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Local Researchers Seek to Measure Health Benefits of Access to Farm Shares

By JEN HOLMES

GREENFIELD – Ever wondered just how much eating vegetables regularly could actually impact your health?

Thanks to an upcoming research program to be carried out by Just Roots, the Community Health Center of Franklin County, and Dr. Seth Berkowitz of Massachusetts General Hospital, we will soon be closer to that answer. Their research proposal, titled “(Im)Proving the CSA Model – A Scientific Study to Demonstrate the Health Impacts of CSA Participation to Insurers,” was recently awarded the Farmers Market Promotion Program Grant through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and will be underway this spring.

“I think this was probably a very different grant than what the USDA was expecting,” says Jessica Van Steensburg, executive director of Just Roots, a farming-based community nonprofit located in Greenfield.

“It went beyond, you know, just posters or things to attract people to a farmer’s market,” she says.

Measuring an Impact

The study concept is indeed innovative, and very collaborative. Through the Community Health Center of Franklin County (CHCFC), based in Turners Falls, patients who meet the study requirements – in this case, those with a body mass index over 25 – will be sent a letter explaining the study, and letting them know that they can opt out of participation. CHC staff will then randomly recruit 120 participants from those who did not opt out. (Random recruitment is a common practice in scientific research, an attempt to diminish the possibility of skewed results.)

“We’re beginning that process now, and are hoping to get recruitment rolling by March or April,” says Ed Sayer, chief executive officer of the CHCFC. Sayer explains that the study is aiming for a total sample size of 100, but that the center is overshooting to account for likely attrition, i.e. participants dropping out.

Of the 120 initial participants, 60 will be offered a subsidized share of weekly vegetables from Just Roots, who has offered a community-sponsored, monthly payment program for their CSAs for the past four years. The other 60 will not receive this option.

Both participant groups will be asked to answer questionnaires regarding their diet and lifestyle habits over the course of the study, as well as have blood samples collected, along with other basic health indicators, such as weight and blood pressure. Both groups will receive a stipend for participating in the study, which will run for 20 weeks from mid-June to the end of October, the duration of Just Roots’ farm share program.

According to Van Steensburg, the study will span two seasons, during 2017 and 2018. The data from questionnaires and healthcare visits will be collected by the staff of Just Roots and CHCFC, respectively, and will be analyzed by Dr. Seth Berkowitz, a primary care physician and public health researcher based at Boston’s Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH).

“We’re not scientists,” says Van Steensburg. “So that’s where [Dr. Berkowitz] comes in.”

Berkowitz has published a number of research studies, supported by MGH and Harvard Medical School, on the topic of “food as medicine” and how diet and fitness can actually act as preventative healthcare, with a particular focus on how effective, and difficult, these lifestyle changes can be for low-income people.

“We met [Dr. Berkowitz] through a public forum on food and health held in Greenfield,” explains Van Steensburg.

One of the Just Roots team members, Jay Lord, connected with Berkowitz over a shared interest in the intersection between health and food, and they stayed in contact.

“When this opportunity came up, we called [Berkowitz] about participating, and he was like, ‘Yes, I am totally on board,’” says Van Steensburg.

“He’s done a lot of projects like this,” says Sayer of Berkowitz. “I was certainly impressed.”

Dr. Berkowitz has helped with the specifics of the research program’s design, including sample size, recruitment methods, and what measure to track. He could not be reached for comment as of press time, but according to Van Steensburg and Sayer, he will play an integral role in study’s development and implementation, and then carry out a “rigorously implemented analysis” to determine whether CSA participation can indeed “improve health outcomes.”

Showing a Savings

At this point, you may be asking yourself: what are some practical implications of this study? Or, to put it more bluntly, what’s the point of all this?

Most of us believe that eating more vegetables would indeed improve one’s health, so is this just proving an already commonly held belief? The answer is partially yes, but also, so much more than that.

“We knew that from a long-term sustainability standpoint, and to really make a difference in CSA affordability for all people, it really needed to come down to figuring out how to engage the health insurance agencies to buy in to help towards the affordability,” Van Steensburg explains.

“Not to say that [insurance agencies] are not making the linkage between healthy foods creating a healthy person, but at the same time, we’re not really seeing healthy programming that speaks to their investment in that,” she says. “We thought that if we can actually run a study that allows us to look at what happens to someone’s health over a long enough period of time to see a difference, then we could maybe ‘prove’ the impact of a CSA on someone’s health.”

The hope, for the entire research team, is that if a significant difference is seen in health outcomes between the participants and non-participants in the CSA, then insurance agencies may decide it’s enough evidence to justify approving “wellness” reimbursements for CSA shares, like many already do for gym membership and exercise classes.

“Why not a ‘food as health’ program?” Van Steensburg asks. “Do both of those things,” – fitness and CSA reimbursements – “and you’ve really changed the paradigm.”

Part of convincing insurance agencies that such a reimbursement would be worthwhile comes down to providing evidence that increasing access to CSAs improves health outcomes, particularly in ways that decrease healthcare expenditures.

“Our hypothesis is that we’ll see health improve, habits shift, and that we’re going to see health expenditures decrease,” says Van Steensburg. “That’s what we think we’ll see based on our own years of experience with a subsidized CSA program.” She emphasizes that results for the “impact on health expenditures” will be the most instrumental in beginning conversations with agencies about reimbursement programs. “Health New England and Harvard Pilgrim have already expressed interest in how this studies shapes out,” she adds.

Education and Access

In terms of overall study results, both Sayer and Berkowitz believe that changes in health will be seen in those in the CSA participation group, even with a sample size of only 60 individuals and over the course of only a few months.

“We don’t expect measures like lipids and glucose to show a lot of difference, because it takes a little while to change those guys,” says Sayer, “but we should see some improvement.”

“We’re also hoping that people who have access to the CSA will show some improvement in lifestyle, and their perceived health,” he adds.

In addition to the possible implications for insurance benefits, Sayer says he feels the study is important in its representation of where healthcare is heading.

“It’s not really about just food or just doctors – or just ‘this’ or just ‘that,’” he explains, “but that in order to really take care of the population of Franklin County, it’s about collaboration across agencies.”

According to Sayer, the CHCFC tries not to focus on “conventional ideas of health and healthcare,” aiming instead to give patients the means and knowledge “to steer their own direction of health.” This research program certainly fits within that mission, which is why, he believes, Just Roots contacted them initially to partner in the study.

Improving access to CSAs and improving the health of residents of Franklin County may seem a lofty goal, but the teams at Just Roots and Community Health Center of Franklin County don’t seem daunted. Both Van Steensburg and Sayer discussed applying for additional grants and funding to offer health interventions, such as food preparation and cooking courses, and are creating literature that to help inform both the study participants and the general public.

Van Steensburg also emphasized the impact that a CSA reimbursement program could have on the “health of the local economy, and the farms that shape it” by opening up the market of CSAs to new customers who otherwise could not afford it.

Whether or not the study confirms the hypothesized results and grabs the attention of health insurance agencies, the collaboration helps set the tone, both for participants and the community at large, that healthcare is about more than prescriptions and check-ups. Making sure insurance and healthcare settings not only emphasize healthy food, but also support access to it is, as Van Steensburg says, “key to the future of people’s health.”