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# Study to look at health impact of CSA participation

By SHELBY ASHLINE  
Recorder Staff

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GREENFIELD — Hoping to gain support from health insurance companies for community supported agriculture, a local farm-share program and health clinic are teaming up on a federally funded study.

The Community Health Center of Franklin County and Just Roots community supported agriculture nonprofit are launching a grant-funded study to evaluate the health impacts of CSA participation.

Executive director of Just Roots, Jessica Van Steensburg, believes participants will see their health improve, offering compelling data for health insurers to support customers joining a CSA, similarly to how wellness benefits are offered for purchasing a gym membership.

The two organizations decided to work together about a year ago, Van Steensburg said, after Just Roots' Community Outreach Coordinator Andy Grant met the clinic's Development Director Cameron Carey.

"We thought we should meet and talk and figure out what both of our organizations are doing and what we could be doing together," Van Steensburg said.

The clinic, a nonprofit agency with three medical and dental facilities across the county, aims to provide excellent medical care to all Franklin County residents regardless of their insurance status or income, offering sliding fee scales for individuals without insurance.

“The health center was an attractive partner for (Just Roots), because we feel very strongly that good health isn’t just about going to the doctor and getting your flu shot, it’s about healthy eating too,” said Ed Sayer, the clinic’s CEO.

Van Steensburg said that Just Roots, a Greenfield-based nonprofit that seeks to increase access to healthy local food across Franklin County, found a United States Department of Agriculture grant through its Farmers Market and Local Food Production Program.

They want to “get the hunches that we have about how powerful food is to people’s health to the health insurers,” Van Steensburg said.

In late September, the two organizations heard back that they’d received a three-year grant for nearly \$250,000 — the first grant the clinic has ever received.

The study itself will run from 2017 to 2018. The clinic staff will be trained to identify possible participants, who will be drawn from the population currently served by the center, Van Steensburg said. Fifty individuals will agree to first-time CSA participation and 50 to participation in a control group not offered CSA participation.

The study has two hypotheses, according to Just Roots: that participation in a subsidized CSA leads to improved dietary quality and health status, and that subsidized CSA participation represents a reasonable return on investment as a way to help improve health for vulnerable patients.

“We’re imagining that the people who have access to the organic produce will have improved glucose levels and lower amounts of bad cholesterol,” Sayer noted.

Dr. Seth Berkowitz, a primary care doctor at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard University researcher, is working with the two organizations to develop a draft of the study. CSA participation will begin in June 2017, after which Just Roots will gather quantitative data regarding consumption patterns of CSA participants and qualitative data regarding their experience, such as how they prepared the food and how they feel.

Three times over the course of the year, the clinic’s staff will weigh CSA participants, collect blood samples and gather other basic health indicators, according to the release. Van Steensburg said 2019 will be used for data analysis, which will be done by Berkowitz.

Van Steensburg said the two organizations have already received support letters from Health New England and Harvard Pilgrim Health Care.

“They’re aware of the study and have expressed interest in the outcome,” she said.

Van Steensburg and Sayer hope the study might result in financial support of CSAs from health insurers, which in turn could lead to increased CSA participation and bring better health to Franklin County.

“Mainly high income people have farm shares, which limits participation. What we’ve been finding in our work, because we’ve been serving the low income population ... is people often can’t afford (CSAs)” she said. Wellness benefits for joining a CSA “would mean a whole slew of new people could buy into farm shares.”

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