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Contact: Edye Kuyper

edyek@communicarehc.org OR

Joy Cohan

joy@yolofoodbank.org

FOOD AS MEDICINE: YOLO GROWN PRODUCE IMPROVING DIABETES MANAGEMENT IN WEST SACRAMENTO

On a Tuesday afternoon at CommuniCare Health Center's Salud Clinic in West Sacramento, patients with diabetes wait to meet with a medical provider. However, instead of being ushered into exam rooms for a typical eight-minute appointment, staff members welcome them into an inviting room with a farm stand-style display, overflowing with locally-grown produce. The patients participate in a group nutrition conversation and leave with their prescription: a grocery bag of fresh produce, provided thanks to collaborations with Yolo Food Bank and FARM Davis.

This innovative "Food as Medicine" approach to chronic disease management and treatment in low-income, food insecure individuals, is in alignment with recent research conducted by Feeding America, a nationwide network of more than 200 food banks. The study documented the benefits to patients of a close partnership between food banks and health care clinics.

"At CommuniCare, we know that our patients struggle with food security," explained CommuniCare Chief Executive Officer Melissa Marshall, M.D. "When we use food to prevent or treat chronic illness, we improve access to healthy food and empower our patients to improve their health."

CommuniCare Health Centers' five locations provide health care services regardless of ability to pay to one in eight Yolo County residents. Most patients are very low income, meaning that they are statistically almost twice as likely to develop diabetes in their lifetimes as middle-income Americans.

As ending hunger and malnutrition in Yolo County is the mission of Yolo Food Bank, the partnership with CommuniCare to address chronic disease is a natural extension of the

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organization's food distribution efforts, which currently total four million pounds of food each year.

"Our partnership with CommuniCare is robust, and an illuminating example of the intersection between healthy eating and active living, and disease management and treatment," commented Yolo Food Bank Executive Director Michael Bisch. "It's our goal in our new facility, over time, to meet the full food security need of the County, and to effect a nutritional paradigm shift in doing so. The 'Food as Medicine' relationship with CommuniCare underscores this potential."

Together with a network of 200 partners, including 72 nonprofit organizations such as CommuniCare, Yolo Food Bank serves the needs of the nearly one in five Yolo County residents living in poverty, including working families, homeless, and other vulnerable neighbors. CommuniCare accesses produce weekly from the Sutter Health Nonprofit Nutrition Center, located within Yolo Food Bank's new, 42,000 square foot food distribution warehouse and operations facility, and from FARM Davis, a volunteer-operated farm dedicated to building community and food security. CommuniCare staff then develops a recipe based upon the seasonal produce selection and prepares a healthy snack for the diabetes patients to sample during group visits, and then try at home.

Local resident Yolanda Turner began participating in the group visits at Salud Clinic shortly after receiving her diabetes diagnosis. An accomplished cook, she likes to modify the recipes she receives at the clinic visits and make them her own.

"The group visits really help me financially," Turner shared. "I don't have an excuse for not having produce now since I get it free every week. The snacks give me ideas of what I can make with the produce, and in the group we talk about how it will affect my blood sugar."

Rates of chronic disease are rising rapidly, and traditional one-on-one medical appointments and pharmaceuticals often do not treat the root causes, according to Marshall. In the "Food as Medicine" group setting, patients gain skills, support, and confidence to manage their conditions amongst clinic staff and other patients who are

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living with the same disease. The produce from Yolo Food Bank and FARM Davis incentivizes participation and enables patients to practice the lifestyle changes discussed at the group visits.

“Without the group, I would be lost,” Turner confided. “If I miss it, I feel anxious and lost.”

CommuniCare soon will begin to produce food of its own, as an empty lot adjacent to the organization’s Hansen Family Health Center in Woodland is transformed into a garden and outdoor classroom. Group visits will be conducted in the outdoor classroom, and the quarter-acre project will include ample space for fruit trees and vegetable beds. Furthermore, pending funding may offer support for beginning farmers, such as the local Center for Land-Based Learning urban incubator farms, to also supply produce to advance CommuniCare’s innovative approach.

To learn more about CommuniCare and “Food as Medicine” partners Yolo Food Bank and FARM Davis, please visit www.communicarehc.org, www.yolofoodbank.org and www.farmdavis.org.

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