space for the program, the health care organizations identify and refer the patients who may be able to benefit the most. VeggieRx empowers the providers with a concrete program to refer their patients with

food insecurity to. CPHP brings nutrition and cooking knowledge and skill, and VeggieRx gives them a consistent gathering of their priority population with SNAP benefits to work with.

## Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Execute the referral through the Electronic Medical Records (EMR).** Including referrals to VeggieRx in patient's EMR and exit paperwork adds weight to its importance. It connects the program to the patient's care plan and health goals they are setting with their provider.
- **Be flexible in program implementation.** Windy City Harvest and LCHC changed the structure of classes in North Lawndale to allow participants to come to any food distributions that fit their schedule. On the other hand, PCC is piloting a more structured model with more individualized support to participants (patients with diabetes) because it is better suited to the work the organization is already doing. Both models function to address food insecurity, but they are adapted to meet the needs of participants and partners.
- **Partnering to serve SNAP recipients is a win-win and must also include supplemental funding to serve individuals who are undocumented.** The majority of food insecure patients that health care providers want to serve are eligible for SNAP, which





present great opportunities for partnership. Programs like VeggieRx that are funded through the USDA's FINI program must look for supplemental ways to fund undocumented community members or anyone else who is not SNAP-eligible. Windy City Harvest and the health care partners have taken a few different approaches to providing access for the undocumented population - PP4H secured funding from the American Heart Association and PCC secured funding from their foundation to cover participants without Link cards.

- **Ensure there is a staff member at the health care organization who can serve as a liaison and champion for VeggieRx.** VeggieRx has found that having someone from the health care organization who is well-connected to the program is essential. This person has access to the EMR, can follow-up with referred patients, knows the logistics of the program for patients and providers, and can connect all the pieces to ensure smooth program implementation.

## Future Directions

Moving forward, Windy City Harvest and their partners would like to bolster evaluation to better understand the efficacy of VeggieRx and its impact on participants. Beyond evaluation, considerations of how to strengthen and grow VeggieRx in years to come revolve around sustainability. One potential opportunity for VeggieRx is to make it a year-round program. Currently, the program runs from June – November as this schedule corresponds with the local growing season. While providing local produce is an important strength of the program, this unfortunately means participants are without the fruits and vegetables they receive from VeggieRx from December – May. Windy City Harvest is investigating possible supply chains that could allow the program to operate all year. Another aspect of VeggieRx's sustainability is the funding system. The program is currently funded by the USDA FINI grant, in addition to funds secured by partner organizations. However, this means financial support for VeggieRx is subject to the uncertainty of philanthropy and funding cycles. Windy City Harvest is exploring ways to integrate program support into existing funding systems. Finally, Windy City Harvest is considering how to support geographies not currently served by VeggieRx. One potential piece of this could be Windy City Harvest's urban agriculture programs which offer paid opportunities for individuals to become trained urban farmers. Hopefully, some of the individuals who go through these programs and start their own farms will be able to join partnerships to help to serve people with food insecurity in their communities.



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