Celebrating Community Partnership: Food Is Medicine Project Delivers Powerful Results

By Gina Johnson

A unique partnership is bringing a new kind of prescription to patients: healthy food. The CARE Clinic, Goodhue County Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP), the Red Wing Area Food Shelf, and the Mayo Clinic Health System has shown how much can be accomplished when healthcare, food access, and collaboration have a shared purpose.

The Fresh Food Farmacy, a Food is Medicine project, has completed another year of providing produce prescriptions to their underinsured and uninsured clients at the CARE Clinic. Julie Malyon, CARE Clinic Director, says that “research shows that if fresh produce is "prescribed" similarly to how medication is prescribed, patients are more likely to increase their consumption of healthy fruits and vegetables.”

Gina Johnson, public health educator at Goodhue County Health and Human Services, is the Goodhue County SHIP Coordinator. Johnson shares that “the Journal for the National Library of Medicine describes Food Is Medicine as a food and nutrition intervention. That is integrated into a healthcare system, where reduced or free produce is prescribed to patients that are food insecure and at risk for diet related chronic conditions.”

The Fresh Food Farmacy, which launched in 2022, was created to help people manage chronic health conditions such as diabetes by increasing access to fresh, nutritious, and culturally relevant foods and by providing evidence-based nutrition support.

Over the course of 12 months**,** participants received produce prescriptions, cooking classes, education sessions, and free produce. Each year the project has been improved and now it is being offered to any CARE Clinic patient.

And the results speak for themselves.

According to data collected by the Mayo Clinic Health System participants experienced measurable improvements in key health indicators such as A1C levels, which can be used to diagnose diabetes.

A major element of the project’s success has been its collaborative structure. Each partner brought unique strengths:

- CARE Clinic offered patient prescriptions, food on site, and nutrition resources.
- Red Wing Area Food Shelf provided onsite food distribution and funding support through a grant from Taylor Farms Foundation.
- Goodhue County SHIP contributed grant technical assistance and funding.
- The Mayo Clinic Health System contributed evaluation assistance.

Additionally, there are local foundations who have provided funding to continue this project. Cargill, Red Wing Grain, and the Taylor Farms Foundation.

Many participants described how the project helped them create new routines, try unfamiliar fruits and vegetables, and involve family members in healthier cooking. One 56-year-old participant said “"Se me hace un muy buen programa que ayuda a la gente. Lo que sea que te den ayuda mucho," which translates to "I think it's a really good program that helps people. Whatever you are giving really helps."

As the Fresh Food Farmacy project celebrates these accomplishments, they are already looking to increase the number of participants, sustain funding, and apply lessons learned to future public health efforts in Goodhue County.

The success of this Food Is Medicine intervention highlights something powerful: when healthcare providers, community organizations, and local partners unite around a shared mission, healthier communities become a reality.