

MAKING LOCALLY GROWN FOOD PART OF THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

Roots to Prevention, Camden, NJ



POWERED BY

The
**BUILD
HEALTH**
Challenge®

BOLD

Garner support for the Food is Medicine programs, like Roots to Prevention, by getting Medicaid's Managed Long Term Services and Supports to promote urban farming ventures and programming while health care facilities provide the demand for produce



UPSTREAM

Encourage for-profit food growing to alleviate contributing factors to chronic illnesses associated with food-insecure households



INTEGRATED

Unite Camden gardening organizations and neighborhood health care providers to participate in citywide Food Bucks Rx and Hospital Produce Subscription programs



LOCAL

Ensure residents have a direct role in the ongoing implementation of programs and decision-making processes



DATA-DRIVEN

Gather and manage baseline data from community-based, educational, and health care institutions, and utilize redemption rate data to help identify future redemption sites for Roots to Prevention programs

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



COMMUNITY IMPACT



\$30,000 of Food Bucks Rx redeemed by Virtua Health and Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers patients for fresh produce



500 copies of Roots to Prevention's bilingual healthy cookbook distributed across the city



\$293,411 awarded to Roots to Market program from the first-ever USDA Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Grant

INTRODUCTION

Christoff Lindsey has deep roots in Camden, New Jersey, and is self-described as “Camden born, raised, scarred, and influenced.”² Raised by his mother and grandmother, he has been passionate about farming since he was 15. As the local newspaper, the *Courier Post* reported, he “believes too few young people in Camden are connected to their literal roots, the ones that provide fresh fruits and vegetables that they need to eat to be healthy.” Lindsey grows all kinds of produce, including peppers and tomatoes.

Another resident, Phyllis Womack, learned gardening from her uncle when she was a child. She sees an opportunity for fresh food to increase health, and have it be available instead of fast food. Womack shared, “Learning leads to resilience—you never know when you might need this.”

We have a history of feeding people, my gardens are open... people know what I have is available to them.—Christoff Lindsey, Camden Resident¹

Not all Camden residents came to gardening through their families. Marian Jones, a veteran who had moved out of the city, returned to choose Camden as the place to buy her first home. She got into gardening through RootCamp and transformed her backyard. RootCamp is a free workshop series for residents interested in growing high-quality and high-quantity produce, both to enjoy and to earn income. Jones is now educating others and believes gardening has helped her socially and mentally.

BACKGROUND

The first European settlers came to the Lenape lands that are now known as the Camden area in the 1600s. Camden was officially formed in the mid-1800s and developed into a thriving industrial city. A small city of just eight square miles, Camden enjoyed strong economic growth through the early 1900s. However, this would change in the 1950s, as manufacturing companies started leaving Camden and the city began to feel more suburban. Simultaneously, demographics changed with a rise in communities of color. In the late 1960s and early 1970s,



the city experienced civil unrest after the police killings of an unidentified Black girl and a Puerto Rican motorist, Rafael Rodriguez Gonzales.⁴ In the decades between the 1970s and 2010s, Camden was known for high crime rates. However, after a series of effective interventions, crime has considerably decreased in recent years. Camden is now home to many community assets, including universities and hospitals.

[We’re] making sure future generations get involved. Hiring elders [from Camden]—not just hiring from the outside.—Jonathan Wetstein, Parkside Business & Community in Partnership

¹ <https://www.tapinto.net/towns/camden/articles/lots-don-t-stay-vacant-in-camden-thanks-to-these-community-farmers>

² <https://www.courierpostonline.com/story/news/local/south-jersey/2020/02/20/seeds-sown-more-urban-farming-access-fresh-produce-camden-virtua-pbcip-food-deserts-nutrition/4811274002/>

³ <https://www.courierpostonline.com/story/news/local/south-jersey/2020/02/20/seeds-sown-more-urban-farming-access-fresh-produce-camden-virtua-pbcip-food-deserts-nutrition/4811274002/>

⁴ <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/camden-new-jersey-riots-1969-and-1971/>

While active revitalization efforts are happening, Census Bureau (2013-2017) data shows that a little over one-third of Camden's 75,000 residents live in poverty and receive SNAP benefits. More than 73 percent of the total number of households in two key ZIP codes within Camden earn below \$50,000, with a median household income of around \$25,575.

Many families struggle with mobility to full-service grocers and often lack the income to afford fruits and vegetables.
—Jonathan Wetstein, Parkside Business & Community in Partnership

Although the city of Camden may have a relatively high concentration of health care facilities and urban gardens, as of 2018, more than 30 percent of Camden adults have high blood pressure,⁵ and more than 10 percent have diabetes.⁶ The intergenerational incidences of diet-related chronic conditions are due in large part to a lack of access to fresh foods. The USDA has designated Camden as a food desert, and the limited supply of healthy foods is linked with the high prevalence of diet-related chronic diseases. Since residents

ADVANCING HEALTH EQUITY: Roots to Prevention considers patients suffering from diet-related illnesses as Camden's future actors in building a healthy, local, and affordable food economy. Along with health care providers, gardeners and growers are partners in prevention.

haven't had access to fresh produce for such a long time, they often don't shop for it right away when they do start to get access to it. As Jonathan Wetstein, Roots to Market Manager of Parkside Business & Community in Partnership mentioned, "For many, these trends are worsening and are intergenerational, resulting in a third determinant—limited demand for healthy fresh foods."

To combat this, many gardening programs are popping up to promote fresh, healthy eating. These efforts have not been able to align and fully scale due to incompatible funding cycles and other infrastructure issues. Gardeners and growers are also often unknown to one another, working individually in small patches or backyards. Together, however, they can form a strong community. Those who are a part of the growing network are excited to teach and expand within the area to reinvigorate the urban agriculture movement.



APPROACH

Even prior to securing an award from The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD), partners in the Camden area had started working together around nutrition and food security. To bridge challenges around small sub-neighborhood groups within Camden working independently and trying to secure independent sources of funding, The Campbell Soup Foundation started bringing partners together in 2018 to learn about the BUILD framework to advance health equity. When partners such as

⁵ <https://www-doh.state.nj.us/doh-shad/community/highlight/profile/CardiovascularDiseaseHBP.County/GeoCnty/4.html>

⁶ <https://www-doh.state.nj.us/doh-shad/community/highlight/profile/DiabetesPrevalence.County/GeoCnty/4.html>

Rowan University and Virtua Health—one of New Jersey’s largest nonprofit health systems—realized they were already aligned in working toward improving healthy food access as a disease prevention tool, they formed the Roots to Prevention (RTP) collaborative. The coalition initially centered data through Rowan University and Virtua Health’s qualitative grower study connecting food with health and wealth, and their quantitative studies looking at hospital visits.

BUILD Principles have meant the willingness to go above and beyond to do what we can for the community.—Andrew Katz, Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers

In addition to data, Virtua Health partnered with The Food Trust’s Food Bucks Rx (FBRx) program, where health care partners distribute coupons that are redeemable for free fruits and vegetables at local retail sites. Virtua Health also launched the Food Pharmacy, which offers patients nutrition education and support via prescription, and partners with local growers and health care providers to bring affordable produce and other healthy foods to residents. FBRx worked to make prescriptions portable and to give emergency room patients with chronic disease access to fresh produce as part of their prescribed treatment plan.



This work resulted in awareness around a lack of food access programs, and in the creation of online platforms that provide prescriptions for food. Now, vouchers can be redeemed within the corner store network for produce grown by neighbors. This has not only improved access, but has also given small urban growers local avenues to distribute their produce.

Now with BUILD, the work has blossomed. Partners have truly joined forces to work across different parts of the city, and projects are sharing the benefits of knowledge, programming, and working side by side. RTP is a collaboration of Camden residents, nonprofits, farmers, institutions, and government entities who

are all committed to improving the health of communities by providing access to fruits and vegetables. On the community side, Parkside Business & Community in Partnership (PBCIP) has led the Roots to Market initiative (with free gardening workshops led by Free Haven Farms), as well as healthy cooking classes and free courses on growing and selling produce. Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers (CCHP) is a multidisciplinary nonprofit working to improve care for people with complex health and social needs in Camden and across the country. The Camden County Department of Health and Human Services provides a critical systems lens, along with Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey (HBCBS).

Together, these partners share a mission to ensure families stay healthy by making it easier to eat, grow, and sell fresh fruits and vegetables. Initiatives leverage diet-related disease prevention programs with urban agriculture, cooking classes, and healthy corner store initiatives. At a systems level, the collaborative aims to increase a hospital's demand for local, healthy food production. In turn, this will reduce inequities in incidence of hunger and diet-related illnesses, while at the same time supporting new sources of income, revitalizing vacant lands, and promoting economic development. Already, the USDA has recognized the model and awarded the community nearly \$300,000 as part of the Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Grant. Jonathan Wetstein of PBCIP summarized, "As health care providers make it easier for their patient population to participate in a local, healthy food economy, families at the highest risk of developing a diet-related illness can now expose themselves to healthier food options while also earning more income."

To reach this level of success, the project had many important turning points. First, the team sought to truly understand barriers to eating healthy. Research found that patients who were prescribed healthy

food for six months often didn't know how to continue that practice after the prescription ended. There was also a strong perception that a farmer or grower would be from a rural area and look a certain way. Stigmas had to be broken down about how urban agriculture happens and who is growing food. The project received critical funding and resource support from HBCBS. Then, the team got Virtua Health and a local farm to sign a purchase agreement, which enabled locally grown produce from Camden to be sold. With support from The Food Trust's Healthy Corner Store Initiative and Virtua's Eat Well Mobile Farmers Market, the FBRx network expanded to offer 17 redemption locations around the city, enabling Virtua Health and CCHP patients to redeem over \$30,000 in FBRx for fresh fruits and vegetables.

One challenge the collaborative has faced is around messaging. RTP's initiatives can become challenging to explain to its different audiences. Having professionals to assist the team in explaining social determinants of health, food access and insecurity, food prescriptions, etc. would enable RTP's resident engagement efforts to run more smoothly. As a result, the team is working to improve communications about this work.



PANDEMIC IMPACTS

Since food production and distribution are activities that can only be done in person, COVID-19 presented a difficult challenge. The team rose to that challenge, however, transitioning to virtual programming wherever possible. For example, the Teaspoon of Love Program⁷ is a cookbook and series of video recordings featuring fresh healthy meals that has been a huge success through the pandemic. Jonathan Wetstein shared, "[We were] originally aspiring to have some workshops where we could get 15 to 20 people into classes, but we were struggling with timing and transportation. We wanted to make it more equitable, and then with COVID-19 it got pushed to the front." Similarly, RootCamp 101⁸ is now an online course, which has made it accessible to a much larger audience. One broad

⁷ <https://www.rootstoprevention.com/resources>

⁸ <https://www.rootstoprevention.com/roots-to-market>

positive outcome is that there is a greater awareness of and interest in supporting fresh food access (especially gardening) because of the pandemic. During the peak of the pandemic, when food insecurity was a critical concern, the collaborative was also able to distribute produce throughout the city. Emergency Food Bucks Rx were purchased with additional funding sources and delivered through a network of nonprofits, as well. The team was also able to complete the first purchase arrangement between Virtua Health and a local, Black-owned farm.

It [the shift to online meetings and courses] showed us we could still reach the community while keeping people safe in a virtual space.—Yvette Alvarez, Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey

The pandemic also made engagement difficult. As Yvette Alvarez shared, “The transition to all things virtual allows people to slowly disengage from connecting online and it was more difficult to develop a connection with people.” Without in-person gatherings, it was difficult for the team to maintain connection and momentum with different stakeholders and collaborators. Although it was



more convenient to connect online, the effectiveness of those meetings may have been reduced because they were online.

While the team’s planned programming was impacted by COVID-19, the pandemic also presented new opportunities to get involved with the health system. The New Jersey Department of Health designated dollars in federal funding to be awarded to county and local health departments to support COVID-19 mass vaccination efforts. The goal was to increase vaccinations, especially in underserved communities. RTP got involved and helped expand operations, promote vaccines, and partner to implement vaccination activities with

critical organizations, such as universities and Federally Qualified Health Centers. In this way, the team could play an impactful role in the health and well-being of its residents, even as its original program goals shifted.

*There are a lot of factions and fractures in the city—I’m optimistic that this work makes everyone look good so this can help smooth the bumps.
—Jonathan Wetstein, Parkside Business & Community in Partnership*



FOOD ACCESS

Starting with supply, producing food has become a community issue. Camden resident Marian Jones proclaimed that she was “not a gardener but a grower!” This gave her the opportunity to interact with other growers in the community, and get access to help when she needed it. Help hasn’t just come from peers—Rowan University, for example, secured \$15,000 from Healthy Places by Design for their Community Collaborative Learning Fund. This grant will connect urban farming apprentices with more educational resources, including nutrition advocacy,

grant writing, and business training skills. One issue that has been a roadblock for growers is infrastructure. Residents have had a hard time securing enough land or funding to make a big impact as local growers. The team started to break down this challenge by securing a Legal Toolkit for Community Gardens, which includes templates and strategies to create land tenancy agreements between third parties and food growers in Camden. Additionally, the team developed sample community garden governance documents and sign-up and registration templates for anyone to use.

Taking the produce into the community also became a collective effort. The distribution of FBRx through community partners strengthened relationships with additional corner stores (as future redemption sites), as well as organizations that may join RTP in rolling out initiatives. Both the community-based FBRx distribution and health care-based FBRx distribution were instrumental in reaching different populations in the city to ensure that the team could make fresh produce more accessible for as many families as possible.

The program is wonderful and has really helped me feel better, since I can now eat better.
—Camden Resident

RTP also heard from health care professionals (social workers, community health specialists, dietitians, physicians, and others) that participating in the FBRx program boosts morale for them and their coworkers and makes patients feel cared for. Most resources that address social determinants of health have an application procedure and/or a waiting list, so being able to provide this type of immediate assistance is greatly appreciated on all sides. Additionally, Free Haven Farms, a small, locally owned farm, became the first farm to begin selling locally grown produce



to Virtua Health. This agreement creates a first-ever opportunity for additional local food growers in Camden to sell their surplus produce to the health system as well.

The team didn't just stop at growing and distributing healthy foods. They quickly recognized that residents who were not used to having fresh produce didn't have easy or familiar ways to consume it. In response, the team created cooking courses online. Families in the community could prepare healthy meals, and others could watch and follow their recipes. This became an opportunity for youth involvement—they got excited about cooking and growing food. This initiative also led to the creation of the Teaspoon of Love cookbook that allowed for visual storytelling at low cost. Along with the Zoom cooking sessions, these outlets provided information to community members not just on cooking, but on disease prevention, lead safety, and more. Residents have loved the program. As Yvette Alvarez of HBCBS shared, it's been important to incorporate family and community as part of the cooking presentations to increase engagement and interest. As of March 2022, Rowan University now has dietetics students offer free consultations for participants.

RTP understands that food access cannot stand alone as an intervention. CCHP is

piloting a health navigator service connecting Camden households to a broader variety of wrap-around services.⁹

Getting investment in urban agriculture, that will probably be the legacy—one legacy that we'll be proud of.—Dan Master, Virtua Health

DATA & POLICY

At the outset of RTP, coalition partners thought deeply about how they could make the most impact. They realized that many residents had a dual diagnosis of food insecurity and diet-impacted chronic conditions, which created a frame into which the intervention fit. To that end, all patients who receive Food Bucks Rx from Virtua Health have one or more chronic health conditions and experience food insecurity. The intention behind this focus is that the interventions could be focused on people who have been affected the most by lack of access to fresh, healthy, and affordable locally grown food.

Within this framework, coalition partners saw a need for broader systems-level change. In order to effectively grow and sell food through the health care system, the team partnered with Success Measures—a

⁹ <https://www.horizonhealthnews.com/horizon-neighbors-in-health>



technical resource team—to enhance their data collection and analysis planning. With this additional data support, and a new statewide initiative to advocate for a formal food policy council, RTP hopes to address policy hurdles like data collection with SNAP and WIC programs. This will make it easier for health navigators to connect patients to its programs. This connection has a data angle—now the team will have better data analytics as well as a greater understanding of how RTP initiatives can become integrated into the health system and become part of patients’ charts and health history documents.

With systems involving growing and selling healthy food currently underway, the next data challenge is to effectively track produce consumption. Dan Master, Strategic Project Manager at Virtua Health, shared, “Every nutrition incentive [or support for the purchase of fruits and vegetables often in the form of matching dollars, vouchers, coupons, or discounts called “incentives”] that is tied to this program is identified by a serial number. We know where it was distributed and redeemed.” This sophisticated system allows the team to know which grocery stores and mobile farmers markets are processing

redemptions. On the health care side, Virtua Health dietitians administer a survey that matches patients’ increases in produce consumption with other biomarkers. Specifically, if patients have visited a food pharmacy, the team can look at shifts in their health markers and visits to ER.

FUTURE

The Roots to Prevention team is committed to continuing work with their existing programming. They also plan to push more for policy changes that will enable Medicaid in New Jersey to support urban agriculture. In addition, the team wants to take their efforts to the next level by demonstrating to Virtua Health that they can do farm to pharmacy or market effectively, with health care being the end user.

Additionally, Virtua Health’s Eat Well program is committed to continuing to purchase locally grown produce so that it can uplift urban growers and patients while addressing the social determinants of health in Camden. In addition, the City of Camden has a master plan which will incorporate health much more broadly going forward. This plan will look at health disparities, and, among other things, aim to provide access to affordable and healthy food options throughout the city.¹⁰

¹⁰<https://www.tapinto.net/towns/camden/articles/camden-s-master-plan-on-track-to-incorporate-health-in-a-bigger-way>



The Build Health Challenge® is contributing to the creation of a new norm in the U.S.—one that puts multi-sector, community-driven partnerships at the center of health in order to reduce health disparities caused by systemic or social inequity.

BUILD is a national program designed to support partnerships between community-based organizations, health departments, hospitals/health systems, health plans, and residents that are working to address important health issues in their community. Each community collaborative addresses root causes of chronic disease (also commonly referred to as the social determinants of health) in their local area by moving resources, attention, and action upstream. To date, BUILD has supported 55 projects across the U.S. over the course of three award cycles.

To learn more about BUILD, visit buildhealthchallenge.org.

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