Mercy LIFE Meets Seniors Need for Fresh Produce

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Addressing Community Needs

Like many urban cities, Philadelphia continues to face a food crisis. Despite the city's reputation for being a center for great eats and 'foodie's' paradise, Philadelphia is considered a food desert. The Coalition of Hunger reports at least one-fourth of the people in Philadelphia struggle with hunger and food insecurity. Food deserts are areas of the country where produce, healthy food choices, or supermarkets entirely are often scarce. In a food desert, neighborhood corner convenience stores serve as a primary food source, and offer little to no fresh produce, but an abundance of processed foods that are packed with artificial ingredients, fat, sugar and salt. The corner stores are often times the only food choice for those with a low income and lack of transportation to get to a proper food store. The senior population, who often requires specific diets for chronic diseases like Diabetes or Congestive Heart Failure, is at an increased risk for suffering the effects of a food desert. In order to meet this need for seniors, Mercy LIFE and Mercy LIFE – West Philadelphia have partnered with SHARE food program, an independent non-profit organization that provides emergency food relief and low cost produce to low-income Philadelphia residents.

Solution/Action

Mercy LIFE partnered with SHARE over five years ago. Headquartered in North Philadelphia, SHARE first opened in 1986 and has broadened its organization with different food programs that help reduce hunger and expand access to nutritious, affordable food. These programs include SHARE’s Nice Roots Farm, a local indoor/outdoor farm. Its mission is to provide "local, affordable nutrient-rich produce for families in neighborhoods where low-price produce is not readily available." Nice Roots Farm harvests 15,000 pounds of produce each year, and a portion of that produce makes it way to Mercy LIFE Adult Day Centers where participants are able to purchase the produce at a low cost. The produce sale allows easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables, encourages healthy eating, and supports socialization among seniors at the day center. SHARE’s produce sale is an opportunity for seniors to try different foods and share new recipes. The program is also a convenient way for seniors to shop. They have the option to use cash, access cards, and/or free produce vouchers given out every year by the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging.

Next Steps

The program has been successful thus far and we plan to continue the partnership with SHARE’s Nice Roots Farm. Partnering with SHARE in its other ventures, such as the Commodity Supplemental Food Program could be a potential next step. This program, developed by SHARE, helps seniors by providing them with a monthly box full of nourishing foods like fruits, vegetables, dairy, cereal and meat. The goal is to provide nutritious foods at a low cost to seniors who can't easily access healthy food.

"The produce sale helps seniors get fresh produce, foster independence and allows program participants to engage with each other on healthy recipes according to the items they purchase."

-Yvette McLaughlin, Mercy LIFE – West Philadelphia